

COMPOSING TUNES FOR DIATONIC ACCORDION

By Kay Hickman

There are many reasons for one to compose his/her own tunes. Somebody has composed every tune you play. It's enjoyable to learn someone else's tunes, but it's even more enjoyable and more satisfying to create your own tunes. It's not that difficult to do if you take it all one step at a time. In order to compose, it does make it easier if you have some skill with the accordion and if you don't know what note each button is, it's good to have an idea of how the keyboard is set up.

It's important to listen to a lot of tunes from different countries and get a handle on what is the same in the tunes. For instance, Scandinavian tunes. Most of the time it is very easy to tell, just by listening, if a tune is from one of the Scandinavian countries. Most of them have a specific Scandinavian flavor. One row Quebec tunes also have their own flavor. Breton tunes have a certain sound also. And so do Basque tunes. If you want to compose a Basque tune, then listen to hours of Basque music and notice what is the same about a lot of the tunes. Or French music - listen to a lot of different composers and musicians and tunes.

Some tunes could be composed as a tribute to someone. When doing this, think about the person you want to pay tribute to. What type of person is this - what is the personality? What type of tune would this person like to have connected to them? I wrote a tune for a friend in France, and I knew ahead of time that it couldn't be a slow pretty waltz, as he hated them. So I composed a fast polka with a very pretty sound that I thought he might like to play also. I composed a tune for my accordion maker, and I think of him as a happy positive thinking man - so the tune had to sound that way. When I composed a tune for his lady friend, I had sad thoughts because she is ill and not able to enjoy life as she should be able to do, and so I composed a minor sad sounding waltz for her.

A lot of composing comes from just "messing around" with the accordion - playing around with no real tune in mind - just hitting notes. All of a sudden there is a riff - a measure or two that sounds good. That's one way to get started. Take some paper and write down the riff you just played, so that you won't forget it. You don't have to write a tune right then. You can just write down a riff whenever one comes. Keep a notebook for writing music. Preferably one that will lay open easily and always start a tune on the left side so that if it becomes a long tune, you've got two pages to write on and you won't have to turn a page. I have several notebooks in different places in the house for when an idea comes. I used to just remember all my tunes and play them from memory. I would quickly record them so that I would not forget them. I have found that ones I did not record quickly and did not play enough, have already been forgotten and lost forever. To keep that from happening, write them down. Keep a pencil handy - not a pen. There might be a lot of erasing.

I was ill with phlebitis for 3 weeks last June, and stuck in a chair with my leg up. There was nothing wrong with my hands and my brain though, so it was a good time to compose. I had peace and quiet and managed to write and record 25 tunes. It was a conscious effort to compose. Instead of noodling around with the accordion, I decided I would compose at least a tune a day. I stopped listening to any other music so that I could concentrate on my own music.

The flow of the tune is very important. You must also make the decision as to how many parts the tune will have and in what order the parts will be played. Diatonic accordion tunes tend to be shorter than other tunes and the order in which the parts flow can make a difference in the tune itself. For instance, a tune with 3 parts could be played as ABCABC or AABBC or ABBCACB - or whatever way works best.

I have found that it takes some thought when writing tunes. If the bellows is all the way out and can go no further easily - then I have to come up with something that takes my bellows in. In writing different parts, I like to make each part end a certain way and begin a certain way so that they can be interchanged and flow easily.

If basses are also to be used in the tune, then they must be added in immediately when composing the tune. It is not as important if the basses are set up unisonorously. If they are regular diatonic basses, then they absolutely must be added in when first starting - to get the treble to work correctly with the basses. This is probably the most difficult part of composing a tune for a diatonic accordion. You must figure out the basses quickly, because depending on what the bass note needs to be - you may have to find the same note on the treble side going in instead of out or vice versa.

Naming a tune that has no words is much more easy than putting basses to the treble side. If you are composing a tune in honor of someone, then you can name it Tribute for Emily or Emily's Waltz. If you compose a tune and have no idea what to name it, just think about it for a bit, and something will pop into your head.

There are several different ways to write tunes for diatonic accordion in tablature. Choose the system that works best for you, or make up your own system. You can use tablature paper or just use notebook paper. I normally just use a notebook. I use three lines to write tablature. On the left side of the paper I write Push on the first line, Pull on the second line, and Bass on the third line. This is how I do it, but you write it out the way that works best for you.

Record your tunes with a home recording device (minidisc recorder or whatever you use) so that the feel to the music is there, since it doesn't show up in tablature. You can also use the software program "tabledit" or another program, to put your tunes into tablature so that it can be easily shared with other folks.

Have fun with composing. Copywrite your tunes. Share your music with everyone - that's how we get more tunes!