

# History of Harmonium: An Overview

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## ABSTRACT

The accordion and concertina early on became associated with the folk tradition and lost favor among classical music lovers. However, not all free-reed instruments lost popularity. The harmonium is said to have been invented in 1842 by the Frenchman, Alexandre Debain, although its prototype, Kirsnik's Harmonica, appeared more than fifty years earlier. By the second half of the nineteenth century the harmonium had evolved into a sophisticated instrument. The bellows were pumped by two foot pedals and the more expensive models had two keyboard manuals (each encompassing a range of five octaves) with up to thirteen stops (ranging from a sixteen foot Bourdon to a two foot Harpe eolienne), including tremolo and one or two knee-pedals to control volume. It was a popular instrument for churches which could not afford a pipe organ. In addition, it was favored for home music-making alongside the piano and in the cinema as a means of musical illustration in the era before sound films. Many nineteenth-century composers wrote serious music for the harmonium.

**KEY WORDS:** Music, Compose, Harpe, Cello, Piano, Organ, Song, Instruments

The French composer and organist, Camille Saint-Saens, wrote several pieces for harmonium, including *Trois Morceaux pour Harmonium*, op. 1, *Six Duos for harmonium and piano*, *Romance*, op. 27 for violin, piano and harmonium, *Marche Religieuse de Lowengrin*, arranged for violin, piano and harmonium, and *Barcarolle*, op. 108 for violin, cello, piano and harmonium.

Another French composer and organist. Cesar Franck, wrote *Quasi marcia*, op. 22. *Five Pieces*, *Forty-four Short Pieces for Organ or Harmonium*. *Offertoire on a Breton Air*. *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* an arrangement for harmonium and piano of his own opus eighteen. and *L'Organiste* fifty-nine pieces for harmonium.

The Italian opera composer, Gioacchino Rossini, wrote *Petite Messe Solennelle* for chorus, four vocal soloists, two pianos and harmonium. The Czech composer, Anton Dvorak, composed a set of *Five Bagatelles*, op. 47, for two violins, cello and harmonium. The work was conceived as *haus musik*: music for amateurs to play at home music-making soirees.

The German composer, Max Reger, wrote the beautiful *Romanze A-Moll*, his only composition for solo harmonium. The piece, in rounded binary form, is sophisticated and harmonically interesting.

The German organist-composer, Sigfrid Karg-Elert, wrote twenty-seven works for harmonium, including *Passacaglia*, op. 25, *Sonata No. 1*, op. 36, *Drei Sonatinas*, op. 14, *Scenes pittoresques*, op. 31, *Ostinato e fughetta*, op. 34, *Madrigale*, op. 42. *Zwei orchestrale Konzertstudien*, op. 70. *Intarsien*, op. 76, *Sonata No. 2*, op. 46, *Die hohe Schule des Ligatospiels*, op. 94 for harmonium and piano, *Portraits: Dreiundreissig Stilstudien von Palestrina bis Schonberg*, op. 101. *Schule fur Harmonium*, op. 99, and *Sieben Idyllen*, op. 104. Karg-Elert also compiled instructional manuals and registration rules for the

harmonium, such as *Das Harmonium und die Hausmusik*, *Die Kunst des Registrierens für Harmonium*, op. 91, and *Gradus ad Parnassum*, op. 95.

The French organist Louis Vierne composed *Messe basse*, *Vingt-quatre pièces en style libre* and *Messe basse pour les défunts* for organ or harmonium. Richard Strauss used the harmonium to accompany a violin solo in his ballet *Schlagobers*, op. 70.

Arnold Schönberg adapted two waltzes by Johann Strauss for salon orchestra (piano, harmonium and string quartet) which were performed in Vienna, Alban Berg playing the harmonium. Schönberg also wrote a version of Busoni's *Berceuse élégiaque* for the harmonium and permitted his own *Five Orchestral Pieces*, op. 16, to be arranged for chamber orchestra with harmonium by Felix Greissle in 1925. As mentioned earlier, Shostakovich used the harmonium in his ballet *The Golden Age* in 1929.

The Australian-born composer Percy Grainger wrote many pieces which included the harmonium, such as *Beaches of Lukannon*, *Tiger Tiger*, *Bold William Taylor*, *Shepherds Hey*, *Shallow Brown*, *County Derry Airs*. *The Old Woman at the Christening*, *Soldier Soldier*, *Spoon River*, *Let's Dance*, *Gay in Green Meadow* for three players at one harmonium. *The Merry King*, *Early One Morning*, *Harvest Hymn*, and *English Dance*.

Although the harmonium was a popular instrument in the late-nineteenth century, changes in musical taste led to its decline early in the 1900's. Alfred Berner wrote in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, "The harmonium reached the peak of its technical perfection in the first quarter of the 20th century; since that time its popularity waned. The decline of interest, which began about 1930, was due to a change in musical taste."

Music in the home as well as musical education in general turned increasingly away from the musical style of the 19th century. The harmonium and everything connected with it fell under the heading of 'kitsch'. Even in light music it was ousted by its more wieldy cousin, the accordion. Above all, however, with the advent of a whole range of electronic instruments, rival instruments have appeared which not only far surpass the sound combinations and expressive possibilities of the harmonium as a solo or accompanying instrument, but match completely the world of modern musical sounds. In sacred music, where the harmonium had taken the place of the organ, it has in its turn been replaced by either a small portable organ or an electronic organ. Just when the harmonium had reached its peak technically it became musically redundant and was laid aside."

The harmonica (mouth organ) was invented in 1821 by the German clock maker, Christian Friedrich Ludwig Buschmann, and quickly became popular among the masses due to its simplicity (it was easy to learn to play), conveniently small size, inexpensive cost and pleasing sound. Within a short time other builders began manufacturing the instrument. Martin wrote, "In 1825 Fr. Hotz began producing mouth organs in his factory in Knittlingen, Germany. Another German, Christian Messner, acquired some of Christian Buschmann's auras. He set up shop in his clock making firm in Trossingen in 1827 and began manufacturing instruments that were similar to Buschmann's 'aura.' Messner called these instruments *mundaeline*s."

During the year 1829, J. W. Glier began manufacturing mouth organs at his factory in Klingenthal, Germany. In 1855 the German, Christian Weiss, started producing mouth organs. Finally in 1857 a firm in Trossingen Germany began mass producing harmonicas for the public. At the head of this company was the famous Matthias Hohner. Today the manufacture of harmonicas in Europe is in the sole domain of the Hohner harmonica factory at Trossingen.

When Hohner first began producing harmonicas, in 1857 his factory produced a mere 650 harmonicas. In 1879 he increased his production to over 700,000 harmonicas. At the turn of the century, the company was producing five million harmonicas annually. Since that time, the Hohner company has expanded their production to over fifty diatonic and chromatic harmonica models.

Despite its popularity among the working class people, the harmonica for more than one hundred years after its invention remained little more than a primitive diatonic folk instrument; it could play in only one key at a time.

In 1930 the American band leader, John Philip Sousa, wrote a piece for harmonica band, titled The Harmonica Wizard. Paul E. Bierley, the author of The Works of John Philip Sousa, wrote, "Leading a harmonica band was a novel experience for Sousa when he was invited to conduct Albert N. Hoxie's fifty-two member Philadelphia harmonica band in September 1925. He was so impressed with their playing and the possibilities of the harmonica that he carried an endorsement for Hohner harmonicas in his 1928 programs and subsequently wrote this march for Hoxie's boys: The Harmonica Wizard. When the Sousa band came to Philadelphia on November 21, 1930 the mayor proclaimed the day: Sousa Day. The chromatic harmonica, introduced in the 1920's and championed in the 1930's by the virtuoso player Larry Adler, was the single most significant improvement in the evolution of the instrument; it directly led to the harmonica's acceptance and use by classical composers. During one of Adler's concerts, Ralph Vaughan Williams was present in the audience. After the performance ended, Adler asked the celebrated English composer to write a piece for him; thus was born the beautiful Romance in D-flat for harmonica, piano and string orchestra.

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