

# Introducing The Diatonic Accordion

**What is it** A 'diatonic' accordion (squeezebox / melodeon / button-box) has only the eight notes of a major scale available, the 'doh re mi fa so la ti doh'. This is enough to play most basic songs and tunes of interest to the folk musician. All the other notes usually available on 'chromatic' instruments, known as accidentals, are left out which keeps the weight down and the playing complexity simplified. Each accordion (or row) is tuned to just one key.

The bass side on the left just has a couple of simple bass chords to worry about, unlike the piano accordion. And in most cases the extra octave reed banks on piano accordions are also left out (again it keeps the weight down) though some boxes do have knobs on top to open or close another bank/s of reeds.

Boxes work like the 10 hole harmonica and the Anglo concertina, all have a push / pull or blow / draw action. Each button or hole gives two notes, one when you push the bellows together, another when you pull. Piano accordions on the other hand play the same note irrespective of the bellows direction, as well as having all the notes of the chromatic scale.

**Advantages** Like a ukulele or a harmonica squeezeboxes are portable and relatively light; economy of finger moves makes them fairly easy to play (because roughly half the note changes are made by changing bellows direction, the other half by a finger move to another button); they have a distinctive choppy sound with good volume which is ideal for dance music and sessions; they are very good for by-ear playing as it is not necessary to be able to sight read; great for folk and traditional styles using a diatonic scale; the basic bass chords complement the melody with little thinking involved; it is easy to play chords as adjacent buttons are a third apart. Some national styles have developed such as Cajun, Tex-Mex, Mexican redovas etc., Irish, English folk and Morris dance, German waltzes etc.; Italian folk music, Quebecois, Australian dance tunes.

**Disadvantages** Changing key is a problem as a different row is needed for each key. So several accordions, or multi row instruments, may be necessary to cover a range of keys. Despite their lack of frills new instruments are not that cheap to buy either. The lack of accidentals may occasionally be a problem but multi-row instruments can assist here.

**Playing a scale** Once the push / pull pattern is in ones head playing instinctively by-ear, without reference to music notation, is easy. You just need to have the tune in your head. With a little practice playing most tunes is easy. To play a scale you start on the third button down / push direction, that's the key note, the 'doh' of the scale. The next note, 're', is the same button but pull. 'mi' and 'fa' are push/pull on the next button down.

**Finding the key/s** Look for a letter stamped somewhere, usually on the bass strap. Play a scale starting on the third button down / push, that's the key note. Take a set of harmonicas if inspecting a possible buy.

**Choices, choices, choices** Multi rows are really several accordions sharing one set of bellows. Rows are generally tuned a 4th apart, ie. D and G, or C and F. The Irish tend to favour two rows tuned a semitone apart such as B and C, or C and C#. Theoretically this allows playing chromatically, in any key, though with a different starting point and fingering pattern for each key. Hmm, sounds complicated to me. Typical key combinations are:

single row-	G, D, C, A are common keys
two row-	G/C; C/F; D/G; Bb/Eb
three row-	A/D/G; G/C/F
a semitone apart-	B/C; C/C# are popular in Ireland

### **Songs that modulate or have accidentals**

Plasire D'Amor and Bunch of Tyme can be played using a two row accordion. Find the missing notes in the other row.

### **Flattened 7th gives a haunting effect**

Some folk tunes have an interesting accidental in them, a whole tone instead of a semitone between note 7 and the octave. The reels Staten Island and Over The Waterfall, and the songs The Garton Mothers Lullaby and some of Ewan McColl's songs (First Time Ever I Saw Your Face) are examples. With rows spaced a 4th apart this attractive and haunting accidental is possible on the 2nd row 4 / pull.

### **Playing relative minor keys**

Relative minor keys can also be played, starting on 5 / pull instead of 3 / push, ie. a 6th higher than for the major scale.

on a C accordion	to play in A minor	→	start on the A	(button 5 / pull)
on a D accordion	to play in B minor	→	start on the B	(button 5 / pull)

**Building a repertoire** Some tunes suit the button-box really well, others don't, so experiment. Accompanying yourself on the squeezebox while singing simultaneously can be tricky due to the tendency for sympathetic breathing with the push / pull action. Practice well before launching yourself on the discerning public. Look on YouTube for material for your repertoire.

**Buying an accordion** Decide what you mainly need it for and what key/s. You may need several, I find a C/F (good for vocal) and D/G/A (good for dance tunes) gives a good coverage on two accordions. Italian models tend to sound sweeter, German Hohners are great for volume. Avoid the Chinese models if possible, the reeds can be hard. Chinese toy accordions are not serious instruments, the bellows are too small for the full size reeds in them. Test the bellows for leaks by holding the instrument end up. Test the keys – are both reeds working per action? (For each actual note played two reeds sound, sometimes more). Check for loose reeds rattling around; reeds are held in place by bee's wax and resin which may melt if left in a hot car.

**Got a question?**  
[donfraseris@gmail.com](mailto:donfraseris@gmail.com)

Don Fraser 03.9737.6441 / 0407.7307.202