

Click [here](#) if you are having trouble viewing this message.



Oxford Word of the Month – April: thongophone

noun: (also thongaphone, thong-o-phone) a percussive musical instrument formed by a series of hollow PVC pipes of varying lengths, the ends of which are struck with a rubber clapper such as a thong.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In a 2014 posting on the video-sharing website YouTube a man can be seen playing the theme song from popular television series *Game of Thrones* on what is captioned as a ‘thongophone’. What immediately stands out is that the musician plays the instrument with a pair of thongs, traditional Australian footwear otherwise known as flip-flops, jandals, slides, or slaps. The thongophone looks something like a pipe organ, and the thongs are used to strike the open ends of the pipes to produce low resonant sounds. The novelty of the instrument is apparent in one of the first pieces of evidence for the term:

What’s a thongaphone? I hear you ask. For those who can’t make it to the Merry Muse, I’ll describe the thing. It looks like a cross between a xylophone, a giant set of pan pipes and a plumber’s nightmare and when hit with thongs provides a tuneful bass line. In fact, considering it’s fashioned from PVC piping, it’s surprisingly melodious. (Canberra Times, 4 February 1990)

Much of the evidence for this term highlights the peculiarity of the instrument, its makeshift nature, and its appearance as a do-it-yourself instrument at school events. The earliest reference so far located comes from a 1990 newspaper article in the context of a Circus Oz performance. In this instance the word takes the form thong-o-phone, one of a number of variant forms.

The evidence indicates that the term thongophone is originally Australian, although the instrument itself can be found in South-East Asia, including Papua New Guinea. Another clue to its Australianness is the use of the word *thong* for the rubber sandal acting as a clapper. While the word *thong* is also used in North America for this kind of footwear, it is ubiquitous in Australian English and culture. In other varieties of English, *thong* usually means a narrow strip of leather (or other material), a skimpy bathing garment, or a style of underwear like a G-string.

The existence of two earlier Australian terms for makeshift musical instruments

that also end in *-phone* (*lagerphone* and *Fosterphone*) is another pointer to the **thongophone**'s Australian pedigree. The combining form *-phone* denotes an instrument using or connected with sound, as in *megaphone* and *xylophone*, and ultimately derives from Greek *phōnē*, 'sound, voice'. The *lagerphone* is another improvised musical instrument made by loosely fitting rows of beer-bottle tops to a pole, which is then struck to create a jingling sound. This term goes back to the 1950s and the instrument is commonly found in Australian bush bands. A more recent instrument is the *Fosterphone*, which is a cardboard beer carton drummed with the hands to create a percussive sound. The term is derived from a blend of the proprietary name *Foster's Lager* and *lagerphone*, with evidence from the 1980s. **Thongophone** is also likely to have been modelled on *lagerphone*.

The relative ease of making this instrument from different lengths of PVC pipe, with a cheap pair of thongs as clappers, makes the **thongophone** a favourite with children. Its novelty and deep resonant percussive sounds see it continue to pop up at festivals and workshops across Australia:

It's hard not to have fun when you're banging out a rhythm on a wheelie bin or discovering funky bass riffs on a thongaphone. (Warwick Daily News, 30 March 2011)

Even the Australian Chamber Orchestra is aware of its musical possibilities, here in collaboration with Sydney schoolchildren:

[Richard] Tognetti and ACO musicians will help music teacher and cellist Rachel Scott include students in on a composition for strings, xylophones, chimebars and thongaphone... (Sydney Southern Courier, 24 May 2011)

Australia's **thongophone**—destined one day for the concert hall?

Thongophone will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

Share our Word of the Month:



Click [here](#) to unsubscribe from our Word of the Month. Read our [privacy policy](#).