

Classroom Hand Drumming

6 pieces for traditional percussion instruments or buckets)

by Kevin Mixon

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Introduction

Background, Rehearsal and Performance Suggestions

This book was written to offer as much flexibility and utility as possible:

1. A hand drum ensemble can be started inexpensively as just about any size or type of hand drum will work. For example, assorted sizes of conga, djembe, or even frame drum (if laid on the lap or stand) can be used.
2. The pieces have been scored so that they can be played by a group of hand drums alone (and still sound full), with a group of small and larger hand drums, or utilizing all 3 parts: small hand drums, larger hand drums, and auxiliary instruments (tambourine, triangle, guiro, etc.).
3. Each piece can also be played with junkyard instruments (i.e., 5-gallon plastic bucket, optional plastic 30-gallon garbage can, and optional auxiliary instruments).
4. Hand drum (and junkyard) ensembles are very engaging and relevant, most often employing styles that are familiar and motivating to students.
5. The book can be used in both general and instrumental music classes.
6. Preparatory exercises preceding each piece target challenges and help students prepare music more quickly.
7. Performance notes for students introduce style characteristics and playing techniques, as well as suggest possibilities for further music and interdisciplinary study to meet national, state and local learning standards.
8. Selected solos have optional improvisation opportunities.
9. This book contains reproducible pages to fit the needs of your classes.

Hand Drum and Auxiliary Instruments

As mentioned above, the first line (Small Hand Drum part) of each piece can be played tutti by the entire group and still sound full. If the first line and optional second line are played, smaller conga, djembe, tubano, etc. should be used for the first line; and lower conga tubano, etc. for the second line. The third line calls for common music classroom instruments such as tambourine, triangles, guiro, etc. Though the auxiliary instruments are often not authentic, I strove to come as close to the stylistic sound using accessible instruments. Similarly, though it is not authentic to play, for example, conga in a piece styled after djembe music (and vice versa), students will need to play on the instruments available.

The world music styles chosen for the pieces are much more rhythmically complex and varied as in these beginning pieces. Nonetheless, the rhythms used are as authentic as possible at this easier level. Further, I only employ, aside from some vocal sounds in one piece, only four different strokes (and three different timbres for junkyard ensemble). This is so rhythmic reading and speed required to perform the different strokes can become gradually more challenging with each piece. Explanations of how to play the strokes are in the Legend section that follows and additional information in the Performance Notes that accompany each piece. Additionally, there are several examples on the internet of the instruments and techniques

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used in all the pieces. It should be noted that I chose commonly used English terms for the hand drumming strokes that describe the stroke so younger players can learn and remember them. However, there are several different terms for the strokes, particularly in languages used by the cultures who use the technique (e.g., West Africa, the Caribbean).

Preparatory Exercises

To help develop all players and keep rehearsal or class engaging, all students should learn the preparatory exercises. The preparatory exercises are important because students should have rhythm patterns and strokes fairly secure and learned at a gradual speed before attempting in the piece. Have students learn the rhythms on only one part of the drum first. For example, use bass or open tone only. I choose the stroke that students need more work on. As rhythms become more secure, add the different strokes indicated in the exercises.

Each exercise is four measures long and the accents and dynamics in the piece are not used. So, if you are performing the pieces with lines 2 and 3 and want to practice part independence, or if you have a wider skill range in the group, some students can play different exercises simultaneously. For example, less experienced students can play Exercises 4-6, while more advanced players play Exercises 1-3. Further, Exercise numbers target specific parts: Exercises 1-3 have rhythms found in the Small Hand Drum part, Exercises 4-5 in the Large Hand Drum part, and Exercise 6 in the Auxiliary part.

Rehearsal Suggestions

Working with one group or individual for too long will slow the rehearsal pace and invites boredom. When introducing parts for the first time in an ensemble or classroom setting, all students can learn each part. For example, small and large hand drums can play the auxiliary part while you are working with the auxiliary players. You can also use this strategy if you need to work with one section for more than a few moments.

Another strategy to keep engagement high is to have all players “air play” their parts while you listen to a section or individual play on an instrument. “Air playing” is done by approximating the stroke away from the instrument. Players should also approximate the placement of the hands and speed of the stroke (i.e., for open tone or muted tone and slap).

Here is a suggested sequence for learning unfamiliar or particularly challenging music:

1. “Tap, pat and rap”: Tap heels on the beat instead of toes as this is gross motor movement as opposed to fine motor movement. Rhythm is kinesthetically sensed and gross motor movement is optimal. Pat beat divisions (e.g., eighth notes in 4/4 time) on the lap with one hand. This beat dividing while counting helps foster a steady pulse. “Rapping” (chanting rhythm syllables or counting when pattern is more secure) should be done with a consistent system of developmental syllables, speech rhythms, or counting.
2. “Tap and clap (rap optional)”: Tap heels on the beat and clap rhythm. Students can rap while clapping as well.
3. Play the passage on one part of the drum or auxiliary instrument only. This will help secure rhythm before adding the new task of changing striking areas. Again, choose a stroke that needs work.

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4. Play part with proper stroke and on proper areas of instrument (center, near rim, etc.) as written. In most cases, it is recommended to start at a slow tempo and gradually increase speed over time. This helps with reading rhythms, but also with technique development and the coordination needed to move to different striking areas of instruments.

Conducting the group will be beneficial in many rehearsal situations and may be necessary with inexperienced or large ensembles. When the ensemble is playing confidently, I typically play along with students in the tradition of master drummers who are the “conductors” in several other cultures. To add interest, I recommend that you try covering the auxiliary instruments (3rd part) if you have students playing the small and large hand drum part, or if students are all on the small hand drum, consider playing the large hand drum part.

Improvisation

Much of world music is improvised. It is also a skill identified in national, state, and local standards. Unfortunately, we do not teach students to improvise enough in instrumental music ensembles. *Darbuka And Frame Drum* and *West African Drums* have sections with optional open repeats for solos. These sections are to be played as written or improvised. Other performers can play their written parts as accompaniment. Of course, students may also pre-write solos as well.

The best way to build confidence with improvisation is to have consistent opportunities to do it. Additionally, when teaching improvisation, limit choices at first. For example, have students improvise using only quarter notes, then continue increasing rhythm choices and length of passages as students advance. By making it a regular part of their rehearsal and performance experience, students will come to enjoy this activity as much as playing from notation.

If playing with junkyard instruments:

Junkyard Instrument History

Music is ubiquitous and has been a part of every known culture or society in human history. The type of music varies, of course, and so does the type of instrument used. This instrument choice is often dictated by available materials. For example, a group of people who inhabit wooded areas might make drums and other instruments from wood. In desert areas, or with nomadic people who are on the move, bone might be used for wind instruments. In some cases, instruments have been made out of discarded items. For example, steel drums were originally crafted from 50-gallon oil drums that were dumped from ships in the Caribbean. Similarly, old 5-gallon buckets such as those used to package paint or pickles have been used by street drummers. Those performers have expanded timbres, or tone colors, by adding trash cans, lids, and shopping carts that also serve to transport instruments. Originally, these street drummers played in the “go-go” style characterized by a fast triple meter feel common in hip hop music. Currently, go-go drummers are typically street performers in New York City, Boston, Washington D.C. and other large urban centers. They can be found as soloists or in duos or small ensembles playing a variety of music styles. Dance and singing are also often infused in these performances. There are several video examples available on the internet.

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Junkyard Instruments

Percussion parts in the pieces contained in this book can be played on “bucket,” which is a five-gallon pickle or paint bucket that can be found easily and recycled for this ensemble or bought at a hardware store at a very reasonable price (less than \$3 at the time of this writing). The optimal garbage can is a plastic 30-gallon variety found in most schools. A good ratio for sound balance is 2-4 buckets for every one garbage can.

Pieces can be played with buckets only (top line of the score), with buckets and/or garbage cans (the two top lines), or with all three parts: buckets, garbage cans, and auxiliary instruments. As you can see from the Legend (page 7), traditional snare drum, tom tom, bass drum, and other percussion instruments can be used as well. The snare and tom tom part is to be played by each individual player (that is, each player has his/her own snare and tom tom). Auxiliary parts can be covered with trash can lids, scraps of metal, etc., as indicated. However, I prefer that actual cymbals, shakers, etc. be used on this part for sufficient projection and a clean sound. If you have several players on the accessory part, some could play the junkyard instruments and others could play the traditional instruments.

It is best to use old or inexpensive drum sticks for the buckets. With the garbage cans, hard felt mallets can be used, but they may become worn prematurely. You can also use wooden dowels for the garbage cans and create a little more resonance with duct tape on the ends. For optimal resonance, and because there is often a plastic lip on 5-gallon bucket and garbage can centers, strike the bottom of the bucket or can off-center, as is commonly done with drums in general.

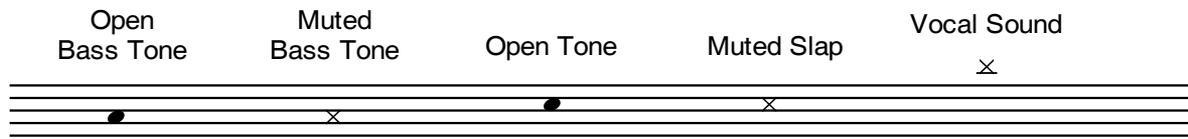
Buckets and garbage cans can be placed upside down on the ground, or suspended on cement or wood blocks, or instrument stands. Go-go drummers use whatever materials might be available; for example, they may suspend buckets to road pylons using rope. They also use shopping carts to transport their gear and as a percussion timbre. The most efficient way I've seen garbage cans (not buckets) suspended is to simply place them over the back of a chair. This places the garbage can at an ideal angle for playing and directs the sound to the audience.

If you have staging space and want to incorporate movement, garbage cans can also be suspended from players. Players can strap on buckets with bungee cords. To affix cords, drill holes in the bucket, insert eye hooks, and fasten with nuts on the inside.

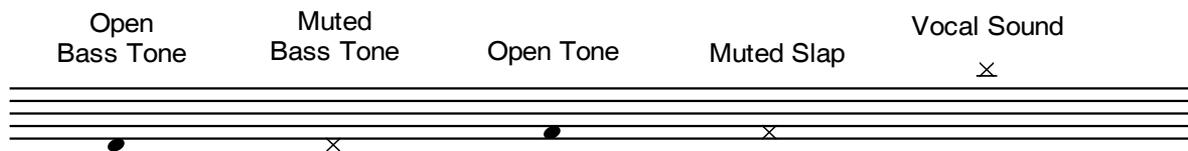
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Legend

Small Hand Drum: Conga, Djembe or Bucket



Large Hand Drum: Large Conga or Plastic Garbage Can



Open Bass Tone: Strike center of drum with entire hand, lifting away from the head as quickly as possible. This “staccato” motion will allow the sound to resonate at a lower sounding pitch. If playing buckets or garbage can, strike center with drum stick/mallet.

Muted Bass Tone: Strike center of drum with entire, slightly cupped hand but keep the hand on the drum to stop the vibration. Think of this stroke as opposite of the bass tone stroke above. If playing buckets or garbage can, strike center, but with a “dead stroke” by keeping stick/mallet on the head instead of rebounding the stroke.

Open Tone: Strike with rapid motion as with the bass tone, but aim for the edge of the head and use the fingers all the way to where they meet the palm. This should produce a full, resonant tone at a higher sounding pitch than the bass tone. If playing buckets or garbage can, strike approximately equidistant from rim and center with stick/mallet.

Muted Slap: With one hand slightly cupped and placed in the center of the drum to stop the vibration, strike the head near the edge as if playing an open tone. If playing buckets or garbage can, strike rim with shoulder of stick/mallet.

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Allemande

The *Allemande* was a Renaissance and Baroque Era instrumental dance music commonly thought to have originated from Germany in the 16th century. It was originally felt in duple meter (written in 2/4 as in the piece here). There was emphasis on the first beat and there was very little syncopation. It later evolved quite a bit in tempo and pulse (e.g., changed to quadruple or 4/4 feel). The Renaissance Era was from around the 14th century to the 17th century. During Bach's time in the Baroque Era (around 1600-1750), the *Allemande* became one of the four central styles—each from a different country—included in dance suites:

1. **Allemande** (Germany) - Moderate tempo; felt in 2/4
2. **Courante** (France) - Lively tempo; felt in 3/4
3. **Sarabande** (Spain) - Slow; felt in 3/4
4. **Gigue** (England) - Fast; felt in 6/8

Allemande instrumental performers must remember they are accompanying dancers and should not overshadow them. So, this piece can be moderately lively but never too loud. Also, notice there are no gradual changes in dynamics; for example, there are no crescendos or decrescendos. The sudden dynamic contrasts seen in this piece are referred to as terraced dynamics. This was a style characteristic of the time likely because the popular harpsichord, unlike the piano that was invented later, was unable to make gradual volume changes. More nuanced dynamic contrasts emerge later. It should be noted that some scholars believe Baroque performers did use gradual dynamics, but it is accepted by most that terraced dynamics were the norm in Renaissance and Baroque Eras.

Percussion during these eras were less prominent in dance music, but included instruments such as triangle, tambourine (as in this piece), hand drum, and various drums played with sticks.

KENDOR PRESENTS
Allemande

by Kevin Mixon

Grade 1
duration 1:45

FULL SCORE

Dance-like ♩ = 92

Small Hand Drum

Large Hand Drum

Tambourine

5

9

14

17

mp

mf

mp

mf

mp

mf

p