



WHITBY FOLK WEEK 2017

Notes on Beginning to play the Maccann System Duet Concertina

For Folk Musicians and Players of Traditional Music

by Paul Davenport

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This oddly configured instrument may seem daunting at first but it's actually no more difficult than playing the guitar, an achievement which millions of people around the world have attained. Yet, it seems probable that there are currently, less than 150 people on the planet that play the Maccann system. Only around 45 to 50 of these are in the UK so its not that likely that they will ever get together in numbers to exchange notes.

The diagrams and notes that follow are my own ideas which are based on the processes in which anyone learns a musical instrument. I approached the instrument in this case as a total beginner and made progress by applying previous experience. So my approach is as follows;

First stage; playing chords for accompaniment.

Yes, that's chords not TUNES - because it gets you in a success situation faster!

A chord is two or more notes played at the same time. Basic chords have three notes which are called, tonic, third and fifth.

Playing Chords on the Maccann Duet Concertina

The chord charts that follow are unconventional in that they do not indicate what notes to play but rather what notes to choose to play in the event of needing a chord. The chord symbol given also has an addition where it states that a given note is 'optional'.

The reason for the 'optional' inclusion is because the indicated note is the 'third' in the chord triad and its position determines whether the chord is major, minor, augmented or diminished.

If the indicated note is omitted in playing a chord then the result is ambiguous. That is, it might be heard as a major or as a minor chord depending on its context and placement in the piece being played. This convention has, of recent years, become a fashion amongst melodeon players who very often tape up the thirds with masking tape in the left hand end of their instruments to obtain this very useful ambiguity.

It goes without saying of course that a chord is only deemed to be such when two or more *different* pitches are playing simultaneously. Simply playing two 'c's for example, does not constitute a chord. Similarly, the 'tonic' must *always* be played. That is, the note which gives the chord its name is mandatory otherwise the chord is not, by definition the chord of that name. A cursory study of the charts will quickly disclose a large degree of redundancy. In actual practice, a player of traditional tunes will be able to cope with only seven chords in most circumstances since the major and the minor are both implied where the third is missing.

It is important to be able to find a chord on either end of the concertina and to be able to select the most accessible buttons with which to play it. Thus the notes are marked as indicated rather than as a chord 'shape' as in the case of guitar chords. The object of this being to indicate which notes are available 'under the fingers' when a chord is needed in the tune.

G G D G

Old Johnny Walk - er's dead and gone, he's dead and gone, he's dead and gone -

G G G G

Old Johnny Walk - er's dead and gone, he nev - er died a - fore!

The Lead Sheet

Starting with songs we need to find our way around a 'lead sheet'. That's just a very basic tune, lyrics and chord arrangement which is used as an aide-memoire. A lead sheet looks like this;

For the next bit you'll need to refer to the chord and notes charts at the end of this document.

For chords, I particularly like Maccann's own patent diagram but you can make your own.

First the Tune!

So now we need to see what this sounds like on our concertina. Firstly it might be useful to make sure that the tune itself is familiar

so it will need playing. For the purpose of the exercise this should be played on the right hand end of the instrument. It is, of course a version of the well known 'Buffalo Girls' but here in a quaintly obscure Yorkshire form from the village of Flamborough.

Now the Chords

Ok, so now we have a melody, next we will need to add the left hand end. Here we play the chords as indicated above the stave and on the beat shown. So...a G major chord can be constructed anywhere on the left hand end that is comfortable. Just choose a combination of the notes G, B and D. Similarly for the D major chord we choose any combination of the notes D, F# and A.

Now, just a point worth reminding you of here...the more buttons you use on the left hand end, the faster you run out of air in the bellows. One useful trick is therefore to use only two notes for your chord as stated above. If you follow the diagrams below you'll notice that the only difference between a major and a minor chord is the note in the middle. Logically, therefore, that's the one you leave out! So now you are playing somewhat ambiguous chords which might be either major or minor as required. If you're using Maccann's chord method this means missing out the notes labelled 'J' or 'N'.

When playing the little tune above, don't linger on the left hand buttons but try to touch them in a rhythmic way that gives a bit of 'bounce' to the tune. It should feel as if you could skip around in time with the melody. You might even try to play a left hand pulse tapping the buttons as if you were tapping your foot whilst playing the melody on the other end. This is a bit like tapping your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. Tricky, but it can be learned!

Books of songs in 'lead sheet' form are available in all music shops and similarly Book/CD sets of tunes can be obtained in the same format.

Chord Substitution

Its useful to note that a Major chord can be substituted by its 'relative minor'. This is found by counting six notes from the name note of the chord you want to substitute. So, for example, a C major chord can be replaced by an A minor chord. From C we count, C=1, D=2, E=3, F=4, G=5, A=6 s the relative minor of C major is A minor. You can do this with all of the major chordal scales. The substitiuon gives a really rich feel to the music if used with care. You can also substitute using other chords which will work provided that the chord contains the relevant notes.

All that Jazz?

Players may ask about 6th, 7th chords and diminished chords. These are, of course, very common in modern music and those

traditions which have descended from African-American traditions. However, the heading above indicates that this document is for those people who play traditional music in the main British traditions. Why? Because that's what I know about. For other musics you need to move on from here.

Next stage? Playing trickier stuff

If you're comfortable with two hands doing different but related things at the same time then you could experiment with playing

Right Hand

Example 2 - When the Saints go Marching In

Left Hand

The image shows a musical score for two staves, labeled 'Right Hand' and 'Left Hand'. Both staves are in the key of D major (one sharp) and common time. The right hand part consists of a sequence of notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, followed by a repeat sign and then a sequence of notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5. The left hand part starts with a whole rest, followed by a sequence of notes: D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, followed by a repeat sign and then a sequence of notes: D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4. This illustrates a 'question and answer' pattern where the right hand plays a phrase and the left hand plays a corresponding phrase.

one against the other. This can involve two or three tactics all of which are simply designed to make the music sound more complex/interesting. The example below involves two ideas. The first is a 'question and answer' type of division of labour and the second involves both hands playing different things at the same time. This is only an example and contains just a couple of phrases from a well known tune.

It's not intended that this should be a series of arrangements for you to play. Most Maccann players are self-taught and all have their own idiosyncratic approach to the instrument. If you're really keen to do so, you can work out the rest of the tune above for yourself.

Moving the Left Hand

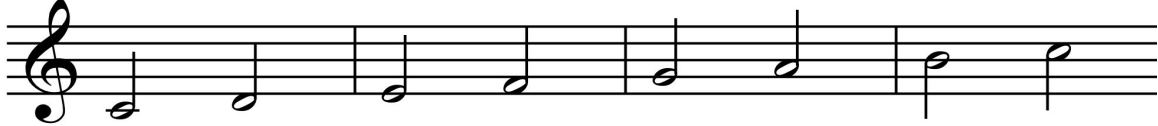
What I have noticed is that my left hand is slower than my right. Someone suggested playing the same notes in both hands at the same time as an exercise to get the left hand up to speed. I practice using 'Just as the Tide was A-Flowing' and that seemed to work quite well. I might try it with some other tunes when I have time. Being able to do this at speed has obvious advantages in terms of volume just as being able to play the same chords in both hands allows you a more varied approach to accompaniment.

More about Chords and Scales


What a lot of folkies don't seem to know is that chords are related to the notes in the scale. I was playing this afternoon and

realised that its really useful to be able to fit the three main chords to the notes in the scale. The 'three chord trick', as it's called is derived from the importance of the chords of the Tonic (start of the scale), the dominant (chord of the fifth note of the scale) and the subdominant (chord of the fourth note of the scale). So, its a handy thing to play the scale in one hand whilst playing the three chords in the other. Then, when you've done that, do it with the chords in the other hand and the scale switched to the other end of the instrument. This works because each chord contains the note you're playing it against. When you get bored you can once again substitute chords making sure that the chord has the note you're playing it with.


C G C F G F G C

Key C  Chords C F G


D A D G A G A D

Key D  Chords D A G

F C F B \flat C B \flat C F

Key F  Chords F C Bb

G D G C D C D G

Key G  Chords G D C

Now there's obviously some link here between the song you're singing or the melody you're playing and the chords. Its simple enough, the chord fits with the note you're playing. The trick is not to shove in a chord for each note but settle for placing the chord on the first or second beat of the bar (in 2/2, 2/4 or 4/4) just to support the melody. Just look at the note on the beat and choose the appropriate chord. For additional help in figuring this out go to the chart in Appendix 3.

The musical theory behind this is interesting. The 'three-chord-trick' uses the chords of the first, fourth and fifth degrees of the scale. Once you know this, it's easy to prepare a chart like the one above by using the following progression.

Chord	1	5	1	4	5	4	5	1
Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1

Now the great mystery of the Maccann system is the actual sequence of button presses. To a lot of people this is a complete mystery and at best totally illogical. Actually it's very simple if you can get your head around the notion of something called 'motor-logic' or really economic patterns of movement.

So, the system plays a scale as follows;

Each finger has its own horizontal row of buttons. These are the four central rows. Place the fingers gently on these with the fingers resting next to each other as if about to close the hand.

The fingers of the right hand will, for convenience, be numbered from the index finger to the little finger as , 1, 2, 3 and 4. BUT...for convenience again, the left hand will be numbered with the LITTLE FINGER as number one and the ring finger will therefore be number four. Okay?

So, a C major scale is played as follows;

1, 3, 2, 4 move one button away then...1, 2, 4 then one button further away and play ...1 !

You should be able to adapt this to play in other keys but...you will need to access a button or two on the outside row in order to do so. It's really not hard...it just pretends to be!

Chords on 58 key MacCann system Concertina

(Wheatstone configuration)

Building Basic Chords

A A C# E
 Am A C E

B B D# F#
 Bm B D F

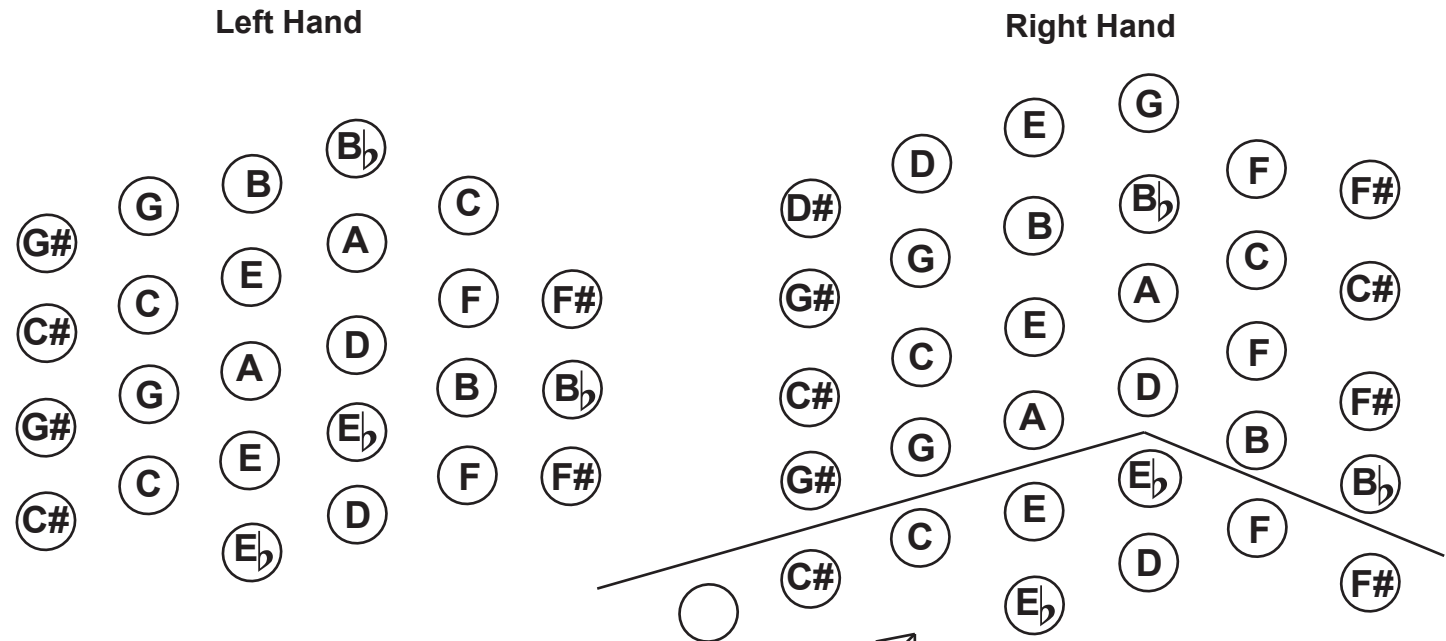
C C E G
 Cm C Eb G

D D F# A
 Dm D F A

E E G# B
 Em E G B

F F A C
 Fm F G# C

G G B D
 Gm G Bb D



The basic 46 key Maccann system instrument lacks these buttons. This means that the C octave has to be accessed by the left hand.

CHORD TYPE	SYMBOL	Notes used
Major	“”,Maj	1. 3. 5
Minor	min, m	1. \flat 3. 5
Seventh	7	1. 3. 5. \flat 7
Major seventh	Maj 7	1. 3. 5. 7
Minor seventh	min 7, m7	1. \flat 3. 5. \flat 7
Minor Major seventh	min maj7	1. \flat 3. 5. 7
Suspended 4th	sus 4, sus	1. 4. 5
Seventh suspended 4th	7sus4	1. 4. 5. \flat 7
Sixth	6	1. 3. 5. 6
Minor sixth	min 6, m6	1. \flat 3. 5. 6
Ninth	9	1. 3. 5. \flat 7. 9
Added ninth	add 9	1. 3. 5. 9
Minor 9th	min 9	1. \flat 3. 5. \flat 7. 9
Augmented	aug, +	1. 3. \sharp 5
Augmented seventh	aug 7 (7+5)	1. 3. \sharp 5. \flat 7
Diminished	dim	1. \flat 3. \flat 5
Diminished seventh	dim 7, $^{\circ}$	1. \flat 3. \flat 5. $\flat\flat$ 7
Half diminished seventh	$\frac{1}{2}$ dim 7, \emptyset 7	1. \flat 3. \flat 5. \flat 7
Eleventh	11	1. 3. 5. \flat 7. 9. 11
Minor eleventh	min 11, m11	1. \flat 3. 5. \flat 7. 9. 11
Thirteenth	13	1. 3. 5. \flat 7. 9. 11. 13
Minor thirteenth	min 13	1. \flat 3. 5. \flat 7. 9. 11. 13
Sixth added ninth	6 add 9	1. 3. 5. 6. 9
Minor sixth added ninth	min 6 add 9	1. \flat 3. 5. 6. 9

Notes in the major scales

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	A
B	C#	D#	E	F#	G#	A#	B
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	E
F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G
Ab	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	G	Ab
Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	Bb
C#	D#	F	F#	G#	A#	C	C#
Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	Db
Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	Eb
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	F	F#
Gb	Ab	Bb	B	Db	Eb	F	Gb

Major scales see chart on Appendix 2. Use this chart to create chords.

Examples

To construct major chord use 1 3 5

To construct relative minor 1 b3 5

Seventh 1 3 5 + 7 (flattened)

Maccann's Chording System

Interestingly, Maccann himself had a patent system for explaining chords which works very well. What you have to remember, however, is that the chart he supplied was only for the basic 46 key instrument. For what its worth here is his chart somewhat abbreviated.

Key:

M J R = MaJoR

M N R = relative MiNoR

M J R S = Major + Flattened 7th

C/Am

G/Em

F/Dm

D/Bm

Bb/Gm

Eb/Cm

A/F#m

E/C#m

Ab/Fm

B/G#m

Db/Bbm

F#/D#m