

# An Introduction to Commonly Used Hand Drums for Educators

## *Djembe, Congas, & Bongo*

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### A Brief History of Djembe, Congas, & Bongo

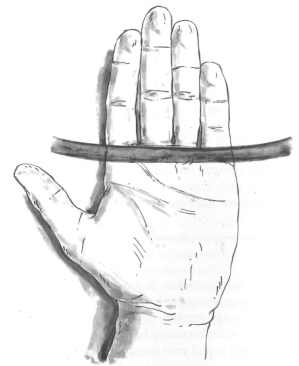
- Djembe Origins: modern day Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, and Senegal (West Africa), approx. 12th century (Mandinka people)
- Congas & Bongo Origins: Cuba, late 19th - early 20th century
- Common names for conga drums (tumbadoras) - often changes depending on style of music being played
  - High: Quinto, Cachimbo, Niño
  - Middle: Conga, Tres Golpes, Tres per Dos, Segundo, Mula
  - Low: Tumba(dora), Salidor, Caja

### The Instrument & Set-Up - Congas & Djembe

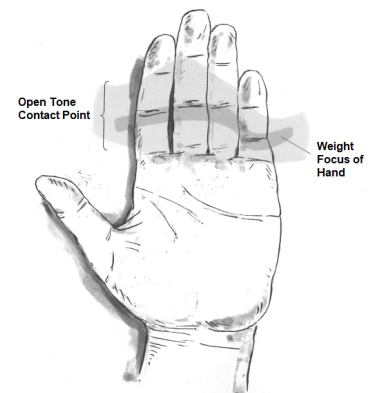
- Angle of the Drum & Body Set-Up
  - The drum is resting between the knees and is slightly angled forward; wrists should be relatively straight.
  - Avoid the tendency to drop your wrists or hyperextend; keep them engaged!
  - The angle of your wrist determines the sounds/tones.
- Seat Height
  - This is more important than you think! Try to find a height adjustable stool.
  - Avoid hyperextending the elbows or creating scrunched shoulders.
  - Allow separation between the chest cavity and the elbow.

### The Essential Tones: Open, Muff, Slap, & Bass

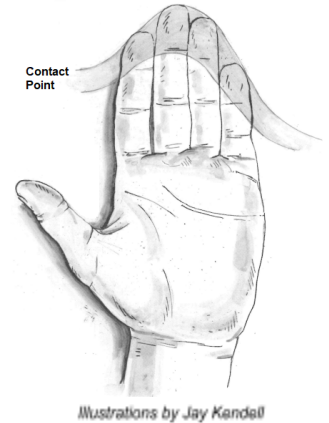
- **Contact Point:** where the hand makes contact with the head of the drum
- **Bearing Edge:** where the head of the drum comes in contact with the shell of the drum
- **Open Tone (same for congas & djembe)**
  - Contact Point: "meat of the hand;" between where the fingers join the palm and the last knuckle of each finger
  - Weight Focus: joint at the first knuckle
  - Bearing Edge Alignment: where the fingers join the palm
  - Wrists: straight (in-line from tip of middle finger to elbow) & engaged
  - Fingers: together as one unit
  - Avoid over-extension or pronation of fingers after the stroke
  - You'll know you're in the right place (contact point) based on the openness of your sound!



Illustrations by Jay Kendall



- **Muffle (Muff) or Mute Tone (same for congas & djembe)**
  - VERY similar to open tone, except the fingers stay on the head
  - The stroke initiates from wrist, making it harder to feel the placement of your hand's weight
    - Accelerate your velocity on the way down to create a full sound
  - Avoid hyperextending the wrist or “dog paddling” with an extended height
- **Slap Tone (Closed - most common on congas)**
  - Contact Point: finger pads
  - Bearing Edge Alignment: middle of the palm
  - Wrists: bent/broken and relaxed
  - Fingers: naturally curved
  - Avoid the tendency to grab the drumhead
  - You'll know you're in the right place (contact point) based on the high pitched sound
  - Channel the relaxed “mousetrap” velocity
  - While one hand plays, the other hand usually stays down (closed slap); let the fingers of the playing hand rest on the head following the stroke
- **Slap Tone (Open - most common on djembe)**
  - Same contact point, placement, and finger motion as the closed slap
  - The only change is what happens AFTER the stroke (a full rebound off the drum head)
  - On djembe, thumbs are generally up and out of the way
- **Bass Tone**
  - Contact Point: full flat palm
  - This stroke is ALL about relaxing and channeling the weight of your arm (low marimba)
  - The palm and whole hand makes the sound (avoid hyperextension of fingers)
  - No punching or placing, just dropping. Let go!
  - Your shoulders should not be actively engaged; feel the resonance move up your arm
  - Congas: let the hand/palm rest on the head of the drum
  - Djembe: let the hand/palm rebound off the head of the drum



## **Extended & Combination Strokes: Heel-Toe & Touch Tone**

- **Heel-Toe**
  - Mostly seen on congas, not djembe or bongo
  - The driving rhythmic force & power behind any salsa band
  - Toe: the “toe” motion stretches the palm and fingers upward as a single unit while the wrist stays planted on the bearing edge, all fingers move downward.
  - Heel: the “heel” stroke is the exact same as the bass tone, but is renamed if it is followed by a “toe” stroke
  - Similar to double bounce technique, there is a technique shift as tempo increases
    - Individual heel & toe motions → hybrid heel with toe up on the rebound
- **Touch Tone (congas, djembe, & bongo)**
  - A quiet stroke that only you (the player) should hear
  - Used for time keeping by dropping your fingers onto the head
  - Similar to taps or check patterns in marching percussion

## **The Instrument & Set-Up - Bongo**

- Angle of the Drum & Body Set-Up
  - Usually held between the legs with the high head (macho) held up against the left leg and the low head (hembra) held down against the right leg.
- Seat Height
  - Generally, a very low seat/stool height is preferred



## **Bongo Specific Strokes**

- In general, all bongo strokes will be with smaller portions of the hands because the drum heads (and instrument) are much smaller
  - Hembra (low drum)
  - Macho (high drum)
- Thumb: press in with the left thumb in the center of the macho head
- Fingers: press in with the left hand fingers on the edge of the macho head
- Martillo pattern (to hammer) is the most common - see pattern handout

## **Why Teach It?**

- Approachable; increased interest from atypical students
- Often, no financial investment is required from students (school owned instruments, no needed implements or accessories)
- Opportunities for student creativity, improvisation, and rote teaching
- Use these rhythms/musics as an opportunity to teach about history, to not avoid the topic of slavery
- Increased exposure and understanding of non-Western cultures
  - Cross-curricular opportunities within your school/district/community
- Increasing frequency in wind band and percussion ensemble literature, as well as modern band and jazz applications
- It's fun!!!

## **How to Pay For It?**

- Grants & Funding Opportunities
  - [Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation](#)
  - [Fund for Teachers](#)
  - [Walmart Local Community Grants](#)
  - [NAMM Foundation: Music Making Grants](#)
  - [Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation](#)
- When pitching a large purchase to your administration, focus on National Standards and cross-curricular opportunities

## What to Buy?

- Congas
  - Nice Enough: [LP Aspire Congas](#)
    - Smaller sizes, lighter, great for younger/smaller students
    - ‘Stock’ heads are generally not very durable, try to replace them; less durable materials (shell & hardware)
  - Very Nice: [LP Classic Wood Congas](#)
    - Full, rich tone; Standardized sound
- Bongo
  - Nice Enough: [LP Matador Series Wood Bongos](#)
    - Great for playing with sticks/mallets, very durable shell, slightly less durable hardware
    - ‘Traditional’ style rims are difficult for playing with hands; often painful!
    - ‘Stock’ heads are generally not very durable, try to replace them
  - Very Nice: [LP Generation II Bongos - Comfort Curve Rims](#)
    - ‘Comfort Curve’ rims allow for much easier playing with hands
    - Solid, full tone; durable shell and standardized hardware
- Djembe
  - Nice Enough: [Remo 14" Key-Tuned Djembe](#)
    - Standard, user-friendly, and durable
    - Difficult to achieve characteristic sounds (especially slaps)
    - Synthetic heads on djembe tend to have too much resonance to achieve characteristic sounds
    - Great for choral programs that need one djembe player to project over an ensemble on occasion
  - Very Nice: [Full Size Djembe \(Custom Made - Skinny Beats Sound Shop - Asheville, NC\)](#)
    - Clear cutting tone and projection
    - Beautiful design
    - Ideal for older/advanced players; fragile & weather sensitive
- General Hand Drum Options
  - [Toca Tubanos \(“Flex Drums”\)](#): removable heads, easy storage, lightweight & portable, very affordable! - great for classroom sets, students with limited mobility or smaller hands
  - [Remo Key-Tuned Tubanos](#): very durable, sometimes difficult to play varying tones/get a characteristic sound, tunable heads (avoid non-tunable heads if you can, this gives you more options with pitch, tone, and orchestration of arrangements)
- Drum Heads: In general, skin heads will not hold up to the stress of a school environment. Try to purchase plastic/synthetics heads to get the most out of your investment. Avoid playing with sticks/mallets on skin heads, only on plastic or synthetic.
  - Congas: [Remo Symmetry Skyndeeep](#)
  - Bongo: [Remo Nuskyn Tucked Bongo Heads](#)
  - Djembe: This is the one drum where I would argue that skin is worth the trouble in a school setting (for older/more advanced students). For skin heads, contact your drum manufacturer directly.
    - Synthetic: [Remo Mondo Skyndeeep Djembe Head](#)

## **The Essential Styles & Where to Go From Here**

- Essential Musical Styles & Concepts - for the beginner conga & bongo player
  - Clave - both styles & directions (rumba & son, 2-3 & 3-2)
  - 12/8 Bell Patterns - traditional, modern, & variations
  - Salsa
  - Rumba
  - Cha-Cha-Cha
- Begin to immerse yourself in recordings & performances to become familiar with the rhythmic language and vocabulary
- Historical Context - instrument, musical styles, rhythms, melodies, cultural context, and more are **essential**

## **National Core Music Standards to Utilize**

- Creating
  - Imagine - Generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts
    - MU:Cr1.1.E.5a Compose and improvise melodic and rhythmic ideas or motives that reflect characteristic(s) of music or text(s) studied in rehearsal.
  - Present: share creative musical work that conveys intent, demonstrates craftsmanship, and exhibits originality.
    - MU:Cr3.2.E.5a Share personally developed melodic and rhythmic ideas or motives – individually or as an ensemble – that demonstrate understanding of characteristics of music or texts studied in rehearsal.
- Performing
  - Rehearse, Evaluate, and Refine - Evaluate and refine personal and ensemble performances, individually or in collaboration with others
    - MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances
  - Present - Perform expressively, with appropriate interpretation and technical accuracy, and in a manner appropriate to the audience and context.
  - MU:Pr6.1.E.8a Demonstrate attention to technical accuracy and expressive qualities in prepared and improvised performances of a varied repertoire of music representing diverse cultures and styles

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## **Resources for Further Information - Afro-Cuban Music**

### **Method Books**

- *The Conga Drummer's Guidebook* - Micheal Spiro (Sher Music Co.)
- *The Essence of Afro-Cuban Percussion & Drum Set* - Ed Uribe (Alfred)

### **Transcriptions/Sheet Music**

- *The Language of the Masters: Transcriptions and Etudes of 10 Great Latin Percussion Artists* - Michael Spiro & Michael Coletti (Sher Music Co.)

- *Salsa Guidebook for Piano & Ensemble* - Rebeca Mauleon (Sher Music Co.)
- *101 Montunos* - Rebeca Mauleon (Sher Music Co.)
- *Roadmap for the Oru del Igbo (Oru Seco)* - Michael Spiro & Justin Hill
- *Bata Rhythms from Matanzas, Cuba: Transcriptions of the Oro Seco* - Kristin Olson & Michael Spiro (Kabiosile)
- *Music of the Arará Savalú Cabildo* by Joseph C. Galvin and Michael Spiro (Sher Music Co.)

### Albums/Recordings

- *Bata Ketu: A Musical Interplay of Cuba and Brazil* - Mark Lamson, Michael Spiro, Bobi Cespedes, & Jorge Alabe
- *Bakini: En el Nuevo Mundo* - Michael Spiro & Joe Galvin
- *Vacunao* - Los Muñequitos de Matanzas
- *Tambor de Fuego* - Los Muñequitos de Matanzas
- *Raices Africanas* - Grupo Afrocuba
- *Habana Dreams* - The Pedrito Martinez Group
- *Indestructible* - Ray Baretto
- *Nuestra Música* - El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico
- *Moliendo Cafe* - Jerry Gonzalez & The Fort Apache Band
- *Mabagwe: A Tribute to "Los Mayores"* - Los Rumberos De La Bahia
- *Tóques y Cantos de Santos Vol. 1* - Grupo Folklorico De Cuba

### Instructional Videos

- Introduction to the Conga Drum (DVD) - Michael Spiro
- Conga Masterclass: Online Videos, Playalongs, & Resources - Jesus Diaz, Phil Hawkins, & Michael Spiro
  - <https://congamasterclass.uscreen.io/>
- Mastering the Art of Afro-Cuban Drumming - Ignacio Berroa, Giovanni Hidalgo, Changuito, Michael Spiro
- Conga Chops: Online Lessons, Videos, & Resources - Paulo Stagnero
  - <https://www.congachops.com/>

### History/Context

- *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean* - Mark Brill (Routledge)
- *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* - Ned Sublette (Chicago Review Press)

## Resources for Further Information - Djembe & West-African Music

### Method Books

- *Anyone Can Play Djembe (DVD & Book)* by Paulo Mattioli (Mel Bay)
- *How to Play Djembe (Book & CD)* by Alan L. Dworsky & Betsy Sansby (Dancing Hands Music)

### Transcriptions/Sheet Music

- *A Life for the Djembe - Traditional Rhythms of the Malinke (Book & CD)* by Mamady Keita (Arun)

### Albums/Recordings

- *Wassolon* - Mamady Keita
- [\*Soungalo Coulibaly \(Mali\)\*](#)

### History/Context

- [Les Ballets Africains Documentary \(1968 United Nations\)](#)
- [Les Percussions de Guinee](#)

If you have any additional questions, feel free to email/DM at the links below:

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**McKayla Phillips** is a percussionist and educator based out of Raleigh, North Carolina. They are currently a Visiting Lecturer of Percussion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an Adjunct Professor of Percussion at Shaw University. McKayla is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Musical Arts (DMA) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where they serve as a graduate teaching assistant. They earned a Masters of Music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and received a Bachelor of Music Education and Bachelor of Music Performance degrees from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. They would like to thank the following sponsors for their support:

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