



# What is the easiest instrument to learn

A lighthearted look at learning different musical instruments



**WMG**

Warwick Music Group

# About the Author



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Chris is an educator, thought leader and innovator in brass instrumental learning.

After training at Leeds Conservatoire and the Royal Academy of Music he enjoyed a successful freelance performing career, alongside consulting to brass instrument manufacturers.

Later Chris' focus moved to education, where he taught in many settings, becoming a Music Service Senior Manager and national level trainer in instrumental teaching.

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# Introduction

We are so often asked about what are the easiest (or hardest) instruments to play? I think my initial answer would be that in all honesty the instrument you love is going to be the one that's easiest to master, simply because your time spent with the instrument is a joy! However, the instrument you love listening to may not be the instrument you love playing so try out a few instruments before you start in earnest... you might be surprised!

Being in love with Rachmaninov's Preludes for Piano is not going to make learning them physically, intellectually or emotionally easier, in fact a deep love of this music may be a barrier to performance if you are so personally invested in the outcome (it also won't make your hands bigger!)



# What does “easy” mean?

The first thing I'd like to point out is that broadly difficulty can be divided into two key areas: the first, and most often considered by beginners, “what are the technical difficulties of operating the instrument?” i.e. getting a sound out, learning the notes, reading the music etc. The second area is often overlooked and that is “what role within an ensemble or genre the instrument plays?”. If you crave the limelight or would rather opt for a more supporting role this could influence your choice of instrument. Similarly, if you want to quickly join a group or ensemble choosing an instrument with a lower technical or musical demand may be the way forward.

Clearly there is a huge difference between enjoying a scrape at the back of the seconds in a community orchestra and playing the Brahms Violin Concerto in the Royal Albert Hall! Even instruments that present the humblest of technical challenges can hold key musical roles that are vital to the success of a performance. I mean the clapping in Pharrell Williams “Happy” isn't just clapping...right?

I'll try and zoom through the most popular instruments by family and mention both kinds of difficulty...I'll include the “standard perceived wisdom” that music industry insiders tend to believe for each instrument with some thoughts of my own.

**BUT!** Remember, every instrumentalist is married to or has joined the family of their own instrument choice, some have spent hours (10,000 usually) trying to be a wonderful player and musician on that specific instrument, so nobody wants to hear or read that their instrument is easy or has a lower status role in music... **NO ONE...** I mean we are talking about peoples flesh and blood here!

By the way, instruments are organized into families based on how they create sounds not by what they are made of (so a metal saxophone is a woodwind instrument because you vibrate its reed (wood) with your breath (wind) to make a sound).

# Classical Strings

Generally thought of as very hard to play (start when you are 3 years old) and super expensive to buy (forget that Ferrari) the classical string quartet has its own internal hierarchy.

Whether solo, in the string quartet, orchestra or Elbow album the musical roles of lead violin and principal cellist are two of the peaks of western art music but the violist (who is often the butt of many a classical music joke) has many moments of glory. The engine room of the bass section underpin and, in some ways, originate the amazingly beautiful sound of any string section.

Undeniably, standing wisdom is that the violin and cello are challenging to operate and both play stellar and demanding musical roles. The double bass probably is the easiest to operate

but the hardest to do the logistics on (try getting that in your Uber!).

The violin can be surprisingly cheap to buy at a beginner level and all the string family come in useful  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and full sizes to suit. But any of these instruments demand oceans of time, patience and good lessons to achieve basic competence. Reading music is essential but is usually learnt as you go along.

If you want to learn a string instrument my advice would be learn in a pack! Learning together in a group is more fun and beginners always sound better together than alone. Combine some personal learning and practice with playing in a group with other beginners for the holistic string experience.

# Guitars: Electric

I guess the six-string electric guitar is king here. It could be jazz, blues, rock, funk, indie, country or punk but the lead instrumental voice is the six-string electric, usually a Gibson or a Fender (other brands are available!). Despite its power chording, scream soloing, feedback dripping sound the electric guitar is surprisingly sensitive instrument when well amplified and needs delicate and subtle control.

Usually, players use their ears and guitar tabs to learn songs that they then play from memory and reading traditional music is somewhat reserved for pro session musicians. I suppose that the best thing is that nearly all the great players have been self-taught so there are few rights and wrongs. With a mountain of YouTube and magazine material to go at alongside more traditional tutor books and Online lessons there are so many ways to access learning...there are even graded exams from UK company, Rock School. Great value far-eastern instruments and amps make for a low-cost barrier to

starting your guitar hero journey.

Down sides are that learning guitar can be a solitary occupation so when the moment comes to emerge butterfly like into the light and play with others this can be daunting. Far better to bite the bullet and get out and join in with a few simple chords as soon as possible (like day 2!).

Expect to be making simple tunes and chords quite quickly but don't expect to play along with Page, Hendrix and Clapton (or Marr and Knopfler) for quite a few years!

Six-string electric skills can be successfully transferred to the steel stringed acoustic guitar but perhaps less so the other way round. Either of these steel stringed instruments could quite literally shred the fingertips on your left hand so be sure to gradually toughen up rather than trying to play for hours a day when you first begin!

# Guitars: Classical and bass

Surprisingly, the nylon stringed classical guitar needs a bit more physical “umph” to make it sing but it really is a “proper instrument” and has a large repertoire of both original compositions and transcriptions.

There is a long-standing tradition of teaching and learning along with graded exams and clubs.

The classical guitar is seen in ensembles and groups together sometimes but is a really great instrument to play for yourself, its self-contained, beautiful sounding and not too loud. Again, in recent years decent far-eastern instruments make the barrier to entry low and learning abounds both in print and off line. Although the highest levels of classical guitar playing are technically demanding, almost unattainable, new players can quickly be making pleasing music that they feel happy sharing with others. You can usually take your classical guitar into informal folk or jazz settings so it's quite a transportable choice.

Electric bass is probably the easiest in this family to get up and at it in terms of technical skills.

The bass languished a bit in the early years of pop and rock but from the 70's onwards a whole plethora of new and amazing bass techniques were developed...slap, p-bass, fret less, etc, which brought a whole host of technical challenges to the bass player.

However, one of the great things about bass playing is that the bassist can bring the most amazing feel and influence to a tune by implementing the simplest of techniques with the highest level of musical skills, creating the momentum of the band by controlling the beat in close collaboration with the drummer...

One of my fondest memories of performing professionally in stadium gigs was our amazing bass player's ability to play a simple, rich and perfectly placed bass note into an expectant silence that propelled the whole performance forward “wow that guy's got such great time”, perfect note placement makes a great bass player!



# Keyboards

In terms of simple motor skills there's not much to choose between these instruments, other than the piano itself which requires more feel and touch in the fingers, hands and arms to create the wide timbre set that a skilled player can use.

The other keyboard instruments have specific, technological knowledge requirements and may include tech that helps the player by supplementing the keyed notes with software-controlled accompaniments. This may seem like a quick fix to making music but to be honest a good piano technique will always pay dividends in the long run. This could be developed on a fully acoustic, traditional instrument or an electronic piano (rather than keyboard) with a proper weighted action.

The idea of being able to walk up to a piano and "tickle the ivories", casually entertaining those around is a long standing and attractive one. This of course can range from having learnt one "party piece" to being one of those awesome people who seem to be able to pluck almost any tune out of the ether whilst smiling and chatting!

Either way manipulating the keyboard takes time, patience and practice. These days there are many ways to get lessons; books, DVD, online, zoom, and of course good old piano lessons. The good news is that increasingly you can learn piano in the genre or style that interests you. In many instances this will require learning to read traditional notation as you go along but can involve learning by ear, using chord guide sheets or a combination of all three. There have never been more competitively priced pianos around and of course there is always a good secondhand market. Acoustic pianos are heavy and quite loud so consider an electronic piano that can use headphones (some of the more advanced acoustic pianos have this built in as well).

With regular, short practice sessions good progress can be quickly made, little and often is the best way. If you are finding a teacher always get references and don't dismiss online lessons as this sector has come on in leaps and bounds recently. If you are a young person or an adult learner it might be a good idea to learn initially in a genre that interests you rather than following a traditional scheme meant for children.

# Brass

Brass...our specialist subject! The perceived wisdom is that French Horn is the hardest instrument (you'll hear trumpet and trombone players saying "certainly sounds hard" as a leg pull to horn players!). This because the horn is very long which puts the notes very close together meaning that the lips and breath must be extraordinarily accurate whilst playing. The horn also has in general the most limited set of genres and ensembles to play in, but it does feature in more orchestral music than any other brass instrument. Interestingly the French horn has a particularly passionate amateur following with a society. The bad news: as well as being difficult the horn is expensive and really needs some one-to-one or small group lessons. The good news: many French horn players begin on the Eb tenor horn which is a brass band instrument and is much more accessible, also you get to play lots of different types of music whilst in brass bands.

Trumpet is the most popular brass instrument along with its conical bore cousin the cornet. The trumpet plays in a whole host of ensembles and genres, usually playing a dominant role.

Musically the trumpet is often reserved for climactic moments and the big tunes, so the instrument often attracts dominant and self-confident people who love the limelight and thrive on a bit of pressure. (I guess you could say the same for the French horn in the orchestra, but horn players hunt more in packs of four and tend to be a bit more philosophical perhaps?).

Trombone is a team game for sure and tends to attract those who love the quality of sound as much as it's musical content. Like the trumpet the trombone appears in a wide range of ensembles and genres and one of the advantages of playing the trombone is the wide range of music making you can get involved with. Also, the trombone is a much more kinetic choice that really suits some more than the "micro skill" orientated trumpet and horn. Trombone players are a bit of a tribe of their own with a strong sense of community.

The cost of a suitable starter instruments for trumpet and trombone is now very low and good teachers abound. Online learning and learning in different genres is new but beginning to grow.

# Brass

The tuba is the largest brass instrument and is most prevalent in brass bands. Being big and specialized tubas are expensive, but if you are interested don't be put off, read on!

In fact all the instruments in a British brass band, except the trombone are a kind of tuba, from bass to sopranino! It's this unity of design that gives the brass band its unique sound. All the brass band family of instruments are very accessible and the ability to transfer between instruments is pretty good.

Brass band composers are good at distributing musical roles and challenges fairly and appropriately for each instrument and the instrument sections inside the bands are supportive and graded within themselves with parts of differing difficulty inside each section.

Brass bands give tuition and supply instruments and uniforms to their members so if you are interested in brass playing a brass band is a great start and join an established team. Brass bands are always happy to accept new members or help you find the right band for you.

So, what's the easiest, well the medium sized mouthpiece instruments; trombone, baritone, euphonium and maybe tenor horn are all easy to get your first sounds on and will allow you to get more notes more quickly. All brass players really will need to read music eventually but that can be learnt as you go along and there's plenty of play by ear material for you to join in with. French horn is probably the hardest with trumpet second in line.

# Woodwind

It's clear to see that recorder gets the prize for easiest woodwind instrument and thousands of people enjoy a lifetime of making music on the recorder, especially enjoying historical music making.

In terms of the woodwinds that require an embouchure (lips controlling the sound and pitch) saxophone is probably the easiest to get to grips with but as we've discussed that's not the end of the story, the sax often has a starring role with expectations of great reading skills and improvising talents (making it up as you go along). You can play sax in wind bands and big bands along with jazz and rock/pop settings, there is also a classical saxophone world which is more specialized and focuses on solo and quartet playing. Saxophones are quite expensive to buy and need annual maintenance, like all the woodwind family. Similarly there is a diet of reeds to be bought. The good news is that one

you have some basic competence on your "home" sax you can easily try the rest of the family, usually baritone, tenor, alto and soprano. The most common to start on are the alto and tenor sax. There is lots of online sax tuition and a strong traditional route via one-to-one teachers. Clarinet comes next and is a more affordable and transportable option. Alongside a strong jazz and wind band tradition the clarinet is a fully paid-up member of the orchestra along with its siblings the bass, Eb and A clarinets. Clarinet is hugely popular in schools and success comes quickly in terms of both being able to play tunes and join in ensembles. The sky's the limit in terms of where you can take your clarinet playing and even the finest instruments are not too jaw dropping in terms of cost. Lessons are still probably the most common way of learning the clarinet with many good teachers around.

# Woodwind

Flute has and continues to be a very popular instrument whether that be the orchestral (or concert) flute or the numerous relatives used in folk music. In terms of getting going it's a bit Marmite where some learners seem to be able to jump straight in whilst others are baffled and can't make a sound. Ergonomically tricky at first the flute can give quite rapid progress in terms of notes and playing tunes or joining a band. However, getting great sound quality and really coming to terms with the range of pitch, intonation and expressive quality of the flute is a life's work and the seeming ease with which star players seem to achieve this is deceptive. Entry level instruments represent great value and the barrier this presents to starting is low. One to one lessons with a good teacher is probably for the best as the posture, ergonomics and sound production on the flute are not always that intuitive. The double reed instruments, oboe and bassoon are traditionally the hardest to get to grips with as a starter. When you consider the musical roles expected of it, the oboe takes the prize

as the most challenging woodwind instrument, always asked to solo and play melodies in the orchestra or band and presenting a lifetime searching for the "right" reed, the oboe is not for the fainthearted or dabbler! This combines with a rather high cost for a decent entry level instrument and the ongoing high levels of reed purchase and instrument maintenance. One-to-one lessons are a must have and it will take some time before a decent sound is produced. However once competent a decent oboist will always be in demand! Bassoonists face a large, heavy instrument with difficult ergonomics and the tricky double reed. As the bass and tenor voice of the woodwind section initially the parts are not so demanding and like the oboe a good bassoon player is hard to find and always in demand. Again, the bassoon is not really an instrument to dip in and out of. Though less so than the oboe, reeds are a challenge and like the oboe one to one lessons are a really good idea. Instruments are expensive and hard to find, even at a beginner level, although they do tend to hold their value.

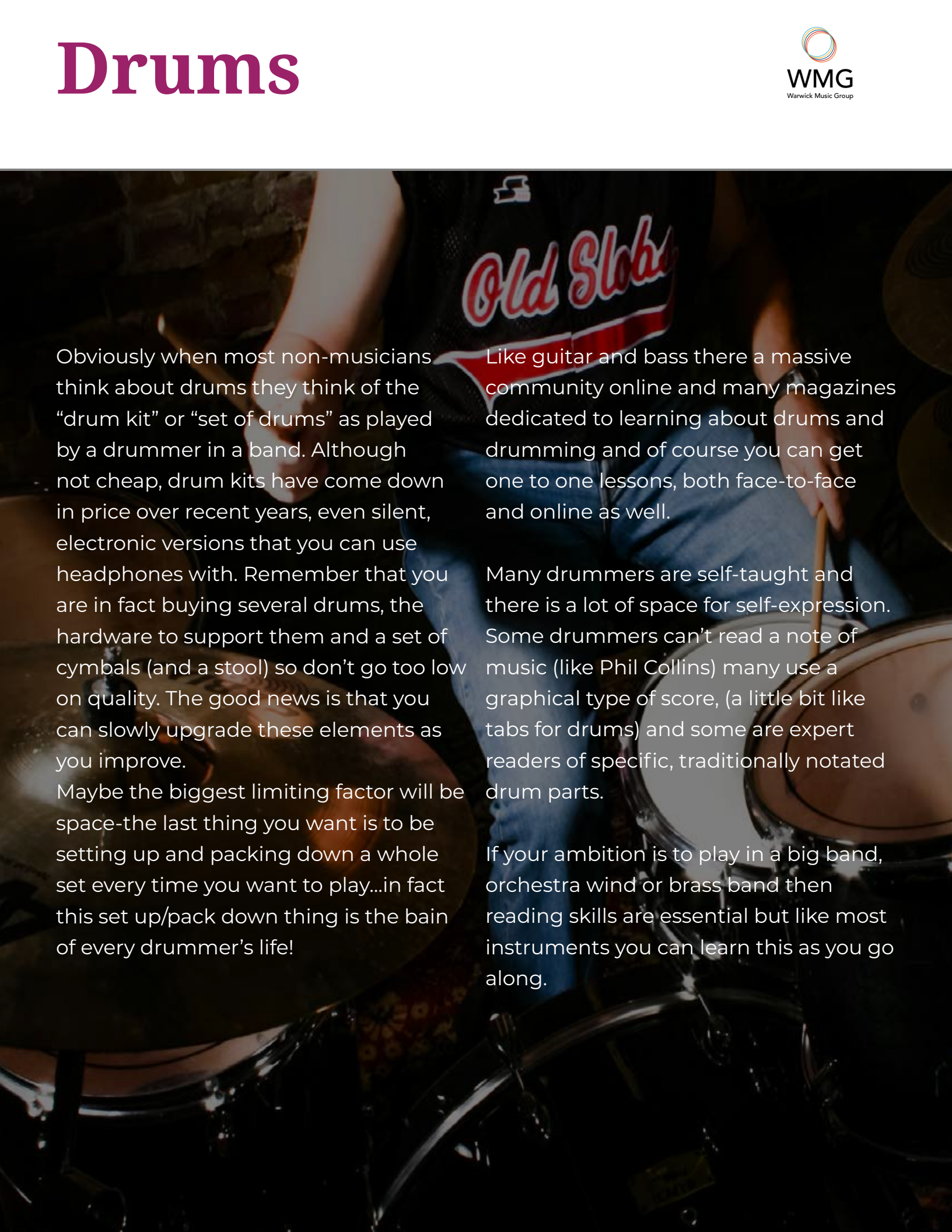
# Percussion

When it comes to the ability to jump straight in nothing really beats drums and percussion (ha ha...get it?). You can be playing samba, djembe (According to the Bambara people in Mali, the name of the djembe comes from the saying “Anke djé, anke bé” which translates to “everyone gather together in peace” and defines the drum’s purpose), taiko or gamlan after one session of group training. This must, of course, be seen as simply the first steps in a lifetime’s journey of learning but yes you can jump straight in, and the session leader will have brought all you need with him/her! Buying your own djembe or samba kit is cheap and easy with lots of online learning, mainly by ear, so off you go!

There is much crossover with drumming but the role of “percussionist” is basically playing all the things that are not the drum kit. Percussionists pride themselves in the breadth and depth of their knowledge and experience of a whole variety of instruments. These may include timpani, side drums, cymbals,

gongs, bells, triangles, tambourines, castanets, whistles, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, xylophone and many more instruments too numerous to mention. Of course, for the amateur it’s impossible to own all these instruments and most large groups like brass bands and wind bands own their own percussion equipment for their members to play on. Most percussionists start their journey on the side or snare drum and an outfit as simple as a pair of sticks and a practice pad could be a great starting point to your journey. Lessons are pretty important, certainly at the beginning whilst learning the rudiments of percussion but once you are up and running and have joined a percussion section you will learn loads from your section buddies as different pieces of music provide different challenges. Percussion is definitely a team activity, and any section will welcome keen beginners with open arms.

# Drums



Obviously when most non-musicians think about drums they think of the “drum kit” or “set of drums” as played by a drummer in a band. Although not cheap, drum kits have come down in price over recent years, even silent, electronic versions that you can use headphones with. Remember that you are in fact buying several drums, the hardware to support them and a set of cymbals (and a stool) so don't go too low on quality. The good news is that you can slowly upgrade these elements as you improve.

Maybe the biggest limiting factor will be space-the last thing you want is to be setting up and packing down a whole set every time you want to play...in fact this set up/pack down thing is the bane of every drummer's life!

Like guitar and bass there a massive community online and many magazines dedicated to learning about drums and drumming and of course you can get one to one lessons, both face-to-face and online as well.

Many drummers are self-taught and there is a lot of space for self-expression. Some drummers can't read a note of music (like Phil Collins) many use a graphical type of score, (a little bit like tabs for drums) and some are expert readers of specific, traditionally notated drum parts.

If your ambition is to play in a big band, orchestra wind or brass band then reading skills are essential but like most instruments you can learn this as you go along.

# Should I learn an instrument?

Firstly, there's nothing to lose!

I've never heard anyone say "I'm really annoyed that I started learning an instrument" but I hear lot's of people say "I really wish I'd carried on/started to learn an instrument".

The first two lessons about learning to become a performing musician

The most important skill is listening (both to the music and those around you).

Music is not and should never be considered a competitive subject, the success of the ensemble relies on trust and mutual support.

There is a place for all of us in music and playing an instrument is a wonderful, life-long challenge that will enrich your time on this planet!

