

Castanets

Castanet(s)

	
Castanets	
Percussion instrument	
Classification	hand percussion
Hornbostel–Sachs classification	111.141 (Directly struck concussive idiophone)

Castanets are a percussion instrument (idiophone), used in Moorish, Ottoman, ancient Roman, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese music. The instrument consists of a pair of concave shells joined on one edge by a string. They are held in the hand and used to produce clicks for rhythmic accents or a ripping or rattling sound consisting of a rapid series of clicks. They are traditionally made of hardwood, although fibreglass is becoming increasingly popular.

In practice a player usually uses two pairs of castanets. One pair is held in each hand, with the string hooked over the thumb and the castanets resting on the palm with the fingers bent over to support the other side. Each pair will make a sound of a slightly different pitch.

The origins of the instrument are not known. The practice of clicking hand-held sticks together to accompany dancing is ancient, and was practised by both the Greeks and the Egyptians. In more modern times, the bones and spoons used in Minstrel show and jug band music can also be considered forms of the castanet.

When used in an orchestral setting, castanets are sometimes attached to a handle, or mounted to a base to form a pair of *machine castanets*. This makes them easier to play, but also alters the sound, particularly for the machine castanets. It is possible to produce a roll on a pair of castanets in any of the three ways in



Castanets seller in Granada, Spain

which they are held. When held in the hand, they are bounced against the fingers and palm of the hand; on sticks, bouncing between fingers and the player's thigh is one accepted method. For a machine castanet, a less satisfactory roll is obtained by rapid alternation of the two castanets with the fingers.

During the baroque period, castanets were featured prominently in dances. Composers like Jean-Baptiste Lully scored them for the music of dances which included Spaniards (*Ballet des Nations*), Egyptians (*Persée, Phaëton*), Ethiopians (*Persée, Phaëton*), and Korybantes (*Atys*). In addition, they are often scored for dances involving less pleasant characters such as demons (*Alceste*) and nightmares (*Atys*). Their association with African dances is even stated in the ballet *Flore* (1669) by Lully, "...les Africains inventeurs des danses de Castagnettes entrent d'un air plus gai..."

A rare occasion where the normally accompanying instrument is given concertant solo status is Leonardo Balada's *Concertino for Castanets and Orchestra Three Anecdotes* (1977). The "Conciertino für Kastagnetten und Orchester" by the German composer Helmut M. Timpelan, in cooperation with the castanet virtuoso, José de Udaeta, is another solo work for the instrument. See also the *tocatta festiva* for castanets by Allan Stephenson. Sonia Amelio has also performed her castanet arrangements as a concert soloist.



Renoir's 1909 painting *Dancing girl with castanets*

In the late Ottoman empire, *köçeks* not only danced but played percussion instruments, especially a type of castanet known as the *çarpare*, which in later times were replaced by metal cymbals called *zills*. Also referred to as clackers in the United States.

Castanets in Spain

Castanets are often played by singers or dancers. Contrary to popular belief, castanets are not commonly used in flamenco dance, except for two specific forms: *zambra* and *siguiriyas*. In fact, Spanish folk dance "Sevillanas" is the style typically performed using castanet. *Escuela bolera*, a balletic dance form, is also accompanied by castanets. The name (Spanish: *castañuelas*) is derived from the diminutive form of *castaña*, the Spanish word for chestnut, which they resemble. In Andalusia they are usually referred to as *palillos* (little sticks) instead, and this is the name by which they are known in flamenco.



Köçek troupe at 1720 celebration fair at Sultan Ahmed's sons' circumcision.

Castanets were used to evoke a Spanish atmosphere in Georges Bizet's opera, *Carmen* and Emmanuel Chabrier's orchestral work *España*. They are also found in the "Dance of the Seven Veils" from Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* and in Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. An unusual variation on the standard castanets can be found in Darius Milhaud's *Les Choëphores*, which calls for castanets made of metal. Other uses include Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio espagnol*, Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, Francis Poulenc's *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in D minor* and Karl Jenkins's *Tangollen*.

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