

**International Course for
Concert Harmonica**

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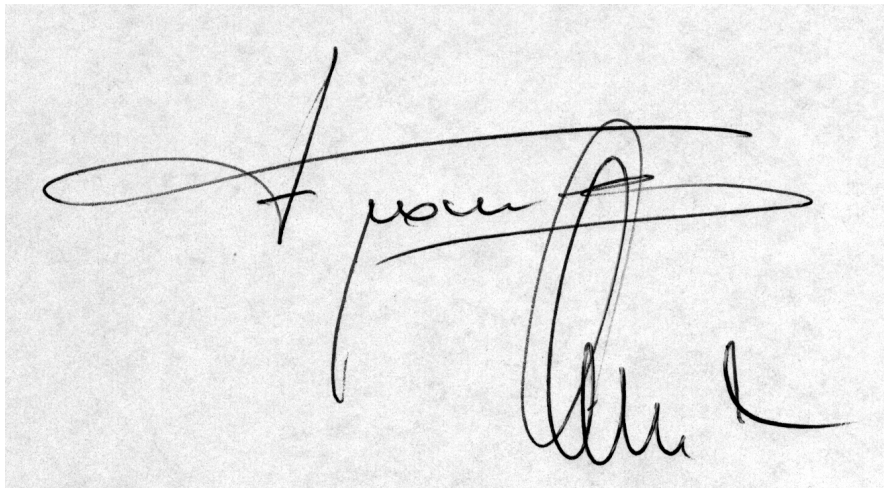
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1. PREFACE

All ideas and statements made in this course are based on my personal experience and not on any objective criteria. Should criticisms made here suggest a similarity to actual persons, such similarities are coincidental and not intended. These seminar excerpts are my intellectual property and solely intended for the participants of the International Course for Concert Harmonica held at Strechau Castle in Styria, Austria. Duplication and dissemination of this information is subject to my approval.

Franz Chmel
St. Pölten, Austria
May 2004

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is highly stylized and cursive, starting with a large, sweeping 'F' that extends across the top of the name. The word 'Franz' is written in a fluid, cursive script, followed by 'Chmel' which also features a large, prominent loop for the 'C'. The signature ends with a horizontal stroke.

2. INTRODUCTION

Start of the seminar at 9 am with a performance of the *Intermezzo Giocoso*

Franz Chmel – Concert Harmonica

Dr. Gerold Preimesberger – Piano

The first piece we played was the *Intermezzo Giocoso* composed by Rudolf Würthner. I consider this piece one of the most interesting compositions for harmonica and a classic example for the topics to be discussed in this course. The piece requires more or less everything:

- Virtuosity
- Musicianship
- Tone production

Does anybody play this piece or has anybody ever played it?

Well, there is one thing I can promise: if you have not yet mastered this piece, you will *not* master it immediately after this seminar. However, you will know *the prerequisites for playing it*. Let me mention right from the beginning that theory is the most important part of this course. If you really accept this theory – of course according to your abilities – you will profit a lot.

What is also of major importance: in this course you will receive information you have never encountered before. Perhaps you have even heard the opposite of what I will explain to you. Therefore let me say clearly that my approach is solely based on my personal experiences and that I would never claim methods other than mine to be incorrect. (This tolerance has its limits, however, when it comes to certain very important aspects.)

When listening to your harmonica playing I will be very honest in giving a judgement. If I do not like it, I will *not* say: “That’s pretty good.” Instead, I will say that it is bad or even very bad. I hope that nobody will feel offended – if so, that is not my intention, because I want you to profit from this seminar: *you and the harmonica*.

Don’t worry, everything that you will learn does not apply only to the *Intermezzo Giocoso*, but to any level of playing. The only difference is in the practice time that is absolutely required. This can be easily explained: in order to master a difficult passage in the *Intermezzo Giocoso*, you will need, say, 10 days practising two hours a day. The *Serenata* by Toselli, however, might only require 15 minutes of daily practice for five days – depending on your level. Whenever I mention examples referring to difficult pieces, you simply have to adapt the time scale to your circumstances. My focus is on general principles. Each individual must learn to evaluate his own practice time requirements.

An example: if the *Intermezzo Giocoso* requires 60 days of practice with two hours every day and if you cannot or do not want to spend that amount of time, then it is more advisable to play pieces which are much easier. We will come back to that later in detail.

3. FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS

If someone said that he had only *a little talent* I would not agree with such a statement. I am absolutely convinced that I do not have more talent than any of you. However, my ability to handle some fundamental problems is a bit more professional. In my opinion there are three basic problems:

- Attitude problem
- Time problem
- The problem of overcoming the disinclination to practise

I can assure you that if you can solve the attitude problem (which is the most important one of the three) you will certainly reach your goals quickly. But I do have to emphasise that your *goal* must be *realistically* connected with the other aspects of *time* and *overcoming*. Obviously this is logical, as reaching one's goals depends on the *sum* of:

I. Attitude towards the harmonica as a legitimate musical instrument

II. Practice time

III. Effort to overcome obstacles

Provided your efforts in each of these areas is 100%, the level that you could achieve will practically be unlimited. Probably none of you can or wants to invest that much, which is OK if you are not going to become a professional player.

What I am getting at is this:

The desired goal refers to the *highest technical level possible on the harmonica*. For the sake of simplicity, let's define that level with the *Intermezzo Giocosso* and rate it as 100% (even though the *Intermezzo Giocosso* is definitely not the most difficult piece). The *Serenata* by Toselli, however, only amounts to 10% of the highest technical level. Working this out arithmetically, achieving 100% requires the player to practise five hours every day. Consequently, a daily practice time of a half an hour is sufficient to achieve 10%.

Unrealistically, you may try to play the *Intermezzo Giocosso* by practising 30 minutes every day. I can promise that you will never ever master this piece technically and hence musically, and you will be laughed at by the critics. However, if you spend 30 minutes every day on the *Serenata* by Toselli, after a while you will master it technically and musically and the critics will be enthusiastic.

Arithmetically: 10% for the *Intermezzo Giocosso* is equal to 100% for the *Serenata*.

Perhaps you may say that this sounds too simple, but I have to tell you that it really is that simple! I think that very little – if anything – has been said about these three fundamental problems which one has to recognise clearly in order to be a good harmonica player. I will therefore spend a lot of time explaining these problems. If you can properly deal with these problems you will soon become aware of what you have been lacking so far. This will enable you to determine how well you play the harmonica.

Therefore let us begin by looking at the problem that is actually the most important one.

3.1 Attitudes towards the harmonica as a musical instrument

The harmonica is one of the oldest musical instruments. Some 2000 years ago there was an instrument in China that already used the principle of free reeds. The “Sheng” is still in use. Nevertheless the harmonica is still regarded by some so-called musical connoisseurs with mild amusement. Such experts can be divided into two groups.

3.1.1 People with preconceived notions

Some people consider the harmonica to be a *toy* rather than a musical instrument, first of all because they have never heard an excellent harmonica soloist on stage, and secondly because of the lack of a repertoire of classical harmonica compositions.

Regarding the first point, we cannot blame people for never having experienced good harmonica playing and *it is up to us* to change this. As far as the second point is concerned, of course they are right in saying that J.S. Bach, W.A. Mozart or L.van Beethoven never wrote music for harmonica – everybody knows that the instrument did not exist in those days. But there is one thing I am very sure about: if today’s chromatic harmonica had existed in the days of Mozart, Mozart and the other great masters would have written for this instrument. Johann Sebastian Bach’s attitude about adaptations should be mentioned at this point:

He himself considered his music transferable to any instrument, wind, string or keyboard, whose compass it happened to fit. When it did not fit he never hesitated to transpose or rearrange.

One can also counter this criticism easily by mentioning composers like Villa Lobos, Gordon Jacob and Vaughan Williams, all of whom have written for the harmonica. These critics can therefore be ignored, as their arguments will over time prove unfounded. Besides, nowadays it is common knowledge that the harmonica is an instrument that great artists write for – whether they are already famous composers or soon will be. Furthermore we can and must make these critics change their minds by means of our musical capabilities.

3.1.2 People who have suffered through bad harmonica playing

This second group is more difficult to deal with. These people are the real opponents of the harmonica. While critics from the first category have never heard a serious harmonica player (and thus could yet be convinced that the harmonica is a legitimate instrument), critics from the second group have already come in contact with the harmonica and have had disappointing experiences. I give you some examples in order to explain what I mean:

- Someone goes to a harmonica concert in which the soloist performs an adaptation of a difficult classical piece using a three-octave harmonica. The soloist uses three different types of vibrato and transposes every passage in the octave below middle C an octave higher. His technical level is – at best – passable, leading to a lack of musicality which is not surprising at all: how can a player play musically if he is constantly worrying about stumbling in the technically difficult passages (of which there are many)? Yet, this player is considered to be one of the best harmonica artists (either by himself or by journalists).

- Another leading harmonica player plays Bach without knowledge of Bach's ornamental practice. Trills are played simply by using the slide button (because it is so easy) regardless of the resulting notes and of whether they are trills or mordents. Sometimes trills are left out completely (which is not as bad as playing them incorrectly).
- A harmonica band plays symphonies originally written for a 100-piece orchestra. These pieces have many subsidiary voices which one cannot omit without changing the piece into a mere fragment.
- The *Roumanian Rhapsody* by Enesco – another fine example. First of all it too is orchestral music. Secondly, this piece contains violin passages which absolutely cannot be played on the harmonica. However, these passages are musically extremely important. Since they are too difficult for the harmonica, these passages are often transposed to C. If it turns out that this arrangement is still too challenging, the difficult passages are rearranged or left out, or portions of them are repeated causing the whole structure to be distorted.
(During my youth I made the same “mistakes” as well. In fact there was nobody to ask for help. When using the word mistake in quotation marks I want to indicate that it is a mistake to perform these pieces in public. However, these kinds of pieces are essential to acquiring a better-than-average technique.)
- Final example: *Zigeunerweisen (Gipsy Airs)*. The Allegro is played more like an Andante, every second note in the A-major part is skipped or rearranged in an amateurish way.

Many more examples could be mentioned, but to come to the point: By chance, this concert-goer is a competent music connoisseur. If he is told that this (referring to the above examples) is the best the harmonica can produce, you can imagine what his opinion will be.

3.1.3 A magic formula and its consequences

Well, it is easy to blame such players for this situation. But I think that this approach is too simple. There is a reason for the calamities mentioned earlier, which is based on the players' attitude towards the harmonica: these players are not absolutely convinced that the harmonica is a fully legitimate musical instrument – hence the outcomes mentioned above (which are actually remarkable for something considered a toy rather than a legitimate instrument).

You have surely heard the phrase “*It is amazing that this can actually be played on a harmonica*”. Superficial players will understand this comment as a compliment (and only sometimes is it actually meant as a compliment). It usually means, however: the quality is unsatisfactory, but very good for a toy like that – it certainly is not capable of anything better. Of course it is true that the harmonica has its limitations, but like other instruments these limitations should be of a *physical nature* rather than resulting from sloppiness or laziness. As with no other musical instrument the harmonica itself (not the player) is blamed for bad performance. “*It cannot be done any better on the instrument*” is a remark that only applies to the harmonica.

How to escape from this disastrous situation? Well, we now come to the most important message of this course. Believe it or not, there is a magic formula consisting of only one sentence:

Consider the harmonica a fully legitimate (and satisfying) instrument which demands to be taken seriously.



Franz Chmel and Dr. Gerold Preimesberger at Strehau Castle, Austria – June 28, 2001

If you can implement this guideline you will attain all of your goals with this instrument. And if you had had this outlook earlier, you might now be in my place as an instructor of this course. Some people may say that they always considered the harmonica a fully legitimate instrument. Well, I could mention several examples proving that such people only partly believe this, but we'll let the matter go for now.

Why should a single sentence hold the key to success? Quite simply because the rules that apply to the harmonica are *the same as those that apply to any other musical instrument*.

Here are some consequences that result from applying this magic formula:

- Regarding the name of the instrument:
Forget the nicknames that are commonly used for the harmonica (of which there are many, especially in German speaking countries, such as “Fotzhobel”, “Goschehobel”, “Mulorgele”, etc.). Call your instrument simply *harmonica* or even *concert harmonica* when playing a chromatic instrument.

- **Musical notation:**
It is not conducive to the good reputation of the harmonica to invent new rules. A good example is the notation of trills. Even in printed harmonica scores one can find them written incorrectly. Why? Because composers have been told by certain players that a trill on E – F# is unplayable on the harmonica. (A trill on E in A major is played E – F# unless indicated otherwise by the composer.) In fact, this trill is indeed playable; however it might require some months to practise! Even worse is the handling of a trill in which the basic note is played using the slide button, e.g. C#. Players often play this trill as a mordent and in most cases even this is not done properly. One has to decide whether to practise this trill very hard or to refrain from playing the piece.
- **Musical literature:**
Fortunately, times have changed a bit and one is no longer criticised for playing adaptations (e.g. a violin piece on the harmonica) as long as these are musically acceptable – especially in case of instruments for which there is no large repertoire of original compositions. However, when adapting such a piece to the harmonica the reason for any changes must not be: “if I were to play the original score I would need much more practice time.”

Some harmonica players tune their instruments to other keys, which is possible, but not advisable. You will never become an excellent harmonica player if you do so; apart from this you will have to use many different instruments. Furthermore you should refrain from playing passages in a different octave simply because the required notes are not available on your instrument or because it is easier to play these passages in a different octave.

If too many passages are modified in an adaptation it would be better to rename the whole piece, e.g. *Fantasy on ... by J.S. Bach*. But please note that in this case you will not only be assessed for your performance, but also for the arrangement and you may easily jump out of the frying-pan into the fire... To summarize the basic points:

Pieces you like a great deal (but which have not been written for the harmonica) can be adapted in any way you like and can be played on the instrument as long as you do not perform these pieces in public. Bear this in mind if you want to be acknowledged not only by harmonica players. Besides, there are quite a large number of original harmonica compositions for any level that are really worth playing. (A comprehensive list of original harmonica compositions is available at www.chmel-classic.de.)

3.2 Time problem

The discussion of the time problem does not take very long as I have already mentioned essential aspects of it in section 3.1 – if somewhat cryptically. I will be more precise now. As you remember I said that the harmonica is a legitimate and serious musical instrument, provided one adheres to the commonly accepted rules of music. Furthermore I already talked about general attitudes towards the instrument. In this section I move on to the time problem when it comes to practising the harmonica.

You may have noticed that I often draw comparisons to other instruments. This is only possible and meaningful provided you fully accept the statements explained in section 3.1 (problem of attitude). Should you have any doubts about the viability of the harmonica as a serious instrument all subsequent aspects will remain of doubtful value.

Let us take the violin as an example:

Perhaps you have already listened to beginners on the violin when they have just started to play the instrument. Frankly, it sounds horrible (due to intonation problems which do not exist on the harmonica). At first, hardly any difference between pupils can be detected in their playing (any differences between pupils are a matter of attitude and talent). Naturally, a violin player practising just *one hour every week* will very soon fall behind his colleague who practises *one hour every day*. However, there are violinists who practise six hours every day (and even more than that). Under normal circumstances these players will become topnotch violinists.

Why should the harmonica be different from the violin in this respect? In my opinion the harmonica is equal to other instruments. Consequently, playing the harmonica is as difficult as playing the violin. If you want to become a first-rank harmonica player you will have to practise as first-rank players do. Well, I do not know if any of you is able and willing to resolve this time problem. I do not want to claim that such a goal is necessarily worthwhile, but it can be explained with a formula similar to the one in section 3.1. This formula refers to a *realistic goal*:

If you want to achieve top results – 100% of what is possible – you will have to invest the requisite time, which means about five to seven hours every day.

I can guarantee that you will then find practically no limits to the musical literature for the harmonica. But apart from practising five to seven hours every day you will have to spend some time on general aspects of music as well, such as music history, music theory (structural and harmonic analysis), etc. In other words it will become a full-time job. But there will then be no harmonica composition that you could not master technically and musically. Practising one hour every day will thus allow you to only achieve 1/7 to 1/5 of top performance level. This means that you yourself determine your future abilities! Of course, this is true for any kind of music (folk music, pop music, jazz, classical music), as you can always find pieces ranging from very easy to very difficult.

Practising Monti's *Czardas* two hours every week will probably never enable you to play the piece properly. But it will be enough to allow you to play lots of nice pieces which, however, will be on an easier technical level.

To remind you again: the *Serenata* by Toselli performed perfectly is much better than the *Czardas* by Monti played poorly.

To summarise the discussion of the time problem: you alone – with the practice time you are willing to invest – can define your goals and level of ability.

3.3 The problem of overcoming the disinclination to practise

Even if you had time to practise five to seven hours every day that does not mean that you are able or willing to practise that much.

It is a fairy tale that musicians actually like to practise five to seven hours every day.

However, musicians have to practise that long in order to maintain their level of accomplishment. Believe it or not, after playing uninterruptedly for four hours practising

becomes plain hard work (this is the way it is with me). After having practised with full concentration for a long time – only this is meaningful – your physical and mental capabilities will begin to diminish. But since you have not yet finished your practice schedule you cannot really stop now. It sometimes requires considerable effort to continue to play for another one or two hours successfully.

Let me remind you again that these guidelines regarding practice times refer to top players only. You can apply these general principles as well by adapting the time scale according to your own circumstances.

I have successfully applied the following trick: when practising I usually start with those pieces which I have not yet mastered or which I do not like very much. When finally I feel like finishing, I practise my favourite pieces. This actually works very well.

To summarise, if you practise only when you find fun in it, you will not be all that successful in the long run and your abilities will remain limited.

4. PLAYING THE HARMONICA

4.1 Tongue blocking versus puckering

This chapter covers theoretical and practical aspects relating to the different techniques of single-note playing and the required mouth positions.

As you all know there are two possibilities for single-note playing on the harmonica: “Puckering” and “tongue blocking”. (In fact there is a third method, which is something in between. This may sound somewhat abstract, but it becomes natural after reaching a certain level of accomplishment.)

Those of you who have been using the puckering method until now will most probably want to change to the tongue blocking technique once I have finished this section. That’s why I will deal with these players separately.

Let’s start with the differences between both methods:

Puckering requires the player to form his lips in a position (similar to whistling) such that breath can only flow through one hole.

With tongue blocking the player’s lips cover two or more holes. Any unneeded left-hand holes are blocked with the tongue.

Theoretically puckering would be the more logical and easier technique. However, the harmonica is a very complex and wonderful instrument whose versatile and marvellous possibilities can only be completely realised by using the tongue blocking method. That’s why my opinion is quite obvious: if you intend to make use of all possibilities that the harmonica offers, you will have to master the tongue blocking method. But let me add that being able to play in the puckering position as well is not a disadvantage. Should anybody have ever told you to start learning the puckering method first, I can only say that this is irresponsible advice! Changing from tongue blocking to puckering is quite simple and does not require much time, I promise you! The other way round, however, is extremely difficult. (I speak from the experience that I have gathered from talking to various players.)

Those of you who cannot manage or do not intend to change to tongue blocking may still put their minds at rest. Most of the issues I am talking about in this section can also be applied successfully using the puckering method, in some cases however with limitations, and in some cases not at all.

Let’s look at the advantages of puckering: in my opinion the only reason to use the puckering technique is when sometimes dealing with very short staccato passages. My entire performing repertory comes to about five hours, only 20 seconds of which uses puckering. Though I never applied the puckering method I have had almost no problems with these passages (different muscles).

4.1.1 Advantages of tongue blocking

The tongue blocking method allows the harmonica many wonderful possibilities:

1 Volume

If you really want to play loudly – something which is often asked for and necessary – you can only achieve this with the tongue blocking method. Because your tongue is blocking the holes, your lips can create much higher pressure on the mouth piece, and as a result there is higher pressure inside your mouth cavity.

(The louder you play in the puckering position – and thus the higher the pressure is inside your mouth – the firmer your lips need to be pressed onto the mouth piece, which substantially restricts tone production possibilities. In the tongue blocking position, however, your tongue supports your lips considerably. By putting your tongue on the mouth piece the whole mouth cavity is available for tone production.)

2 Tone production

There are not many musical instruments that offer such versatile tone production possibilities as the harmonica. Changing the oral cavity allows for many different tone colours, ranging from hard to soft and delicate, from dark to bright...

3 Breathing technique

When playing in the puckering position a lack or surplus of air can only be compensated through the player's nose which very often causes annoying unwanted noises. Players who use tongue blocking can compensate by letting the air flow through their mouths while playing.

4 Vibrato

The most common vibrato on the harmonica is the hand vibrato which, however, is not a real vibrato in the true sense of the word. In fact, the hand vibrato is a tremolo rather than a vibrato. That's why I consider the hand vibrato inappropriate and useless in classical music.

As the vibrato – especially my own vibrato – is a very important issue, we will deal with it later in section 4.4.

4.1.2 Tongue blocking in practice

I will now talk about the tongue blocking technique and I want you to do some practical exercises. Perhaps some of you have successfully developed your own technique. We will find out later if your technique is really correct. I can only explain the way I do it.

The most important aspect is the position of your tongue. As you can see I use the right side of my tongue to block the holes rather than the tip of my tongue, which clings to the left corner of my mouth (so that air cannot escape on the left side unintentionally).

Exercise: Play a chord and move your tongue forward slowly. With the tongue, slowly block the left holes until only the rightmost note can be heard. Repeat this exercise diligently with different chords, paying attention that only the highest note of each chord is actually sounded. Then you can try to play simple tunes, at the same time using your tongue to make accompanying chords. This is the best exercise to learn the tongue blocking technique.

If you have not yet mastered this technique, you should practise very hard as your sound is very much dependent on your tongue and mouth position.

As soon as your tongue position is more or less OK you should try to produce different tone colours by altering the position of your tongue and your lower jaw. While doing so, make sure that the contact position of your tongue on the mouth piece does *not* change! A fine example of how to move your tongue is the pronunciation of the German word “ja”.

Mastering this tongue movement is the sole secret of my sound. If you like to play with this kind of sound you will have to practise until reaching the point of exhaustion. The reward, however, will be your ability to produce a sound that will please not only harmonica connoisseurs.

4.2 Legato and staccato on the harmonica

Legato and staccato are important musical terms, mainly because it is very difficult to produce them well on the harmonica.

4.2.1 Playing legato

In particular, this is true for a good legato – it is really difficult to accomplish, especially when the player has to alternate between blowing and drawing breath and use the slide button. The most difficult exercise, however, is to play legato if the holes used are not next to each other (in this case a true legato is indeed physically impossible). When playing the interval D-G# for instance, skipping the intermediate hole cuts off the note D abruptly while the note G# requires a fresh start. Unfortunately, this cannot be changed, but there is a way to make this transition as smooth as possible.

Generally, you should try to make gradations in the notes involved. At the end of its length D should become softer while G# should begin softly and grow louder. How can this be achieved? Well, first of all by changing the tension of your cheeks and secondly by slowly sealing off the mouth piece at the left corner of your mouth while simultaneously altering the tension of your lips.

At this opportunity I would like to point out a bad harmonica habit, that of increasing the volume of a note just before playing the next. This habit really ought to be avoided.

4.2.2 Playing staccato

There are no quick remedies for learning to play staccato (using the tongue blocking method), except for the following advice: practise a lot! This is because the muscles of your larynx need practice. Appropriate exercises such as coughing – where one’s larynx is jerked open and closed – are helpful.

At first noises produced by your larynx will be somewhat disturbing, but do not worry: larynx noises will lessen once you have developed better control over your muscles! However, eliminating these noises completely is hardly possible. As with other instruments such as the guitar or the violin where string noises can be heard, these extraneous noises must be accepted as intrinsic to the instrument.

Pieces that offer great exercise possibilities are *Hora staccato* by Dinicu and *Carnaval de Venise* by Arban.

4.3 General aspects of practising

The more time and intensity you spend on practising the harmonica, the better your skills will develop. This is obvious and you all know this. In this section I want to suggest some advice for structured and well-organised practice.

Generally speaking there are no standard practice methods; rather there are certain basic principles, the execution and importance of which in actual practice can vary greatly from player to player. Some players acquire skills more quickly than others. Whereas one player might need to play a passage correctly only four or five times to achieve the necessary security for a public performance, another player might have to repeat the same passage 50 times in order to achieve the same result.

4.3.1 The role of human brain

The human brain consists of two basic parts. One is the “temporary area” (comparable to the RAM of a PC); the other part is the “memory area” (which corresponds to the hard drive of a PC). Both parts work together closely in the following way:

Imagine that you intend to learn to play a piece of music that you don’t yet know. If you play a certain passage of this piece just *once*, you will hardly be able to remember and play this passage on the following day without looking at the sheet music. If you play the same passage 50 times in full concentration, however, this may be enough to create a perfect stimulative pattern in the temporary area to be copied automatically to the memory area, where it remains available for a certain period of time (“automatic function”). Considerable differences do of course exist! You surely know people who are able to memorize a sentence having listened to it only twice, while others need ten or more repetitions. In music it is absolutely the same! You have to find out which group you belong to and how long your memory keeps its contents without any need for refreshment.

Example: Some players need to refresh their memory just once a week, while others have to repeat passages every 2nd or 3rd day. In addition, there is the problem already mentioned above: some players have to practise a passage 50 times perfectly, others only need four times; this is however more a problem of self-confidence and stage fright.

The automatic function can be very dangerous. Have you ever had the experience when a passage – one which you already played 1000 times perfectly – all of a sudden no longer works properly? To discover the reason for this unfortunately took me about ten years and countless sleepless nights bathed in sweat, and that is what I would like to spare you.

Make sure that you practise only with full concentration!

Finishing practice 30 minutes earlier is much better than an additional ten minutes of practice without full concentration. Here is an example of my sleepless past:

I have been playing *Zigeunerweisen (Gipsy Aires)* by Pablo de Sarasate for 20 years. Almost every day I practise the A-major section of the final Allegro which is one of the most difficult sections. To be honest, I have mastered this section 98%. In spite of that I have “lost” it suddenly several times in the last ten years. Even though I would know exactly what to do – e.g. use the slide button and draw to produce the next note – I wouldn’t do it. Actually, it was as if someone were blocking my finger. In fact, this blockage was caused by my brain. I was

angry with myself until I knew the reason behind this phenomenon: well, like copying the correct version to one's memory area after ten perfect repetitions, one can also copy an incorrect version. But how does this happen? If you lose full concentration while practising, you might omit a certain note or play it incorrectly several times consecutively. After the 7th repetition your temporary area – which cannot differentiate between the correct and false versions – assumes that now it is time for copying. The disastrous result is that the correct version will then be replaced by the false version. This results in your inability to “access” the correct version again when playing with full concentration on the following day. You will have to practise this passage almost from the beginning in order to remedy this accident. (The same applies when playing with a badly maintained harmonica.)

However, the above only refers to “automatic playing” (playing without looking at the score). Note: “automatic playing” does *not* mean to know a score by heart. Knowing a score by heart – which would be the ideal – means that the player can start to play at any passage of the piece without looking at the score itself, i.e. the player can write down the score from memory.

4.3.2 How to practise

Studying and practising a piece of music known to you should not be too difficult. As you already know the melody and rhythm it is not necessary to be really good at reading the score. In this case, practising is restricted to learning the required blow-draw-rhythm (change of breath) together with the use of the slide button. After having repeated the difficult passages often enough you may immediately start to think about the musical requirements of the piece.

Sometimes it is said that the player should pay attention to the musical aspects of a piece right from the beginning. Well, I do not know how to consider musical aspects if I have to concentrate fully on getting each note of a technically difficult phrase.

A long time ago a music professor of mine once told me:

If you want to make beautiful music, don't waste your energies thinking about technique.

Learning a piece of music is more difficult if you have never heard it before, if you have neither relative nor absolute pitch, if reading music is difficult for you, or if you have not mastered metre and rhythm; in other words, playing simply “by feel”. You would do well to listen to a good recording of the work, and then practise it by following the general practice suggestions made earlier. Even better, find a good music teacher who can identify and strengthen any weaknesses you might have in basic musical knowledge.

I am often asked about my attitude towards etudes. Well, many harmonica experts will not appreciate my comments on this question: etudes which have no connection to actual music are entirely worthless, or worse, a complete waste of time. The problems of the harmonica are too complex to solve with simplistic exercises. Why should I practise rhythms or sequences of notes which do not appear in any of my pieces of music? On the contrary, if you intend to play all possible rhythms and sequences of notes as an etude... have fun, but then you will have no time to practise and play real music.

Let us look at a simple example, the ordinary C-major scale. One can start on any of its seven notes, each time having a different blow-draw-rhythm. In addition, each of these seven notes can have a different accentuation... you may add a semi-tone between each note... the notes may require a very difficult rhythm ... again starting with each of these seven notes... Even if you practised all of these possibilities successfully (which would definitely require some months), the problems of breath technique would still require you to consider how to get to a certain phrase and how the phrase continues.

But why couldn't I arrange a difficult phrase of one of my pieces as an etude?

Also important: if you do not feel like concentrated practice, at least play all scales up and down several times, preferably in varying tempi. The purpose here is not so much to practise scales *per se*, rather to ensure that you stay in constant touch with the harmonica.

4.3.3 Technical level

As this topic has already been discussed at the beginning, it should be enough to repeat some comments here. A piece should be chosen with a realistic assessment of the time available to learn it and the ability to surmount its technical difficulties. A simple calculation could be helpful:

Let's say you would like to play a certain piece and you encounter a passage that would require, say, at least ten hours of practice. In fact you find that the piece has ten passages of that difficulty. This makes 100 hours of practice – in reality it comes to approx. 50% more than that, because passages already mastered need to be repeated on a regular basis. This piece will therefore require at least 150 hours of practice. Assuming you practise one hour every week, you will almost need three years to learn only this single piece. Obviously this is possible, but unrealistic.

To summarize once again: your committed efforts will determine the technical level of the pieces you choose. Don't forget that less is sometimes more.

4.3.4 Develop your sound

The tongue and mouth positions you master determine the various tone colours you are able to produce on the harmonica. Fortunately, you hear and feel the results immediately. What I find extremely important is the following advice: Try to record your music often and play in front of an audience (e.g. friends). Ask for an honest feedback – in particular regarding your tone. Listen to your recordings and please be honest with yourself. When playing an adaptation compare it with the setting for the original instrument. Under no circumstances should you simply say: "This is good enough for a harmonica."

4.3.5 Playing with accompaniment

When playing and performing together, each partner should ideally play with perfect competence, i.e. be able to play at a level of 100%. It would be wrong to assume that, with a soloist playing at a level of only 70%, the pianist or other accompanist would have to play at a higher level than 100% in order to compensate. This of course is arithmetically impossible: no

one can contribute more than 100%. The fact remains that if the soloist can master a level of only 80%, the accompanist *must* invest 100%.

In the reverse case, when the soloist has fully mastered tempo, technique and musical expression, it is conceivable that an accompanist able to put in a level of only 80% might suffice. The worst situation of course is when soloist and accompanist each attain a level of only, say, 70%; as neither can provide any orientation for the other, this would be a case of the blind leading the blind.

As you can see, the less secure you are, the better your accompanist should be. This has its limits, however: a really excellent pianist may not want to accompany a harmonica player of only average or below-average ability for very long. The ideal level of ability is – as you already know – 100% which, however, can only be achieved if your goals are defined realistically. *Gypsy Airs* versus *Humoresque* – you know what I mean, don't you?

Computer equipment or electronic systems as a substitute for an accompanist can be very helpful for a soloist to get familiar with rhythm and chords as well as to master a perfect tempo and to play in time.

4.4 Vibrato

4.4.1 General aspects

This subject is quite delicate. As I have developed a totally new type of vibrato, I find myself isolated and criticised by many people. Time will show whether these criticisms are right or wrong. This section will not be very interesting for those who do not like my vibrato, consider it inappropriate or prefer to apply the more usual common types of vibrato. Everyone else will be glad to know that my vibrato is not sorcery, but simple logic. Before discussing my vibrato let us look at what a vibrato actually is.

A good vibrato is a fluctuation of pitch, usually accompanied with synchronous fluctuations of loudness and timbre, of such extent and rate as to give a pleasing flexibility, tenderness and richness to the tone.

This definition is a quotation from a book about the vibrato, with special focus on flute players (*Jochen Gärtner, Das Vibrato unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Verhältnisse bei Flötisten, Gustav Bosse Verlag Regensburg 1974, ISBN 3 – 7649 – 2094 – 7*).

While a true vibrato requires a more or less rapid fluctuation of pitch for expressive purposes, the rapid fluctuation of intensity (loudness and sound pressure) without changing the pitch is defined as *tremolo*.

The most commonly used vibrato on the harmonica, the hand vibrato, is not really a vibrato at all, but a tremolo, which in my opinion is usually unsuitable for classical music. In lighter music such as *La Paloma* or *O sole mio* the tremolo can occasionally be used.

You can be certain that I will not make many friends with this statement (something you will notice yourself if you should ever express this opinion to others). I not only hold to it, but

would go a step further: the only ones who would be content with the old rules of tone production and vibrato are those for whom the harmonica means little or nothing. (These old rules say that the harmonica must have an even sound and the player has to use the hand vibrato). Adhering to these outdated rules will virtually guarantee that the harmonica will never emerge from its shadowy existence in the world of classical music.

For some of you this is probably quite a strong statement. I say it, not to seek acknowledgement from others (I really don't care what others think), but because I would like to help one of the world's best instruments to take the rightful place that it deserves in the orchestra of musical instruments.

At this point I would like to mention some statements by important musicians (not harmonica experts) regarding my tone and vibrato – not in order to promote myself, but to promote this great instrument:

- Your tone is similar to a violin, which is really positive...
- I am happy that you do not use the hand vibrato...
- I did not know that a harmonica can sound that expressive...

An additional advantage of my vibrato that relates to the harmonica's tone production possibilities is the following: you surely know the wonderful effect that is achieved when the hands are completely closed: the tone gets darker and softer. Unlike the hand vibrato, my vibrato can still be applied in this situation.

The hand vibrato should only be used if it is explicitly demanded (which will quite rarely be the case in classical music).

Before discussing my vibrato, the throat (larynx-produced) vibrato must be mentioned briefly. When appropriate it is really beautiful, but it suits lighter music rather than classical music. In addition, the throat vibrato has a serious disadvantage: it cannot be produced over the whole range of the instrument. While it is possible to produce in the octave above middle C, it is of limited use two octaves above middle C and, as far as I know, almost impossible to achieve outside those ranges.

Mixing different types of vibrato is something I reject altogether. (The player should not use the hand vibrato in the octave below middle C, play a throat vibrato in the octave above middle C and two octaves above middle C and finally use the hand vibrato again three octaves above middle C.) My vibrato, however, can be applied almost in the same way over the whole range of the instrument. This only requires some practice and a well-maintained harmonica. Most important, it allows the player complete control over amplitude and frequency and hence his musical expression.

4.4.2 The “Chmel Vibrato”

There have recently been some players who use my vibrato occasionally without actually knowing how it is produced. As my vibrato is quite difficult to produce with certain notes, they might think that, like the throat vibrato, my vibrato is limited to certain octaves.

In order to play my vibrato two aspects are of essential importance:

1. The player's ability to perfectly master the correct tongue blocking technique.
2. The necessity of using a very well-maintained instrument.

(Unfortunately, it is difficult to adjust a harmonica well.)

“How do you produce this kind of tone and vibrato?” is a question often posed to me. Actually I do not understand why this question comes up so often because, in fact, the theoretical basics of my vibrato are known to everybody. Vibrato means a change of the note's frequency (something which cannot be done on a piano, for example). What about on a harmonica? Have you ever heard of “bending“ the pitch? If it is possible to bend a pitch by a half tone, shouldn't it also be possible slide a quarter tone or less – and to do so continuously (in portamento)? Well, this is interesting. Do you know how to bend a note? If not, you should start to learn how to do that, because it is the basis for a controlled classical vibrato.

In my opinion vibrato playing should be applied whenever possible, i.e. at every note (unless the composer explicitly demands non vibrato). Consider vibrato as part of your personal tone, revealing your unmistakable individuality!

When listening for example to recordings by Yehudi Menuhin or David Oistrach (or better yet, watching them play), you will notice that they use vibrato even when you think it would no longer be audible. Vibrato is used as a matter of course to bestow a personal sound on even smallest note values. The book “*Das Vibrato unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Verhältnisse bei Flötisten*” (already mentioned in section 4.4.1) contains a wonderful statement which suits this topic perfectly:

Imagine ten first-rank violinists standing behind a curtain and playing without vibrato and personal means of tone production. They can hardly be distinguished. Once you let them play with their personal tone and vibrato, these violinists suddenly appear as ten totally individual artists. Most important: at this point the listener all of a sudden starts to compare their performances. What I am aiming at is: pure technique cannot be an attribute for identification, as each of these violinists has a perfect technique. As soon as the player adds his personal tone, the listener will detect differences and start to evaluate the players' qualities: you feel that one player is better than another because *for you* his tone is the more musical.

Of course, talking about personal likings in music implies that there can be opposing views on this matter. You do not necessarily like what I like and vice versa. The fact, however, that everyone has his own notion of musical expression is a wonderful thing in music. We will come back to this issue in section 5.

5. GENERAL MUSICIANSHIP

To my questions about their special problems seminar participants would often answer, “I would simply like to play beautifully.” Well, I could make it easy for myself and reply, “If you just play the piece correctly, it will sound beautiful.” But then someone might probably ask, “What does ‘playing correctly’ mean?” to which I would have to say that it means playing with proper technique and musicianship, with the foremost quality – and I am certainly not the only person who believes this – being musicianship.

Technical mistakes – of course within certain limits – are easily forgiven. Serious critics will assume that you have mastered your piece technically and will therefore ignore minor technical lapses, which can always occur. (This is because playing a difficult technical piece perfectly not only requires much good luck, but a lot more...) However, musical mistakes in performance will almost always lead to scathing reviews, since they expose a player’s musicality (or lack of it).

To make this difference clear I would like to cite the following statement by J.S. Bach – one of the greatest musicians of all times:

If a wrong note is played, a serious musician can expect a serious listener to hear the correct note instead.

What does “musically correct” mean? A piece is played correctly if the performance reflects the composer’s conception. One might then conclude that everyone would play a given piece musically in the same way. However, this is not true, because each player brings to the music his own vibrato and tone quality. And here is a critical point: the composer’s indications are usually to be understood as relative suggestions rather than absolute requirements. The score offers the interpreter quite a bit of musical leeway, naturally within certain limits. The following examples may explain this:

- What do *piano* and *forte* mean? Do they indicate in absolute terms how softly or loudly a given passage is to be played? What a composer surely wants to express is that *forte* is louder than *piano*, but by how much?
- *Allegro* according to the metronome can be 116–168. When playing *Allegro*, your feelings about the proper tempo are important (but remaining of course between 116 and 168). Tempo indications used in former times sometimes differ markedly from those used today. Therefore, if you are uncertain about musical indications in a piece (very often I also have to use a book to look up musical indications), you should buy a good recording of it. Recordings may give you a very good orientation for tempo and musical expression. However, copying these 100% is not a good idea – you should have your own musical conceptions and play accordingly.
- I doubt you would all play a funeral march in the same tempo without prior agreement. Everyone feels sorrow in his own way.
- A final and more drastic example: the way an Italian would express passion is certainly much different from the way an Icelander would express it – but both are right. The listener will decide which version he likes better.



The participants of the international course for concert harmonica at Strechau Castle, Austria – June 28, 2001

With music you can express your inner being. But don't just play the notes; make music! Your conceptions do not have to be the same as those of your friend. Nevertheless, you should always keep to music's basic laws. You cannot play Bach's *Air* as an *Allegro*, even if you should feel like doing so.

Virtuosity dies without musicianship – this statement by Yehudi Menuhin illustrates the importance of a performance's musicality. What he meant was that a musician must let his own feelings flow into the music. When making a crescendo or accelerando you should do so to express something special – not just because it is written in the score. Your feeling and expression lend the music something special. That's why the same piece of music sounds differently when played by different musicians. We like it if it is close to our feelings and we dislike it if we have a different conception of the music. In order to express your feelings in a piece of music, you must of course analyse it. What is it about? What are or what were the composer's ideas? Composers today avail themselves of a wide range of feeling and expression, compared to Bach's or Händel's times when feelings were constrained by strict rules.

Finally: Play with spirit, but even more play with your heart – the listener will be grateful.