

Traditional Button Accordions

The button accordion is a traditional instrument, but its popularity is as strong as ever.

Accordions come in a variety of styles and forms. Chromatic, diatonic and piano accordions are just a few of the most popular types. Another family of accordions, used since it was first developed in the late nineteenth century, is the button accordion.

The button accordion is an adaptation of an older and more basic instrument called a melodeon. Physically, the button accordion is unique in that it has an extra row of buttons that have been pitched a semi-tone above or below those of the melodeon. It's possible for the musician to manipulate the bellows and actually create two notes from one single button. This is what gives the button accordion greater articulation, and economy of fingering.

There are variations within the family of button accordions. The widest variations can be seen on the basic construction, keyboard systems, action and tuning of the individual instruments. One of the most notable styles of button accordion is the diatonic. On a diatonic accordion, there is a melody-sized keyboard that is limited to the notes of diatonic scales. These notes are provided through a small number of keys, or even just one key. It is worth noting that the bass side of the diatonic usually contains the principal chords of the instrument's key, including the root notes of those chords.

Diatonic button accordions are generally bisonoric. This means that every button produces a couple of notes. One note is produced when the bellows are compressed, while the other is produced when the bellows are expanded. However, there are few diatonic button accordions that are unisonoric. For instance, each button on the garmon produces the same note, regardless of the direction of the bellows. Other still have a combination of the two styles.

The chromatic is another well-known variation of button accordion. On this instrument, the melody-sized keyboard is composed of uniform rows of buttons. These buttons are arranged so that the pitch increases chromatically along diagonals. The bass side keyboard of this instrument is typically the Stradella system, which is one of many converter or free-bass systems.

Some instruments of this class are simply called "chromatic" accordions, even though the other types, such as the piano accordion, are also fully chromatic. Since the introduction of chromatic buttons, they have become the preference of many classical music performers. As a result the treble keyboard of this instrument is denser than that of a piano accordion, allowing a much greater musical range.

Various cultures have developed their own versions of modern button accordions, and have adapted their inventions to suit their own traditional styles of music. Russia alone has a number of accordions, such as the Garmon, Saratovskaya Garmonica, Livenka and the very popular Bayan.

If you love the unique sound that an accordion can bring to traditional and popular music, pick up a button accordion and try your hand at playing this age-old and ever-popular instrument.