

GETTING STARTED HAND PERCUSSION



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■ Hand percussion instruments are among the oldest known to humanity, and all the varieties—such as congas, cajóns, and djembes—can trace their lineage back to prehistoric hand drums made from hollowed-out logs and animal skins. A much more common sight in music stores than they were a few decades ago, affordable, modern hand percussion instruments are a great addition to any instrument collection, for those times when you want to jam acoustically or to form an impromptu drum circle around a camp fire.

Congas are common in Latin and Caribbean music, such as salsa, merengue, and reggae. They are often made of either fiberglass or wood with a leather or synthetic “head” (drum skin). Congas come in several sizes: the “requinto” is a small conga, the “tumba” large, and the “conga” itself a medium-sized drum. Several sounds can be produced from the tuneable head, depending on how it is struck and whether or not the tones are played open or dampened by using one hand pressed against the skin.

The first cajóns were homemade instruments, made out of fruit or shipping crates, or any similar box with a resonant tone. Introduced into Peruvian music in the 1970s, modern cajóns are quite sophisticated boxes, with snares inside to add a buzzing tone, adjustable screws for tuning, and sound holes. To play one, you sit on the instrument (no need to buy a drum throne!) and hit various parts of the cajón to get different sounds. Fans of flamenco and rumba will love this drum!

A traditional West African drum, djembes are an instrument of choice for any self-respecting drum circle. Although they look quite different than a conga, there are many similarities between the two drums: a djembe is tuneable, most commonly with rope, but modern djembes also use lugnuts; the heads are traditionally made of rawhide; and both instruments are played using slaps and strikes.

If you’ve ever wanted to play drums or percussion, think of trying a conga, cajón, or djembe first. They are less expensive than a full drum kit, relatively easy to get started on, and a great way to learn hand coordination and basic drum rhythms. Can’t decide which one to buy? Well, electronic hand percussion instruments have conga, cajón, and djembe sounds, and many more besides!

TRY THIS: BASIC DRUM RHYTHM

As you play each beat, are you using one motion or two? Many people begin playing the drum using two motions: hit the drum, lift the hand. But you can improve the ease and quality of your playing by allowing the natural bounce of your hand to turn those two parts into one fluid motion. The key is to let the downward force of gravity drop your hand, and when you make contact, let the weight bounce your hand back up, much like a drumstick would bounce back up. It’s a natural and relaxed movement, but it may not feel that way at first. Practice makes perfect. Once you’ve mastered it, you’ll be surprised how much easier it is to play your drum.

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CONGA

Derived from African drums made from hollowed logs, the conga, or more properly the “tumbadora,” is a tall, narrow, single-headed Cuban drum. It is used in Afro-Caribbean music and as the principal instrument in rumba.



CAJÓN

A cajón is a box-shaped percussion instrument originally from Peru. You sit on a cajón and play it by slapping the front face and other parts. Look for cajóns made from quality wood and snare wires for a buzzing effect.



DJEMBE

A traditional djembe is a rope-tuned, skin-covered goblet drum played in much the same way as a conga (and like modern congas, modern djembes use synthetic materials). In Mali, the name “djembe” is derived from the saying “everyone gather together in peace,” and this defines the drum’s communal purpose.



ELECTRONIC PERCUSSION

Want hundreds of sounds and patterns in your rhythmic arsenal? Electronic hand percussion is good choice for the multi-instrumentalist—or the perpetually undecided—an electronic hand drum puts myriad sounds and patterns in your palm, as well as metronomes, pitch and effects controls, backing rhythm patterns, and much more.