World Music

How musical instruments work

You can hear music wherever you go in the world. Each culture has developed its own musical instruments, but there are traditionally three principal types of instrument.

Percussion instruments

You play percussion instruments by hitting them with your hand or a drumstick. The instrument vibrates and this produces the sound. The percussion family includes some of the oldest musical instruments. There are hundreds of different percussion instruments. Examples of common percussion instruments are triangles, xylophones, tambourines and cymbals.

Stringed instruments

You play stringed instruments by vibrating a string, or a number of strings. You sometimes use your fingers to do this, for example when you play the guitar. You sometimes use a bow, for example when you play the violin. Tight, short strings produce high notes. Looser and longer strings produce low notes. Examples of common stringed instruments are the harp and the double bass.

Wind instruments

You play wind instruments by blowing air into a tube. There are sometimes holes on the tube. You change the sound when you cover the holes with your fingers. Examples of wind instruments are the flute and the clarinet. Many students learn the recorder at school, because it is easy to play. The saxophone and clarinet are very popular wind instruments in jazz music.