



Chromatic for Diatonic Players, Part 1

By Winslow Yerxa, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

Chromatic – Why?

Why play the chromatic harmonica? Just listen to Stevie Wonder or Larry Adler on chromatic – plenty of grease and grit, tons of soul – and lots of bending. It's a powerful sound, and expressive in a way that's different from diatonic. Chromatic can be a wonderful addition to your bag of tricks.

However, the differences between chromatic and diatonic can be a little daunting. This article is the first in a series designed to help you get friendly with the beast, with hints on getting it tamed and singing your song.

Choosing an Instrument

Chromatics are most often found in the 12-hole size, which has the same three-octave range as a 10-hole diatonic, and the 16-hole size, which has an extra fourth octave on the bottom end. 12-hole chromatics come in multiple keys. C is the highest, with Middle C as its lowest note. Other keys progress downward in pitch through Bb, A, G, F, E, Eb, D, and tenor C.

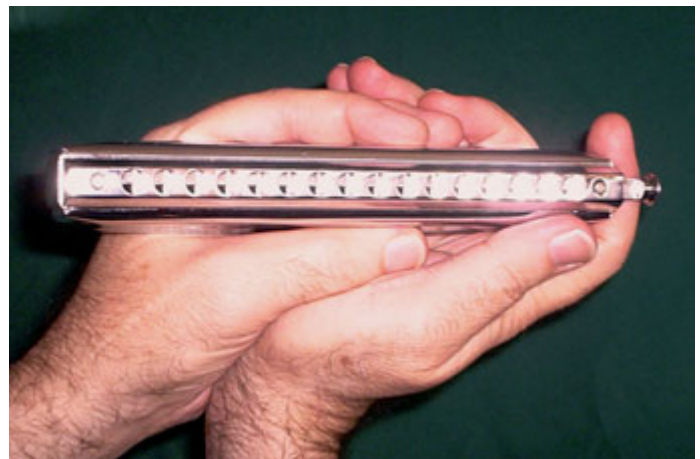
I recommend you start with a C instrument. You can branch out to other keys later, as needed. The question is, should you get a four-octave, 16-hole monster (often called a "64" because it has 64 reeds) or a more compact 12-hole instrument?

For third-position blues, the four-octave instrument will give you those low, dark chords you're going to want. The three-octave tenor C is more compact and still gives you the same bottom end. If you're going to venture into melody playing and explore playing in various keys, a 12-hole instrument will be far more manageable – it's just too easy to get hopelessly lost in the vastness of a 64.

Any of the Hering, Hohner, or Suzuki 64s are good choices for a 16-hole instrument. For a 12-hole that is airtight and well built, I'd recommend either a Hering 5148 for economy, or a Hohner CX-12 if you have more money to spend and want higher performance.

Holding the Instrument

Chromatics are much bigger than diatonics. For many folks, they're too large to be fully cupped in the hands. In addition to cupping, you need to operate the slide button with the forefinger of your right hand. The classic sandwich grip that works well on small instruments can be used with one modification: let the left end of the instrument extend out past the joint of thumb and forefinger and grab the instrument toward the middle. This will allow you to cup your hands together for tone shaping and microphone cupping while letting your right forefinger reach the slide button.



Breath Attack

In a standard diatonic, your breath flows through both the blow reed and the draw reed. Usually only one of them will sound while the other acts as a sort of shock absorber if you attack or breathe too hard. This makes the diatonic very forgiving of hard attacks and excess breath pressure.

In a chromatic, each reed is isolated and receives all the breath. This improves airtightness, helps to concentrate tone, and allows every note to be bent. But it also makes each reed sensitive to excess force and pressure. To start out, breathe naturally and gently until you get a sense of how the reeds respond.

A simple exercise is to warm your hand with your breath. Hold the back of your hand up to your mouth and breathe on it so you feel warmth but no wind. To make the most of this, open your throat as if to yawn, letting your tongue lie relaxed on the floor of your mouth. Let your lips relax and feel your mouth open like a huge cavern. Now, breathe out gently so that you can feel the warmth of your breath on your hand without feeling any cooling force of wind.

Now, use that same gentle, warming breath to play any blow note in the middle range of the chromatic. If the note won't sound, add a slight amount of airflow until it sounds.

Now, breathe out for a slow count of 2 and then in for a count of 2. Keep alternating blow and draw notes with this gentle breath. Then try to make it louder but without any increase in airflow.

After playing the two notes for a while, try starting each breath with a gentle cough – as gentle as you can, like you're trying to clear your throat silently without waking the sleeping person next to you. The cough should give a slight emphasis to the start of the note.

Work on playing in this gentle fashion until you can float full-sounding notes out of the instrument on the warmth of your breath. Once you develop this essential approach, you can increase the level of airflow as needed. Over time you can develop a wide range of attacks and sounds, from very gently to extremely aggressive.

Note Layout

The middle octaves of the diatonic and the chromatic have identical note layouts:

<i>Diatonic:</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Blow	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C		
Draw	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A		
<i>Chromatic:</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Blow	C	E	G	C	C	E	G	C	C	E	G	C
Draw	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	B

Where they differ is that the chromatic uses the same layout for all three octaves, while on the diatonic each octave is different. On chromatic there are no missing notes, and all melodies, licks, riffs, and chords play exactly the same way in all three octaves. You can learn a tune or a lick in the middle octave and play it an octave higher or lower in an identical fashion.

Exercises and Tunes

Within an Octave

Let's start with the simple major scale, played up and down. First try it in the middle octave:

Ex. 1

The same motion pattern can be used in the top octave. If the notes squeak, try to play gently and with an open, cavernous mouth and throat. Let the notes be persuaded to float out on your breath.

Ex. 2

Again, the same motion can be used to play the scale in the bottom octave. If holes 2 or 3 draw seem to sound foggy and flat, again, make sure your mouth cavity and throat are wide open.

Ex. 3

Let's try some simple tunes that can be played in all three octaves, starting with "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Ex. 4

6 6 5 5 5 6 7 7 7 6

6 6 6 7 6 5 5 5

Now, try finding it in the other two octaves. As with the major scale, once you find your starting note (Blow 9 and Blow 1), the same motion pattern can be used in all octaves.

Here's "Joy to the World." The first note is found in both Hole 8 and Hole 9. Make sure you start on Hole 8. Much of the tune is just playing down the scale and back up again in a sprightly rhythm. A few times you have to leap several holes. If you can't find your target note easily, keep blowing and slide up or down until you hear yourself arriving at the note you need.

Ex. 5

8 8 7 7 6 6 5 5 7

7 7 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 7 7

7 6 6 8 8 8 7 7 7 6 6 6

6 6 6 6 6 7 6 6 5 5 5 5 6 6 6 5 6 5

5 8 7 7 6 6 6 6 5 5

Now, try to figure out the tune yourself in the top and bottom octaves. The action sequence is the same – you just have start in the right place (Blow 4 or Blow 12).

Try finding other simple tunes in the middle octave, then in the top and bottom octaves. Suggestions might include “Frère Jacques,” “Three Blind Mice,” “No Place Like Home,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” and “O Susanna.” All these tunes fit within the octave from C to C.

Moving from Octave to Octave – the Double C’s

Look at the tuning layout for the chromatic and you’ll notice an oddity – two blow C’s side by side, in Holes 4 and 5 and again in Hole 8 and 9. One C ends an octave, and the other begins the next octave – this keeps the note layout consistent in all octaves, but it can be confusing. When you play a blow C, which one is it – the one paired with Draw B or the one with Draw D? The one with blow G to the left or another blow C? Does it have a Blow E to the right or another C?

When we cross the boundaries between octaves, we have to deal with the double C’s and the challenges they present. The tunes in the previous section avoided this challenge, but now it’s time to tackle it.

Here are some simple, well-known tunes that will show you ways to navigate across the double C’s. Usually the C chosen is the one that makes the smoothest connection between the notes that precede and follow it.

Ex. 6 - Hot Cross Buns

Hot Cross Buns

4 3 4 4 3 4 5 5 6 6

7 6 6 5 4 3 4

Ex. 7 - Aura Lee

Aura Lee

3 4 4 4 5 3 5 5 4 3 4 5

3 4 4 4 5 3 5 5 4 3 4 5

6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 5 6

6 6 6 6 5 3 5 5 4 6 5 5

Ex. 8 - Down in the Valley

3 4 5 6 5 6 5 5 5

3 4 5 6 5 4 5 5 5

Ex. 9 - Good Night Ladies

6 5 3 4 6 5 5 5

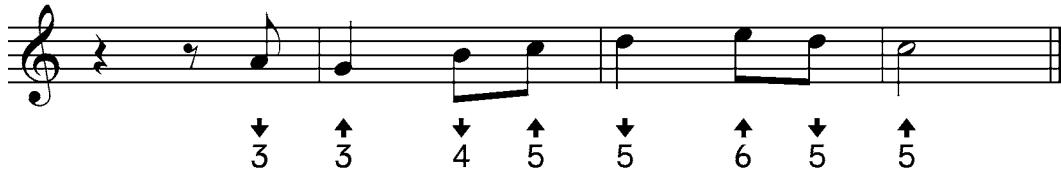
6 5 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 5

Ex. 10 - Red River Valley

3 4 6 6 6 6 5 6 5 5

3 4 6 5 6 7 6 6 5

7 6 6 6 5 5 5 6 7 6



Can you make choices for which C to play that differ from the written ones? What are the advantages?

While you work on these tunes, concentrate on tone. Try to get a full, warm tone with minimal breath pressure. Experiment with using your cupped hands to shape and amplify the tone. Next time we'll start putting the slide button to work.

Notation Key

Please visit the www.harmonicassessions.com website for a notation key.