

How to Buy a Snare Drum

by Neil W. Grover

The snare drum is one of the most important members of the large percussion family of musical instruments. Whether you're listening to a marching band, a symphony orchestra, a jazz trio or a heavy metal rock group, the snare drum plays an important musical role. It is common for students of the percussive arts to begin their studies on snare drum. The snare drum provides a good foundation from which the drummer/percussionist can embark. Contrary to popular belief, the snare drum is by no means easy to play. Like any other musical instrument, mastering the snare drum can be both challenging and highly rewarding.

Background: The snare drum has its roots in janissary or military music. As far back as the middle ages, guilds of drummers were formed to add brilliant rhythm and flourishes to festivals, occasions of the royal court and to march troops to battle. During our own Civil War, young snare drummers accompanied fifes while leading troops to the battlefield. Over many centuries the snare drum has developed from a rather large, deep, military drum (approximately 24 inches deep) with real skin heads and genuine catgut snares, to the refined musical instrument of today with plastic heads and wire snares. While we still use some very deep military snare drums in the orchestra for special effects, our modern snare drums have gotten much smaller.

The snare drum is distinguished from any other drum because attached to its bottom head is a snare. A snare is a series of wires or cables that run across the diameter of the bottom head. In addition to snares, every snare drum has a mechanism or switch to put tension on the snares so that they rub up against the bottom head. This mechanism is called the "throw-off" or "strainer." (They are different terms for the same part.) The "throw-off" usually has a lever to tighten the snares (snares on), or drop the snares away from the bottom head so that they don't touch (snares off). In addition, a good throw-off will have an adjustment knob to gradually increase or decrease tension. Without the use of snares, the snare drum would sound just the same as an ordinary tom-tom. The wire snares provide that cutting snap that's uniquely characteristic of the snare drum sound.

What To Look For: There are literally hundreds of snare drums available for purchase today in every price category. Choosing the right drum can be difficult, yet it is important to establish a few guidelines to narrow your search.

The first step is to determine what you want a snare drum to do. That is, will you use it to play in school band, a jazz group, symphony orchestra, a hard rock band, or all of the above? While it is possible to use one drum for every type of playing, a single drum cannot excel in all areas. You may want to decide what the primary use of the drum will be and proceed accordingly.

Size: As a professional of over 21 years and someone who has played with a wide range of ensembles, from the Boston Symphony to Aerosmith, I recommend the following: If you are purchasing a snare drum as a foundation around which to start building a drum kit, purchase a 5x14-inch (depth by diameter) drum. If you know that you are purchasing a drum primarily for orchestra or concert band use, purchase a 6.5x14-inch drum. In my opinion, if you're not sure, or you want a drum that will work in various applications, go with the smaller 5 x 14-inch size.

Wood, Metal or Composite Shell: Drum shells (the cylindrical body) are available in different woods, metals and new composite materials. Wood shell drums have been around the longest and are the most popular. Metal shell drums are also very popular and sound much brighter than the warm tones of a wood shell snare drum. Composite shells are the newest type and claim to encompass the best qualities of both wood and metal, yet are not as popular and are sometimes more expensive.

If possible, check out the different types of drums by visiting a music retail store. A good drum department will have wood, metal and perhaps composite shell drums to try. Keep in mind that all wood shells are not created equal. The best wood shells are generally made from either maple or birch. Be wary of shells that use inferior “mystery” woods; these are usually inferior in quality and sound. If it is not possible to test drums with various shells and you’re not sure what to do, I suggest sticking with a quality wood shell snare drum. You can’t go wrong with this choice.

Hardware: The hardware on a snare drum consists of the throw-off, butt plate, lugs, tension rods and hoops. The most important of these components is the throw-off. It should be sturdy, quiet and have a fine-tuning knob adjustment to change the tension of the snares. If possible, test the throw-off by turning it on and off several times. Is it quiet? Does it feel smooth? Is it well made (sturdy)? If it feels flimsy and/or is noisy, look for another drum. I can’t emphasize this enough. The throw-off is the one moving part that must function properly at all times. The lugs, tension rods and hoops are used to tension the heads. Ideally, you want good, precision-machined lugs and tension rods that will last. Some inexpensive imported drums may use poorly made lugs and rods that will strip out over time and use, making the drum un-tunable. The rims of the snare drum hold the head in place under tension. There are various types available, such as triple-flanged and die-cast. The type of rims preferred is a matter of taste. The important factor is that the rim is solid and perfectly round. A rim that is out of shape will make proper tuning of the head impossible. A good drum sales clerk can assist you in determining which drum brands use quality components. Don’t hesitate to ask for advice and direction from a knowledgeable salesperson.

Heads: Drums come from the factory already fitted with heads. Choice of head can have the greatest effect on the sound of a drum. It is possible to greatly improve the sound of a drum by merely changing the heads. Unless you or your teacher are experienced in this area, it’s best to consult the expertise of a good drum sales clerk. For the purpose of this article, head choice is not an issue, except that you should purchase a drum with good quality plastic heads.

Muffler: While drums of past years have had internal mufflers to dampen the sound, today, most drums do not have these components. Over the years, they start to rattle and break. In addition, they interfere with the air column inside the shell. Most drummers today use external mufflers (i.e.: zero rings or moon gel) to dampen any extra resonance from the drum. A good piece of duct tape on the top head works wonders. This is something that can be added at a later time.

Conclusion: Buying a snare drum can be a fun, rewarding, and exciting experience! All major drum manufacturers have Web sites describing their products. This is a good place to start. Be diligent in researching these sites to help narrow your choices. There are many good music stores in virtually every metropolitan area. Visit one and introduce yourself to the drum department clerk; they’ll be happy to assist you in making your purchase. Be prepared to describe your playing level and the types of music you’re interested in playing. Try a few drums at different price points. Turn the throw-off on and off a few times. Turn the drum over and look at the snares. Play the drum both loudly and softly. The wire snares should be heard at both dynamic levels. Of course, buying a quality brand drum from a good retailer is always a good bet. If you do, you should get many years of service from your investment. One more thing, don’t forget to purchase a good stand for your new drum!

Neil Grover is a world renowned cymbal, tambourine and triangle specialist. For over 20 years, he has performed with the Boston Symphony and the Boston Pops. In addition, he has played with the Royal Ballet of England, Boston Musica Viva, American Ballet Theatre, Bolshoi Ballet and Boston Symphony Chamber Players. He has been seen in the hit movie Blown Away and in a music video on MTV, with the legendary rock group “Aerosmith”. Neil has also recorded with the Boston Symphony, Boston Pops, Philip Glass Ensemble, Empire Brass, and Music from Marlboro, on the Sony, RCA, Telarc, Nonesuch, Phillips and DGG labels. Neil has recorded a special segment of percussion for the hit movie Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. As the founder and president of Grover Pro Percussion, Neil Grover’s innovative designs and manufacturing techniques have catapulted the standards of excellence in the percussion industry. Neil was formerly an Adjunct Professor of Music at the Boston Conservatory and the University of Massachusetts. Neil Grover holds the distinction of serving on both the Board of Directors and the Sustaining Members Advisory Council of the Percussive Arts Society.