

# Musical Instruments in Turkey

## Overview:

Modern Turkey is a fascinating place. It has been the home for many different civilizations, and now has the rich socio-cultural heritage you would expect from such a long and varied history. Music is an important part of this social and cultural life. We can learn a great deal about Turkey just by understanding just a little about the musical life, since Turkey's history and contemporary society is reflected in the music they listen to and make.



Perhaps the most fascinating part of Turkey's musical life is what the different people living in Anatolia bring to it. Turks, Greeks, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Persians, Roma, Bulgarians, and many others have all lent something to the musical make-up of modern Turkey.

By studying the instruments of Turkey we will begin to learn about the kinds of music played in Turkey. However, we can also begin to see what kind of people play this music with these instruments and why.

This unit is intended to show you some of the most important Turkish instruments. You can further explore both Turkey and Turkish music by learning about who plays these instruments, where they play them, and who listens to the music they play.

**Saz** – The *saz* is one of the most important instruments in Turkey. Quite a few people in Turkey can play the *saz*, since there are lots of shops to buy one and lots of places to learn how to play it. It is a long-necked lute with frets that are tied onto the neck. It has eight strings in three courses. Courses are groups of strings tuned to the same note. Another Turkish name for this instrument is *bağlama* (Baa – laamaa) meaning ligature, which refers to the frets which are tied on so they can be moved to change the tuning of the scale.

People in the cities and in the villages play the *saz*, and sing common songs called *Türkü*. These songs can be described as folk-songs. In



most cases everyone in Turkey knows at least a few of these songs.

Professionals also play the *saz*. There are professional *Türkü* singers, and even professional electro- *saz* players in Istanbul. However, in the eastern part of Turkey, professional and semi-professional singers called *Aşıks* (Ash-uks) write special songs and perform them in coffee houses and in other informal gatherings. The *Aşıks* are often self-taught *saz* players, and they use the instrument to accompany songs they have written before hand or make up on the spot. One special coffee house activity is to listen to an *Aşık* duel, where each *Aşık* tries to outperform others in writing songs on the spot.



**Ud** – The *Ud* is an instrument that is found across the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and Arabia in almost the same form. In Turkey it is an instrument for both professionals and amateurs. An *ud* is a large bodied instrument with a short neck. The neck has no frets so a wide variety of pitches are possible on the *ud*. It is played like a guitar with a plectrum, or pick, called a *mizrab*. This instrument is most likely the forerunner of the European guitar, and early examples of it come from both Greece, Turkey, and Spain. Early European Lutes look almost exactly the same, but usually have gut frets tied onto the neck like the *saz*.

**T**anbur – The *tanbur* is a long and elegant instrument that was played at the Ottoman court. It is one of the most important instruments for **Ottoman** classical music. Like the *saz*, it has a small body and a long neck. The *tanbur* can be very long however, and it has many more gut frets than a *saz* does. This is because Turkish classical music theory recognizes many more notes than Western music, and the large number of frets on a *tanbur* reflects this.

The *tanbur* can be held like a guitar and plucked with a plectrum (pick), or it can be bowed like a large cello. The sound is very delicate and soft because of the body, which is made from very thin wood over a wooden frame. This instrument is perfectly suited for the small and intimate court concerts but not for playing outside. Because of this, the *tanbur* is a very specialized instrument, and is only used in classical music.



**K**anun – The word *kanun* means law, but it also refers to an instrument that is very important in classical and urban music. One reason it might be called *kanun* is that it is a larger version of an instrument used in scientific experiments on music and the physics of vibrating strings.

Today the *kanun* is one of the most important instruments in Turkish classical music, and in the *fasıl* (faa-sul) a form of urban light classical music played in nightclubs called *gazinós* (from casino). It is often found in groups with the *ud*, the *ney*, a clarinet, a violin, and a *darabuka*.





*Kanuns* can be very large, with around 78 strings grouped together to make courses, (group of strings with the same note). Each note has two or three strings in a course. The instrument is about the size of a small table and is held on the lap of the performer. It is played by plucking the strings with small plectrums attached to the first fingers of each hand with small metal holders. The pitches of the notes can be changed with little levers on the left-hand side of the instrument. These levers are called *mandals*, and change the pitch very slightly. Players move these levers while they are playing to alter the pitch of some notes to fit the scale they are playing.



**Ney** – In Turkey, the *ney* is a very important instrument. It is made from a long piece of river cane, with a special mouthpiece fitted to the top of the tube and seven holes cut into the body. It comes in many sizes, each having a different name. The standard size is the *kiz ney*, and a common large size is the *mansur ney*. This instrument is important to the **Mevlevi Dervishes**, often known as the ‘Whirling’ Dervishes, who use it to accompany the adepts’ whirling during their ceremonies. They say the sound of the instrument is like the sound of a soul crying after being cut from its roots.

Because the Mevlevi Dervishes were very influential in the Ottoman court, the *ney* was also an important instrument in Ottoman Classical Music. In fact, it was the only wind instrument commonly used in the intimate court concert setting.

**Def and Bendir** – The *def* is one of the most simple percussion instruments. Nevertheless, people play it all over the Middle East and Central Asia. It is a frame drum, which means it has a single piece of hide, usually goat or cow stretched over a wooden hoop. It is played with two hands and can yield a large number of tones. Because it is so simple and so versatile people in Turkey play the *def* in all types of music. People play it in folk music, in pop music, and also in Ottoman classical music. They also change the design to meet different needs. A



large frame drum with a piece of gut stretched across the hide to make it rattle is called a *bendir*. A *def* with little cymbals on it, like a tambourine, is called a *zillidef*, or def with bells.



**Darbuka** – The *darbuka*, or *darabuka*, is a goblet shaped drum, traditionally made out of clay. Now instrument makers also make it out of metal, plastic, or fiberglass. It is quite a loud instrument and is often used outside. It is one of the important instruments in the *fasıl* or light classical style of music, amongst others. This type of music is an urban form based on Ottoman classical music and urban folk music. The *darabuka* is the most important percussion instrument in this group, called a *fasıl* (fah-sul) ensemble. This instrument is very popular with Roma musicians. Because **Roma** musicians are the most popular *fasıl* musicians, they often use the *darabuka* in this ensemble.





**Zurna** – The *zurna* is a double reed instrument that is very loud and only used outside. It is a very old instrument, and scholars are not totally sure of its origins. Some believe it came with the **Roma** populations as they left northern India and migrated into Anatolia and into Europe. This is because it is very similar to instruments called the *nagaswaram* and *shennai* which are still found in India today. The *zurna* is still associated with Roma musicians throughout Turkey and the Balkans.



The *zurna* is a very simple instrument. It has a cylindrical body with a conical bottom and seven or eight holes. It is very difficult to play however, and many Roma musicians spend their lives mastering it.



The Ottoman's used the *zurna* as a military instrument. The **Janissary corps**, the sultan's elite troops, had a band which accompanied the troops everywhere and played for official government ceremonies. These ensembles were the inspiration for European military bands after the Viennese heard them when fighting the Turkish forces.

Today the *zurna* is used at ceremonies and important events. Roma ensembles of one or two *zurnas* and a *davul* (see below) play for weddings, circumcision celebrations, and for the famous Turkish wrestling competitions.

**Davul** – The *davul* is a large drum similar to a small bass drum. It is played slung over one shoulder by a strap. Like the *zurna* the *davul* is played by Roma musicians. It is a double sided drum played with a large beater in the right hand and a small wooden switch in the other. The large beater makes deep bass sounds and the small stick makes high-pitched sounds. Using both, a performer can make a wide amount of different sounds to create complicated rhythmic patterns.

This drum is almost always found along side a *zurna*. The two instruments together form a unit that performs at many outdoor events.





**Mey** – The mey is an important instrument in the eastern part of Anatolia and in the Kurdish regions in the south east. It is also found in Azerbaijan and Georgia, where it is called the *balaban* or *duduk(i)*. The *mey* is used in Turkish folk music, but because it is so quiet, it is most often used in small ensembles in intimate indoor settings.

It has a thin cylindrical body with no bell at the bottom and eight holes. Its most important feature is the large double reed made from cane. The reed can be over two inches long and is the largest. What makes the *mey* very distinctive is the sound that the large double reed makes. This sound is very low and mellow and is often mistaken for a clarinet.

