

# The History and Evolution of Percussion Instruments in World Music

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## Abstract

This paper explores the history, cultural significance, and evolution of percussion instruments across diverse global traditions. From primitive rhythmic tools in prehistoric societies to complex orchestral and electronic applications in contemporary music, percussion has played a foundational role in communication, ritual, and musical expression. By examining archaeological records, ethnomusicological literature, and comparative musicology, this study provides an analytical overview of how percussion instruments have adapted and transformed across continents and centuries, reflecting both technological advancements and socio-cultural dynamics.

**Keywords:** Percussion Instruments; Ethnomusicology; Musical Evolution; Cultural Significance; Comparative Musicology; Rhythmic Traditions

## 1. Introduction

Percussion instruments are arguably the oldest category of musical instruments, integral to the development of music across cultures. Defined by their sound production through striking, shaking, or scraping, percussion instruments serve rhythmical, melodic, and symbolic functions in human societies. Their simplicity of design and universality of use make them a critical subject for understanding the evolution of music and cultural exchange. Music is a universal language that can elicit profound emotional and cognitive responses. In this literature review, we explore the intricate relationship between music and the brain, from how it is decoded by the nervous system to its therapeutic potential in various disorders. Music engages a diverse network of brain regions and circuits, including sensory-motor processing, cognitive, memory, and emotional components. Music-induced brain network oscillations occur in specific frequency bands, and listening to one's preferred music can grant easier access to these brain functions.

This paper aims to trace the historical trajectory of percussion instruments, their typological evolution, and their integration into world music practices, using both historical documentation and ethnographic insights.

## 2. Early Origins of Percussion Instruments

### 2.1. Prehistoric Evidence

The earliest known percussion instruments date back to prehistoric times. Archaeological findings such as bone clappers, log drums, and simple idiophones made from stones or shells suggest that humans have used rhythm for ritual and communication long before melodic instruments emerged (Montagu, 2007). Cave paintings and artifacts from Paleolithic sites depict dance scenes that likely incorporated percussion rhythms.

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## 2.2. Ritual and Communication

In many ancient societies, percussion instruments were used in spiritual and communicative contexts. African talking drums, for example, transmitted messages over long distances. Similarly, frame drums in Mesopotamia and Egypt were associated with religious ceremonies and female spiritual leaders (Conway, 1992).

## 2.3. New uses of percussion

Significant changes in the number of percussionists needed, the types of instruments, and their uses were central to the new roles for percussion in the orchestra. This can be found in such works as Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* (1887) and Debussy's *La Mer* (1903-5). Opposed to many of the works written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, these works required a greater number of percussionists, in addition to using new, exotic, and strange instruments that were yet to be used in a purely orchestral setting. These changes were stepping beyond the uses of the instruments from the Turkish military bands as new cultures and sound worlds began to emerge.

*Capriccio Espagnol* uses percussion to create new and exotic sound worlds, as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov uses percussion in new and interesting ways. The first example is his use of castanets, to evoke an exotic Spanish sound. He uses these instruments throughout his work to accentuate changes and colour the sound created with his use of melody and harmony, which makes the work overflow with the Spanish culture. Another significant way that he wrote for percussion was by increasing and changing its role in the orchestra by writing for timpani, triangle, and snare drum rolls to underpin various solos in other instruments throughout the fourth movement of this work. There were many composers who also experimented with new and non-traditional uses for percussion instruments including Strauss in *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1911-1915) and Mahler in his 4th, 6th and 7th Symphonies written in 1900, 1904, and 1905 respectively.

In *Eine Alpensinfonie* Strauss uses multiple cowbells to musically illustrate cows grazing on the mountain plateau. In addition to this he wrote for two thunder sheets and wind machines to represent the "storm", which is believed to be the first example of these instruments being used in a concert hall outside of an operatic setting. Mahler also employs unusual instruments in his symphonies such as sleighbells opening his 4th Symphony to conjure horses pulling a cart in the minds of the audience, the hammer sound in his 6th Symphony to illustrate the three blows of Fate on his life, and multiple cowbells in his 7th Symphony to represent cows in a meadow, similar to Strauss' *Eine Alpensinfonie*. These two composers show that the role of percussion instruments was beginning to change as they were starting to be acknowledged for their sonic potential instead of just their rhythmical qualities.

There were countless composers at this time who were writing percussion in new and interesting ways such as Debussy's use of antique cymbals in *Afternoon of the Faun* (1894) and Igor Stravinsky use of snare drum and timpani interludes in *Petrushka*. Works like these allowed many composers to begin experimenting with the role of percussion and subsequently the technical challenges for percussionists were expanding. One example of a work that shows the new choices a percussionist was expected to make is *La Mer*, by Debussy as it features a cymbal part which focuses on the orchestral colours and timbres that are possible out of cymbals, parts like this adds to the potential musical decisions that the percussionist can and were being expected to make. John Beck states percussion instruments have a great "timbre efficiency" as they are instruments that can produce an enormous variety of sounds in the hands of only a few players. This became a major focus of composers in the twentieth century as composers started making music that was focusing on timbre change instead of just focusing on melody and harmony.

## 2.4. Animal symbolism in art and music

The Natufian flutes all had traces of contact wear around the finger holes, indicating people had played the instruments. But what were the flutes used for? Davin and his team can only speculate, but it is possible the flutes were used in rituals with spiritual or quasi-religious meaning.

Davin points to contemporary evidence of the symbolic meaning of birds. The Plains Indians in North America, for example, held communal religious ceremonies in which they blew similar whistles made from eagle bones decorated with feathers. Similarly, Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea wear the feathers of rainforest birds which are considered to be spirits.

"The plains Indians want to communicate with eagles to take their strength. The relationship is symbolic," said Davin.

### **3. Evolution Across Civilizations**

#### **3.1. Africa**

Africa is often regarded as the rhythmic heart of the world, due to the continent's deep-rooted percussive traditions. Instruments such as the djembe, dunun, and kalimba not only provided musical accompaniment but also served ceremonial and social purposes. African rhythmic structures have influenced nearly all modern musical genres, especially jazz, funk, and hip-hop.

#### **3.2. Asia**

In South Asia, percussion instruments like the tabla and mridangam are central to classical music forms. These instruments evolved alongside raga and tala systems, emphasizing intricate rhythmic cycles. East Asian traditions, including Japanese taiko and Chinese lu, also feature large-scale percussion ensembles in both folk and religious settings.

#### **3.3. Europe**

In Europe, percussion initially played a minor role in music, often limited to military and ceremonial uses. Timpani, imported from the Middle East during the Crusades, were the first to be integrated into orchestral settings during the Baroque era. The 19th century saw a rise in orchestral percussion with composers like Berlioz and Stravinsky using expanded percussion sections for dramatic effect.

#### **3.4. Americas**

Indigenous American percussion includes shakers, drums, and slit gongs, often used in spiritual ceremonies. With the transatlantic slave trade, African rhythms merged with European and indigenous forms, giving birth to new genres like samba, salsa, and jazz, characterized by their polyrhythmic structures and percussive complexity.

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### **4. Technological Advancements and Globalization**

#### **4.1. Industrial and Electronic Innovations**

The Industrial Revolution allowed for the mass production and standardization of percussion instruments. The 20th century introduced electronic percussion, including drum machines and MIDI controllers, transforming production and performance in popular music.

#### **4.2. Cross-Cultural Fusion**

Globalization has led to unprecedented cross-cultural collaboration. Percussionists today often blend instruments and rhythms from different traditions, creating hybrid forms such as Afro-Cuban jazz, Indo-jazz fusion, and world percussion ensembles.

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### **5. Contemporary Applications and Trends**

#### **5.1. Education and Therapy**

Percussion is increasingly used in educational contexts and music therapy. Its accessibility makes it ideal for early childhood education and cognitive rehabilitation, with studies showing benefits for motor skills, coordination, and emotional expression (Thaut, 2008).

#### **5.2. Gender and Social Roles**

Historically, percussion was often gender-specific in certain cultures. Contemporary movements have seen a rise in female percussionists, breaking traditional roles and expanding participation in percussion traditions worldwide.

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### **6. Conclusion**

The evolution of percussion instruments mirrors the broader trajectory of human civilization reflecting technological innovation, migration, colonization, and globalization. From ritualistic tools to concert hall essentials and digital

interfaces, percussion continues to adapt, resonate, and redefine its role in the musical ecosystem. Further interdisciplinary research combining musicology, anthropology, and digital humanities can deepen our understanding of its enduring impact.

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### **Compliance with ethical standards**

#### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

#### *Authors declaration*

The authors declare that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All ethical standards have been complied with.

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