

A Beginner's Guide to Buying a Drum Kit

"Most professionals have kits worth thousands of pounds; however, owning an expensive kit doesn't make you a better drummer. A great drummer can get music out of a cardboard box and a Quality Street tin".

In my capacity as a drum tutor, new students or their parents often ask me the same questions: which kit should I buy? should I buy an acoustic or electronic kit? should I buy new or second-hand? how much should I spend?

The answers to these questions vary from person to person and for that reason what follows is by no means the definitive word. I fully encourage you to do your own research; however, for those in the market for their first kit, this document provides a little bit of guidance to get you started.

Which kit should I buy?

There are many drum manufacturers and most of them cater for the beginner's market. Brands to consider are **Yamaha, Sonor, Mapex, DW, Tama, Pearl** and **Ludwig**. **Yamaha** also make electronic kits, as do **Roland**. Cymbal manufactures include **Sabian, Zildjian, Paiste, Meinl, Bosphorus** and **Istanbul**. Good cymbals can be expensive but fortunately beginners' ranges are available. **Rhythm Magazine** often prints articles on the latest entry-level instruments.

Many drummers learn on either a **standard five-piece acoustic rock kit** or **fusion kit**:

- Rock kits usually comprise a snare drum (14" in diameter), bass drum (22"), two mounted toms (typically 12" and 13") and a floor tom (16").
- Fusion kits are usually smaller: snare (13" or 14"), bass drum (20"), two mounted toms (typically 10" and 12") and a floor tom (14").

The main difference between the rock and fusion kit is the pitch that the drums can be tuned to. As a rule of thumb, the wider the drum, the deeper it will sound (although there are many other factors which influence the sound).

Both kits require cymbals: a set of hi-hats (usually 13" or 14"), one or two crash cymbals (roughly 14"-19") and a ride cymbal (20" – 24").

Acoustic kits can be fitted with volume reduction pads to reduce noise levels. Brand names include **QT, Vic Firth** and **RudiMat**. I use a combination RudiMats on my snare and toms and QT pads on my bass drum and cymbals.

There are also many electronic kits on the market...

Should I buy an acoustic or electronic kit?

Practicalities aside, an acoustic kit would be my first choice. The reason why is quite simple: there's no substitute for the real thing. A good acoustic kit is a beautiful thing to behold (and play). You'll never get the same experience playing an electronic kit. The sound of a wooden drum is determined by a wide range of factors including the type of wood used in the shell construction,

the thickness of the shells, the number of plies, the depth of the shells, the finish (e.g., varnish, wax or wrap), the type of heads used, the tension of the heads, etc. The sound of a drum can be changed dramatically just by using different heads. All in all, you get the real deal with an acoustic kit.

Unfortunately though, acoustic kits are not always the most practical choice; they take up a lot of room, they're heavy and, let's face it, are very audible even when fitted with volume reduction pads. For this reason, some beginners opt for electronic kits. These require less space to set up since they don't have drum shells (electronic drums are essentially velocity/touch sensitive pads). They're much quieter too because you can listen to what you play through headphones. Unlike acoustic drums, they don't weigh much, so you probably won't end up doing your back in when you're carrying them from the car, down the road to the venue, up two flights of stairs and onto the stage. If this all sounds pretty good, the downside to electronic kits is that the pads are often small and don't quite match the stick rebound of an acoustic kit. Playing side-stick and rim shots is fairly unsatisfactory. Electronic kits, no matter how expensive, still produce essentially freeze-dried drum samples (although the range of sounds you can make is often very broad; press a button and your rock kit turns into Latin American percussion, etc.). Electronic cymbals are also pretty disappointing, especially the hi-hats. If you must have an electronic kit, buy a real hi-hat.

If space is a problem but you don't want an electronic kit one option is the **Arbiter Flats** kit. Like electronic kits they don't have shells so they are very compact but because they use real heads they give the same stick rebound as a normal acoustic kit. They are acoustic; however, you can buy them fitted with 'mesh heads' which produce hardly any sound but still feel like a real drum.

The upshot of all this is that you have to consider your options carefully. If you live in a small flat, with neighbours above, below and to the sides, it's only fair to them that you buy an electronic kit and some headphones. An acoustic kit fitted with volume reduction pads is fine if you have the space and your walls are thick enough, although, obviously you can play without the reduction pads if your house is detached and you have tolerant neighbours (the advice then is to wear ear protectors).

New or Second-hand?

Let's talk about second-hand kits first. Really, the advice here is to do your research thoroughly and ask lots of questions. Be careful. I was caught out recently on Ebay when I bought a second-hand kit on impulse. The kit arrived in poor packaging (actually, £50 worth of poor packaging!), it was dirty and had dented heads, even though the seller had assured me it was in amazing condition for its age! I ended up taking it all apart to clean and spent a further £25 on replacement heads. I could have saved a lot of time and money by asking the right questions: **is the kit clean? does it have new heads? is it dented or scratched? are any parts missing? will it be packed securely? what if it arrives damaged?** If a seller can't answer these questions: **AVOID THEM!**

To help with your research, try and find out when the kit was made and the model / serial number, then use Google to get an idea of its true value.

There are pros and cons for buying new and second-hand kits. The following tables compare both options separately.

Buying New	
Pros	Cons
<p>You'll be the first owner of a nice and shiny new kit!</p> <p>Shops often have deals on entry-level kits.</p> <p>There is a wide range of kits to choose from.</p> <p>Usually there will be a 12-month warrantee.</p> <p>It's usually possible to get spare/replacement parts, should you need them (hopefully you won't).</p>	<p>Its value will depreciate as soon as it leaves the shop.</p> <p>Not exactly a con but you pay for what you get.</p> <p>Kits don't normally come with cymbals although some shops have offers on that include them.</p>

Buying Second-hand	
Pros	Cons
<p>There are bargains to be had – but do your research before you commit. (Find out the make and age of the kit. If using Ebay, get the seller to send you pictures and describe accurately the condition. Scour Google to get an idea of its value.)</p>	<p>Kit might be damaged/dirty.</p> <p>Choice is limited to whatever is being sold, so you might be waiting a while for the kit of your dreams to show up.</p> <p>Postage costs on Ebay are sometimes too high.</p> <p>Sellers are sometimes economic with the truth!</p> <p>No warrantee.</p> <p>Replacement parts maybe hard to locate.</p>

My first kit comprised a four-piece Tama Swingstar, metal Pearl snare and Zildjian A cymbals. The Swingstar was Tama's entry/intermediate level kit; 'no thrills' shells but sturdy enough fittings. My parents purchased it second-hand for about £200 in 1986. I've played it for 23 years and I still use it for teaching and practising. Over the years it's suffered from a little metal fatigue but it still stands up to a bashing.

How much should I spend?

This really depends on how sure you are about becoming a drummer. If you're buying a kit for your 6-11 year old and don't want to spend too much in case they give it up after a couple of months, then consider buying a starter/entry level kit (£200-£399). These may not be handcrafted or custom built but they're fine for a young beginner. Just be aware that if you take this option, you may well find yourself looking to upgrade after a couple of years!

If you can afford to spend a little bit more then you can get a kit that's going to last a good few years and sound pretty decent. A better sounding, more robust kit is probably going to cost about £450+ (again, consult Rhythm Magazine). Zildjian, Meinl, Paiste and Sabian all make affordable cymbal packs containing all the cymbals a beginner needs (i.e., a set of hi-hats, a crash and a ride), probably costing an additional £120 - £200. If you're lucky you may be able to get a cymbal pack thrown in as part of a deal.

Of course, you can spend as much as you like on a kit. Most professionals have kits worth thousands of pounds; however, owning an expensive drum kit doesn't make you a better drummer. A great drummer can get music out of a cardboard box and a Quality Street tin. You really only need a high-end kit if you're planning on recording and performing at a professional level. As a beginner, that's a little way off...

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