

Orff Instrumentarium

The Orff approach to music education uses a variety of percussion instruments. Along with vocal exploration, instruments provide the means for students to experience musical inquiry, exploration, improvisation, and composition. The instrumentarium provides students the ideal medium for the exploration of timbre and texture in music, as well as the aural and visual reinforcement of pitch relationships.

Unpitched percussion instruments (those that do not function melodically) engage students in a variety of rhythmic experiences. These instruments are grouped into four categories: wood, metal, rattles and scrapers, and membrane (or skin). Playing of these parts often is prepared through body percussion. Students are first taught rhythmic phrases through word patterns that also are expressed with body sounds like clapping, snapping, and patting. They then make the same sound patterns using percussion instruments. Some familiar unpitched percussion instruments are wood blocks, claves, jingle bells, triangles, tambourines, hand drums, and bongo drums. The variety of unpitched percussion instruments is vast and provides students a rich and engaging sound palette from which to make music.

The barred instruments of the Orff instrumentarium were developed in the 1920s by Carl Orff himself. These are the “melody-making” percussion instruments of the Orff orchestra, capable of both melodic and harmonic elements. These instruments are constructed for child-friendly use. They are sized for smaller hands and arms and are designed with removable bars, enabling the students to take off bars that aren’t necessary for a given work. Student success is instantly heightened when all the “wrong” notes are unavailable!

The xylophones have bars made of rosewood or fiberglass and are voiced in three sizes — soprano, alto, and bass — covering a three-and-a-half octave range from c to a₂. These instruments are modeled after their African counterparts.

The metallophones are voiced like the xylophone family, but the bars are made of metal, which likens their sound to elements of the Indonesian gamelan.

The glockenspiels are the smallest and highest members of the Orff orchestra. They are modeled after Orff’s own (German) glockenspiel and are voiced in only two ranges: alto and soprano. Their combined range covers a two-and-a-half octave range from c₁ to a₃.

To purchase instruments for your students’ use, see www.westmusic.com.

To learn more about the Orff approach, go to the American Orff-Schulwerk Association Web site, www.aosa.org.