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Advice to Accordionists
by Charles Magnante
Published in 1936

Choosing An Instrument

An accordion with 41 treble and 120 bass keys is recommended. The ultimate value of any musical instrument rests in its "listener appeal," in other words, what goes into the ear of the audience. So, a beautiful, rich tone is of foremost importance. The tone must be full, round and pleasing, and of sufficient volume. Large sums are paid for a master violin because it has a certain tonal richness and mellowness, while a new instrument with a loud rough tone may be bought for a comparatively small amount. Choose your accordion first for its tone, for its "listener appeal," regardless of model or size. It has been the rather raw, brassy-edged tone of many accordions that has done the instrument untold harm with sensitive and serious musicians.

Today it is possible to have an accordion with a refinement of voice or tone to compare with the rarest violin, cello, or piano. Next in importance is that your accordion have a smooth, flexible, rapid action, as nearly noiseless as possible. Thirdly, the response (air-tightness) is of vital importance in obtaining shading and dynamics in your playing.

Poor instruments with rasping, cutting tone, sluggish, heavy action, and lack of responsiveness (usually caused by air leaking around the reeds or a bellows leak) have given our beloved accordion in some circles a name that it will take some time to live down. Often the novice must start with a cheap instrument to obtain the fundamentals of accordion playing, but I advise that, as soon as possible, a fine-toned, reliable instrument be obtained. It will help your progress musically and make your services more in demand.

A fine instrument is a good investment, and its trade in or resale value is always comparative to the amount you invest in it. Remember, the three "vitals" of an

accordion are, in turn, TONE, ACTION, RESPONSIVENESS.

It is not the purpose of this booklet to promote any particular music, study books, or makes of accordion. Many have asked me to write a strictly modern Accordion Method, right up to date, with ad-vice on radio, solo, orchestral and accompanist playing. My time is so occupied with engagements and rehearsals that this is impossible. How-ever, if you address me personally, I will gladly advise privately just what books I use and recommend. There are many that are deserving of praise.

Importance of a Good Teacher and Study Books

In the more populous districts there is usually a good accordion teacher, and I strongly recommend that you obtain his services. No matter what your natural talent may be, your way will be made smoother and easier, and your progress greater under the guidance of an experienced teacher. Bad playing habits will thus be nipped in the bud and months of effort necessary to undo some of these wrong impressions, will be saved for progressive study. I doff my hat to the many fine teachers who are bearing the brunt today in bringing the accordion and its playing to the front, They are the real heroes in the struggle to artistry and increased earning power. I can tell you that it pays to play the accordion it well. But, by all means-OBTAIN THE SERVICES OF A GOOD TEACHER.

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Uses of the Accordion

Great artists of the accordion, such as Pietro and Frosini, have used the instrument mostly as a solo instrument. In all fairness, I must give credit to my dear, departed friend Mario Perry, for the part he played in bringing out the possibilities of our instrument for orchestral and recording work. About 15 years ago he used the accordion very effectively in recording with the Palace Trio, composed (I'm told) of that great saxophone artist

Rudy Wiedoeft, Victor Arden, famous radio pianist and conductor, and Mario Perry accordionist. He had natural ability in fitting the accordion into instrumental combinations, in addition to his ability as soloist. I feel that proper printed credit has never been given to Mario for his pioneer work on the accordion with the above trio and for his years as Paul Whiteman's accordionist, prior to his fatal accident in Hollywood during the filming of "The King of Jazz." Had fate spared him, he would have gone to still greater heights as soloist and accompanist. Pardon me for digressing, but I believe in giving credit where credit is due.

You perhaps have noticed in my radio playing I do many single reed obligates with orchestra, playing variations such as are usually allotted to the clarinet or flute. This has brought our instrument more into the limelight. In the past few years I have also accompanied, with accordion alone, many opera and concert singers, also nationally known instrumental soloists, who expressed themselves as amazed and gratified at the completeness of the accordion as an accompanying instrument, a few, in fact, stating that they preferred my accompaniment to that of the piano. Most of my guest artist appearances on the radio of late have been as soloist, and I have attempted with success some of the major works originally written for piano. My radio leaders are giving me more and more important passages, choruses, etc., to play, proving their increasing appreciation of the accordion.

You will pardon me, I hope, for mentioning an instance at the Chicago Convention of the Music industries, in 1935, where I appeared as soloist at the banquet before piano manufacturers and dealers from all over the country. My numbers included Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C# Minor" and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumble Bee," as well as a selection from "Carnival of Venice," all of which were of serious mein, and adapted for the accordion by myself. The famous pianist and symphony conductor, Rudolph Ganz, was speaker of the evening. He grasped my hand twice as I stepped from the platform, and after I had played "Flight of the Bumble Bee" a second time, he said, "This Bumble Bee tonight was one of the liveliest little animals I have ever heard. It is one of my repertoire, and if I am to play it like he did, I shall have to spend many hours of my forthcoming vacation in practicing it." Thus, a great musician, and a group of artists, music lovers, and dealers from every corner of the United States, acknowledged our instrument. I am told that is was with some hesitancy that the parties in charge of the program agreed to have an accordion on their rather serious and high-brow program, but the fact that the applause accorded me was so

overwhelming that I had to play six numbers, one of them twice, before retiring, speaks for itself. Here, in an evening, outstanding people in the world of serious music, acknowledged that our accordion has a rightful place along with such immortal instruments as the violin, cello, and the piano. I had to fly to Chicago one morning and fly out the next, to make this appearance, but the recognition given our chosen instrument was worth the trouble, and I shall recall this as one of memorable instances of my career.

Recently, I have been approached by one of the best known liked radio impresarios, who has been so enthused with the interested response to my radio activities that he offered to manage my career to make it possible for me to greatly increase my earnings. He says he thinks "Magnante has something beyond that to which he has already striven." I predict that the day will come when accordion at will be touted around our country in recital the same as famous violin cellists, pianists and vocalists are today. Truly, my friends, the accordion has gone far since the days of its first appearance on street corners, ferry boats, et al.

My reason for writing so much of my own activities is to try enthuse my readers to strive long, patiently and enthusiastically, to train the heights to which our accordion is so surely destined as a musical instrument.

Periods of Study

To a student of 13 or less, I recommend about three hours of practice, with at least half-hour rest periods after each hour. Students of greater age may study two hours steadily, with one hour intermission. This may be divided thus: two hours in forenoon two in afternoon. Four hours daily is a good average study program

The first work should be mechanical studies, "setting tip exercises for both right and left hands. The beginner should practice mechanical studies for at least 5 to 10 minutes daily. Later a half hour to hour should be given to these studies. Lift the fingers high in playing "setting up exercises," in order to get the maximum benefit from study, both right and left hands.

After this limbering up of the fingers, scales and arpeggios should be studied for at least 5% of the total practice period. After this, you are ready to proceed with your actual progressive

lesson for both hands. Finally, you should work on whatever musical selection is allotted for your weekly study.

I practiced as much as eight hours daily for some time, and study several hours daily whenever my engagements permit.

The Accordion in the Orchestra

The major requirement in orchestra playing is sight reading. A half hour daily should be devoted to the study of sight reading. A plan is to use a metronome to give rhythm while you read the music. Begin in slow tempo, remembering also to read the bass notes. One of the first requirements of your leader will be that you stand up and take a chorus. There are many different styles employed in a chorus. There is the so called hot style, used during a number which has a moderate or fast tempo, and it is done best by the weaving single notes around the melody . . . improvising a counter melody blending with the theme. When the melody is held for a measure or then is the time to put in a hot lick or any sort of modern figuration the player's finger tips. This improvisation naturally comes easiest to some than to others... much may be gained by listening to a hot accordionist and trying to emulate him.

Melodic Style (in Orchestra)

This style is simplest and most effective of all. Here the melody is played as written. The different tonal possibilities are shown to the last effect. With the right hand vibrato, the proper phrasing, expression, and thorough control of the bellows, effects to rival the finest violin are possible. I always have my accordions tuned with less vibrato than usually used . . . the tone is found richer, mellower, nearer to perfect pitch.

A good routine in 32 bar choruses is to play the first sixteen bars with full chords, rest eight bars, and finish the remaining eight with all chords. Another routine is to allow the orchestra the first sixteen bars, and the accordion to take the next eight bars in melodic or chord styles . . . the orchestra plays the last eight bars. In taking an entire chorus, I suggest full chords for the first sixteen bars, single notes played legato for the next eight, and finish with full chords.

Legato and Staccato Playing

It is more difficult to Play legato than staccato because each

tone must be given its precise value. Passing the thumb under the fourth finger, it is necessary to hold the finger down until the thumb has passed entirely under and is beginning to press the key of the following note. In passing the fourth finger over, as in descending scales, the thumb must be held down until the finger has passed entirely over the thumb and is beginning to press the following note. You will facilitate the passage of the fourth finger over to the next note, by bending the first thumb joint.

In playing actual legato it is necessary to touch the keys more firmly than while playing staccato. Holding the palm of the hand nearer the keys automatically gives the necessary weight for the legato. It is vital that the legato key pressure be equalized. In legato playing, the fingers should barely be lifted from the keys. In staccato, it is the direct opposite ... the palm of the hand is held higher ... less than half the pressure used for legato is necessary on the keys ... the weight of the falling finger alone is required. Complete laxity of the wrist and fingers is vital also.

Legato Chord Style (In Orchestra)

This style is interesting though difficult ... sounds at its best in slow tempo numbers. Many find difficulty in passing from one chord to another. To overcome this and assure a perfect legato, the right hand is held very low over the keyboard. The way to play legato with as full chords as possible when making a jump of many tones, is to glissando up or down to it, whichever the case demands. Never play full chords in low register ... they sound scrambled, muddy. Middle and high registers are best for legato chord effects.

The rhythmic chord style is another effect used successfully in taking solo choruses ... playable in tempos moderate or fast. Just the opposite to legato, this style is very staccato ... the wrist becomes flexible to obtain a clean cut effect. The time to employ a rhythmic figure is where the melody stops for a bar or two. Listening attentively to orchestras playing ensemble or the final chorus of a snappy number will give good ideas as to rhythmic playing.

Finale

It is not expected that all my readers, especially professional accordionists, will agree with me. There are usually several right ways to do anything musically. I have merely tried to set

down in an un-biased and straightforward manner precisely what my experience has taught me. I could go on and on, but time calls, and space does not permit. Some day, I hope to have enough leisure time to write my version of a complete and modern method for the accordion, with information and studies to surmount the increasingly difficult passages and conditions under which the modern accordionist doing solo, radio, orchestral and accompanying playing must perform, If my efforts herein have made the way a trifle brighter and easier for even one of the struggling young accordionists, I shall consider that these hours have not been spent in vain.

Repairing and Tuning

If your accordion becomes out of playing condition or needs tuning, I suggest that you send it to an experienced, competent and not attempt this yourself, as lasting damage may be done to instrument. A personal letter to me as to what person or concern to be recommended, will receive prompt reply. However, it is not my purpose to recommend any particular person or firm.

Before closing, I wish to acknowledge the cooperation and advice of Mr. Geo. M. Bundy in my efforts as a writer on the subject of accordion. With deep appreciation for your close reading of these paragraphs, and regretting that I could not have gone to even greater depths in the study of our loved instrument, I remain

Gratefully yours,
Charles Magnante

Who is This Chap Magnante?

Born December 7, 1905 in New York City. His Dad played accordion and little Charlie liked to fool around with it. Dad valued his instrument, however, and decided he'd better get one for Charlie . . . he did ... a semi-tone accordion. Under his Father's guidance . . . , at 14 . . . Charles was soon making his own way, playing in dance halls and theatres. At 16 his solo work so impressed vaudeville agents that he was offered a tour at a nice figure. He was wise enough to remain at home and study further, however, as he had heard of other young players becoming "professional" too quickly . . . regretting it later.

When Radio Station WEAf was first opened, he was invited to play

over the air, . . . gratis . . . then to Roxy's Gang, Frank Harling had written a jazz concerto, featuring the accordion, which included a very difficult cadenza. Several accordionists had tried out but stumbled over the cadenza. Magnante was offered the chance . . . practiced it until he could play it in his sleep . . . got the engagement. This led to an engagement at the Roxy Theatre with the Rosy Jazzmanians and in the Roxy Grand Orchestra, This was the first time that an accordion had been used in a symphony orchestra , . . 110 musicians . . . under Erno Rapes, He became a regular member of Roxy's Gang on WEA.

Later he played on many of the finer radio hours and at the Victor under exclusive artist contract. His work with B. A. Rolfe on the Lucky Strike program did much to establish the accordion as a regular orchestral instrument. Prior thereto, it was used almost entirely as a solo instrument. He is conceded to be the most finished accordionist before the public, according to Major Bowes and the announcers of the NBC and CBS air lanes. Soloist and guest artist on Show Boat, Hammerstein's Theatre of the Air, Texaco, Manhattan Merry-Go-Round, Melodiana, Waltz Time, and many other of the finer network programs, as we go to press.

He has written many of the most popular solos for accordion, including "Accordiana," has arranged a number of original bass studies, plays piano, and also arranges for orchestra. Several impresarios have lately shown considerable interest in Magnante as a concert artist, believing he has possibilities beyond his present field of effort.

Geo. M. Bundy

Note: Charles Magnante died the 30th of December, 1986.