

The Perfect Tone

The perfect tone is the one that you're trying to create, at any moment.

If your instrument doesn't sound good to you, it becomes difficult to feel good about playing. You must decide what you want your instrument to sound like. Some will like it, some will not. I don't like to muffle the drums, and I'll describe why shortly, but here's the thing that makes so many people muffle their drums... It's "safe".

Here's what I mean. If people like your unmuffled sound, they will call it "resonant". If they don't, they'll call it "ringy". Rather than risk a confrontation with a sound man or another musician, many drummers will muffle the drums to a point where they are only serving as "triggers", and the sound man is virtually (artificially) creating whatever the audience hears. That's one approach, but I suggest another... Get a great acoustic sound first, and reduce the soundman's job to simply amplifying what you play. This takes a little more effort, but is something that is, in my opinion, a fundamental of drumming. It's a much better approach than trusting others to create *your* sound.

See the "References" section for some "tuning" ideas which will help you get started, if you're new to the drums, or want to do some experimentation.

You can, moment by moment, control the sound of your drums by using your *wrists*. However, you've got to start with an open and resonant sound. It's relatively easy to muffle a drum as you play it, to *decrease* the resonance. It's impossible, however to *increase* the resonance of a drum that's already physically muffled by thick heads, tape, or other means.

Also, *resonance is power!* If you're playing muffled drums, you're definitely using more effort than you will when playing on unmuffled drums. Yes, it takes more control to play unmuffled drums at a low volume, but the goal of this project is to help you achieve that control.

Any accomplished drummer will show you that it's possible to play most techniques on a surface that is quite loose. This is important to know, for two reasons:

1. Drums heads (snare drum heads in particular) DON'T have to be tight, either for response, or to enable you to execute precise techniques. The control must come from *your wrists*.
2. Drum heads (bass drum and tom heads in particular) DON'T have to be extremely loose, in order for you to get a deep, powerful tone.

What then ? For most playing, you'll find that a *medium* tension head works best.

1. A medium tension head can resonate, but is not so loose as to be "papery" in sound.
2. It gives the right amount of physical resistance without being "hard".
3. Finally, it won't become "used up" as quickly as either a tight or loose head. Loose heads tend to dent, and tight ones tend to break.

Although "best" is a subjective word, most pros agree that drums sound best when tensioned in their midrange. Don't waste too much of your career trying to prove them wrong. It's wasted effort.

Realize that your sticks also have an effect on your sound. Let's talk a little about that before going deeper.

The Perfect Drumsticks

The perfect drumsticks are the ones that help you create the sound you want to hear.

The size and shape of your sticks has to be determined by the size of your hands, and by the sound you want to produce. For any given size though, here are some guidelines you can depend on:

The more dense a stick is, (the harder the wood) the higher pitch it will produce. Also, since it's more rigid, it will transmit more shock to your hands. Very soft sticks, on the other hand, can actually take energy away from you, by absorbing it. So my preference, and suggestion would be that you use a medium size, medium density stick, for most playing. Most manufacturer's "5A" model is the type I'm speaking of. Further details must be decided by your experience.

It's important that when you buy a pair of sticks, that you really get a *pair*. Do this by listening to the pitch of the sticks. Take each stick, and with a very loose grip, tap it on a rubber practice pad. You'll hear the stick "ping". I don't think it's important that every pair of sticks you buy should be the same pitch, but I do think it's helpful that both sticks in a *pair* have the same pitch. Otherwise your audience may hear something "uneven" in your playing, that's just a result of a mismatched pair of sticks. (Especially true if you're playing into a microphone one inch from the drum head !)

One of the technical goals of this presentation is to enable you to achieve this "ping" at will. It'll double your power!

I prefer and recommend higher-pitched sticks, because, when used properly, they can increase the range of your instrument. When you play a rimshot, rim click, or a stick shot, (the sound you get when you lay one stick on the drum and strike it with the other stick) the pitch is quite high compared to the actual pitch of the drum. It's like adding another drum to your kit, and gives you more *contrast*.

Don't overlook brushes, mallets, and any other tool that enables you to get the sound you want. Each of these tools will require it's own techniques to sound right, so spend time with them all.

The Perfect Drum Sound

The perfect drum sound is the one that makes you feel good.

If you're not happy, forget it.

I prefer to use the term "tensioning", rather than "tuning", here because, although pitch can be used as a reference, you usually won't be "tuning" drums to specific pitches, the way you would with another instrument, such as a guitar. What you need is a variety of low to high *tones* that enable you to blend with a band and compliment the sound. The last thing you want to do is spend all your time sitting at the drums with a drum key, worrying over every little detail.

I don't muffle any of the drums, except for a narrow felt strip behind each head of my bass drum. It's my opinion that you should first learn to control the drums with your hands and feet, before doing any muffling. It's a fact that unmuffled drums have more range and tonal possibilities than muffled ones, and that says it all for me. As your experience and needs change, you may find that you want or need to muffle your drums, but learn to control the sound first.

Pitch is used here as a reference in these tensioning examples. It's only used because it's a more specific reference than "medium" or "tight", to a new drummer. The exact pitches do not matter. If you don't have access to a musical instrument, go to a music store and get a "Chromatic Pitch Pipe", for just a few dollars. It'll fit in your pocket, (or snare case) doesn't require electricity, and will last forever.

Describing a drum sound is subjective...If you like it, it's "good", and if you don't, it's "bad". Be aware of how your drums and cymbals project, and if applicable, how they sound through the speakers. Most of the time, what you hear will be quite a bit different from what the audience and your fellow musicians hear. We'll begin with general guidelines, then move on to details. (A chart showing several different "tuning" options is in the "References" section.)

One-headed drums generally produce a more definite pitch, and are generally less resonant than two-headed drums. There may be times when you select single heads, but two-headed drums will give you more potential sounds.

Using thin to medium-weight heads will give you the most flexibility, because they are more resonant and responsive. It's true that they're a bit less durable than thick heads, but that's the price you pay for tone and range. You can always muffle a drum if it's really needed, but if you use thick ("dead") heads, you'll be stuck with that one sound. Tension them evenly, (more on that later) and in their midrange. Extremely tight or loose tension limits the range of sounds you can produce. The *feel* of a drum is usually better in it's midrange, too.

On toms and the bass drum, begin with both heads tensioned the same, as a starting point. On the snare drum, tension the bottom head a little tighter than the top head. (musically, a 4th to a 6th interval) For example, if the top head is tensioned to approximately an "A", then tension the bottom head to approximately an "F#" above that. (If you like a tighter sound, try the top head tensioned to a "C", and the bottom head tensioned to an "F" above that.) Depending on how many drums you have, try tensioning them so they are equal intervals apart. The most popular intervals with 3 to 4 tom setups seem to be minor 3rds, fourths, and fifths. I prefer 5ths.

(If you don't understand these terms, see the "References" section)

Remember, drums that sound too resonant up close will probably be just right when you play with a band, and have to blend with and project through everyone else's sound. *Resonance is power.*

Drum “Tuning” Chart

Remember that the precise pitches shown here do NOT matter. They’re only a reference.

Here’s the setup I use, and it’s a fairly common one for the size drums I play. I don’t touch the drums, as a rule, whether I’m playing in a trio or a big band, or a pop gig. The only difference is whether the drums are miked or not, and how loud the PA system is. It works!

I use white coated “Diplomat” heads (by Remo) on all the drums, and use these approximate pitches. The reason I mention the heads is that a different head may not produce the same pitch at the same tension.

Drum	Batter Head	Opposite Head
5 1/2” snare drum	A to C	F or F# (6th higher)
9” X 13” tom	D	D (same)
16” X 16” tom (1)	G	G (same)
16” X 16” tom (2)	C	C (same)
14” X 24” bass drum	G	C (4th higher)

I tension the bottom snare head tight enough to get a crisp response, but not choke the drum. The snare wires are tight enough to enable you to define every beat, but still play a soft press roll, and get good response with brushes.

The tensioning method on the bass drum gives at least two distinct sounds. When you play the bass drum and hold the beater against the head after impact, you get a crisp tone, and the audience hears the FRONT head pitch. When you relax and let the beater bounce back from the head, you get a more resonant sound, and the audience hears the lower, batter head pitch. I use a wood beater, and use only a 2 to 3 inch wide felt strip behind each bass drum head, placed at about the one third point across the head. See the illustrations for an example of this approach.

By the way, this is the TIGHTEST tension I ever use. I often play the drums for quite a while before touching them with a drum key, and they do tend to become looser over time. I like the variety, and find that they all tend to loosen about the same rate, so they don’t sound “out of tune” with each other. Don’t become obsessed with exact pitches. It’ll drive you nuts, and it’s simply not that important. (Unless you are specifically called on to play PITCHES... a very rare thing for any drummer, and something I’ve never been asked to do in over 35 years of playing) Just get a good, flexible sound, and think about TONE.

If you find that any drum head is producing a pitch that is too definite, try this often-used tip. Slightly loosen only one or two tension rods on that head, which makes the drum head have a less definite pitch. It’s equivalent to using a small amount of muffling.

The tensioning method above sticks to the "medium" philosophy discussed earlier. They're not too "stiff", yet they're not "sloppy loose" either. The drums get to resonate, and they're comfortable to play. Try it.