BEGINNER'S BUYING GUIDE · 2026

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Your first *rabab.*

What to look for, what to avoid, and how to pick an instrument you'll actually enjoy learning on.

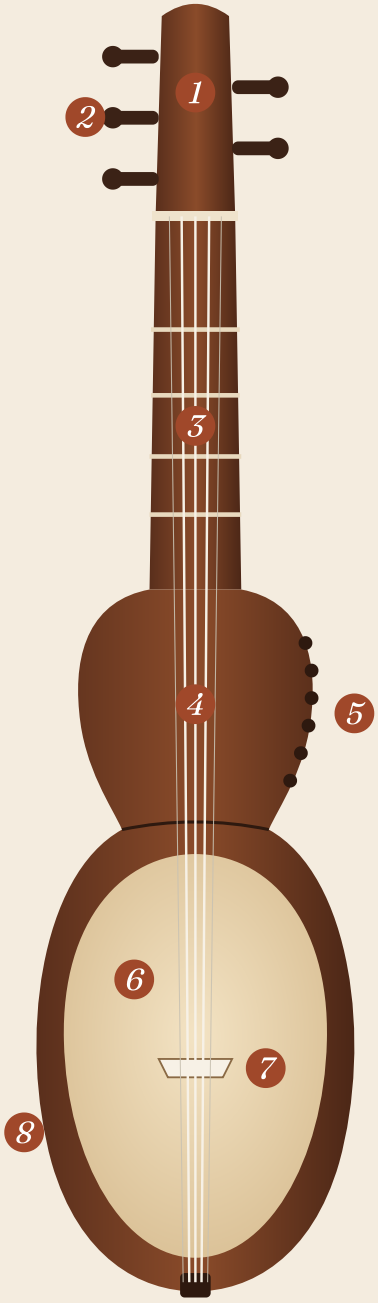
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FOR STUDENTS OF THE BEGINNER BATCH

Anatomy of a rabab

The rabab is carved from a single block of mulberry wood, with a goatskin belly, three main strings and a set of sympathetic strings that ring on their own. Learn these names. You'll hear them in every class.



1 **Pegbox** · *Taj*
The carved "crown" at the top that holds the main tuning pegs.

2 **Tuning pegs** · *Ghwagi*
Wooden friction pegs. They must grip firmly and still turn smoothly.

3 **Neck & frets** · *Gharai, Parda*
Frets are tied-on loops of nylon or gut, usually three to five.

4 **Chest** · *Sina*
The wooden lid over the upper chamber. Your left hand moves along here.

5 **Sympathetic pegs** · *Bachi / tarab*
Small side pegs for the 9–15 strings that resonate under the main ones.

6 **Skin belly** · *Tsarman*
Goatskin stretched over the lower chamber. It is the rabab's speaker.

7 **Bridge** · *Tatu / Kharak*
Sits on the skin, held in place only by string tension.

8 **Bowl** · *Dol*
The hollowed body. On a good rabab it's carved from one piece of mulberry.

02 — SIZE & MATERIALS

Pick the right size

Rababs come in three common sizes. Bigger means a deeper voice and more sympathetic strings, but also a longer reach for your hands.

SIZE	LENGTH	SYMPATHETIC STRINGS	WHO IT SUITS
Small *Warukay rabab*	~27 in	Fewest	Younger students and smaller hands. Lighter and easier to hold.
Medium START HERE *Standard rabab*	~28 in	Around 13	Most adult beginners. It's the standard size used in class and gives the full rabab sound.
Large *Loy / Shah rabab*	~30 in	Up to 15	Experienced players who want a deeper, heavier tone. Not a first instrument.

What a good one is made of

Body: mulberry (shahtoot)

Carved from one solid piece of mulberry wood, ideally the variety makers call *shah tut*. Some makers in Pakistan also use walnut.

Belly: goatskin

Natural animal skin, stretched evenly over the lower chamber. It shapes most of the tone.

Main strings: nylon or gut

Three melody strings, tuned in fourths. Nylon is standard today and easier on beginners' fingers.

Drones & sympathetics: steel

Two or three drone strings plus the sympathetic set. Metal strings give the rabab its shimmer.

Bridge: bone

A small bone bridge resting on the skin. It should be shaped cleanly, not cracked or chipped.

Frets: tied nylon

Tied around the neck so they can be adjusted. They should sit firmly and not slide on their own.

03 — BEFORE YOU PAY

The 10-point check

Take this page with you, or keep it open on your phone. If a rabab fails more than one or two of these, walk away.

- [ ] *1* **Solid, one-piece body**
  Look inside the sound holes and along the sides. No glue lines where blocks are joined.

- [ ] *2* **No cracks**
  Check the bowl, chest and neck joint under good light. Small cracks spread with weather.

- [ ] *3* **Skin is tight and even**
  Press gently. It should feel like a drum: firm and springy, with no tears, patches or soft spots.

- [ ] *4* **Neck is straight**
  Sight down the neck from the pegbox. Any twist or bow makes it hard to play in tune.

- [ ] *5* **Pegs hold their tuning**
  Turn every main peg. It should move smoothly and stay put. Slipping pegs mean endless retuning.

- [ ] *6* **Sympathetic pegs work**
  Try a few of the small side pegs too. Beginners often forget these until they're stuck.

- [ ] *7* **Bridge sits flat**
  The bridge should sit squarely on the skin and not lean. Bone, not plastic.

- [ ] *8* **Frets are firm**
  The tied frets shouldn't slide when you press a string. They can be adjusted, but shouldn't be loose.

- [ ] *9* **Strings are fresh**
  Old, grey or fraying strings sound dull. Ask the seller to fit a new set, or budget for one.

- [ ] *10* **It sounds clean**
  Pluck each open string. Listen for a clear note and a ring from the sympathetics, with no buzz or rattle.

Not sure? Send a video first.

Before you pay, record a 30-second clip: slowly show the whole instrument, then pluck each string. Send it on WhatsApp and Ali will tell you whether it's worth buying.

Red flags

- ✕ **"Showpiece" rababs.** Decorative instruments sold as gifts or décor look nice on a wall but rarely hold tuning or play in tune.
- ✕ **Heavy paint or glossy lacquer.** A good rabab is usually left close to natural wood. Thick paint can hide joins, cracks or cheap wood.
- ✕ **Loose, wrinkled or patched skin.** Replacing the skin is possible, but it shouldn't be your first repair.
- ✕ **Pegs that are glued, jammed or spin freely.** You will be tuning before every practice. Bad pegs make that miserable.
- ✕ **A plastic bridge or plastic frets.** Signs that corners were cut elsewhere too.
- ✕ **A price that's far too good to be true.** Online listings with stock photos and no video. Always ask for a real video of the actual instrument.

REALISTIC BEGINNER BUDGET

Rs 30–40k

starting

This is what a properly playable beginner rabab costs in Pakistan today. Spend less and you usually end up buying twice.

Where they come from

Traditionally, rababs have been made in Peshawar, Mardan and Swabi in Pakistan, and in Kabul, Kandahar and Herat across the border. Many good makers are small family workshops.

If you're buying from a market for the first time, take someone who plays, or ask us to arrange one for you (last page).

05 — EXTRAS & CARE

Accessories you'll need

MUST HAVE

Shabaz / Mizrab

Plectrum

The rabab is played with a plectrum, traditionally made of bone. Keep a spare, because they're easy to lose.

MUST HAVE

Tuner

Tuner or tuner app

A clip-on tuner or a free phone app. Essential in online classes, where tuning by ear over Zoom is hard.

MUST HAVE

Case

Padded bag or case

Protects the skin and pegbox. Don't carry a rabab around unprotected.

RECOMMENDED

Strings

Spare string set

Main strings especially. A snapped string shouldn't stop a week of practice.

RECOMMENDED

Peg key

Peg key

A small tool that grips the tightly packed sympathetic pegs so you can turn them precisely.

RECOMMENDED

Cloth

Soft dry cloth

Wipe the strings and wood after playing. Never use water or polish on the skin.

Looking after it

Retune every time

Rabab strings slacken when the instrument sits unused. Tuning at the start of every session is normal, not a fault.

Keep it away from heat

No heaters, direct sun or hot car boots. Heat dries the skin and wood and can crack them.

Watch the weather

Skin reacts to humidity. It may sound duller in damp weather and tighter in dry weather. That's natural.

Store it in its case

Lay it flat or stand it securely. Most damage happens when a rabab is leaned against a wall and falls.

Hands off the skin

No stickers, no pressing hard, no cleaning products. Oils and moisture mark it permanently.

Change strings when dull

If a string sounds dead or won't stay in tune, replace it. Ask in class and we'll show you how.

06 — THE EASY WAY

Or let us arrange it

Don't want to hunt through markets? Enrolled students can get a beginner rabab arranged through Ali: checked, set up and ready for your first class.

Checked before it reaches you

Every instrument is inspected against the 10-point check in this guide. No showpieces.

Set up and tuned

Strings fitted, frets placed and bridge positioned, so you can start playing on day one.

Beginner rabab from Rs 30–40k

The final price depends on the instrument and what's available. You'll see a video of your rabab before you pay.

Outside Pakistan?

Message us with your country and we'll tell you what's possible for delivery.

Ready for class one

1. Your rabab, plectrum and a tuner app.
2. A phone or laptop on a stand, so Ali can see both your hands.
3. Zoom installed, with a stable internet connection.
4. A quiet room and a firm chair or floor cushion.

Questions about a rabab?
Send photos or a video on WhatsApp

WHATSAPP
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