

## Xylophones and Metallophones

Xylophones and Metallophones are used all the time both as melodic and rhythmic instruments. They come in many different types but all share the characteristics of having tuned keys that are played with beaters or mallets. Some have individual resonators or a resonating chamber under the keys to amplify the sound.

### Xylophones

Here the keys are traditionally made of wood, although many now use synthetic materials. They are usually played with harder beaters to make short clicky sounds, but are also great for pouring conkers over, or rice/lentils/barley from a rice swinger. Larger types have tubular resonators under individual keys for more accurate amplification. They are tuned to a western scale so can be used with a wide variety of other instruments

Xylophones are useful in a number of ways:

- They enhance themes that are primarily to do with wood and trees e.g. activities based around autumn or rainforests for example.
- They can form part of specific activities such as wood chopping.
- They can give some melodic structure and interest to percussive work using drums and/or other wooden instruments.
- They can be played by two or more people together, or in groups of several instruments.
- They can be played by participants to accompany the rest of the action.
- They look great and can give visual clues to the thematic content of a session.

Balafons come from West Africa and are different to western xylophones in a number of significant ways:

- There is no standardisation of tuning i.e. they are not tuned to a western diatonic scale. This gives them a specific sound, very different to our ears, but can make it tricky to match other instruments to them.
- The keys are bound onto the frame, which in our world is incredibly useful because they can't be removed by enthusiastic dismantlers.
- They use gourds to amplify the vibrations and sometimes there is a membrane added to the gourd which vibrates, giving an enhanced percussive buzz to the sound.
- They are slightly easier to manoeuvre, onto wheelchairs for example, than the western instruments that have a heavy box construction.

Tongue drums and gato drums are boxes with wooden keys fixed at one end in the top face. Compared to a xylophone they produce a note with more emphasis on the wooden quality of the sound rather than the actual pitch. Buy the best ones you can afford because they will definitely sound better and last longer.

**Homemade Xylophones** - sometimes you can build a simple 'xylophone' that complements the theme of the workshop. This could mean using flower pots in a workshop about gardens, wine bottles in a session about France or carpet tubes if they are a prop that is already being used.

### Metallophones

Metallophones have metal keys that give more sustain and volume than xylophones. They tend to produce a more ambient, reflective soundscape than the more percussive wooden keys. Large bass metallophones can be expensive but produce a rich sonorous tone that is difficult to reproduce elsewhere. The natural sustain produced by the keys means they can be played gently with great reward for little impact by a beater. Use soft woven or felt beaters for the best mix of attack and bass frequencies. As the keys are removable you can 'tune' them, in the sense that you can modify the available notes to fit in with other instruments

## Tips:

- Metallophones can produce a dreamy atmosphere that somehow lends itself to being underwater, in an ice world or in the clouds.
- The detachable keys can be quite heavy. As such they require monitoring, especially with participants who have a tendency to throw items or if being used with an unfamiliar group. Some glockenspiels, small metallophones, have fixed keys and these may be preferable.
- Most metallophones available to purchase are tuned in a western scale but in other parts of the world they may not be. You may be fortunate enough to have access to a gamelan, or know someone who could make a version of a differently tuned instrument.
- Large free-standing types can even be played by bowing the ends of the bars with a violin or cello bow. This is tricky do, especially for many participants, but can produce a wonderful ethereal sound.

Tank drums are a fairly recent development that relate to metallophones in the same way that tongue drums relate to xylophones. They consist of a metal tank, sometimes an old gas bottle, into which several tongues have been cut, usually in a circular pattern. Each tongue produces a note of a different pitch. They are easier to move around than metallophones and all parts are secured. They are also cold and have a smooth texture for tactile exploration. Highly recommended.

Xylophones can often be built out of materials that reflect the nature of the workshop. For example using flower pots in a garden setting, or wine bottles in a workshop about France. Use water to tune the bottles, a good frame and string 'stabilisers' to keep the bottles steady and light beaters to ensure no breakages.

## Links

Wood sounds (Props)

Musical instruments (Props)

Underwater (Activities)

Seasons (Activities)

Workshops: Autumn Watch, Banyan Tree, Mulberry, Magic garden

## Videos

Tank drum

Vibraphone in the clouds

Chopping wood

Marchand de Vin

Bowed metallophone