

Darbaki

Brief History

The darbaki is a single-headed goblet drum that is played with one's hands. It is traditionally made from clay and shaped by hand, dating back to ancient Egypt. Modern darbakis are mass produced by machine and are made from porcelain or aluminum. In many West Asian (Middle Eastern) and North African countries, especially Arab speaking countries, it is considered to be the lead drum for most ensembles.

The name darbaki is derived from the Arabic word daraba, meaning to strike or hit. Depending on which part of the country you are studying, you will hear the darbaki be called different names and notice slight differences to the drum's appearance, with 'darbaki' being most commonly used in the Arabic speaking countries of West Asia. For this section, we will be focusing on rhythms from the country of Lebanon.

Playing Position

1. If you are right-handed you will place the darbaki on your left thigh, sideways as close to your hip as possibly with the head facing out. If you are left-handed you will place the darbaki on your right thigh, sideways as close to your hip as possibly with the head facing out.
2. Search for a point of balance while the darbaki is on your thigh. You will want the drum to have a slight tilt aiming towards your feet. Once you find a comfortable position you will place your opposite leg just in front of the rim to secure the drum and to prevent it from falling while playing.
3. Place your nondominant hand on the top part of the darbaki. Have your fingertips touching the top part of the drum head, your wrist naturally resting on the shell, and your elbow placed towards the back of the shell.
4. With your dominant hand, arch your fingers and place it on the side of the drum. Rest your wrist on the side of the rim and keep your fingers over (not touching) the drum head.

Tones

There are three basic tones used for darbaki.

- Doum – a low tone played by your right hand. Move all four fingers, closed together towards the middle of the drum and strike with the fingertips. You should hear a DOUM sound!
- Tek – a high tone played by your right hand. While keeping your hand in the original playing position, strike the drum with the tip of your index, middle and ring finger.
- Ka – a high tone played by your left hand. You will keep your hand in the original playing position and strike the drum with your ring finger and pinky. You can also use your middle finger and ring finger, or all the fingers to strike the drum.

The tek and the ka tones are meant to have the same function but due to the hands not being in a matched playing position you will have a slight difference between the two tones.

Types of Darbaki

- Classic: 8.75-inch head: Most popular size darbaki.
- Sombaty: 9-inch head: More bass tone and projection than Classic size. Preferred soloist drum and can be used as an accompanying drum.
- Dohola: 10-inch head: Bass darbaki. Holds down back beat in the ensemble.



Rhythms of Lebanon

By Joseph Boulos
and
The Darbaki Ensemble

Under the mentorship of
Dr. Michael Vercelli,
in collaboration with Ziyad
Marcus

Rhythms of Lebanon

This creative mentored research project is a presentation of traditional music from Lebanon. I was given the opportunity, as a World Music Graduate Assistant, to structure the class around my principal instrument, the Lebanese darbaki. The overall goal with this class was to teach the proper technique, function, and approach to the instrument and music. The project we had completed on April 23rd, 2021 was a virtual exchange program, similar to what we were doing in the African Music and Dance Ensemble. I organized two masterclasses via zoom with Ziyad Marcus, an accomplished oud player. The masterclasses focused on the melodic aspects of Lebanese music. For our concert, the ensemble had recorded a full arrangement of a piece highlighting popular rhythms in Lebanon, and Ziyad layered an oud part to fit our arrangement. By adding the oud, the students were able to see the importance of the instrument on its own, as well as understanding its role in an ensemble.

Incorporating this West Asian section into WVU's already diverse world music program will enhance the positive impact of the global music program for students, faculty, and the community. My hope is to expose many students to the music of West Asia, an underrepresented music culture in U.S. higher education, and explore how the indigenous music culture has been hidden by foreign interest, colonialism, and war.