

Finger Cymbals: Percussion at your Fingertips

An introduction for new dancers

Ok. So you're thinking about buying a pair of finger cymbals (a.k.a. sagat or zills, depending upon which part of the world you're in at the moment) and there are about 90 bazillion types out there. Clicking through the dearth of bellydance vendor websites, a dancer can become overwhelmed with the sheer number of choices. Finger cymbals are available in a variety of different colors, shapes, designs, and metals. So how on earth does one know what types to buy? What are the differences in sound? Material? Does the color or design matter? And, most importantly are some types better than others?

The simple answer is, maybe! Once a dancer becomes comfortable with playing finger cymbals, he or she may choose to experiment with different types and styles. But, for those starting out, there is a simple answer in "student" zills.

Luckily, most finger cymbals sold by a reputable dealer (see list below) are marked fairly clearly for students vs. professionals. This is not a commentary on a dancer's technique or performance skill but rather how well she or he can play the finger cymbals. "Student" grade instruments are often a bit smaller and lighter than the "professional" quality cymbals. This makes them easier to play and allows the dancer to become used to the weight and shape of the cymbals on his or her fingers while dancing. Many dancers start with the student grade and then graduate to a larger, heavier zill type once they are proficient players.

When buying finger cymbals, here are some other tips to keep in mind:

- *Slots vs. Holes:* First off make sure that your finger cymbals have SLOTS in the top and NOT HOLES. While both can be played effectively, finger cymbals with holes in the top may tend to spin on your fingers as you play, making it rather difficult to play them quickly and clearly. For those dancers who are just now beginning to play finger cymbals, a spinning zill can make it very difficult to play and sabotage one's learning of the different tonalities produced by the instrument. Slots will make them *much* easier to play! In general, higher quality zills or sagat will have slots and not holes.
- *Price:* You do NOT have to buy super expensive zills, but it's a pretty good bet that you're going to get what you pay for. What exactly *are* you paying for? Mostly the sound quality. A cheaper pair of zills, no matter how well they are played, often will not have the same bell-like tone of higher quality instruments. They may even sound rather "out of tune" and, for those planning on playing them for a while, could cause an audience to cringe! Quality finger cymbals will run you anywhere between \$20 and \$50 a pair. A nice set is certainly available on the lower end of roughly \$20 and

- these will have a nice, clear tone and will last for quite a while.
- Be sure to steer clear of zills that come in a "how to be a bellydancer" box. Generally these finger cymbals are made out of fairly cheap metal and will tend to have a rather clicky sound to them.
 - What you *do* want to look for are zills that are marked "student" zills. As mentioned above, these zills tend to still have a nice sound, are of a medium size (as opposed to some of the huge Saroyan Grecian or Arabesque II zills!), and a lighter weight. By using the student zills, you can get used to having the zills on your fingers and in your hands, playing them, and moving around with them before you work up to a really heavy set.
 - *Color*: Generally finger cymbals are sold in either a golden or brass color or a silver color. Color does not really affect sound, but many dancers will have a silver and a gold pair in order to color coordinate with different costumes.
 - *Design*: Different zill makers decorate their instruments in different ways. The type or style of decoration has (generally) no influence onto the sound. This is a personal preference – some dancers may buy zills according to their design but usually the decoration is secondary to sound.
 - *Sound Quality*: Once you narrow it down to pair X, Y, or Z you'll want to consider finger cymbal sound quality. While it's of course best to try out the instruments in person, many websites now have a place where you can preview the instruments and hear the sounds in a .wav file. This will help give you a good idea of what the zills will sound like once you purchase them. Different styles of finger cymbals DO sound different! Some have a very "bright" and higher pitch while others are a bit lower.
 - If you're just starting out, I recommend the medium range to higher pitch. Generally, the lower tones are used by professionals for special events or performances and/or tribal-style dancers. A brighter tone will work for *both* cabaret and tribal styles.
 - *Intermediate vs. Professional vs. Beginner*: As noted above, if you're looking on a finger cymbal site and you see these definitions, most often it refers to your ability to play the zills and dance, not necessarily where you're at as a bellydancer. So, err on the side of "beginner" or "intermediate" or "student" if you're just starting out. Don't let your pride get the better of you! Saroyan's Nefertti zills, considered student grade, are GREAT for people who are just starting out...they're a wonderful size and tonal quality and will work for any style of bellydance.

Looking for zills online? Here are a few to check out:

Saroyan (some of the best zills you can buy):

<http://www.saroyanzills.com/>

Audrena carries Saroyan and several other nice types:

<http://www.audrena.com/ZillsMain.html>

Saroyans at Salome's Tent:

<http://www.salomestent.com/swords.htm>

Turquoise International, another excellent brand of finger cymbals:

<http://www.turquoiseintl.com/cymbals.html>

Bellydance Shoppe (GREAT vendor...carries pretty much everything)

<http://www.bellydanceshoppe.com/index.php?cPath=28>