

American Fiddle Styles
for the Anglo Concertina

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Thirty Studies in the Art of Phrasing

Bertram Levy

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Dedicated to

~ Rodolfo Daluisio

~ Conservatorio de Manuel de Falla

~ Buenos Aires, Argentina



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PREFACE

It is almost thirty years since I wrote “The Concertina Demystified” and its widespread popularity has been very gratifying. I am equally gratified that over these years, I have continued to evolve and grow in my understanding of the instrument. Study and growth are essential parts of the musician’s life. My evolution has come in part from playing repertoire not usually associated with the concertina. The other part of that growth has come from my studies of the bandoneon in the last two decades and in particular in the last six years at the Conservatorio de Manuel de Falla in Buenos Aires with the great Rodolfo Daluisio. While it is impossible to play the two instruments interchangeably, the skills required to play the bandoneon have great applications to the 30-button Anglo concertina.

“The Concertina Demystified” is an introduction to the chordal organization of the Anglo concertina keyboard. This present work is an in-depth study of the art of phrasing. Phrasing is the basis of style and essential to playing tunes smoothly, rapidly, and rhythmically. The 30-button Anglo concertina is a two-and-a-half to three octave instrument of which a number of notes are only present in one direction. This forces changes in bellow direction that can alter the natural phrasing of the music. Fortunately one can work within these limitations to produce a pleasing result and in fact it becomes an interesting spatial game. However, to play the game, one needs a large toolbox of fingerings from which to draw. This book contains thirty studies, each of which presents a different set of moves to accomplish the diversity of phrasings. Although the repertoire is based on American fiddling styles, when you finish these thirty studies, you will have the skills to better approach all styles of music including folk, popular, classical and world music.

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL OVERVIEW

This book is more than just a collection of fiddle tunes for the concertina; it is a concertina method that, for many, will require study. These thirty graded studies are designed to be studied in the order presented. The tunes in this collection are arranged in phrases which follow the bowing of the fiddle but which are adapted to the unique structural qualities of the Anglo concertina. For many Irish Anglo concertina players who are well versed in the cross-row techniques, these studies will be easier. Nevertheless the approach presented here may be unique, even for the mature player, as it is built on a concept of learning by hand positions.

The principle of the approach is to visualize the melody not as a linear series of notes but rather as a collection of phrases. Every musical phrase has its own unique shape that can then be transferred into a shape of the fingers of the hand. The brain first tells the hand to assume the shape of the entire phrase and only then is the phrase played on the concertina. One does not try to learn a melody note by note but rather to learn to construct a set of finger shapes and practice progressing from one shape to the next. Once the progression becomes automatic, the musical intention and expression will follow naturally.

The efficiency of learning music with this technique is dramatically greater than learning note by note. It also makes improvising and playing music spontaneously in sessions much easier.



PART I

THE ART OF PHRASING

THE ART OF PHRASING

The flow of language is determined by grouping of words into phrases. For example, the following sentence can be recited at least 4 different ways:

1. The...Rain...In...Spain...Lies...Mainly...In...The...Plain
2. The rain in Spain... lies...mainly in the plain.
3. The rain....in Spain...lies main... ly in the plain
4. The rain in Spain lies mainly in..... the plain

Each example communicates a significantly different feeling. Similarly, grouping of notes into phrases has a profound effect on the intention of the melodic line.

The Anglo concertina, as a diatonic instrument, is often played in an alternating “in and out” fashion as in example 1. This method of playing creates a bouncy effect that is well suited to a certain repertoire. More lyrical tunes depend on a fluid movement from the beginning to the end of each phrase as illustrated in example 2 above. Example 3 is similar to the structure of many fiddle tunes where the first three measures of each part are rhythmically identical and, as such, must each be phrased identically to be consistent with the style. Finally example 4 demonstrates that change in bellows direction before completion of the thought can interrupt the phrase and will sacrifice the drive in the music.

Sound production is the second important part of phrasing and is the great lesson learned from studies of the bandoneon. When a note is opened, the reed must accelerate from zero. In the concertina with its powerful reeds, this can cause an unpleasant bite or wolf tone unless the bellow pressure is executed with care. Once the reed begins to vibrate, the column of air within the instrument is in an energized state. Here slight changes in wrist movement create significant expressive differences. Thus, in a run of notes in the same direction, subtle wrist movements create shape in the phrases. On the other hand, in phrases that change bellows direction, the sound is interrupted, the column of air must then be reenergized, and the notes can lose their expressive quality. This is best illustrated if one were to sing the air “Amazing Grace” while taking a breath between each word.

One might think that a more fluid unidirectional approach to phrasing sacrifices the bounce and life of the music. Not so, as evidenced by the playing of the great English-system concertina players who play in a unidirectional fashion. In reality the life in the phrases is as much dependent on the weight of the touch, the release on the buttons, and the variations in bellow pressure derived from wrist and arm action as by the changes in bellow direction.

In general, the music should determine the style and not the instrument. Having said that, the in-and-out movement of the concertina does afford the instrument its own personality. The

method presented here does not seek to eliminate that movement but rather to harness it in a way that rhythmically enhances the music.

Thus the principle of the approach offered in this text is to first construct and learn phrases based on bellows movement and then to add the expression and swing through touch and pressure.

THE AMERICAN FIDDLE STYLES: THE BELLOWS AS A BOW

The essence of the American fiddle music style depends on the bowings and on the use of double stops (two complementary notes played simultaneously). In the concertina, the bellows provide the same function as the bow. The double stops are accomplished through playing more than one note at a time.

The bellows are your bow. They give the concertina its great quality of expression. However, they do not have the same freedom as the bow in the violin because of two unique limitations in the concertina. The first is the limitation of available notes in the same direction. A significant number of notes are only represented in one direction:

C	E	F	B \flat	C	C \sharp	D \sharp	E	F	F \sharp	G \sharp	B \flat
---	---	---	-----------	---	------------	------------	---	---	------------	------------	-----------

C \sharp	D \sharp	F	G \sharp	B \flat	C \sharp	D \sharp	F	F \sharp	A
------------	------------	---	------------	-----------	------------	------------	---	------------	---

R1	R1	R8	R3	R3	R4	R4	R5	R15	R5
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Thus, for example, the 4th note of the C scale (F) is in the opposite direction to the rest of the scale and forces changes in bellows direction. Similarly the 2nd and 3rd notes in the D scale (E and F \sharp) are in opposite directions and have a similar effect. When these two notes are part of