

The Accordion's Ancestry: Origin and Development

By Nick Ariando

Surprisingly enough, the accordion was not the very first instrument which utilized vibrating reeds, a bellows and keys. Throughout history, we find the accordion's ancestry dating back as far as 2700 B.C. to the *free-reed* of the Cheng (Tcheng or Sheng), an ancient Chinese wind instrument. The accordion *bellows* date back to the Middle Ages and Renaissance period of the 12th, 13th and 15th Centuries (A.D.) with the advent of bellow-operated instruments (the portable organ, the bible-regal and the harmonium) to name a few.

It wasn't until the 1800's that a steady flow of inventions and experiments took place using metal reeds, bellows, keys and buttons in search of the accordion's discovery. The very first attempt was made by **Christian Friedrich Bushmann** of Berlin in 1822, and he called it the *hand-aoline* (a small portable keyboard attached to an expanding bellows, operated by one individual with only a few buttons or keys).

Revisions and improvements were sought after by curious inventors intrigued with this new portable instrument. In 1829, **Cyriillus Damian** of Vienna, became responsible for naming his instrument the *accordion*. He is also attributed to making significant changes and adding pre-fixed chord buttons to the left-hand section. Of course, this was the accordion in its earliest stages of development. As the accordion progressed into the 20th century, vast improvements occurred. Although modern technology was a contributing factor to today's sophisticated instruments, the basic concept remained true to its original design: *a wind instrument, where the performer depresses a key or button with his fingers while simultaneously pulling the bellows. The bellows forces air through the key valve opening and into the reed, causing vibration of the reed by which sound is produced.*

Let us now look back into more detail at the ancestral beginnings and evolution of this versatile music machine called "*the accordion*".



The Cheng

way through Europe (late 1700's) thus leading to the invention of the mouth organ, concertina, bandoneon, etc.

What is a Reed?

A reed is a sound producing agent made of a thin strip of cane or metal adjusted before an opening where the reed is fixed at one end, causing it to vibrate when set by a current of air. There are two types of reeds: the *free-swinging reed* and the *beating reed*.

1) *The Free Reed*, as found in the accordion, mouth organ, and concertina, etc., vibrates through an opening, creating a back and forth motion as it vibrates freely but remains fixed at the base attached to a reed plate.

2) *The Beating Reed*, as found in a clarinet or saxophone, vibrates against an air slot (the mouthpiece of the clarinet) as the reed strikes on its side.

Whether it be a free-swinging reed of an accordion, or a beating reed of a clarinet, or a double-reed of an oboe or bassoon (also a beating reed), all are categorized as "reed" or "wind" instruments because of the flow of air through a vibrating reed.

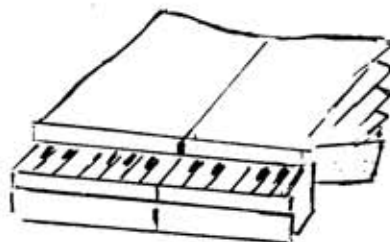
The Bellows

The bellows were found in use during the Middle Ages (12th and 13th Centuries). The *portative* was a small portable hand-organ which was, similar to an accordion, strapped onto the player. The performer would press down the keys (similar to that of a small piano keyboard) with his right



Portative

hand, while the left hand operated the back and forth motion of the bellows, providing air pressure through reeds and pipes (see drawing).



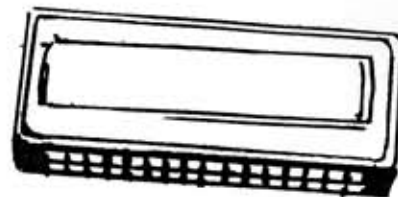
The Bible-Regal

The *bible-regal*, similar in appearance to a bible when folded and put away, was a type of reed-organ used in the 15th Century. This instrument would lay flat and the attached bellows would operate the air-flow through

the reeds inside. There were other instruments, before and after, that also used some form or another of a bellows to provide air pressure.

The Harmonica

The harmonica, invented by **Sir Charles Wheatstone** around 1825, is also credited for inventing the concertina in 1829. The harmonica is also claimed to have its origins in Trossingen, Germany, where the Hohner organization became one of the largest manufacturers/distributors in the industry.



Harmonica (Mouth-Organ)

The tone is produced by the player blowing and sucking air similar to the push/pull action of the accordion bellows. Like the German concertina, the harmonica changes pitch in each direction of air flow. Inside the instrument sits a number of metal reeds (*free-reeds*) fixed on a metal plate. When blown through the outside air