The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about about orchestras

敲 (qiao1)
Cantonese pronunciation: haau1
Meanings: hit, knock, beat, percussion instrument

敲 = 敲打 (hit-beat): 敲門 (qiao1 men2 = knock-on-door), 敲詐 (qiao1 zha4 = beat-deceive = extortion/blackmailing).

鑼 (luo2, gongs), 鐸 (ba2, cymbals), 鼓 (gu3, drums), 三角 (san1 jiao3 = three-corners = triangles), 木琴 (mu4 qin2 = wood-lyre = xylophones), ancient Chinese 編鐘 (bian1 zhong1 = arrange-bell = set of bells/chimes) are 敲打樂器 (qiao1 da3 yue4 qi4 = hit-beat-music-instrument = percussion instruments). In 秧歌 (yang1 ge1 = young-padi-shoot-song = northern Shaanxi Province folkdance), dancers beat 腰鼓 (yao1 gu3 = waist-drum = drums hung from waist).

旁敲側擊 (pang2 qiao1 ze4 ji1 = side-hit-aside-beat) means asking tacit/oblique questions to tap information. 敲山震虎 (qiao1 shan1 zhen4 hu3 = beat-mountain-shake-tiger) means launching attack to warn/intimidate enemy.

by Diana Yue