

Tin Can Set

Example of one of many music projects from Bart Hopkin's book, Making Musical Instruments with Kids.

If you strike the bottom of a tin can with a pencil or a chop stick, the sound you get may not seem very musical at first. But when you gather a set of cans and start playing rhythms and melodies – surprise! The tone takes on an unexpectedly appealing character.



MATERIALS

Clean, empty tin cans in various sizes, at least 6 or 8 of them (more is better). The top should be removed with the bottom still in place. If possible, use the lift-off style can opener to open the cans. Otherwise, carefully check the opened end of the can for spurs or jags, and dispose of cut-off lids out of the reach of children.

A towel or similar thick cloth, hand towel size or bigger.

Two unsharpened pencils, chopsticks or similar lightweight sticks to use as beaters.

PROCEDURE

Optional: remove the paper from the cans.

Lay the towel out on a table, and place the cans open-end-down on the towel.

Strike the ends of the cans with the pencils or chopsticks. Select a set of them whose tones seem to complement on another nicely. Arrange those cans on the towel from lowest pitch to highest, or in any other sequence you like.

With small children, the selection process can be quite random; they may simply decide to include all the cans. Older children may give more thought to the process of selecting which cans to include in the instrument, looking for the cans that have the best sound and whose pitches go well together.

PLAYING THE TIN CANS

Strike the ends of the cans with chopsticks or unsharpened pencils to play rhythms and melodies. When striking, let the stick bounce off, leaving the lid free to vibrate. If you use unsharpened pencils as beaters, you can get different tone qualities depending on whether you strike with the wood end or the eraser end.

FURTHER POSSIBILITIES

Children like instruments they can carry around. You can make a tin can set portable by strapping several cans together with strong rubber bands. (The common 3 1/2" x 1/4" rubber bands, referred to as size #64 are good.) To make the strapping easy, do it in sequence: first put a rubber band around two of them, then add a third, then a fourth. The maximum you can hold in a group without slippage is about five. To increase stability, use two or more rubber bands. The player can hold the set with one hand while striking with a pencil or chopstick in the other.