

The Three Row Diatonic Melodeon A Comprehensive Guide

Part 3 – In General

The melodeon is normally referred to by players as a "box". As this is quicker to say and much less of a mouthful, I will be using this term a lot.

This guide is based on a right-handed instrument – left-handed boxes are possible but fairly rare.

This instrument has a few variations. The one I am going to be talking about is the Hohner Compadre which is pretty much the same as the Hohner Corona which has been around for years. If you have another make or model, don't worry as most of what I will say will apply to your box. Some boxes have more lower notes and less higher like the Castagnari Benny.

Go to www.melodeon.net home page to see a chart for this type of instrument and lots of others.

This instrument is great for playing tunes – usually on the right hand keyboard whilst accompanying yourself with the basses (notes and chords) on the left hand. There is nothing to stop you singing along with your tunes, singing to your left hand accompaniment only or just playing the right-hand tune without playing any basses at all. Basically, it can give you a wonderfully complete sound when the two hands are working in conjunction – a one-man or one-woman band if you like. This type of box is widely used in Central America and surrounding countries to play Tex-Mex music. This has a very flamboyant style with lots of right hand chords. I personally don't play in this style.

The three-row melodeon is great for playing folk music but of course you can play any type of music you want. Just bear in mind that this

instrument is not really fully chromatic, in other words, it doesn't have every note over a wide range like a piano so you may not be able to find all the notes you need. It will almost certainly be fine for most folk tunes you want to play. Although the box can be played in three basic keys i.e. the keys of the three rows, other keys are also possible.

This instrument is the same as a standard two-row melodeon but with an extra row plus extra bass notes and chords. For example – an ADG box is the same as a DG with an extra, lower A row. The GCF box is the same as the CF with an extra, lower G row etc.

The ADG is the highest pitched three-row box to my knowledge and the EAD the lowest. ADG and CFG boxes are readily available in the UK. You might have to import one from the US if you want one in another key. If you learn a tune on an ADG box you can easily play the same tune on a GCF or other three-row as all these instruments are relatively the same. i.e. in the case of the GCF, it's exactly one tone below the ADG (treble and bass). An EAD box has the A and D rows of the ADG instrument as its middle and inside rows and a low E row on the outside.

I also have a Roland FR-18 which is an electronic three row melodeon which you can alter to play in *any* key you like!. This is a strange instrument with 18 basses. Suffice to say, it's great for experimentation with different sounds and keys but no substitute for the real thing. Being electronic you have all the palaver of mains supplies or batteries so, in all honesty, I would strongly suggest this as a useful addition to your instruments - not something that will replace them.

In the case of the ADG, the extra bass buttons (12 as opposed to 8) provide an alternative A bass note and A major chord – on the push of the bellows, an E bass note and E major chord, B bass note and B minor chord and F# bass note and F# major chord.

Some bigger 3-row boxes like the Castagnari Handry and the Saltarelle Ocean, have 18 bass buttons! Both are fairly heavy.

The three-row box is very well suited to playing a long run of notes whilst “steering” the bellows in one direction. Unlike the two-row or one-row melodeon where more frequent changes in bellows direction are required. Of course that style can be used on this instrument as well if required.

Pros and cons of the three row:-

So why would you choose the 3-row box? Well, although you can think of it as three one-row melodeons all in one box, that would be missing out on its full potential. Tunes can, of course, be played up and down the rows but the real fun is to be had when you go *across* the rows as well.

Some melodeon players prefer the more dynamic quick-fire pushing and pulling style more associated with the one and two row boxes. They tend not to like the smoother, more legato feel of playing cross-row on this instrument. Although, of course, it's perfectly possible to play in the aforementioned way on this box.

From a physical point of view, I definitely find playing cross-row with more consecutive notes in one bellows direction much less stressful on my body but then again, I am over 60!!

Obviously, with that extra row comes extra weight – more internal parts etc. however the Hohner Compadre is a particularly lightweight instrument so, as such, shouldn't cause you any problems.

So, why the Compadre?

At the time of writing this guide, the Hohner Compadre is a reasonably good quality instrument, assembled in China for around £450 - £500 - available in the UK. There are usually quite a lot of second hand examples to be had - I bought mine for £210 in 2012. Ironically although it's the cheapest of all my melodeons, it's the one I play the most. Bear in mind that a top quality version of this type of instrument like a Castagnari Benny could cost you around £3,500 new. So the Compadre is an excellent starter instrument. There are also lots of second hand Hohner Coronas - these too are fine and are pretty much the same only better quality. New, these will cost you far more. In the US, the Hohner Panther which is of similar quality, is readily available in all keys and is very cheap! The Hohner El Rey Vallenato is similar to the Compadre but has three reeds per note.

Bear in mind that if your box needs tuning or fettling (tweaking and/or repairing) you might need to add £200 or more to the price you pay. My advice is to go to a reputable dealer. In this way, the price you pay will be for a ready-to-play instrument with no nasty surprises. Even new boxes can have problems, especially if you buy it from a mail order "box-shifter" as opposed to a proper music store.

Now go to Part 4:-

The Three Row Diatonic Melodeon
- How Does It Work?