

The Evolution of Philippine Drum & Bell Lyre Traditions

By Satur Tiamson

The Philippines boasts countless Drum & Bell Lyres corps, making it the most active country in the world in this musical tradition. Every province has at least one Drum & Bell Lyre group. Its popularity is due to the affordability of the instruments compared to those of Drum & Bugle Corps and the ease of learning compared to instruments in orchestras or concert bands.

Drum & Bell Lyre Corps are categorized into two types: the scholastic class, which includes school-based bands from elementary to college, and the open class, which consists of community-based bands managed by private individuals, government agencies, or organizations. Typically, these ensembles feature keyboard percussion instruments (bell lyres, xylophones, marimbas, and marching bells), a drumline (snare, tenors, cymbals, and bass drums), as well as color guards and majorettes.

HISTORY

The Drum & Bell Lyre Corps in Manila has origins dating back to the 1960s. The most notable pioneer in the area is D'Harmony, formerly known as the Green Beret Drum & Lyre Corps, located in Pasig City, Manila.

D'Harmony was founded by Wilfredo S. Tremor. In September 2022, the Philippine Drum & Lyre Associates Inc. and the Color Guard Alliance of the Philippines recognized Tremor as the "Father of Philippine Drum & Lyre."

COMPOSITION OF A DRUM & BELL LYRE CORPS

A Drum & Bell Lyre Corps is typically divided into two main groups: the musicians and the visuals.

Musicians: This group generally consists of several sections: pit section/front ensemble; marching keyboard percussion section; drumline/battery section.

Visuals: This group enhances the performance through visual artistry and movement: color guards; majorettes.

The entire corps is typically led by a conductor, often referred to as the Bandmaster, who coordinates the musicians and visual performers to create a cohesive and engaging show.

THE BELL LYRE

The bell lyre, commonly referred to simply as the lyre, is the primary instrument of the Drum & Bell Lyre Corps. In the Philippines, the establishment of numerous Drum & Bell Lyre corps can be attributed to the affordability of their instruments com-



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pared to those used in Drum & Bugle or marching brass/winds bands. Interestingly, the earliest models of the bell lyre were designed to resemble the stringed instrument known as the lyre.

The Philippines PAS Chapter is currently working to promote the standardized and accurate description of this musical instrument. In some provinces, the bell lyre is incorrectly referred to as a xylophone, which is inaccurate, as xylophones are made of wood. Additionally, some people traditionally call the bell lyre simply “lyre,” which is also misleading, since a lyre is a stringed musical instrument. Currently, various organizations reject the standardization of international terminologies, arguing that the term “lyre” is an important aspect of Filipino culture that should be preserved.

THE PHILIPPINE-MADE BELL LYRE

Presently, most bell lyres are made by local makers. This also promotes the creativity and craftsmanship of the local makers. Branded or international musical instruments have a big difference in cost compared to locally manufactured ones. That’s why Drum & Bell Lyre bands usually choose to buy locally made instruments.

The bell lyre was introduced to the Philippines in the 1960s, initially referred to as the “Chinese Lyre,” available for purchase at Raon, Manila. This nomenclature persisted until the 1990s. During the late 1970s, local musical-instrument makers, many of whom were band trainers, began crafting their own versions of the instrument, contributing to its evolution. Over time, the bell lyre, or Chinese lyre, became commonly known simply as the “lyre.”

The design of the bell lyre resembles that of the traditional stringed lyre, and it was originally played in an upright position. However, as the instrument gained popularity, it was adapted into a horizontal format, allowing for two-handed play. This evolution reflects the instrument’s integration into the local music culture and its adaptability to different playing styles.

Instruments such as the Musser M65S Aluminum Marching Bells, which are made in the USA, and the E-lance Percussion Marching Lyre differ considerably in cost from those produced

Wilson Marching Percussion at the 5th National Competition 2024 by DBCOPI- Bacoar City



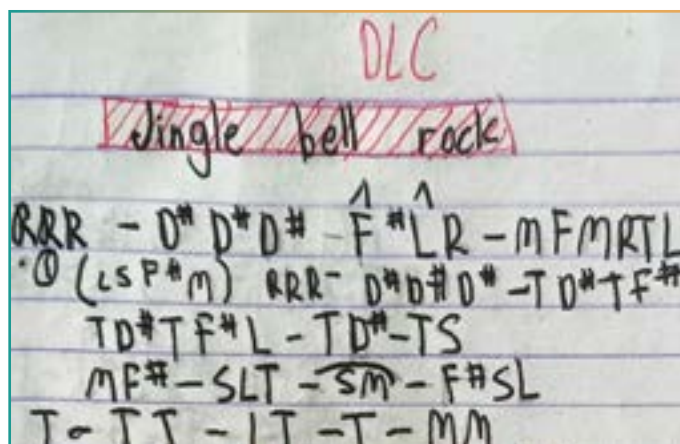
domestically. While many top drummers and drum lines opt for branded or imported instruments, the Philippines currently lacks the technology and advanced steelworking processes necessary for manufacturing high-quality imported drums. Additionally, the country does not have the appropriate types of wood that are durable enough for making high-tension drums. Nevertheless, there are still locally manufactured drums available in the market, such as those made by Lester Aristoteles, member of PAS Philippines and owner of E-Lance Percussion.

TEACHING METHODS

To become familiar with the bell lyre, students are taught to mark the notes using *so-fa* syllables, while others may use pitch names or the musical alphabet. They then practice scales. The teacher often dictates or sings the notes, allowing students to hear the melody before they see it written on paper.

Similarly, for the drums, instructors sing the beats and demonstrate them to the students before they begin to play. The teacher writes the notes using *so-fa* syllables or pitch names, assigning syllables to each note value, which makes it easier for students to understand.

Sample by Tirso Caragay



Each note is represented as follows: Do - D; DO# - DI; Re - R; RE# - RI; Mi - M; Fa - F; FA# - FI; Sol - S; SO# - SIL; La - L; LA# - LI; Ti - T.

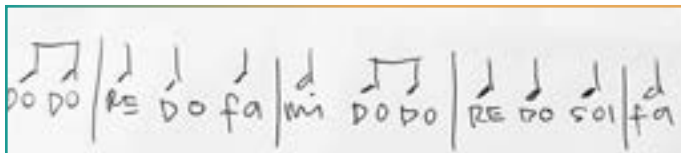
Flat signs are not used in this notation style. They will also indicate the numbers representing how many times to play each note. When indicating pitch, arrows are used to denote high or low notes. An upward-facing arrow signifies a higher pitch, while a downward-facing arrow indicates a lower pitch.

To facilitate learning, fast passages are simplified from sixteenth notes to eighth notes when using one mallet. However, if students demonstrate the ability to play fast passages with one mallet, they are encouraged to do so, fostering individuality in their learning process.

In 2018, some bandmasters began teaching their students how to read music notes. They use notation alongside *so-fa* syl-

lables. Most Drum & Bell Lyre groups today are arranging music with complete harmony.

Sample by Rocky Isanan



Students also learn to execute single- and double-stroke rolls, which they refer to as “rolling.” This terminology helps unify their understanding of rhythm and technique, allowing for a smoother transition between different styles of play.

Today, their style is influenced by what they see in DCI (Drum Corps International). The marching, drill, choreography, arranging, and color guards are all quite similar.

COMPETITIONS

Drum & Bell Lyre competitions have been a part of the Philippine music scene since the 1980s, spearheaded by the Department of Education (DepEd), which was formerly known as the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS). These competitions continue to thrive today, with events held almost every month across various locations in the Philippines. Most competitions are organized by local government units, different organizations, or private companies.

The 1997 DECS “Paligsahan sa Sining” (Arts Competition) was held at the Cultural Center Complex and attended by Drum & Lyre groups from 13 regions. The top three winners were Makati, Dasmariñas Cavite, and Bocaue Bulacan. The first official national Drum & Lyre competition took place at Baclaran Elementary School on May 4, 2013. Organized by the Philippine Drum & Lyre Associates Inc. (PDLAI), the event saw participation from nearly 40 bands from Luzon.

PDLAI 9th National Competition 2024 - Bacoor City, Marching Band Capital of the Philippines



In 2014, Doowee Donut sponsored a televised national Drum & Bell Lyre Competition called the Doowee Hooper Beat Band Competition, which aired on ABS-CBN Sports and Action Channel 23. This competition ran for four seasons, from 2014 to 2017, and was open to all Drum & Bell Lyre Corps.

The Bacoor City Government organized the Bacoor International Music Championships in 2018, featuring 31 bands from across the Philippines as well as marching bands from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong. This event highlighted the vibrant Drum & Bell Lyre community in the Philippines.

Currently, there are two separate national competitions organized by the Philippine Drum & Lyre Associates Inc. (PDLAI) and the Drum & Bell Corps Organization of the Philippines (DB-COPi). These competitions continue to showcase the talent and dedication of Drum & Bell Lyre ensembles nationwide.

JUDGING SYSTEM FOR COMPETITIONS

The rules, guidelines, and criteria for judging in Drum & Bell Lyre competitions vary depending on the organizers. Current-

Partida Blue Cadets / Rocky Isanan - Bandmaster



ly, national organizations have aligned their competition standards with those of international entities such as Drum Corps International (DCI), Winter Guard International (WGI), and the Asian Marching Band Confederation.

Competitions are categorized into three main divisions: Elementary, High School, and Open Category. Each category has its own set of judging criteria, ensuring that participants are evaluated fairly based on their skill, creativity, and overall performance.

In the early 1990s, when I was in Grade 3, I started with the Drum & Lyre (Angono Elementary School Central Drum & Lyre Corps) before joining the Community Band (Angono Wind Ensemble). Everything the bandmasters I spoke with for my PASIC presentation said rings true, as I have experienced it myself – from learning, competitions, instruments, and the evolution of the style from then to now. In my PASIC presentation, I will showcase several videos of Bell Lyre training, instrument-making, and competitions in the Philippines.

In the end, I hope that these experiences will inspire and provide knowledge to the next generation of musicians and students who wish to continue the tradition of Drum & Lyre in our country.

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations: Isaac De Alva III (Vice President of Philippine PAS Chapter); Manuel Los Añes (Founder of DBCOPI); Patricia Real Barairo (Founder & Executive Director of CGAP, Inc.); Gibson Miguel Zapanta (Judge Academy Director of PDLAI); John Lester Aristoteles (Owner of E-Lance Percussion); Tirso Montoya Caragay (San Carlos College DBC Bandmaster, San Carlos City, Pangasinan); Rocky Isanan (Bandmaster of Partida Blue Cadets); Joe Daryl Diesta (Bandmaster of Xtended Drum and Bell Corps); Marlon Lopez and PASAMVlog team; Ryan Gleserio P. Palamos (Chairman of PDLAI); Dino Tamondong; Wilson Marching Percussion; PDLAI and DBCOPI. Thank you for your invaluable contributions and support!

Satur Tiamson is an active drummer and percussion performer, educator, adjudicator, and clinician. He is the President of the Philippine PAS Chapter, PASAMBAP (National band organization in the Philippines), member of the PAS World Percussion committee, and a PAS advisory member. He was a featured artist at PASIC 2023. Satur was hailed by *Time Out Magazine* as one of the Top 20 Musicians in Hong Kong. He is also a recipient of the TOYM (The Outstanding Young Men) award in the Philippines for his achievements in the Arts in Music. **PN**

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