

# LISTEN, HEAR!

by Geoff Plant



hear**LIFE**

## Handmade Music

### INTRODUCTION

In the last issue of this newsletter, I told you about Zack Moir's visit to Boston, and the music activities that we conducted during those three weeks. One activity of particular interest was developing a set of simple percussive instruments for use in the music workshop we ran with children with cochlear implants. I promised that I'd give more details in this issue.

When I encourage teachers and clinicians to provide music activities, their response is often to say that they cannot afford the "set-up costs," because musical instruments are expensive and they don't have the resources to purchase them.

Handmade instruments using "throw-away" materials are a solution to this problem. In this issue, I'll tell you how to make simple drums, shakers, and other percussive instruments for use in musical activities. Some of them require a little time, but none of them require any great skill.

### DRUMS

If you have ever seen a street musician playing a "found" drum kit consisting of empty containers, saucepan lids, pieces of scrap metal, etc., you'll know that complex sounds can be made using very basic items. There's even an Australian folk singer, Ted Egan, who accompanies himself using an empty cardboard box. It's not very complex, but it's very cheap, and it makes a good sound.



The drums that we used in our activities were empty plastic containers of varying sizes.

*One of the containers we used to make simple drums. These were then decorated by the children.*

Different sized containers gave different sounds; the larger the container, the lower the sound.

All of the containers we used had a good sound, but, as you can see, they were not very nice looking. We solved this problem by having the children decorate their drums. We gave each child a long piece of paper on which s/he drew a picture. After they had gone home for the day, we cut the paper to fit the drum and then attached it, using a spray adhesive. I would have liked the children to have seen the whole process, but spray adhesives are potentially dangerous, so it was safer to do it when they were not present. You can see some of their creations below.



*The children's drums decorated with their pictures*

Each child took her/his drum home at the completion of the workshop. Maybe it was not the most welcome gift for some of the parents, but we hoped that they would encourage the children to continue to work with rhythm.

If you are thinking of making a set of drums for your work with children, consider decorating them yourself. It doesn't matter what you use, whether it be paint, pencils, marker pens, etc. What's important is that you make the drums attractive.

These drums are usually played with the hands, but sometimes it's a good idea to use drumsticks. To

make these, Zack and I visited a local craft store and found some small wooden balls with holes drilled in them. Then we found some dowel of the correct size, and combined the two to make very effective drumsticks.

Of course, you shouldn't confine yourself to just plastic containers. Boxes made of thick cardboard have a lovely sound when they are hit with the hands, and some of them are strong enough to use as drums. Wooden boxes are another possibility, as are small metal trash bins. None of them were designed to be used as drums, but all are quite suited to the purpose. Keep an eye out on trash collection days, or ask local store keepers if they have anything you could use, and you'll probably soon find that you have a serviceable set of drums.

## SLAPSTICKS

Slapsticks were a popular percussion instrument in the early days of vaudeville. The Free Dictionary defines them as (an) "acoustic device consisting of two paddles hinged together; used by an actor to make a loud noise without inflicting injury when striking someone," which is, I suppose, rather encouraging!

The slapsticks we made consisted of two 3.5" x 0.75" (85 x 20 mm) boards, around 1 foot (30 cm) long. We liked the sound that they made when they were banged together, but felt that they were a little large for children to use in that fashion. Our solution was to attach handles to each board, so that the chance of thumbs or fingers being caught between them was minimized. We could have hinged them at one end, but decided that they would be easier to play if they weren't attached. Ours are made of pine, but if you have access to a selection of off-cuts of wood, experiment to find the one with the best sound. Hardwoods are probably best, but most woods will sound quite acceptable. Once you've got them, you can get ready to "slap the sticks!"



*A pair of slapsticks made from two pieces of board with handles attached.*

## SHAKERS

When I was a child, I made simple maracas by covering a light bulb with papier mâché, and then smashing the bulb. The glass fragments made a great sound, but, looking back on it, it really wasn't a very sensible idea. Here are a couple of much safer alternatives.

The first shaker (below left) was made using an empty vitamin pill container. We filled it with dried barley, but rice or dried beans would have been just as acceptable. Don't put too much in the container; just enough so that you get a good sound. I put a little glue on the inside of the screw cap, and then tightened it. So far, no one has been able to open it! The final step is purely decorative. I painted a simple pattern on a piece of artist's canvas, and then applied a couple of coats of varnish to protect it. Once it had dried, I cut the canvas to size and glued it to the container



*Two shakers: one made from an empty vitamin pill container (left), and the other from two empty tuna cans.*

The second shaker (above right) required a little more effort. I put some barley in one of the cans, and then taped the other on top. The picture shows how it looked at that stage. The two cans were balanced

rather precariously, so it needed a little more work to make it more stable. I covered the two cans with papier mâché made from torn up strips of newspaper and wallpaper paste. All that left to do then was to apply some paint.

It's hard to describe the sounds of these two shakers, but they are quite different. Again, it might be worth experimenting with other containers and other materials – fine pebbles, sand, etc., – to hear how they sound.

## SCRAPERS

The guiro, a serrated “scraper” made of metal or wood, has a very distinctive sound that forms part of the driving percussive force of much Latin music. Even if you don't recognize its name, I'm sure that you would recognize the sound of the guiro. It is a wonderful instrument, but, unfortunately, it is also quite expensive. I looked online to find the cost and most were in the range \$80 - \$130.

Our alternative couldn't have been cheaper – a serrated soup can and a plastic knife. Running the knife across the ridges produces the sound, and you'll quickly pick up how to produce the correct rhythm. I had a little trouble at first, but, with help, I was able to do it. Here's what you do.

- 1 Draw the blade of the knife all the way across the ridges.
- 2 Change direction for a short distance, and
- 3 then flick back the other way.



- 4 Now, all the way back in the opposite direction
- 5 A short distance the other way, and
- 6 flick back to the starting point



Once you've got this basic pattern, you can start to “play around” with other rhythms. How does it sound when you use the blade of the knife? Is it the same on both sides? What about the handle? You'll find that the way you hold it can influence the sound considerably. Hold the open end against your stomach and the sound is damped. Move the can away from your body and the sound will change.



*A simple guiro made with a tin can and a plastic knife.*

Before you use this simple instrument, however, please make sure that you remove any sharp edges; I used a pair of pliers to carefully turn over the edges to make sure it was safe.

## THE MUSIC BOX



*The Music Box with various noise makers attached*

The top is easily removed, and it's still the place where I store my found drums. Attached to the side and top are eight tuned Chinese “fish” wood blocks of various sizes. When these are struck by a drumstick, they produce a very distinct sound. I bought two of them on a visit to China in 2006, but once I started playing with them, I knew that I needed more! A Chinese colleague bought eight more for me, which I then mounted onto the box. The larger ones are held with clips designed for storage of brooms, while

the smaller ones are loosely nailed onto the lid of the box. I also cut up an old rubber mouse pad and glued squares of it under each of the smaller blocks. These cut out any "rattle" that occurred when the blocks were struck.



*Chinese "fish" wood blocks*

I often use these blocks to accompany simple songs such as, "Hickory, dickory dock," and "My Grandfather's Clock." With these songs I use one large and one small block to create a beat that sounds like the ticking of a clock. In these cases, I'm only striking one block at a time, but it's a lot more fun to play it with two sticks, and create more complex patterns. Once most people hear the blocks, they want to try it for themselves! It's a great sound and, best of all; it's very easy to play.

One of the things I like about the blocks is that most people don't have any idea about how they should sound, or how they should be played. As a result, people feel free to experiment with them, and quickly realize that there are other simple sound producing objects on the box that can be incorporated into their "piece." In the photo of the box top below, for example, you can see a metal can attached, which can be used as a "cymbal." There's also a brass bell, a set of hand bells, and other potential "noise sources." Even the top of the box can be used as a simple drum.

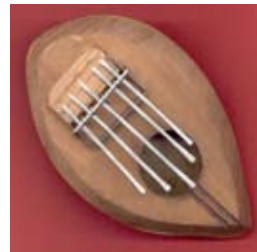


*Some simple percussion instruments on the box top*

I'm currently working on adding some chime bars to the box. Zack and I cut metal tubing into three different lengths, and then punched some holes so that they could be suspended on leather thronging. I still need to file the ends to remove some sharp edges, but once that is done, I'll construct a simple wooden frame and hang the tubes from it.

## KALIMBAS

Whenever I travel for my work, I look for simple musical instruments that I can use in my work. Last year, in South Africa, I found two thumb pianos, or kalimbas. Although they are very easy



*A South African thumb piano (kalimba)*

to play, they have a haunting sound quality that lends itself to simple rhythmic pieces. The kalimba is very quiet, and would be drowned out by most other instruments, but it's very relaxing to play. I find myself repeating the same pattern of notes over and over, and anyone who has seen the movie "The Constant Gardener" probably remembers the sound of the kalimba, during the closing credits. If you can find one, try it out. I'm pretty sure that both you and your clients will enjoy playing and listening to it

Finally, as always, I would welcome any comments, feedback, or suggestions. Please contact me at [hearf@aol.com](mailto:hearf@aol.com) Zack can be contacted at [zack@zackmoir.com](mailto:zack@zackmoir.com).

Geoff Plant