

**A Brief Survey of the Arabic *Darabukka*, Illustrated by Two
Twentieth-Century Instruments at the National Music Museum**

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Goblet drums in their various forms can be found through nearly all musical cultures and regions of the Asian and African continents. There is evidence of their existence in early Mesopotamian civilizations as far back as 1100 BCE.¹ For centuries, these instruments have remained largely unchanged in their design, construction, and use. Although widespread, the most prolific body of goblet drum references lies within the scope of the Arabic nations, specifically the Middle East encompassing what is present day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and Northern Africa across Morocco, Algeria, and Libya. Interest and use of goblet drums, however, continues to expand beyond these borders.

As international exchange flourished through the twentieth century, spurred by innovations such as electronic media, improved trans-continental shipping, and widespread growth in international tourism, the Arabic goblet drum has come to see a new shift in its market from strictly traditional instrumentalists, to modern musicians and the percussion world as a whole. This shift has given rise to instruments that might not specifically capture all the original characteristics of their regional ancestors, but instead present affordable, widely marketable variations which fit the part in the eyes of curious consumers. Two goblet drums from the collections of the National Music Museum (NMM) succinctly illustrate one approach to meeting this demand, and facilitate further discussion of the delineation between the traditional, regional goblet drums and the twentieth century ‘global’ equivalents.

Throughout the Middle East and Arabic nations there are many different names for goblet drums, but they all refer to the same general type of percussion instrument. In most cases, the Arabic term *darabukka* is used as a blanket term for goblet drums originating from these

¹ William J. Conner, et al., "Darabukka," Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.usd.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/07209>.

regions.² The origins are obscure, but the term likely originates from the Arabic word *darba* (to strike).³ The darabukka is a single-headed drum, consisting of a bowl-shaped body and a continuous foot, with a tuned membrane covering the open end of the body, and the foot left uncovered to facilitate projection of the tone. The foot is considerably smaller in diameter than the body. Typical materials of traditional darabukka construction are wood, clay, and ceramics.⁴ The head would be made of stretched goatskin or similar natural material.⁵ In the MIMO/CIMCIM revision of the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, the darabukka falls into the membranophone category 211.26 – Goblet-shaped drums: the body consists of a main section, which is either cup shaped or cylindrical, and a slender stem.⁶ Darabukka are typically played while sitting down, laid across one leg, using the fingers and palms of both hands to alternately strike the head and body in rhythmic patterns. Despite its long history, confusion among the names and types of darabukka-esque instruments visible in the historical record is an ongoing phenomenon. In 1929, Henry George Farmer evaluates the *dibrakki*, and by association, darabukka, as a long-shelled tambourine, identical to the *tabla*.⁷ In prior generations, all of the goblet-type drums extant in the Middle East were used to provide the driving rhythmic foundation of small ensembles, accompany dancing, or otherwise support some nature of

² William J. Conner, et al.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ruth Midgley, ed., *Musical Instruments of the World: An Illustrated Encyclopedia with more than 4000 Original Drawings* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1997), 150-151.

⁵ William J. Conner, et al.

⁶ Musical Instrument Museums Online, *Revision of the Hornbostel-Sachs Classification of Musical Instruments by the MIMO Consortium*, July 8, 2011. Accessed February 12, 2016, <http://www.mimo-international.com/documents/Hornbostel%20Sachs.pdf>

⁷ Henry George Farmer, “Meccan Musical Instruments,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3 (July 1929): 504-505.

structured music that was pre-set in form.⁸ There are dozens of known darabukka rhythms, consisting of multiple ‘phases’, each of which is designed for use in a particular situation, and repeated *ad libitum* throughout the performance.



Figure 1. *Darb al wasta* and *Fallahi* darabukka rhythms. Notated pitches indicate the low “doum” and high “tek” sounds. *Source:* Oscar van Dillen, “Darbuka Patterns,” accessed February 13, 2016, http://www.oscarvandillen.com/tools_for_students/world_music/darbuka_patterns/



Figure 2. 19th Century painting of a darabukka player. *Source:* Hytham Hammer, “The History of Debka Music,” *The Audiotopia Blog*, May 25, 2012, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://theaudiotopia.blogspot.com/2012/05/intermission-bonus-compilation.html>

The two Arabic goblet drums in the NMM (nos. 13823 and 13825) were originally identified as *doumbek*. Well, what is a doumbek and how does it differ from a darabukka? In

⁸ Henry George Farmer, 504.

Persia (Iran), goblet drums were traditionally known as *tombak* or simply *tabla* (Persian for drum, not to be confused with the Indian *tablā*, which is an unrelated set of paired kettledrums). The word *tombak* is onomatopoeic, deriving from the two sounds (“toom” and “bak”) produced by playing on different areas of the drum’s head.⁹ This word eventually became transliterated into the Arabic *doumbek*. Various similar names are ascribed throughout the Middle East and North Africa including *donbek* and *doumbelek*.¹⁰ This apparent etymological root implies that if not the instrument, then at least this modern name can be traced to the Persian Empire. To this day, the *doumbek* remains the primary percussion instrument of the Persian classical ensemble.¹¹ Whether or not the Arabic *darabukka* and Persian *doumbek* developed coincidentally is at this point unknown. In modern global discussion the terms *darabukka* and *doumbek* are largely used interchangeably, referring to instruments of the same general form.¹² In light of the apparent distinction between the use of ‘*darabukka*’ in the Arabic portion of the Middle East and Northern Africa, and the use of ‘*doumbek*’ in the historically Persian regions, indicates it is more culturally appropriate to refer to those drums of Arabic origin and design as *darabukka*, and those in the traditional Persian style—carved from a solid piece of wood, with a glued skin head and ornately inlaid body—as *doumbek*.¹³ It would be possible to further delineate the naming of individual instruments only if its origins—specifically where it was made, and who it was made by—are precisely known. In absence of such information, the distinction between Arabic and

⁹ Jo Ann Baird, “Arabic Musical Instruments,” *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 3 (Nov. 1989): 12.

¹⁰ Mohamed Jamal, “The Arabic Doumbek,” *Percussive Notes* 48, no. 5 (Sep 2010): 21.

¹¹ Timothy Rommen, ed., *Excursions in World Music: Sixth Edition* (Boston: Pearson, 2011), 55-56.

¹² Jeremy Montagu, review of *Georgian Folk Music from Turkey*, Peter Gold. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 9, no. 4 (Dec 1974): 657.

¹³ William J. Conner, et al.

Persian origin will necessarily suffice. Modern deviations from these long-standing cultural standards are easily visible in the NMM's two examples.

NMM 11823 is the larger of the two darabukka at the NMM. It is made out of a single, brazed sheet of nickel-silver; the seam being visible inside of the foot. The bowl has been turned to shape on a lathe, leaving telltale continuous rings on its surface. The foot appears to have been hammered to shape over a mandrel, with a few turned decorations at the open end and a terminal, stylized crimped edge. The entire body is covered with engraved and embossed decorations, including floral patterns and geometric shapes. "M, IN, SYRIA" is shallowly engraved near the bottom of the foot. There are four engraved medallions, one at each cardinal point of the bowl perimeter, with stylized peacocks placed between the medallions. The medallions contain a series of Arabic characters. The head is secured by a modern hoop with six, wing-nut screws mounted on a removable tension ring. The head, made by RadioKing, is marked "genuine calf" under the logo. As nickel-silver does not readily tarnish, degrade, or otherwise oxidize, the finish is still rather brilliant and clean.

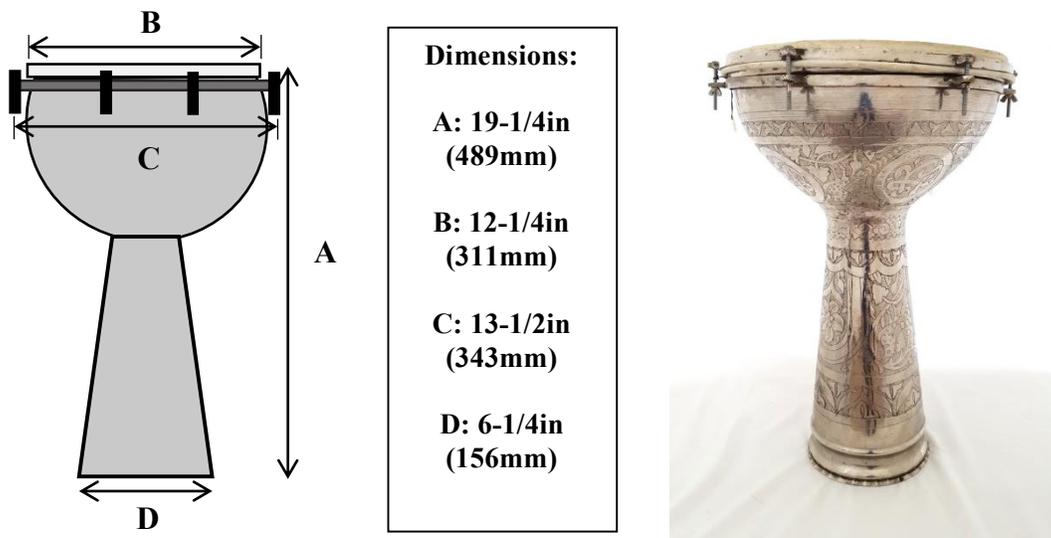


Figure 3. Dimensions and snapshot of NMM 11823. *Source:* Photo and graphics by author.

NMM 11825 is substantially smaller than 11823, and differs slightly from the traditional Middle Eastern darabukka shape, having a body with characteristics of hourglass drums. Hourglass drums are found in many Asian and African cultures, and this darabukka's genesis in Northern Africa (Morocco) could illustrate some of the cultural intertwining between the Asian and African Arabic subcultures. The body is in three sections, all made of hammered sheet brass, and soldered together at the joints. The metal edge at the foot has been rolled. The body is covered with stylized engravings of repeating, geometric patterns. The head is secured by a single hoop, which tightens into a groove on the body by means of a single screw at the hoop closure. The head is made of some sort of hide, but is unmarked. The raw-brass surface has darkened over time, developing a rather even, attractive patina.

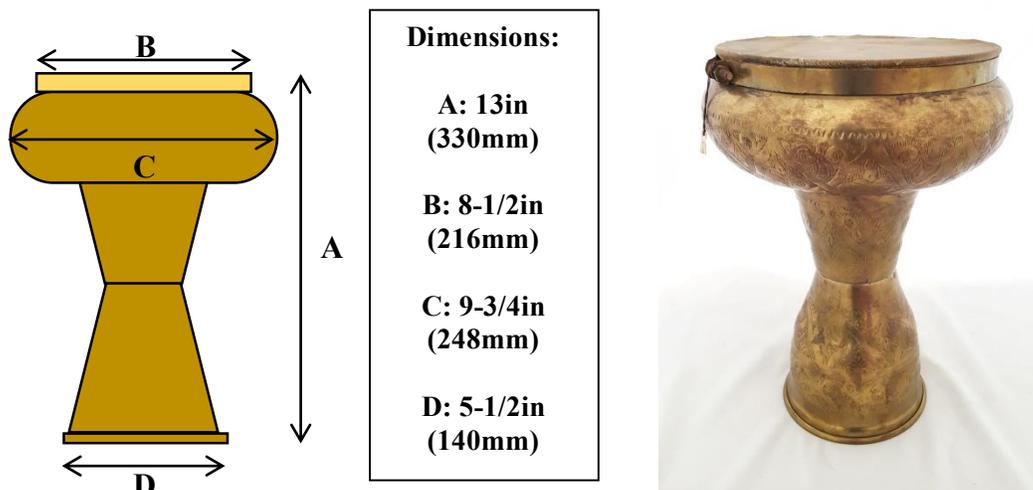


Figure 4. Dimensions and snapshot of NMM 11825. *Source:* Photo and graphics by author.

NMM 11823 and 11825 are clearly modern instruments, both in construction and their intended uses. These instruments are part of the Paul & Jean Christian Collection, and were originally purchased at what are only described as “village bazaars” around 1980.

Commercialized darabukka are readily available today, and seem to have first appeared at large

around 1950 based on available examples in other museum collections. They are typically made either of easily formable metal (brass, copper, aluminum), or highly (albeit cheaply) decorated wood, and focus more on eye-catching aesthetics than traditional adherence or musical performance. There is nothing that indicates that NMM 11823 and 11825 were made any earlier than the time period in which they were purchased, but it is possible. Instruments quite similar in design and size to the NMM's two examples can easily be found online, like this example available on "Musician's Friend" for \$59.99 –



Figure 5. Modern "trophy dumbek" *Source: Musician's Friend*, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.musiciansfriend.com/drums-percussion/trophy-dumbek>

There is also one very similar instrument to NMM 11823 in the collections of the Musée de la Musique, visible online through MIMO. Inventory number E.996.12.4 is an anonymous, twentieth century Syrian darabukka with the same construction that features the same Arabic medallions and stylized peacocks embossed on the perimeter of the bowl.



Figure 6. Anonymous Syrian darabukka, twentieth century. Musée de la musique, E.996.12.4. *Source: Musical Instrument Museums Online*, accessed February 11, 2016, http://www.mimo-international.com/MIMO/doc/IFD/OAI_CIMU_ALOES_0158541/tambour-en-gobelet-darabukka

Other than the shape, and some elements of the stylized decorations, there is little to connect these modern instruments with the traditional darabukka. The brass construction is a stark departure from the traditional wood or clay instruments that proliferated before the global market emerged. There is only one extant example of a metal darabukka made before the twentieth century, which can be found in the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This particular instrument is made with visibly finer engraving and embossing, and follows the traditional method of attaching the head directly to the rim of the body with glue. It is possible that at this time, before large-scale production of metal instruments was common-place, a hand-made, ornate instrument of brass could be seen as signifying greater wealth or class. NMM 11825 also originates from Northern Africa, and shares the decorated brass construction, indicating a potential trend towards brass substrate in North African, Arabic darabukka.



Figure 7. Nineteenth century brass darabukka, possibly Algerian, from the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments. *Source:* Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Collection Online*, accessed February 13, 2016, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online>.

The use of modern, screw-tensioned hoops and drumheads is the most immediate giveaway that NMM 11823 is a modern darabukka. NMM 11825 is fitted with a more traditional calfskin head, but it is still secured with a modern metal hoop, easily distancing it from traditional designs. Few, if any, commercially available darabukka can be found without modern drumheads or fittings. Instruments made locally at low-cost and destined for sale in tourist shops, bazaars, flea markets, etc. might on occasion end up with a glued head, but that cannot be said with any certainty unless such examples are documented. The presence of a visible drumhead rim and external tension keys is notably unique to the Turkish darabukka. In modern instruments, it is typical for Turkish darabukka to be made of copper or brass, whereas most Arabic

darabukka use a lightweight aluminum body.¹⁴ Although neither NMM 11825 or 11823 are from Turkey, they both share some of these characteristic features.

All of these consumer-grade instruments diverge from the long tradition of Arabic drumming not only in their construction, but also in their musical use. As the darbukka expanded beyond the classical and folk-driven Arabic ensembles, it has merged its capabilities and tones with other musical cultures. Western European composers began incorporating the darbukka into some of their works—such as Ibert’s *Suite Symphonique* (1932) and Orff’s *Prometheus* (1963)—around the same time that export-conscious instruments began to appear.¹⁵ While there may not be any direct causation between the arrival of export darbukka and its entrance into the Western repertoire, there is certainly a coincidence in the timing. The darbukka has also seen a much more recent resurgence in the digital age as a virtuoso solo instrument used in jazz, contemporary, neo-classical, and popular genres. Often, these combine elements of traditional darbukka rhythms with new methods and styles of approaching the instrument. A simple YouTube search yields over 350,000 videos related to darbukka playing, many of them as a virtuoso solo instrument. Sometimes traditional instruments are used in these expanded roles, but modern alternatives are much easier to acquire and maintain, and can sustain considerable abuse. In the modern age, the new style of darbukka has proliferated through popular media.

The two Arabic darbukka in the NMM collections are excellent examples of the type of instrument that came into vogue for sale to individuals operating outside of classical Arabian music. This trend began near the middle of the twentieth century, and continues to evolve as

¹⁴ Arab Instruments, “The Difference Between Turkish and Arabic Darbuka,” accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.arabinstruments.com/the-difference-between-turkish-and-arabic-darbuka>

¹⁵ William J. Conner, et al.

instruments become increasingly modern in their construction and design. They share some key aspects with traditional instruments, such as the shape and decorative styles, but depart in others which make them easily distinguishable. They can certainly be played in the same manner as any traditional darabukka, and the resultant tones might be similar enough that no difference would be discernable. Regardless of these distinctions, they are decidedly modern. It is possible that the darabukka could continue to shift further away from its traditional form, branching into a new instrument entirely, requiring further distinction and terminology. For now, instruments such as NMM 11825 and 11823 remain as key illustrations of the darabukka as it was known in some way during the twentieth century.

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