

What to look for when purchasing a tabla

Compared to many instruments, tabla are relatively inexpensive to purchase. The hidden cost, however, is in their maintenance. How much maintenance – and associated cost – is determined by the following factors:

- Dramatic changes in humidity and temperature
- Careless storage and transportation
- Damage from careless tuning
- Dramatic tuning adjustments (e.g. up or down an interval of a minor 3rd or more)
- Poor quality shells and heads
- Sweaty hands
- Overuse of talcum powder
- Playing intensity
- Time.

I always recommend that instruments are tried before they are bought, but acknowledge that with tabla this is not always possible. Internet-based stores are increasingly used for purchases. Friends visiting India often purchase drums on behalf of the tabla student, without the skills to determine the quality of the product beforehand.

If you are a beginner tabla player and don't know what to look for, the following criteria might be considered as indicating a better instrument:

- More expensive
- Heavier in weight
- Sound resonant and loud
- Sustain well
- Have clean heads without nicks or blemishes
- The black spot (gab) is intact without holes or severe crazing.

Some more specific criteria for the individual drums:

BAYAN

- 9.25-9.5" head
- Gab (black spot) intact and without buzzes
- Made from copper or nickel-plated brass (not aluminium!)
- Strap without nicks
- One-piece strap (not multiple pieces knotted together)
- Tuning pegs on baya are optional and not necessary.

DAYAN

- 5.25-6" head
- Resonant at pitch C or C#
- Gab (black spot) intact and without buzzes
- Made from hardwood such as shisham or rosewood
- Strap without nicks
- One-piece strap (not multiple pieces knotted together)
- Tuning pegs (8) solid condition.

Furthermore, your tabla set should come with solid, heavy rings (cushions), good covers to protect the heads, and a heavy tuning hammer. You'll need a decent bag for local transportation and a flight case for airline travel, also.