

Drum Set And Cymbal Recommendations For The School Band Program

Over the past several years I've spent a great deal of time working with high school band programs. On many occasions I've been asked to assist in the selection of equipment for the student's use. I've found that there are many inexpensive options available for budget-minded groups and also very common mistakes made by all band programs. I hope to provide information that can inform any program to make intelligent equipment decisions.

DRUMS:

First, a word about drum set marketing. In the late 1970's drum manufacturers began to use birch and maple woods instead of the traditional mahogany blend. They claimed different sonic properties resulted from the different woods and created a line of more expensive drum sets based on this claim. While I have no doubt there are subtle differences in the sounds of these three woods, there is no basis to claim that one wood sounds "better" than another and therefore charge more money for it. A drum's sound is determined by the width and depth of the sound chamber, the number of plies of the shell and drum head, and the mounting and attachment hardware. A drum's quality is NOT determined by the wood used to make the shell. If you take one mahogany and one maple shell of the same size and attach the same hardware and heads to it, you will get a similar sound only differing in subtle qualities which I defy anyone to identify consistently.

Most major drum manufacturers have become extremely consistent in the quality of their production across the line. Meaning that the inexpensive drum sets are made to the same quality standards as the top of the line equipment. So what are you getting when you buy a top of the line drum set?

Die Cast Hoops - These are heavier steel hoops that will decrease the drum's resonance but enhance its articulation. This is especially effective at the dynamic extremes as the drum will remain articulate at a low volume and also it will focus the sound at high volumes. Die cast hoops make the drum set more universally applicable as flanged hoops (less expensive) sound best only in medium volume situations. However, medium volume is where most school bands perform.

Options - There is a greater range of sizes, finishes, shell hardware and mounting options available with top of the line equipment. Drum manufacturers are motivated to do this because these drums are aimed at professionals who will be more selective when they make their equipment purchases.

My point in all of this is that there is no need to buy an expensive drum set in order to get a high quality sound. As I said before, major drum manufacturers have exacting standards across the line that are designed and enforced by a single engineering corps for each manufacturer.

Now for the recommendations:

UNDER \$1000.00

Pearl FZ Forum 5-Piece. Order this drum set in the smaller sizes (20" Bass Drum) as it will make the kit more universally applicable
\$749.00 at steveweissmusic.com

UNDER \$2000.00

I would recommend buying two different kits, one for your jazz band and another for pep band/marching band/louder volume situations.

Gretsch Catalina Club Jazz Shell Pack. These drums are in what has come to be known as "classic be-bop sizes." Although most be-bop drummers did not use these sizes, they will work very well for your jazz band. The only drawback being that this is a shell pack and no hardware aside from the tom mount will come with the kit.

\$649.00 at steveweissmusic.com

Pearl FZ Forum 5-Piece. I would still recommend this kit in the smaller sizes as they are easier to tune.

\$2000 AND ABOVE

At this price you will generally be ordering your drums in component pieces. If you have the means to do this then I recommend Yamaha Maple Custom (NOT Maple Custom Absolute). Yamaha is extremely consistent in their manufacturing processes and provides shell hardware produced in the Yamaha Motorcycle plant. These drums will come standard with die cast hoops. In this price range I also recommend buying a couple of different size options for toms and bass drum along with both a metal and wood snare. You certainly don't need all of these drums but if price is not a concern then this is what I recommend:

18x14 Bass Drum (for jazz)

22x16 Bass Drum

12x8 Tom (for jazz)

14x14 Floor Tom

8x8 Tom

10x9 Tom

12x10 Tom

16x16 Floor Tom

Ludwig 14x6.5 Hammered Bronze Snare Drum

Ludwig 14x6.5 Classic Maple Snare Drum with die cast hoops

Pearl 14x3.5 Brass Free Floating Snare Drum

DRUMHEADS

Please realize that it does not matter how nice a drum set you buy if you are playing on inferior or damaged heads! For the batter side of your snare and toms I recommend buying one or two ply coated heads from either Remo, Aquarian, or Evans. The single ply head will offer more resonance and a quicker response (jazz) but will not be as durable as a two-ply head. For bass drums I recommend either a Remo Powerstroke III or an Evans EMAD and no muffling. Both of these heads were designed

to be thick enough to eliminate the need to muffle the bass drum. The EMAD comes with muffling options for the head itself which can produce as dry a tone as you need. Generally speaking factory resonant (batter) heads will work well and do not need to be replaced.

CYMBALS

Cymbals are more difficult to select because they are not manufactured as consistently as drums. Most of this has to do with the fact that most high quality cymbals are hand made and therefore each retains its own identity. However there are lines of cymbals within specific brands which are consistently pleasing and make smart purchases. Unlike drum sets, there is a vast difference between inexpensive and expensive cymbals. Not all expensive cymbals will sound good, but almost every inexpensive cymbal will sound abrasive when struck and have an unpleasant sustain characterized by a single piercing overtone. Cymbals are also more specific to their application than drums. However, symphonic and jazz cymbals retain a number of the same qualities. Its best to pick out cymbals buying lining them up and comparing sounds but for most school band teachers this is a luxury their schedule does not permit. I will attempt to describe each of these cymbal's sonic qualities and applications and to recommend budget conscious choices. All the cymbals are available at steveweissmusic.com

RIDE CYMBALS

Bosphorus 20" Master Series Ride Cymbal \$295.00 - Ideal for jazz it produces a very warm and low pitched sound. This cymbal will blend very well with the rest of the ensemble but does not articulate very well and has a small bell. I would recommend applying a small amount of tape to the cymbal to enhance articulation.

Sabian 20" HHX Manhattan Jazz Ride Cymbal \$349.00- More articulate than the Bosphorus but without the same pleasing overtone blend. Also features a larger bell. A good choice for universal application.

Zildjian 20" K Custom Medium Thin Ride Cymbal \$419.00- An excellent choice but by far the most expensive. This will be the most consistent pairing of articulation and warmth along with having a adequate bell.

The 22" version of these three cymbals would also make an excellent choice but are considerably more expensive.

CRASH CYMBALS

Zildjian A Custom 18" Crash Cymbal \$244.95 - Very pleasing overtones along with a responsive attack. A good choice for universal application.

Zildjian K Custom 16" Dark Crash Cymbal \$249.95 - Features a lower pitch and shorter decay than most 16" crash cymbals. This makes it ideal for accenting short articulations in the ensemble.

HI-HATS

Zildjian 14" A Custom Pair Hi-Hat Cymbals \$349.00 - Not too heavy where the cymbals won't vibrate against one another but not so light that they won't respond when played with the foot. Great for universal application.

Zildjian 14" K Light Hi-Hat Cymbals \$400.00 - Similar in weight to the A Customs but with lower pitch and overtones.

Hopefully this information is useful to you. If you have the time and resources, try to match the sound of your favorite recordings with the equipment you purchase. Ultimately your own taste should dictate your choices and relying upon it will invariably lead you to the best sounding equipment.

