

# Hey Kids, It's a Tympani



Timpani, also called kettledrums, are instruments from the percussion family. Unlike most percussion instruments, they produce a pitch when struck. Most symphony orchestras use three or four timpani of various sizes. A timpani player may be referred to as a percussionist or a timpanist.

## History

Timpani began as military drums. In the late 19th century, a mechanical system was invented to quickly change the tension of the drumhead. These drums were referred to as machine timpani because they required the player to turn a handle to adjust the tension of the drumhead. The modern timpani is known as a pedal timpani because it allows the player to adjust the tension of the drumhead with a foot pedal.

## How It's Played

The timpanist plays the timpani by striking the drumhead with a special stick called a timpani mallet. A timpanist must determine how loud to play a note and how long the note should sound. To end a sound, the timpanist must place his/her fingers against the drumhead while holding the timpani stick with the thumb and index finger. This technique is called muffling or damping and is an important part of timpani playing.

## How It's Made

Timpani begin as a large copper bowl which is called the resonator. A drumhead is then added to the top which is made of calfskin or plastic. Tension rods are then added to stretch the head tightly across the top of the drum. Lastly, a foot pedal is attached to allow the percussionist to quickly adjust the pitch of the drum during a performance.

## Fun Facts

Eighteenth century composer Johann Fischer once wrote a symphony for timpani and orchestra which required the timpani player to play eight drums at the same time!

