

Introducing The Harmonica, Button Box and Anglo Concertina

The harmonica, the Anglo concertina and the button accordion are three instruments that operate on a similar blow/draw or push/pull principle. This means, in theory at least, that if you can get your mind around the way one of them works then moving on to another will be familiar, even relatively painless. So if you can rattle out a tune on the mouth organ you should at least have an idea how the concertina or button accordion works.

A full octave of musical tones or steps contains 12 notes, 13 if you count the next octave note. (To get an octave note just means doubling, or halving, the frequency, such as by halving the length of a guitar string, or causing a reed to vibrate half, or twice, as fast). A scale containing all those 12 notes is called a **chromatic** scale. Most basic songs and tunes however only need a select 8 of these tones, the familiar 'doh, re, me, fa, so, la, ti, doh' thing, that's 7 only notes, or 8 if you count the second 'doh'. This is called a **diatonic** scale.

The harmonica, Anglo concertina and button accordion are diatonic free reed instruments, in general they come with just the basic 7 notes that you will need to play most tunes, in one set key or starting point. And they make those notes when air is blown over little metal reeds that sit snugly in a frame. Each button, or hole on a harmonica, has two reeds and makes two different sounds, one when the bellows are pushed together, or you blow into a harmonica, another when the bellows are pulled apart, or you draw air in.

There's a hitch here. If your song is in the key of C you will have all the notes of the C scale, a couple of octaves in fact. That's good, the ones you don't need are not there to get in the way. But the key of C could be too high, or low, for your voice. The key of D, or E or F might be a better choice for that particular song. You will need a different harmonica tuned in the new key. Or a different accordion or concertina. That's another thing about diatonic instruments, you are going to need a few of them. Harmonicas are relatively cheap and easy to carry around, but accordions and concertinas not so. That's why they usually build accordions with two or three rows of buttons, each row of 10 buttons is one set key. Typically the rows are a 4th apart, that is in G and C, or C and F, or A/D/G.

Here's a diagram of a C harmonica, compliments of Suzuki Harmonicas. The scale starts on the C at hole 4 / blow. The next note, D, is hole 4/ draw. And so on up to hole 7 where things are reversed, the next note in the series, the B, is hole 7 / draw. That's because they want to keep all the Cs and Es and Gs as blow notes, so that if you blow two or three holes together you will get a nice C major chord.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
C	BLOW	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C
	DRAW	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A

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The same principle applies to the button accordion, except the first note of the scale is on button 3 / push (not 4), with the reverse occurring on the 6th button. Try playing a scale for two octaves. You will notice that things get bit messy towards the high end. Not to worry, we don't often get up there anyway, but with practice this push / pull pattern becomes very familiar, to the extent that these diatonic instruments are very easy to play by ear, without reference to a music score. Button accordions also have a couple of bass buttons on the left side that produce good solid bass chords without even thinking.

What about the Anglo concertina? Pretty much the same as the button accordion really. Imagine the melody side of an accordion cut in half, the five lower notes or top part goes to the left hand while the five higher notes to the right hand. Forget about the bass buttons though, they go west. So now you have two hands free to play melody. You may be able to play a tune on the lower octave with the left hand and the upper octave on the right simultaneously. Or do a chord vamp on the left while playing melody on the right. As with the other instruments adjacent buttons, being a third apart, make a nice chord when played together.

Anglo concertinas often have a third row of buttons that produce accidentals, those notes not found in the other two rows. This makes them 'sort of chromatic', for those occasional tunes where you do need to find that odd missing note. Also note that there are other types of concertinas such as the English system which is fully chromatic and makes the same note irregardless of the bellows direction. It is a different instrument entirely, the button rows run up and down whereas on the Anglo the rows fall crossways, in a natural arc under the fingers.

Where to from here? If you don't yet have a free reed diatonic instrument the harmonica is a good place start, they are relatively cheap. Get a couple of 10 hole harmonicas, sometimes they are called blues harps. Start with a C, then maybe add a G and a D, possibly an A, later. Try playing any basic folk or country or standard tune, generally starting around hole 4, but sometimes elsewhere. Soon the 'blow, draw, blow, draw, blow, draw, draw, blow' pattern will become natural and you will be able to play most tunes on demand.

When finances allow and you want to move up to a button accordion or concertina consider a multi row instrument. I find a C/F and an A/D/G accordion covers a range of five useful keys on just two instruments. Concertinas are usually in G/C or D/G with 20 buttons (10 for each key), but a 30 key model with the extra row of accidentals is recommended, it makes them that much more useful.

Have fun.