

MAKE YOUR OWN

MARACAS

MARACAS AROUND THE WORLD

Maracas of various sizes and shapes are a rich part of Latin American musical styles and history. Often associated with the music of Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Colombia, maracas have actually been played for centuries. One set of clay maracas found in the ruins of present day Columbia dates back to that area's indigenous culture, almost 1,500 years ago.

Maracas or similar percussion instruments have also found in Hawaii, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Brazil and regions of the South Pacific where materials such as gourds and coconut shells lend themselves to creating this type of easy percussion instrument.



Maracas are one of the simplest instruments to play.

They consist of a pair of rattles with handles. Place one in each hand and you can shake, rattle and roll! At the same time, experienced percussionists can create some really intricate patterns and rhythms with a set of maracas. Making your own pair of maracas is a great way to explore music, rhythms, beats and world cultures - all at the same time!

HOW ARE TRADITIONAL MARACAS MADE?

Most traditional maracas are made from natural materials such as gourds, clay, wood or coconut shells. More modern ones can be made of plastic, leather or other synthetic materials. They are filled with small objects such as seeds, pebbles or dried beans.

Many sets of professional maracas have an interesting trait. They are “pitched” differently. In other words, shaking the right hand rattle will produce a different sound than shaking the left hand one. Because each sounds a bit different, you can create some great patterns by playing with both hands and both sounds!

SUPPLIES

To create one pair of recycled rattles, start with two small plastic water bottles (8 oz/236 mL size). You'll also need two toilet paper rolls and some sturdy tape. Electrical tape works best and colorful electrical tape adds a nice decorative touch to this project!

For the rattle, you'll need two different types of fillings. A complete supply list is below.

Supply List (For One Set of Maracas)

- (2) 8 oz/236 mL size water bottles
- (2) toilet paper rolls
- Electrical tape or sturdy tape
- Filling for your maracas – any of the following: sand, salt, pebbles, birdseed, rice, beans, small beads, large beads, dried pasta, rice, dried peas or beans, dried pasta, small washers, paper clips, small erasers.

MARACA COMBINATIONS

We've experimented and love the sounds created by pairing these items. Here are some of our top choices for filling maracas.

- **Rice and Beans Maracas**
Rice in one maraca, beans in the other. The color and the sound are different, making it really easy to create patterns.
- **"Back To School" Maracas**
Colorful paper clips in one, small extra erasers in the other. A nice difference in sound between the right and left hand.
- **Sand and Little Pasta Maracas**
These are really quiet and subtle. The sand or salt maraca is softer than the tiny pasta (choose acini de pepe, pastina or orzo pasta) making this a great choice for kids that want to learn to listen, kids with noise sensitivity or for learning some of the aspects of playing a percussion instrument quietly.

MAKE YOUR MARACAS

First take your clean, dry 8 oz water bottle and fill with your chosen contents. Once it sounds good to your ears, close the cap tightly.

The next step is to create the handles. Take your two toilet paper rolls and make a straight cut from one end to the other. Tighten the roll in on itself to about the size of a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch dowel and then apply your electrical tape. Start wrapping the tape around the bottom part of the rattle on the bottle and move down onto the new handle. Wrap slowly, covering all the cardboard of the toilet paper roll and you will have a sturdy handle for your new instrument.

TIME TO JAM

Do you want to just jam? Then simply pick up your instrument and shake, shake, shake. Or dance around, move and groove, and shake things up to your heart's content. If you want to get into more of the maraca's musical possibilities, then feel free to read on and explore what else they can do.

Aside from shaking them back and forth, you can "swoosh" them around. By moving your hand in a circular motion, the contents of your maracas won't hit from side to side, but will whoosh around the circular interior of the water bottle, creating a completely different sound.



ABOVE: "Back To School" Maracas

BELOW: How To Tape Your Handles



You can also “crescendo” your maracas. Start by shaking them quietly and then build up, little by little to get the loudest sound. Then, stop! It’s a fun way to begin or end a song.

Next try playing some patterns. All rhythms are built on a series of repeated sounds that form patterns. For instance, if you make the rice and beans maracas, the rice will be sound a bit softer and higher in pitch, the beans a bit louder and lower in pitch, so you can base rhythms off of those sounds. You can also describe the rhythms in a fun way, such as:

Left hand, left hand, right...
Left hand, left hand, right!
Rice, rice, beans... rice, rice beans!



Left, right... left, left right!
Rice, beans... rice, rice beans!

Almost anyone can create and learn new rhythms and even complicated rhythm patterns with this creative approach.

MAKE MORE MARACAS

You can also make several pairs and mix and match.

- » What sound patterns can you create?
- » Which maracas sound best to you or sound best as pairs?
- » Does a certain pattern sound like a song you know?
- » Or does a song you know inspire a new pattern?

Despite the fact that these are really simple little instruments, they can truly inspire hours of musical fun.

