

LAKE SIDE

Percussion Studio

Concepts and Techniques

Your First Drum Set

Configuration

Most entry-level drum sets are sold in a five-piece configuration that includes a *bass drum*, a *snare drum*, and three *tom-toms*.

Along with the drums themselves, you will need (at least) a pair of *hi-hat cymbals*, a *ride cymbal* and a *crash cymbal*. To make the kit complete, you need a bunch of hardware: two *cymbal stands*, a *hi-hat pedal/stand*¹, a *bass drum pedal*², a *snare drum stand*, and a *throne* (that's what drummers call the stool they sit on).

Here's a typical (almost) complete five-piece set:



Color: Vintage Red (VTR)

Quiz time: What's missing from the above picture³?

¹ Historically drum sets were called *trap* sets, named after the pedals and other “*contraptions*” that allow one drummer to play several instruments at once.

² The origin of the modern drumset can be traced back to 1909 when William and Theobald Ludwig invented the spring-action bass drum pedal. The Ludwig drum company is still in business today.

³ There's only a ride cymbal, no crash. This is very common – beware!

Advice: Make sure you know exactly which items are included with any drum set you are considering purchasing. Buyer beware!

Brand and Model

This is a great time to be a drummer! Plenty of manufacturers are producing good quality drum gear that's very affordable. Some of these companies have been in business for over a century (Gretsch and Ludwig for example), while others have joined the market more recently.

Generally speaking, all the products from major brand-name drum manufacturers are good, and most of the off-brand drum gear is junk. It's a very competitive business, so all the major vendors tend to offer similar products at similar prices.

What are the brands to trust? Well, here's my list, based on personal experience⁴⁵⁶:

- Tama
- Yamaha
- Pearl
- Pacific (Drum Workshop's economy line)
- Gretsch
- Ludwig
- Mapex

For marketing reasons, each manufacturer offers drum kits at several different price points. The drum industry's "dirty little secret," which isn't secret at all, is that price is often the only significant difference between student and professional models. It would be too costly to set up many different manufacturing lines, so most drum companies only have two, cheapo and pro. Your job as a consumer, therefore, is to identify the least expensive student model that's built with the same hardware⁷ and shell construction methods as the company's high-end products. You'll appreciate good hardware and round shells⁸ every time you play your drums, but nobody really cares what type of wood the shells are made of or how the finish was applied.

Also, keep in mind that ***drumheads* affect the sound of the instrument much more than the drums themselves**. Read that last sentence again, and take it to heart!

⁴ Other drummers might quibble with my list, perhaps wanting to add or delete a brand or two, but I think most experienced players would agree that the ones I listed are safe bets.

⁵ Since we're talking about entry-level drums, I omitted high-end brands like Craviotto, Noble & Cooley, and DW, which we *all* wish we could afford.

⁶ What's my favorite brand? I think Tama has a great product and represents the best value on the market. I just bought a Tama Silverstar kit for my studio and I love it; I once took an inexpensive Tama Rockstar kit on tour (because of the risk of airline damage) and the band's audio engineer thought it sounded better than my usual high-end drums.

⁷ "Hardware" includes everything made of metal, except for the cymbals themselves.

⁸ A well-engineered manufacturing process produces laminated wood drum shells of precisely controlled shape and thickness, making the drums sound better and tune more easily, regardless of the type of wood used.

Unfortunately, most manufacturers ship their student-level drums with low quality drumheads that sound terrible and wear out quickly. That means, sadly, that the first thing you will probably need to do when your brand new drum set arrives is to take off all the heads and throw them in the trash. Gretsch is an exception, since their drums come with good Evans heads.

The good news is that you can't buy anything but good quality heads in retail stores. Remo, Evans, and Aquarian are all fine, and they are all made in America. Go to these companies' web sites and read up on the different types of heads they offer, and follow their recommendations based on the type of playing you expect to do. There's no wrong answer, so don't agonize over the decision. As the heads on your drums wear out and need to be replaced, try different kinds and see what *you* like best.

Advice: Buy brand-name drums, and look for an upgraded student model that's basically the same as their professional product. Check the heads that come on new drums, and replace them if they are not pro grade (made in USA). Get an experienced drummer to help you tune⁹ your drums.

Cymbals

Inexpensive drums can be made to sound great by putting good heads on them and tuning them carefully, but inexpensive cymbals just sound bad, and there's nothing you can do about it. Since good cymbals are very expensive, you're probably going to be stuck with less-than-great sounding ones on your first kit, and you'll want to upgrade them when you can.

The brands to look for are Zildjian (American), Sabian (Canadian), and Paiste (Swiss). Less expensive cymbals from those companies are mass-produced and very consistent, so if you like the sound of a particular model in the store you can order one for yourself and rest assured yours will sound exactly the same. High-end cymbals tend to be much less uniform, each one having its own unique sound. Advanced drummers test hundreds of cymbals for each one they purchase, and it takes years of experience to recognize a great cymbal.

Advice: Buy a good student-level drumset with inexpensive cymbals, and upgrade the cymbals after a year or two.

New or Used?

Used drums are a better value. You can get the same kit for less money, or better drums for the same cost. And if you decide to sell the drums, you'll be able to recover more of what you spent. You may even get lucky and find a used kit with upgraded cymbals.

⁹ Tuning a drum set is an art, every bit as complex as tuning a piano. It's a skill every drummer must develop, but for your first kit you'll need to get help from a teacher or experienced player.

But used drums are risky! You have to understand the market (the brands, products, and prices) to know how much a used kit is worth. And you have to understand the drums themselves, so you can check used kits for wear, missing/broken parts, and other potential problems. You can avoid this risk by buying used drums from a reputable dealer, but you'll never get a great deal¹⁰ from a dealer.

New drums are an easy, safe option. You have your choice of brands and colors, and you can buy them through mail order or from a local store, probably for about the same price. Best of all, they are beautiful, shiny, and new.

But the cost adds up! After any necessary add-ons (like another cymbal and cymbal stand and new heads), tax, and shipping, you'll probably be spending at least \$800 for a cheapo model, over \$1000 for an upgraded student model. If you decide to sell the drums later on, you'll be lucky to get half what you paid for them new.

Advice: If you're an ambitious, mechanically inclined bargain hunter, look for used drums at garage sales, Craig's list, etc. If you want to play it safe, buy a new kit from a local store or reputable online retailer. If you're in between, see what used kits are available at local drum shops.

¹⁰ A "great deal" means paying significantly less than the drums are worth. Sometimes you can get away with that when buying from private parties, either because they don't know the value of the drums, or because they just want to get rid of them. But the folks who run drum shops and music stores are professionals - they know the value of their merchandise, and they need to make a profit to survive.