

REDISCOVERING THE 19th CENTURY REPERTOIRE FOR FREE REED KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS

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Classical accordionists of the 20th century have been more concerned with creating an original repertoire of contemporary compositions than with recognizing the past of their instrument. One of our biggest problems is that we do not have so much original repertoire and even less tonal repertoire; so, what we propose in this little article is to get to know our past better, to dig up our forgotten repertoire, to create new professional perspectives for the accordionists of the 21st century.

The main problem when we think about the past of our instrument is to consider that the predecessor of the classical accordion in the 19th century was only the “toy” called diatonic accordion, an ineffective instrument to do serious music.

The accordion is a keyboard aerophone free reed instrument. The first instrument of this type was the portative organ built in 1780 by Franz Kirsnik (1741-1802) and Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein (1723-1795). After this invention, there was a deep development of this kind of free reed keyboard instruments and thousands of patents of similar instruments were registered. All of them should be considered predecessors of the classical accordion. The two 19th century instruments which are more similar to the modern accordion are the concertina and, very specially, the harmonium, an instrument extremely similar in sound to the classical accordion. I invite anyone who doesn't agree with this assertion to listen the recordings of great harmonium players such as Joris Verdin.

The earliest classical works for a free reed instrument were the seven *concertinos* for jew's harp, mandora and string orchestra (1764-1771) of the great contrapuntist Johann Georg Albrechtsberger (1736-1809), a teacher for Hummel, Moscheles and Beethoven among others.

Between 1840 and 1870 the most important English composers wrote for concertina. During this period, we have some works for concertina solo by concertinists such as Giulio Regondi, Richard Blagrove, Catherina Pelzer, George Case, Joseph Warren... Nevertheless, the biggest development took place in the repertoire for concertina and piano, with works written by these same concertinists and by important composers who wrote works for Regondi and Blagrove such as Bernhard Molique, George Alexander Macfarren, John Barnett, Julius Benedict, James Harcourt, Edward Silas... Other chamber music was written by Macfarren, Molique, Warren, Case or Silas. There also were concertos composed for concertina and strings by Bernhard Molique and Franz Bosen.

But the most reputable free reed instrument was the harmonium, which was accepted in the classical world from its beginning, being included in the conservatories during the 19th century. The first composer to write for this kind of instrument was Haydn's student Sigismund Neukomm in 1824 (*Duo C-Dur n°227* for harp and orgue expressif), but the first really important composer who wrote for it was Franz Schubert in 1827 (*Schlachtlied* for chorus and piano or physharmonika).

Among the composers who wrote for harmonium solo are Neukomm, Czerny, Berlioz, Smetana, Saint-Saëns, Rossini, Bizet, Alkan, Meyerbeer, Cesar Franck, Liszt, Guilmant, Busoni, Bruckner, Boëllman, Elgar, Janacek, Reger, Karg-Elert, Vierne, D'Indy, Massenet, Dupré, Nielsen...

The harmonium also found its place in chamber music: the type of ensemble for which more pieces were composed was piano and harmonium (Neukomm, Czerny, Saint-Saëns, Lefébure-Wély, Widor, Guilmant, Gounod, Franck, Liszt, Sibelius, Karg-Elert, Janacek, Alain...). Other ensembles were also popular like violin and harmonium (Liszt, Karg-Elert, Grainger, Zamacois...); duo of harmoniums (Richard Strauss, Grainger...); harmonium, piano and strings (Saint-Saëns, Liszt, Gounod, Dvorak, Sibelius, Richard Strauss, Bruch, Grainger, Pedrell, Berg, Schönberg...) or other chamber instrumentations (Rossini, Widor, Liszt, Johann Strauss Jr., Grainger, Schönberg, Bruch, Hindemith, Richard Strauss, Kagel...).

One of the genres in which the harmonium was used most, was in vocal music. The harmonium worked very well accompanying the soloist voice (Liszt, Bruckner, Puccini, Gounod, Chapí, D'Indy, Reger, Pedrell, Schönberg...). It was also included in choral music: many composers wrote for voice (choir or soloist and choir), accompanied by organ, piano or harmonium (Schubert, Berlioz, Gounod, Faure, Liszt, Gounod, Puccini, Busoni, Bruckner, Grieg, D'Indy, Cui, Chapí, Fauré, Reger, Sibelius, Franck, Pedrell, Janacek, Vaughan Williams, Kodaly, Kagel...) or by different instrumental ensembles that included a harmonium (Gounod, Saint-Saens, Rossini, Liszt, Böellmann, Reger, Leoncavallo, Janacek, Schönberg, Weill, Kagel...).

The harmonium was also used in orchestral compositions (Liszt, Smetana, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Webern, Schönberg, Berg, Elgar, Honegger...), in ballets (Richard Strauss, Shostakovitch, Ibert, Maderna, Penderecki, Ligeti...), in great works for chorus and orchestra (Berlioz, Liszt, Bizet, Dvorak, Fauré, Puccini, Webern, Stravinsky, Martinu...) and in operas (Massenet, Verdi, Dvorak, Richard Strauss, Hindemith, Weill, Stockhausen...).

In the 1930s, the harmonium started an inexorable slump with the arrival of the electronic keyboards, and became practically extinct since mid-20th century, so his repertoire fell into oblivion and it has hardly been played in the last 80 years.

During the classicism, something similar happened to the repertoire for harpsichord, viola da gamba or lute but during the romanticism, pianists, cellists and guitarists rediscovered this repertoire making the rebirth of these old instruments possible in the second half of the 20th century; and so, their original repertoire was retaken.

The accordion is the heir of this harmonium repertoire and we have the responsibility to rediscover it. It is shocking to realize that some of these works, by really important composers, have not yet been recorded. This is the great challenge that opens before us: to retrieve and record this almost forgotten repertoire. An idea for new perspectives for modern accordion could be to propose, for example, the recording of complete works for harmonium by Liszt or other great composers for Deutsche Gramophon or other big record labels.

Rather than our prerogative, we should consider it our duty, since when we hypothesize about what the recognition of the current concert accordion would have been if it had really existed in the 19th century, the answer would probably be: very similar to the recognition that the harmonium had.

The ones who have more interest in all this repertoire will find a complete repertoire list in my next book “The accordion in the 19th century”, and those who want to listen to some of these works could find them in the CD “Los acordeones del s. XX” recorded recently by my students. They played works for harmonium by Saint-Saëns, Janacek, Franck, Berlioz, Elgar, Liszt and Almagro, works for concertina by Harcourt and Regondi and the first recording of the oldest original piece known for diatonic accordion: the *Thème varié* by Louise Reisner of 1836.