



**MID-ATLANTIC
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**
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Spotlight on Instruments

PERCUSSION



The percussion family is a diverse group of musical instruments that produce sound by being struck, shaken, scraped, or otherwise manipulated. Percussion instruments have been an integral part of music-making across various cultures and historical periods. Here's an overview of the history and repertoire of the percussion family of instruments

Prehistoric and Ancient Times:

Percussion instruments likely have the longest history of all musical instruments, with evidence of their use dating back to prehistoric times. Early humans likely used drums made from hollowed logs or animal skins. Percussion was prominent in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia,

Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Drums, cymbals, bells, and rattles were commonly used in religious, military, and ceremonial contexts.

Medieval Europe:

Percussion instruments like tambourines, timpani, cymbals and bells were used in medieval European music. Timpani, or kettle drums, gained popularity during this period. Percussion instruments in medieval times were diverse and widely used, playing an essential role in various social, cultural, religious, and military contexts. The instruments ranged from simple handheld drums to more complex tambourines, reflecting the musical richness and cultural exchanges of the medieval period.

Renaissance - 14th to 17th Century:

Renaissance: Percussion began to be incorporated more prominently into ensembles. Tabor and the side drum were common, and percussion instruments were used in military bands. The emergence of the timpani as an orchestral instrument and the refinement of playing techniques marked notable advancements during this time. Percussion played an essential role in both sacred and secular music, enriching the musical landscape of the Renaissance.

Baroque Era - late 17th to early 18th Century:

Timpani gained further prominence during the Baroque period, being a standard part of orchestral ensembles. Other instruments like tambourines, triangles, and castanets were also used in opera, sacred, and dance music. Baroque composers including J.S. Bach and George Frideric Handel incorporated percussion instruments, primarily timpani, into orchestral compositions, such as symphonies, concerti grossi, and overtures. Timpani provided rhythmic drive and accentuated harmonic changes.

Classical Era- late 18th to early 19th Century:

Classical Era: Composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven expanded the use of percussion within orchestral compositions, utilizing instruments like timpani, snare drum, and bass drum. Timpani became a standard part of

orchestral ensembles, often used in pairs and tuned to specific pitches. Composers in the Classical era began to notate percussion parts more precisely, specifying the pitches, rhythms, and dynamics for timpani and other percussion instruments.

Romantic Era – 19th Century:

The 19th century saw the development of new percussion instruments and techniques, including the vibraphone, marimba, xylophone, and tambourine. Composers like Berlioz, Wagner, and Mahler further embraced percussion, incorporating exotic and non-traditional instruments to evoke specific moods and imagery in their compositions including both symphonic and operatic works. Timpani saw advancements in design, including the use of pedals to change pitch, allowing timpanists to play a wider range of notes more easily. This innovation greatly enhanced the role of timpani in the orchestra. Percussion instruments were increasingly integrated into chamber music, expanding the variety and sound palette of ensembles. Chamber works featuring percussion showcased the versatility of these instruments.

20th and 21st Century:

The 20th century saw significant innovation in percussion instruments, with the development of electronic percussion and the incorporation of non-traditional sounds into compositions. Percussionists developed and refined playing techniques, including extended techniques, multiphonics, and improvisation, pushing the boundaries of traditional percussion performance. Percussion music in the 20th and 21st centuries benefited from increased exposure to and integration of diverse cultural influences, leading to a fusion of traditional percussion styles and modern approaches. Percussion became a prominent element in contemporary classical music, with many composers writing solo and ensemble works for percussion. Compositions like "Ionisation" by Edgard Varèse and "Rebonds" by Iannis Xenakis exemplify the experimental and avant-garde nature of percussion music in this era.

Percussionists began incorporating world percussion instruments and techniques into various musical styles, leading to a fusion of genres such as Latin jazz, Afrobeat, and world music. Artists like Mickey Hart and Zakir

Hussain played pivotal roles in promoting world percussion. Percussion instruments, including drum set and electronic drums, became central to various popular music genres, such as rock, pop, hip-hop, and electronic dance music. Drummers and percussionists became essential figures in bands and recording studios.

In summary, the history of percussion instruments spans millennia, and they have evolved significantly in terms of types, techniques, and repertoire. Percussion instruments have found their place in diverse musical traditions and continue to be an essential part of musical expression in various genres and cultures.

Some prominent percussionists of our time are Evelyn Glennie, Zakir Hussain, Sheila E., and Glen Velez.