

Covers:

- Pros & Cons of various drum types
- construction materials
- head materials
- drum care
- other issues.

Does NOT cover:

- How to play the drum
- Any Rhythms
- Authenticity/Research/Documentation issues

Plans for additions to this document:

- Photos illustrating some items
- Strap explanations
- Comments from others
- Requests

First and foremost, choose a drum that speaks to you. If you don't have a drum that you like, you won't play it, and if you don't play it you won't become proficient. If you don't become proficient, you won't have any fun with it. If you aren't having fun with it, what's the point?

A better drum will not make you a better drummer. If your drumming doesn't sound right, chances are pretty good that it isn't the drum that is the problem. A better drummer will be able to take advantage of a better drum, but will also be able to get decent sound out of a marginal drum. That said, no one benefits from a lousy drum.

What is the intended use of the drum, concert or drumcircle? Indoors or outdoors? What type of music will you be playing? Different drums sound different, play different, and are used different. Choose the right drum for your purposes.

Rings: Rings will mess up your drum and your ring. Do not ever wear rings when drumming. Put them on a leather strap around your neck so they don't get lost and the strap doesn't wear them out. If you put them on a metal (silver, gold, stainless, whatever) necklace, eventually the necklace will wear away at the band of the ring, and that will be a bad thing. Use leather or some other non-metallic material.

Drumming Etiquette

- The point is for EVERYONE to have fun. Remember that.
- Don't play someone else's drum without asking
- NEVER WEAR A RING
- It doesn't hurt to ask before joining in

Listen to the groove and add to it.

Sit so you can see the other drummers, as well as the dancers.

Recognize your abilities and don't play too much beyond them. If you aren't helping, drop back to something simpler, or drop out.

If you can't hear the person next to you, you are probably too loud.

Silence is a note.

It's not how loud you can play, but how well. The name of the game is control.

Keep an eye on the leader or facilitator, and follow what they do.

About 2/3 to 3/4 of the drummers should be playing a steady simple basic beat.

If people in the circle are giving you strange looks, you may be doing something that upsets the rhythm. This could be anything from playing too loud to not playing on the beat to abnormally wild improvisation. You may want to adjust your playing accordingly.

Drum Care

Washing it?

Unless you are in dire circumstances, it's unlikely you will ever need to wash your drum. If you do need to clean it, I would recommend starting with a damp (not soaking wet) cloth with no soap or other cleaning agent. If that doesn't work, your next step depends on what material your drum is made out of. My Alexandria aluminum drum has sat outside in a lightning storm. I've attacked the head with "Goof-Off" to remove the Alexandria logo. I could probably put it in the dishwasher if it got really dirty without hurting it. On the other hand, my fishskin clay drum doesn't go anywhere near water. I dust it off if it needs it, and wipe it with a mostly dry cloth if the dry one doesn't get everything. Most drums will fall somewhere between these two extremes. If you wash a drum with a fixed natural or artificial head, be careful not to get the area of the head where it attaches to the drum too wet. This could loosen the glue and then your head would come off. If a fixed/glued head does get wet, wipe it dry and place it where it will dry reasonably fast. Don't use a hair dryer or put it in the sun, but place it somewhere dry with reasonable air flow.

No Rings (I've already covered this topic above)

Holding it by the fire to tune it.

Often times you will see someone with a natural head drum holding it by a fire to tighten the head. This is something that should only be done in extreme cases and with a great deal of caution. The reason the head gets loose is it absorbs moisture from the air. Holding it by a fire acts to drive off the moisture and tighten the head. The problem is that it is a largely uncontrollable process. It is very easy to hold it just a little too long and cause head damage. Also, just the process of heating and drying will reduce the life of

your drum head. A better solution is to use a drum with a synthetic head, especially if you are playing outdoors regularly in an area that has wide variation in humidity. If all you have is a natural head drum, play carefully and realize that holding the drum to a fire is a risky way of tuning it. Another, safer, method is to use a heating pad set on a low temperature. Resting the drum on the heating pad when you are not actively playing will help it stay in tune. It will still reduce the life of your drum head, but probably not as severely as holding it over a fire.

Side note: If you are playing a rope-tuned drum, such as an ashiko or a djembe, and it goes out of tune because of the humidity, don't hold it by the fire to tune it. Use the ropes, that's what they're there for. Tuning a rope-tuned drum by holding it over a fire is a signal that the drummer is largely clueless about the drum they are playing, and likely equally clueless about how to play it. I've seen it more than once.

Keep it in a case (see "Cases" below)

Don't drop it

Kind of self explanatory. The aluminum drums and the lighter nickel-brass drums will survive a drop better than a clay drum. Both will survive being dropped onto soft grass with damp soft ground under it better than a drop onto cold concrete. If you can, position yourself so the ground under you is gentle to your drum.

Standing on it's head, stability vs. head damage

If you need to set your drum down for a period of time there are basically 3 ways you can set it: Standing upright, standing upside down, or laying on it's side. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Standing upright is probably safest for the drum head, but may have other problems. Standing upright your drum becomes a very inviting table for people to set things on. For an aluminum Alexandria this probably isn't a problem unless someone were to place a knife blade or broken glass on it. But someone setting a can of soda or a sweating water bottle on a natural skin drum could lead to permanent head damage. Some people will place a cloth over their drum when not playing it as a signal to others that no one else is to play their drum. Standing upright the drum is also top heavy and will tip over without much effort. For a ceramic drum on a hard surface, this can be instant disaster. For my Remo, it's no big deal.

Placing the drum upside down has the advantages of much greater stability and resistance to accidental tipover, as well as being less inviting as a tabletop. It does, however, render the drum

susceptible to head damage if it is placed on a rough surface. If you are on clean carpet you probably won't have any problems placing the drum head down, but I would avoid it if you are outside or on rough terrain. This applies to any head material, natural or synthetic. A useful item to place in your drum case would be a small piece of deep-pile carpet that you could place on the ground, and then place your drum on top of that. If you are energetic, you could make a protector especially for this purpose and decorate it in an appropriate manner. One idea would be to mark the protector with a variety of rhythms as a quick-reference.

Placing the drum on it's side is an option that I really don't see much. This is probably due to the tendency of the drum to roll away when placed on it's side. I store several of my drums on their sides, but they lay in special holders made of dense foam to keep them protected and immobile.

Straps: Fixed/Hooks/Cleats/Loops/Drill & Bolt/Wrapped
Tension/compression/shrink straps/Leather

Cases

Comments about cases: Cases serve two purposes, first to protect the drum, second to help transport it from place to place. Make sure your case helps you do both. What kind of case you need will depend on what kind of drum you have. A ceramic drum needs much more protection than an Alexandria or Remo. Don't skimp on a case, or you'll end up buying a new drum sooner than you had planned.

Alexandria/Istanbul drums usually come with a case. I have seen the quality of these cases range from extremely poor to quite good. The Alexandria drums tend to have poorly made vinyl cases. Quite often the case will tear at the joint where the strap attaches to the case, sometimes the first time you pick it up by the straps. The zippers also tend to be of marginal quality and will tear out after repeated openings. The Istanbul drum cases seem to be much better quality, though I haven't used one for any length of time. Both of these types of cases primarily will give you a handle to carry the drum by, as well as some protection from rain and minor bumps. They don't have any significant padding, and are not much protection for rougher handling. If you are going to use your Alexandria much, plan on getting a better case for it.

Quilted cases are available from several sources, notably Mid-East Manufacturing. While I've never bought one of their cases, they should be better than the case that a typical Alexandria comes with and would probably make a decent replacement. I wouldn't recommend them for a ceramic drum.

Hard cases, made of plastic and foam in a cylindrical shape, are much better for a ceramic drum. While they are somewhat bulky, they offer good protection for your drum. They are available in several sizes, so make sure you get one that fits your drum. If your case is too big, your drum will bounce around inside the case instead of being held rigidly in place.

I have put together several cases for my drums, as I often couldn't find appropriate cases. A trip to the luggage department at your local Wal-Mart/Target/Kmart/etc. can yield several potential cases.

For my Remo, I found a large gym bag that would allow me to put the drum in from the end. I lined the case with a large piece of cardboard, and it has worked well for me for over two years. It doesn't have any real padding, but the Remo is rugged enough that I haven't had any problems with it.

For my Alexandria, another gym bag was the solution. This one is smaller and the drum goes in from the top. I lined it with some 1/2" closed-cell foam padding that was being sold as a sleeping bag pad.

My ceramic drum, while smaller than the others, has a larger case. Again I purchased it from the luggage department and made some minor modifications. This bag is a duffelbag with wheels. A zipper runs the length of the bag. I lined the entire case with some 2" foam padding from a fabric store. Another piece of foam for a cover, and my drum is completely surrounded by at least 2" of foam. The case itself is water resistant. I have thrown this case in the trunk of my car, in the back seat, into the trailer for the trip to Pennsic, and generally treated it like any other piece of luggage. My drum hasn't had a scratch.

All of these bags have the added benefit of shoulder straps and additional pockets to hold some of the miscellaneous things I bring with me when drumming. They also don't look like drum bags, and are possibly less of a target for thieves.

Other Modifications

Rim Padding. Some drums, like my Remo or some of the cheap Pakistan made Nickel-Brass drums, have rims that are hard on your hands. Sometimes it's from the hex bolts they use for tuning lugs, or just from a hard blunt edge where the head meets the drum shell. In any case, adding some padding to the edge can make life much easier for your hands. I've seen leather covers made for the tuning lugs, and I have made rim pads out of foam pipe insulation for my Remo. Other possibilities include covers made of flexible tubing, heavy cloth, or large

rubber bands. The important thing is to make a pad that doesn't touch the head, but will offer some cushion or other protection to your hands.

Tabletop protectors (felt pads). My Alexandria has a fairly sharp bottom edge. My ceramic, while not sharp, is hard and abrasive. Because these can cause unintentional damage to a surface that I might set them on, I have added felt pads to the bottom edge of my drum. You can get these pads in most department stores or hardware stores. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and are usually supplied with an adhesive backing. Peel off the backing, stick it on the bottom edge of the drum, and no more table damage.

Painting. I could write a whole book just on painting your drum. Just the explanation of turning my Alexandria from a hideous pinkish-purple vinyl covered monstrosity into the thing of beauty that it is today would take several pages. So instead, I'm just going to give some pointers. Most drums look good enough when you buy them that they really don't need any paint job, but if you really want to change the look of your drum, first & foremost, protect the head. If you can take the head off, as you can on most tunable drums, do so before you paint anything. If all you want to do is paint the head, find someone who really knows their way around different types of paint and ask them what you should use. Different natural heads will react differently to different types of paint or ink. Synthetic heads will do likewise. Painting some heads may change their tonal characteristics and make your drum sound more muted or flat. Also, the paint you use on a head must remain somewhat flexible, as the head constantly vibrates while you play it, and tuning the drum or changes in humidity will stretch the head, which may crack paint if it isn't the right type.

Isn't all this going to screw up the sound of my drum?

Probably not. I have drilled holes in drums, added padding, painted, coated, strapped, and modified drums in just about every way imaginable. In every case, to my ears the sound before and after was the same. Drums are pretty forgiving instruments. I've seen them played with holes in the head, major dents from playing at some wild drum circles, scratches, cuts, missing tuning lugs and more. I have one ceramic that was completely cracked from top to bottom in two places, and the only thing that held it together was the head. Until the head broke it was the best sounding drum I had. Chances are, any modification you do isn't going to significantly alter the sound of your drum.

Sources:

Local music stores

Mid-East Mfg. www.mid-east.com

Touch The Earth www.touchtheearth.com

Pennsic
Lark in the Morning www.larkinam.com
Other online places
Ren Faires
Some art fairs
Ethnic stores
Some events
Ebay

Ebay warnings. Buyer beware. I would hesitate to buy a drum that I hadn't played, and could not touch before I bought it. Compare prices carefully. Be sure of what you are doing. You can find some real gems on Ebay, but you can also get burned.

Other Drums

Riq - tambourine
Tar – tambourine without jingles
Bendir – tar or riq with snares
Muzzar – big monster Riq
Other Frame Drums
Djembe

Djembes are not just big doumbeks. They sound different, have different origins and histories, and are played and used much differently. While both are goblet drums, doumbeks are finger drums where djembes are hand/palm/base drums. Middle East vs African. Polyrhythmic vs. monorhythmic. If you want a big doumbek, go to www.larkinam.com and get one of the giant doumbeks or a doholla. I think Touch The Earth also has a doholla.

Doumbek Types

Natural vs Synthetic Heads

Synthetic: Fishtone & Mylar
Natural: calf, goat, fish (sturgeon), eel

Synthetic heads don't need tuning and are resistant to weather/rain effects.

Natural heads will change tune, are more fragile, and are very affected by changes in the weather. Natural heads will also generally sound better and have greater tonal range than synthetic heads.

Ceramic with synthetic head
Pro: Great sound
Easy on the hands
Light
Not affected by heat/humidity
Easy to get a "ka" to sound good

Never needs tuning

Con: very fragile

Difficult to add a strap

Sound: Full doums, nice sharp teks, easy ka. Good resonance.
Great range.

Comments: my favorite drum is this category. Sounds great,
inexpensive, easy to play, loud.

Ceramic with natural heads

Either goat, calf, fish, or eel skin

Pro: Great sound "Best" Sound

Easy on the hands

Light

Great tonal range

Con: very fragile

Difficult to add a strap

Very affected by heat/humidity

Slightly more difficult to play

Sound: Full doums, sharp teks, easy ka. Good resonance. Great
range.

Comments: I like this type, but they require much more care to
keep them going than ceramic with synthetic heads.

Aluminum with mylar head, good, Alexandria vinyl

Pro: Nearly indestructible

Very easy to get good "ka" sound

Not affected by heat/humidity/moisture

Not likely to ever go out of tune

Can be found fairly cheap.

Con: Vinyl can look tacky

Vinyl can peel

Can be hard on the hands if played hard

Straps can be a problem or cause cracks.

Sound: Short doums, very sharp teks, easy ka. Limited resonance.
Loud. Can sound like a machine gun in the right hands. Sound will
cut through most drum circles. Can sound very staccato when
needed.

Comments: My black drum was one of these before I refinished it.
Don't peel off the vinyl unless you want a lot of work to make it look
good again. Great starter drum.

Aluminum with mylar head, better, Alexandria inlay or powdercoat

Pro: Nearly indestructible

Very easy to get good "ka" sound

Not affected by heat/humidity/moisture

Not likely to ever go out of tune

Con: Can be hard on the hands if played hard
Straps can be a problem or cause cracks.
More susceptible to chipping or cracks from impact damage than the vinyl style.
Can be heavy.

Sound: Short doums, very sharp teks, easy ka. Limited resonance. Loud. Can sound like a machine gun in the right hands. Sound will cut through most drum circles. Can sound very staccato when needed.

Comments: Cost more than vinyl, but look a lot better. Sound is about the same though.

Aluminum with mylar head, best, Istanbul

Pro: Nearly indestructible
Very easy to get good "ka" sound
Not affected by heat/humidity/moisture
Not likely to ever go out of tune
Lightweight

Con: May be hard on the hands if played hard
Straps can be a problem or cause cracks.
More susceptible to chipping or cracks from impact damage than the vinyl style.

Sound: Short doums, very sharp teks, easy ka. Limited resonance. Loud. Can sound like a machine gun in the right hands. Can sound very staccato when needed.

Comments: These are the top of the line for the Turkish/Aluminum style of drum. Light, beautiful, well made. Sound doesn't seem to be quite as full as from the cast aluminum, but is good nonetheless. This is probably due to them having a thinner head and body; less mass=less resonance=not quite so full sound. You can get these from Touch The Earth.

Improving an Alexandria (NOT an Istanbul)

Sand and file the rim. Take the head off and with a small file or sandpaper, gently smooth the edges of the rim. Smooth away any large imperfections. Smooth the edges where the tuning screws go through the rim, as these can be hard on your hands. Also smooth the edge where the rim meets the body on the side of the drum.

Sand and file the head seat. This is the area of the drum shell that the head fits over. It needs to be smooth and even. Large imperfections can cause premature head failure.

Buy or make a new case.

Remove head logo with nail polish remover or “Goof-Off”. If you don’t like the logo that’s printed on the head, you can take it off with “Goof-Off”. Do this only in a well-ventilated area, like outdoors with a breeze. Put a small amount of “Goof-Off” on a rag and then use that to wipe away the logo. It will go slow, but shouldn’t damage the head.

A note about removing the head from an Alexandria doumbek. All the drums I have found seem to be individually drilled, so you can’t swap a rim from one drum to another. Not only that, but quite often there is only one way that the rim will go onto a drum. To avoid a lot of hassle, if you remove the rim and head from an Alexandria, mark the rim beforehand so you know how it gets aligned. Whenever I disassemble a drum I mark the inside of the rim and the matching part of the drum shell so that I can match up the markings and get the drum back together easily.

Pakistani embossed nickel-plated brass, natural or synthetic heads

Pro: Great doum sounds
Very lightweight.

Con: Cheap.
Bolts are hard on the hands
Sharp edge can be hard to get used to
Probably the hardest to get a good “ka” from

Sound: Full doums, less defined teks, rough ka. Great resonance.
Comments: These drums are plentiful, frequently overpriced, hard to play, and often poorly made. In the right hands they can sound fabulous. For an inexperienced drummer they can be frustrating. Not a good choice for a first drum. One key feature of the cheaper Pakistani drums is the use of hex bolts for tuning. If the drum has hex bolts on it, beware.

Turkish embossed nickel-plated brass, natural or synthetic heads

Pro: Great doum sounds
Very lightweight.
Better than the Pakistani ones

Con: Still Cheap.
Bolts are still hard on the hands
Sharp edge can be hard to get used to
Probably the hardest to get a good “ka” from

Sound: Full doums, less defined teks, rough ka. Great resonance.
Comments: While the Turkish embossed drums are better by a long shot than the Pakistani ones, they still leave a lot to be desired. They can sound great, but they are relatively difficult to play. Look for a cast tuning ring instead of welded one, and smooth topped bolts instead of hex heads.

Remo

Pro: Seldom if ever need tuning
Light
Nearly indestructible
Some are easy to play
Not affected by weather

Con: tend to have a tinny or ringy sound (but can be fixed)
Sometimes have a social stigma (but only by people who don't know any better)

Sound: Full doums, reasonable teks and kas. Great resonance. Good range. Good when you need a long sound (as opposed to the Alexandria's, which are good for short sound).

Comments: My first heavy duty, play it a LOT drum was a Remo tunable doumbek. Still have it, still love it. Learned a lot on it. It has a great range of tones, long resonate doums, and is light enough that I can play it for hours on end.

Toca

Comments: Only played on very briefly. Seemed to be more ringy or tinny than my Remo. Don't know if it can be fixed or not. Toca is more used to making Djembes, which are a whole different animal than doumbeks.

Wood (Zarb or Tonbak)

Comments: Only very similar to a doumbek. This Persian drum is supposed to have great sound and range. Best ones come from Iran and hard to get because of embargo. Mid-East ones said to not be very good, but I have no hands-on experience with either.

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