

Drum options

Diameter: as small as 12” as large as 26”

The most popular drums are between 14” and 18” in diameter. The bigger the diameter, the louder and boomier the voice.

18” drums were the standard for many years. The vogue today seems to favor smaller diameters. Lots of 16” drums on the market. Many pros are playing 14” drums.

If you want a traditional, boomy, loud voice, consider an 18” diameter drum with a natural hide head. If you want a modern sound, or play top end style, consider a 16” or 14” drum with a natural hide.

Depth: as shallow as 3” to as deep as 7”, even more on specialty drums.

The deeper the drum the deeper the tone will be. Deeper drums, if tuned properly, usually are louder. Large depth drums usually have cutaways so that you can position your hand inside the drum.

There is no “standard” depth to a bodhran.

The Head: Natural or Synthetic

Natural heads are generally goatskin. Drums are available with sheep skin, lambskin, reindeer skin and kangaroo hide heads. Natural hide has the best tone quality. Many makers are very particular about selecting and preparing the hide. Higher priced drums usually have much effort and cost invested in getting the head to sound as good as possible. Natural heads need some care and they are sensitive to humidity and temperature.

Natural heads may be a uniform color or splotchy. Splotchy heads have not been bleached or treated in any special way. The dark portions of the head are where the animal’s fur was dark. Natural heads that appear uniform in color have been bleached and treated. They tend to produce uniform sound through the head. Many high-end drums have bleached and treated heads. These often have extraordinary voices and possess great capacity for making tonal changes while playing.

Synthetic heads are not troubled by changes in temperature or humidity. The downside is that no synthetic head produces the tone quality of natural hide. In addition, it is nearly impossible to change the pitch of a drum with a synthetic head. It is possible to generate an open sound and a closed sound, but not a modulated pitch.

Synthetic heads are convenient and often less expensive than natural hide heads. They require no maintenance. It is almost impossible to damage one. But, they just don’t have the tone.

Cross Bars: none, single, T or X

The interior of a drum may have a cross bar in it. Cross bars may be a single length of wood, or in the shape of a T or an X. Cross bars are very helpful if you must stand to play. Many players find the cross bars get in the way of producing tonal changes. Often drums are designed so that the cross bars can be removed

Tunable

Traditional drums are not tunable except by heating or spritzing water (or, God forbid, Guinness) on the head. Modern drums often are equipped with thumb or wrench tuners mounted inside or outside of the drum. The tuners adjust the tension on a rim that will, in turn, increase or decrease tension on the head; and thereby change the pitch of the drum. It is possible to get a wide range in the basic tone of the drum with tuners.

Turners help to tension the head uniformly. That means the voice of the drum will be clearer and louder. Get a tunable drum if you can. Opt for tuners inside the drum, if you can. Opt for thumb screw tuners inside of wrench tuners if you can.

Frame Wood

Mostly this is a cosmetic decision. Many drum frames are laminated. That does not imply a cheap drum. Plywood can be much stronger than a solid wood. A mahogany ply frame is likely to be very much more expensive than a solid rosewood frame. Mass produced drums sometimes use a polymer frame to support a synthetic head.

The wood used in the frame of a drum makes very little contribution to the overall sound of the drum. The voice is formed in the head and shaped by the physical dimensions of the drum, not the material of the rim.