

Learn to Play

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I was given / bought / inherited / found... an accordion. *How can I learn to play?*

Get a teacher!

You'll be glad you did... especially if you're a skilled pianist.

For many folks, the accordion feels more awkward than expected, for longer than expected! A teacher will help you learn proper technique, avoid frustration, and nip bad habits in the bud.



pianist preparing to learn accordion

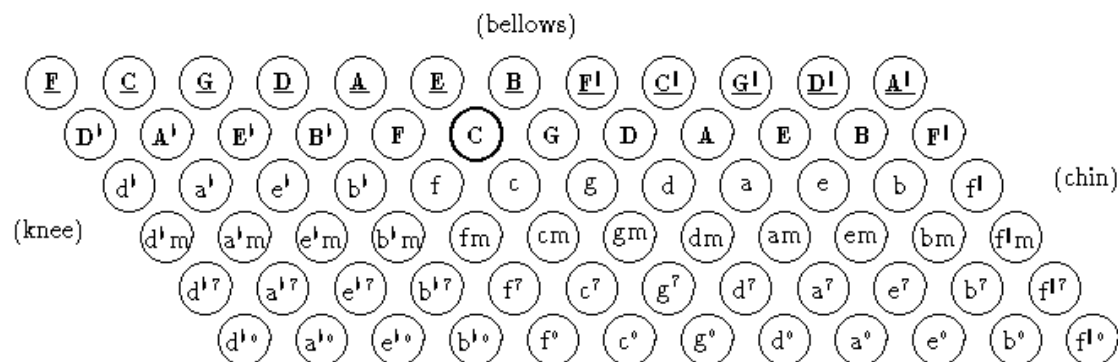
For Atlanta-area teachers, see Accordionology.com/learn-to-play. For any location, we recommend **Aleksandar Raskovic**; he teaches from his home in Serbia by video call. **1-hr lessons: \$30.** Contact him to request a no-cost intro session: accordioteacher01@gmail.com (he's really good!)

Meanwhile, this intro/crash course should help. If not, try other resources! Go with whatever works. If you get stuck or frustrated (e.g. with fingering)... try a few lessons.

You don't have to know a lot about sheet music, quite a few people play by ear only.

If you read sheet music even a little, that opens up a wealth of material for you!

The basses - Layout



The accordion has a lot of bass buttons, but don't worry, you need only four or six of them to start with.

Accordions have from 12 to 120 basses, arranged in up to 20 columns and up to 6 rows.

The diagram shows a 72 bass layout: 12 columns, 6 rows. (48 bass = 8 columns, 6 rows)

There are **two bass rows** and **four chord rows**.

- The first row (closest to the bellows) is the **counterbass** row, denoted by underlined capitals,
- The second row is the **fundamental** row, denoted by CAPITALS. In each column, *the counter bass is a third higher than the fundamental bass*; but apart from that these two rows are the same, the C in the counter bass row will sound exactly the same as the C in the fundamental bass row.

The chord rows are all denoted by a lower case letter plus a suffix. They are:

- **major** chords, next to the fundamental basses: these are denoted by just the chord name, or with a suffix `maj' or `M': e.g. `c', or `cM', or `cmaj'
- **minor** chords, with a suffix `m' or `min'
- **seventh** chords, with a suffix `7': `c7'
- **diminished** chords, with a suffix of `d', `dim', `v' or a degrees sign

The columns are arranged along the *circle of fifths*: each column is the fifth of the column just below it, and conversely each column is the fourth of the column just above it. That is a very clever arrangement, because this way the basses that you need most often in a given key end up close together. For instance, for a tune in the key of C major, you often need the C major, G major, and F major chords, and they are next to each other. If your accordion has more bass buttons, 80, 96 or 120, then see Hans Palm's [Stradella basses layout](#) page; the extra columns are simply copies of columns that are there already: e.g. the next column on the right would be the C sharp column. But that is simply D flat under a different name. (an 80 bass accordion does not have the diminished row)

If your accordion has less buttons, 32, 40, or 60, then the layout will be the center piece of the 120 bass layout: As for the rows, first the diminished bass row disappears, then the counterbass row; and as for the columns, the C column will almost always be just below the middle.

Playing

As you will find out soon enough, you can't see what you are doing! For that reason, some buttons are marked. The C fundamental bass is always marked, usually indented. If there are more than 8 columns, then usually the E fundamental bass and the A flat fundamental bass are marked as well, often cross-hatched. But Your Mileage May Vary: I've got one accordion where the E flat bass is marked instead of the A flat bass. When in doubt, start from the C fundamental bass and count from there.

Now, how do you use these basses?

Play the fundamental basses with your fourth finger (the ring finger), the major chords with your third finger (middle finger), and the minor, 7th chords and diminished chords with use the second finger (index finger) for the chords. (Some older American courses that you might encounter say to use the 3rd finger for the fundamental bass and the 2nd finger for major chords as well, but using your 4th finger for the fundamental basses is better).

The basic way of playing is in a **oom pa pa** fashion:

play a fundamental bass on the stressed beat, and a chord on the off-beat.

For 4/4 time, that is *fundamental-bass>chord>fundamental bass>chord* or *fundamental-bass>chord>chord>chord* (for tangos, often), for waltzes, that is *fundamental-bass>chord>chord>*. For 6/8 time, the pattern is fundamental-bass on the first beat, nothing on the second, chord on the third, etc.; e.g. C . c C . c | C . c C . c.

Play the basses *staccato*: press them and release them immediately, as if the buttons were burning hot. If you don't play them like that, you will probably find that the basses are 'too loud'. If the basses are written out, like I've done below, they have the staccato implied: if there is a quarter note for a bass, that doesn't mean that you hear that bass for a quarter note (a crotchet), it means a short bass, and wait a quarter before you start the next one. On the other hand, if a bass note takes up more than a beat, like a half note (minim) or a dotted half note, often at the end, that usually means that the bass should sound for the whole note.

Examples

1. Merrily we roll along

The first system of musical notation consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The treble clef staff contains a melody of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass clef staff contains a bass line of quarter notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. Chord names are written below the bass staff: 'C c' for measures 1 and 2, 'G g' for measures 3 and 4.

The second system of musical notation consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The treble clef staff contains a melody of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass clef staff contains a bass line of quarter notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. Chord names are written below the bass staff: 'C c' for measures 1 and 2, 'G g' for measures 3 and 4, and 'C c' for measures 5 and 6.

A very simple one to start with: only two chords, and a melody that spans only a fifth, so you can leave your fingers on the keyboard (thumb on the C, pinky on the G): start with the 3rd finger on the E. Try to keep your fingers in contact with the keys as much as possible: that is the easiest way not to get lost.

For notating the basses, I've used a common convention: on the bass staff, notes in the lower half denote fundamental basses, notes in the upper half denote (the root note of) chords; I've written out the names of the basses and chords as well. Sometimes you will find all three notes of the chord written out; sometimes the bass and chord names are not written out, and then often you will see just a single 'M' above a chord: 'this is a major chord'. Sometimes the chord names are omitted if they are the same as before, e.g. in the second bar I could have left them out.

Fingering for the basses is 4-3-4-3 all along; in the 3rd and the 7th measure you have to shift your hand up one column, for the 4th and 8th measure you have to come down again.

Not much more complicated, only this one uses the F chords as well, and I've replaced the G major chord with a G seventh chord.

For the first three notes, there are no chords; at the end, play the C fundamental bass and the C major chord at the same time.

2. Oh when the Saints

First system of musical notation for 'Oh when the Saints'. It consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a melody of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass staff contains a bass line of quarter notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. Chord symbols 'C c C c' are placed below the bass staff in the second, third, and fourth measures.

Second system of musical notation. The treble staff continues the melody with quarter notes: C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The bass staff continues with quarter notes: C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3. Chord symbols 'C c C c' are placed below the bass staff in the first three measures, and 'G g7 G g7' is placed below the bass staff in the fourth measure.

Third system of musical notation. The treble staff continues the melody with quarter notes: B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2. The bass staff continues with quarter notes: C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2. Chord symbols 'G g7 G g7' are placed below the bass staff in the first measure, 'C c C c' in the second and third measures, and 'F f F f' in the fourth measure.

Fourth system of musical notation. The treble staff continues the melody with quarter notes: A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1. The bass staff continues with quarter notes: C2, B1, A1, G1, F1, E1, D1, C1. Chord symbols 'F f F f' are placed below the bass staff in the first measure, 'C c C c' in the second measure, 'C c G g7' in the third measure, and 'C c C c' in the fourth measure.

The right hand

I hope you can find your way around the right hand keyboard, sort of.; If not, a page [Das Akkordeon](#) (🇩🇪) at the site of Handharmonika-Club 1932 Ditzingen shows the right hand keyboard, and how it corresponds to the staff. It also shows the layout of the full Stradella keyboard, by the way. It's no problem if you can't read German, the note names are easy to translate: if X is a note name, then Xes is X flat, e.g. Des is D flat (Es is E flat, and As is A flat), Xis is X sharp, e.g. Ais is A sharp; the exception is that (German) B is (English) B flat, and (German) H is (English) B.

But what do you do if the melody does not fit on five fingers? *Do not* crawl around using just your thumb and index finger. For playing scales, the proper fingering is: 123-1234-123-1234 going up and 4321-321-4321-321 going down. Going up, cross with your thumb under your third or fourth finger; going down, cross with your third and fourth finger over your thumb.

3. Scales of C

With black keys, you have to avoid playing the black keys with your thumb (except when playing chords): your thumb is too short to reach them conveniently, and crossing over your thumb is next to impossible if the thumb is on a black key. For instance, you would play the scales of B flat as follows:

4. Scales of B flat

Often you need to stretch your hand, for example for *arpeggios*:

5. Arpeggios

Spicing up the basses

The simplest way of spicing up the basses is the **alternating bass**: If the chord does not change, replace every other fundamental bass with its fifth. For instance, instead of `C c C c | C c C c', play `C c G c | C c G c', and instead of `C c c | C c c' play `C c c | G c c'. If the chord is a major chord, use the second finger for the alternating bass (you have to turn your hand a bit to in this case), and with minor and 7th chords, use your 3rd finger for the alternating bass. For 7th chords, replace the *first* of the two basses by the fifth: e.g. `D g7 G g7' (to avoid repetition of the same bass: e.g. for C G7, C c G c D g7 G g7 is nicer than C c G c G g7 D g7. Thanks to Michal John Kozak for pointing that out to me). Example:

6. Oh when the Saints (alternating basses)

The musical score consists of four systems of music, each with a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The bass clef staff includes chord diagrams and bass line notation. The chords and bass line notes are as follows:

- System 1:** Treble staff: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass staff: C4, G2, C3, G2. Chords: C c G c, C c G c, C c G c.
- System 2:** Treble staff: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass staff: C4, G2, C3, G2. Chords: C c G c, C c G c, C c G c, D g7 G g7.
- System 3:** Treble staff: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass staff: D2, G2, C3, G2. Chords: D g7 G g7, C c C c, G c7 C c7, F f C f.
- System 4:** Treble staff: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. Bass staff: F2, C3, G2, C3. Chords: F fm fm, C c G c, C c G g7, C c G c, C.

But you haven't told us anything about what the **counterbasses** are for!

They're for playing passing-notes and counter melodies. Find a player or teacher to take you from here!