

# Percussion

## Pitched & Unpitched

The percussion section divides in two. Some instruments play tunes and are written on a normal stave; the rest play rhythm alone and need a stave that carries no pitch at all. Knowing which you are writing for decides everything about the notation.

PITCHED — WRITTEN ON A STAVE, PLAYS TUNES

| INSTRUMENT    | CLEF   | WRITTEN RANGE | WHAT TO KNOW                                                                                                           |
|---------------|--------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Timpani       | Bass   | D2 – A3       | Three or four drums, each tuned to one note. Write the tuning at the start; allow bars for a pedal change.             |
| Glockenspiel  | Treble | G3 – C6       | Sounds <b>two octaves higher</b> than written. Bright, metallic, cuts through everything.                              |
| Xylophone     | Treble | F4 – C7       | Sounds <b>an octave higher</b> . Hard wood, very short — it cannot sustain, so repeat or roll.                         |
| Marimba       | Both   | C2 – C7       | Sounds as written. Warm and woody, softer than the xylophone, and often played with four mallets.                      |
| Vibraphone    | Treble | F3 – F6       | Sounds as written. Has a sustain pedal and a motor that makes the shimmer; say <i>motor off</i> if you do not want it. |
| Tubular bells | Treble | C4 – F5       | Sounds as written. Rings for a very long time — mark the damping.                                                      |
| Celesta       | Grand  | C3 – C7       | Sounds <b>an octave higher</b> . A keyboard striking metal bars; written on two staves like a piano.                   |

UNPITCHED — RHYTHM ONLY, NO PITCH TO READ

| INSTRUMENT | STAVE    | STRUCK WITH    | WHAT TO KNOW                                                                                           |
|------------|----------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Snare drum | One line | Sticks         | Rolls, flams and drags are its language. <i>Snares off</i> turns it into a small tom.                  |
| Bass drum  | One line | Soft beater    | The lowest sound in the orchestra. Long decay — write the damping in.                                  |
| Cymbals    | One line | Pair, or stick | Say which: <i>a2</i> for the clashed pair, <i>suspended</i> for one hung and rolled with soft mallets. |
| Triangle   | One line | Metal beater   | Tiny but piercing. A trill sign means the rapid rattle inside the corner.                              |
| Tambourine | One line | Hand, knuckle  | Three sounds: struck, shaken for a roll, and the thumb roll along the skin.                            |
| Wood block | One line | Hard stick     | Dry and dead. Temple blocks give five of them at different sizes.                                      |
| Tam-tam    | One line | Heavy beater   | Unpitched, unlike a tuned gong. Needs several seconds to bloom, and a written cue to damp.             |

MARKS THAT MEAN SOMETHING PARTICULAR



**The roll**

Strokes through the stem mean shake the note, not play it that many times. Three strokes is the usual sign for an unmeasured roll.



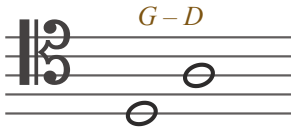
**One line, cross heads**

An instrument with a single sound gets one line and the percussion clef. A cross notehead usually means metal — cymbal, triangle, hi-hat.



**Let it ring**

*l.v.* — *laissez vibrer* — with a tie into nothing means do not stop the sound. To stop it, write *damp* or a plus above the note.



**Timpani tuning**

Name the notes the drums are set to above the first bar. Any change of tuning needs a written *muta* and enough rest to make it.

### Laying out a part

Name the instrument above every entry, even when it has not changed. A player reading three instruments from one stave should never have to guess.

Two or three unpitched instruments can share a five-line stave, each on its own line, with a key printed at the top of the part.

Count the players, not the instruments. One person cannot play the triangle and the bass drum at once, and a change takes bars.

### Sticks and mallets

The beater changes the sound more than the dynamic does. Ask for what you want: *soft mallets*, *wooden sticks*, *wire brushes*, *coin on cymbal*.

Give a bar or two before the change, and remember the player has to put the old pair down.

Where on the instrument matters too — *at the edge*, *on the rim*, *at the dome* all give different sounds.

### Common mistakes

Writing a long note for the xylophone or wood block. They stop dead. Use a roll or accept the silence.

Forgetting the octave transpositions. A glockenspiel line written high will scream two octaves above that.

Leaving no time to damp. A tam-tam or a set of bells will go on ringing under everything that follows unless you say otherwise.