

Beautiful Instruments for Young Children

from Nikhil Dally

Finding good-quality instruments suitable for young children can be difficult. Many of the most easily obtained instruments are mass-produced out of cheap materials, produce clunky sounds which are lacking in resonance and disrespectful of the gentle quality of children's singing voices, and are so awkward to handle that they induce tension in the children handling them. In other words, they can spectacularly backfire at encouraging and enabling the development of true and sensitive musicianship! So, when setting up my own music school for young children, Stepping Notes, I decided to abide by the following principles:



- (1) Children should be given instruments which are quiet enough to accompany their own singing without drowning them out or causing them to shout, thereby supporting the primacy of the singing voice as the principal means to their musical education.
- (2) Children should be given instruments whose moving or resonating parts are large and solid enough that children can use them easily, preserving their natural freedom and flexibility of body movement, without encouraging physical tension.
- (3) Children should be given instruments which are made of natural materials, look beautiful, and produce rich, long-lasting, resonant sounds which support their voices and inspire and uplift their spirit.
- (4) Children should use instruments which exemplify and support the fundamental elements of the music they are learning: in my case, Western diatonic/pentatonic melody, chordal harmony, bass, and rhythm.

There is a recording which accompanies this brochure. Feel free to ask me for it,

As most of my instruments are hand-crafted to order, the measurements and descriptions of these instruments may vary slightly from those given below. Also, if you would like to custom-design your instruments (in terms of numbers of notes, pitch, tuning, even colour and style of decoration) to match your own requirements, please let me know; this should usually be possible.

As my instruments come from far away lands, prices for them may change. Please ask me for up-to-date prices.

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slentho: soft bass metallophone



approx. dimensions: length 43 cm.; width 35 cm.; height 47 cm.
made of: wood, with metal resonating tubes and brass keys
made in: Indonesia

This is the ideal instrument to provide a gentle bass-line for a children's ensemble. My sample has three keys, tuned to D, G and A (in the octave below middle C) – so as to provide simple bass-lines in the keys of D major or minor. However, you can have your *slentho* custom-made, with any number of keys you like, and tuned to your requirements.

The notes on this instrument, while quiet, are rich and resonant, and take a long time to die away. Therefore, players will need to learn to damp each note whenever a new note is played. This can initially be practised with a partner, before learning to both play and damp simultaneously.

I have coded my keys using coloured *bindis*. Feel free to choose your own system.

saron: treble metallophone



approx. dimensions: length 56 cm.; width 34 cm.; height 37 cm. (to top of side panels)
made of: wood, with steel keys
made in: Indonesia

This is the ideal instrument for playing melodies. My sample has five spaces for keys, and all keys are removable. My sample has a number of extra keys, allowing me to select either the D major pentachord (D, E, F#, G and A – in the first octave above middle C), the D minor pentachord (D, E, F, G and A), a D-pentatonic scale (D, E, F#, A and B), or any subsets of the above.

However, you can have your *saron* custom-made, with any number of keys you like, and tuned to your requirements. If you like, you can have the keys made smaller, and tuned an octave higher.

The notes on this instrument take a long time to die away. Therefore, players will need to learn to damp each note whenever a new note is played. This can initially be practised with a partner, before learning to both play and damp simultaneously.

I have coded my keys using stickers with different characters on them. Feel free to choose your own system.

ghungru: ankle bells



made of: brass, with cloth straps
made in: India

The perfect instrument for those who teach rhythm through body movement. Suitable for children from 4 years upwards.

kantele: soft stringed instrument



approx. size: length 62 cm.; width 12 cm.; height 7 cm.
made of: wood, with metal strings
made in: Finland

This is the ideal instrument to provide gentle three-chord chordal accompaniments to songs or instrumental tunes, and to begin your students' education in tonal harmony. My instruments have five strings each, tuned to D, E, F#, G and A (in the first octave above middle C), producing the D major pentachord. By stopping the 2nd and 4th strings with one hand and running one's other hand across the strings, one produces a tonic triad. By stopping the 1st and 3rd strings, one produces a sort of dominant seventh chord. And by stopping the 3rd and 5th strings, one produces a sort of subdominant (with added sixth).

My instruments can easily be re-tuned to produce the D minor pentachord (D, E, F, G and A), or a D-pentatonic scale (D, E, F#, A and B).

You can order *kanteles* in a number of different tunings and designs: please ask me for further details. I have coded my strings using coloured *bindis*. Feel free to choose your own system.

kendhang: drums



made of: wood, with buffalo-hide heads and straps
made in: Indonesia

These drums usually come in three sizes. Approximate dimensions:

- (1) *kendhang gedhé* (bass): length/height 68 cm.; diameter of large head: 34 cm.
- (2) *kendhang ciblon* (tenor): length/height: 65 cm.; diameter of large head: 27 cm.
- (3) *kendhang ketipung* (treble): length/height: 48 cm.; diameter of large head: 22 cm.

In Indonesia, these drums are traditionally played horizontally, with one hand at each end; the smaller head produces a higher pitch than the larger. However, with young children I usually stand these upright, with the larger head uppermost, so that children can play them with their hands on top. They can be tuned by loosening or tightening the straps – though I find I tend to tune them to maximise their rich resonant timbre, rather than to attain a particular fixed pitch. Because the bass and tenor drums stand so tall and have such large heads, they encourage a delightful freedom of movement, especially in very young (pre-school) children.