6. Musical Instruments

Using musical instruments with a whole class can seem a daunting prospect, however the more the use of instruments can be integrated into the school day the less this will be the case. The class need to become familiar with using instruments, looking after them and learning how to play them sensibly and creatively.

Depending on your school’s resources for instruments and the available spaces you have around school, will of course also influence how you use musical instruments. Below we’ve outlined some basic and useful instruments to have in school for EYFS and KS1, what they are called, where they originate from and how to play them. We’ve also included a few extra special instruments that may be worth investing in.

Charanga: Click ‘Freestyle’ > ‘FS and KS1 Units of Work’ and explore the different percussion units available.

A good song to get the class exploring instruments and how to play them can be found on the Sing Up website, called ‘Make that Sound’. There are recordings, backing tracks and lyrics to get you going.

www.singup.org/teaching.../lesson-plan-make-that-sound

Establishing the ground rules when using instruments

It really is worth explaining to the children, before even getting the instruments out, a little about them. Instruments are a costly resource for any school and we must therefore know how to look after them and play them carefully. I would always demonstrate how to use different instruments before handing them out and explain a few basic signals for stopping playing and for starting playing.

Whatever that signal might be, make sure everyone is clear that when you give the signal to stop playing, that is what they do. You might want to turn this into a game of musical statues i.e ask everyone to tap along on their instruments to a piece of music but when you stop the music they have to stop playing too!

Knowing how to put the instruments away is also important. It’s very easy for them to get chucked into the box or cupboard at the end of the session, so ensuring that the instruments are carefully put away is also good practice. You may want to create a tidying up song, similar to one you already use in class:

‘It’s time to tidy up, it’s time to tidy up.
Put the instruments away, it’s time to tidy up’
To the tune of “The farmers in the dell”

Select a piece of recorded music which indicates it is time to put the instruments away e.g. the Mission Impossible theme tune. Here is a link to a video and soundtrack with a 60 second timer on the Tes website which you can download:

www.tes.com/teaching-resource/mission-impossible-timer-3004203
Un-tuned Percussion Instruments

**Djembe Drums**
Small / medium sized (around 7 inches in size). Originating from Africa these hand drums are easy to play and give a great sound. Do not play with beaters, hands only – they will get damaged! Toca percussion do some great lightweight, yet sturdy djembes in a great range of different colours.

**Hand Drum / Tambour / Frame drum**
These look similar to a tambourine but without the bells. They are easy to play, light and portable and come in different sizes which enable different pitches.

**Gato Drum**
This is a wooden rectangular drum with shapes of varying lengths cut into the top surface. You play it with a beater and it produces different tones depending on the shape struck. They are great drums originating from South America.

**Claves**
Wooden “tapping” sticks. These can come in all sorts of shapes, sizes and colours. They originate from the South American continents and are heard throughout Latin music.

**Tambourines**
If possible it’s great to have a variety of different sized tambourines for more depth and sound options. You can get tambourines with or without a skin or ‘head’. Great for shaking and tapping; Explore the different sounds to be made. If tapping, try to tap on the padded part of the hand at the base of the thumb.

**Guiro**
Wooden “scraper” that looks a bit like a fish. There are two holes to hold it with your thumb and finger of one hand, whilst with the other hand scrape the surface with a thin stick or beater. Originates from South America and used in Latin music although you will find different versions used in other cultures too.

**Two Tone Woodblock**
A double woodblock that produces two different pitches, rather like a tick tock! To be tapped with a wooden beater.

**Woodblock**
Make great resonant sounds for tapping. Try to tap in the middle of the block, towards the edge and over the hole to get a better sound.
Maracas
Hold the handles and flick with the wrist or tap into the palm of your hand. South American instruments used in Latin music.

Egg shakers
These are great for small hands.

Cowbell
Hard metal bell in the shape of an old cow bell! Plat with a rubber or felt headed beater as the sound can be quite piercing in young hands unable to yet control the volume! Can be found both in African and Latin music and often used to mark the pulse as it can cut across other sounds in the ensemble.

Rain Stick
A long stick looking instrument that you tip upside down to allow the beads to run the length of the stick and make the sound of falling rain. This is a great instrument for creating textures. It is not a rhythmic instrument. Originates from South America / Rain Forests

Cymbals
Suspended cymbals are a great instrument to have, even if only one, as they can create a great texture of sound for composing. At this age I think it is useful to have the cymbal suspended on a stand if possible to allow for both hands to hold beaters to explore “drum rolling” textures etc. they can also be quite heavy for youngsters to hold.

Gongs
As above the suspended variety are best and great for composing and learning about different sounds or Timbres.

Jingle Bells
Easy to play and a great texture instrument.

Triangles
Great textural sounds. Try to play with a short string attached to the triangle or better still hold your pointer finger out straight and suspend the triangle off of it. You can then hit the triangle with the metal beater using your other hand.
Large Gathering Drums
These are great for circle games and working in large teams together on the same drum. They can be costly but are a great resource to have and provide a very different sound to other instruments in the classroom.

Wooden Drumsticks
Drumsticks can sound great played on the floor by a whole class. They can really help co-ordination as well as develop pulse and rhythm sticks. You can explore all sorts of different sounds and surfaces to play on!

Instruments to avoid...
There are some un-tuned instruments that are not so easy to play or useful at KS1 or EYF levels, but often found in the classroom, such as castinets and vibraslaps.

The Charanga website has some helpful videos covering the basics of Pulse and Rhythm, with backing tracks for the class to clap or play along to. Good practice for the start of lessons or 5 min fillers with instruments.
Charanga: Click ‘Freestyle’>‘Creative Apps’> ‘Musical Toolkit’ to access a creative resource that explores musical dimensions such as pulse, rhythm and pitch.
Click ‘Freestyle’> ‘KS1 Units of work’ > ‘Rhythm in the Way we Walk’ to access a comprehensive scheme of music, based around learning two pieces of music. Explore the ‘Flexible Games’ within each unit to play fun games with your class that explore rhythm and pulse.

Tuned Percussion Instruments

Chime bar sets
Metal single tuned bars. Hit with a rubber beater in the middle of the bar, over the hole for a good resonant sound. Remember to bounce the beater off the bar, no splats!

Metallaphones
These are the larger metal instruments that look like a wooden Xylophone but are metallic. They are very resonant and can add a great sound colour to your compositions as well as being used for melodic lines.
**Xylophones**
Wooden tuned instruments. Play with a hard beater in the middle of the note, not the edge, for a good quality of sound. Bounce the beater off the note.

**Glockenspiel**
Small metallic instruments that make a high pitched sound that can cut across an ensemble. Great for working on melodies and creating metallic textural sounds.

**Hand Bells / Desk Bells**
These bells are great for children with limited movement. They can be played with a flicked wrist action or some will have a tag on the top of the handle that can be pressed to make the sound. The desk bells can be placed on a table or flat surface and tapped on the top to make a sound.

**Boomwhackers**
Tuned and colour coded plastic tubes that produce a sound when tapped against a surface. The larger tubes can be a bit difficult to handle for smaller children so make sure there are smaller ones to hand. They are great for pulse keeping and creating rhythmic patterns but there isn’t much variety in the sound that they can make.

**Beaters**
A mixture of felt headed, rubber headed, woollen and wooden beaters are best to have in school, depending of course upon the instruments you have.

If you lack instrument resources in your school and would like to hire some, this can be arranged through the Hub. SoundStorm have a wide variety of instruments available at a nominal cost to hire; they can also advise you on what to purchase and introduce you Music Hub partners that can show you how to use them.
Playing Together

Once everyone has an instrument, allow everyone a chance to become familiar and to try the instrument out. Where possible have the children sitting in a circle when we have the instruments out so that they can all see the leader as well as each other. Useful when you need to stop everyone playing!

Explore how many different sounds can be made on the instruments

Activity How many sounds? (5 min)

Challenge your young players to find 5 different sounds on their instrument
- Each sound should be different; ask the class to think creatively about how they make each sound.
- Can they perform their different sounds to the class?
- Discuss the sounds you heard

Once everyone is familiar with the instruments, you may want to consider grouping instrument sounds together e.g. all the tapping instruments to sit together in the circle, all the drums together in the circle etc.
- Explore and discuss the contrasting sounds/timbre that the instruments make.
- What the instrument is made of makes a big difference to the sound it produces.
- What are your instruments made of?
- Can the class categorise themselves according to similar or contrasting instrumental sounds?

Activity Whats that Sound? (5 min)

Can the children guess which instrument they are listening to?
- Ask the class to close their eyes and listen to the sound that is being played.
- Can they name the instrument heard or can they describe or draw it?

Great for getting the children to listen to the different sounds/timbres that the instruments make but to also learn the instrument names.

Further activity
You may want to make an ‘instrument board’ on the classroom wall or a scrap book that stays in the instrument box with drawings and descriptions of the different instruments the class have been exploring.

The ‘Magical Musical Aquarium’ (Sing Up) is a pitch and tuned percussion composition activity for KS1 which includes listening links, topic related songs and a step by step guide through a creative composition lesson using tuned percussion and voices. Charanga: Each unit of work in the ‘Scheme’ will progress to include composition components.