

History of the Accordion

From traditional old-world ballads to modern Acadian and even punk rock, the accordion is a staple in many musical bands.

This humble instrument actually boasts a fascinating history. The accordion family tree stretches back centuries, to an ancient Chinese instrument called a Cheng or Sheng. This instrument, used during the time of Confucius (551-479 BC), is believed to be first to use the free vibrating reed principal. This principal provided the basis of sound production for today's modern accordions.

Fast forward to 1829. A Viennese instrument maker by the name of Cyrillus Damian was credited with creating the first "true" accordion. Numerous historical resources show that Mr. Damian was first to patent an instrument of that name, and received royal patronage for his invention. There are conflicting reports, however, holding that the first true accordion actually appeared in 1822 when a fellow named Christian Friedrich Buschmann put some expanding bellows onto a small portable keyboard, with reed vibrating freely inside the instrument itself. Buschmann dubbed his new instrument the "hand-aeoline" and toured in the year 1828 to help propel its popularity.

Regardless of who actually "invented" the modern accordion style, the popularity did certainly take off. Following that era, several varieties of free-vibrating reed instruments were developed. Some of them are still considerably well known today. As the instrument enjoyed growing popularity, the demand for instruction manuals began to increase. According to certain historical resources, the first accordion textbook featured both original music, and arrangements of familiar pieces. The book, written by Adolf Reisner, was published in Paris in 1832. Countless textbooks and manuals have been created and distributed since then.

From 1830 onwards, the development of the accordion continued at a rapidly accelerating pace. Several varieties of instrument were further developed such as the bandoneon, a chromatic model and even the harmonica, all of which still exist today. Perhaps one of the interesting developments from this period was the introduction of the Schrammel, a complicated instrument that made its debut onstage with a Viennese quartet comprised of a bass guitar and two violins. The Schrammel became popular at Viennese gatherings and can still be heard today.

In 1863, when the first piano accordion was introduced to the public, many performers regarded it as a means of liberating themselves from being confined to their massive and immobile walls of pipes. One of the artists of the time named Pietro Diero brought his custom built piano accordion to the United States and earned recognition as the "father" of American accordion playing. During the early part of the twentieth century, several accordion manufacturers began to establish their companies. These manufacturers met the needs and pressures of professional accordion players, and formed the standard size and shape of the instrument, as we know it today.

Hundreds of years have passed in the timeline of the accordion, but it remains an international phenomenon. Although there are still accordion manufacturers in the United States, their numbers are quite small compared to those in Europe. German, France, Italy and Russia are still important players in the making and export of today's accordions.

Listen to traditional musical pieces from virtually any country, and you can pick up the distinctive notes of the accordion. It is an instrument rich in history and long in worldwide appeal.