

# Bandoneon Notation

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translation of the original by Sheldon Sper

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The following examples show some characteristic sounds and techniques of the bandoneon and are meant to serve as a help to those composers and arrangers who desire to write for this versatile instrument, which, unfortunately, has little original literature, perhaps because of the little knowledge that exists concerning its immense musical richness.

## Example 1

The presentation of the theme in a rhythmic figuration, generally in sixteenth notes, which appears in the final section of many instrumental tangos is called *variación*. The present example is a fragment of the *variación* of the tango RESPONSO by Aníbal Troilo (figure 1).

In the example one can hear the timbre of the right keyboard of the bandoneon almost in its entire register since the *variación* reaches to the upper limit of



Figure 1: A fragment of the *variación* of RESPONSO by Aníbal Troilo

the right hand opening and a fourth above the lowest limit.

The recording of this example was made incorporating an effect of *reverb*, because the *dry* sound, especially in the very high tones does not come off as natural.

## Example 2



Figure 2: “Bandoneón”, from the SUITE TROILEANA by Astor Piazzolla

The SUITE TROILEANA of Astor Piazzolla (figure 2) begins with a free *cadenza* (written without bar lines in the original) for left hand alone.

Besides the particular sound characteristic of the left keyboard of the bandoneon, in this example one can appreciate two interesting properties of the instrument: on one hand the capacity to produce chords consisting of widely separated notes. The last chord, for example, is composed of three notes in the upper limit of the high register sounding simultaneously with a note almost in the lower limit of the left hand. On the other hand, one can also note the *vibrato* effect which is achieved by vibrating the bellows of the instrument. (acoustic example)

## Example 3

A fragment of an invention for three voices of J. S. Bach has been used for this example (figure 3). The goal is to demonstrate the possibility that the bandoneon has of using distinct timbres and types of key strokes (*touches*) simultaneously. To this end the example is divided in five partes and the score is written on three staves, each one corresponding to a voice. (acoustic example)

1. In the first part one hears the left hand in the middle and low registers corresponding to the keyboard. The touch is *detached*, a key stroke between *legato* and *non legato*. The sound is brilliant and a bit metallic. It corresponds to the first staff of the score.

2. In the second part one hears the left hand in its medium high register, with a very velvety sound, and the touch is (note that the bandoneon, like an organ or an accordion, can unite continuous sounds, something that a piano for example, cannot do.) It corresponds to the second staff of the score.
3. The third part corresponds to the third voice of the score. This part placed in the medium low register of the left hand keyboard with a *non legato* touch similar to the one used by bowed instruments. The sonority is similar to that of a cello playing in *basso continuo*
4. Two low voices playing simultaneously by the left hand are shown in the fourth part. To be able to maintain the upper voice *legato* one should take advantage, at various places, of changing the finger already pressed on a key, in accordance with the indications in the score, in order to free up fingers destined for the other voice. This resource (technique) is also used very frequently in playing the organ. Even if the recording is made in this manner to exemplify the aforesaid, in the score is added another fingering possibility, beginning with the bellows closing instead of opening, which makes the execution notably easier. One of the big advantages which bisonoric bandoneons have (with different chord voicings depending on whether one is closing or opening the bellows) is the possibility of choosing the fingerings most comfortable to the player.
5. Finally, in the fifth part one plays the three voices simultaneously.

Ej.3 J.S.Bach Invención a tres voces

The image displays two musical systems for a fragment of J.S. Bach's 'Invención a tres voces'. Each system consists of three staves: a treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, and a lower bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

The first system is labeled with a boxed 'A' in the first measure. It features a treble staff with a melodic line and two bass staves with accompaniment. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. The first measure of the bass staves shows fingerings: Treble: 2 --- 3 -- 2; Bass: 4 5 2 4. Subsequent measures show various fingering patterns such as 3, 4-3, 2, 3, 4 5 2 4, 4 2 5 4, 4 5 4 4, and 3 4 4 5.

The second system is labeled with a boxed 'C' in the first measure. It follows a similar structure. Fingerings include 4, 3--2, 4, 4 5 2 5, 5 3 2 5, 5 2 3 2, and 5 2 3 2. The system concludes with the word 'etc.' in the treble staff.

The third system is titled 'Con otra digitación' (With another fingering) and is labeled with boxed 'C' and 'A' in the first and second measures, respectively. It shows an alternative fingering for the same fragment. Fingerings include 5, 2, 3, 3 4 2 4, 4 3 4 5, 3 4 5 4, and 3 4 5 4. The system also concludes with 'etc.' in the treble staff.

Figure 3: Fragment of a three part invention of J. S. Bach

## Example 4

This example (figure 4) is a fragment of an excellent arrangement for unaccompanied bandoneon made by Rodolfo Medeiros on the tango OJOS NEGROS by Vicente Greco.

The example is divided in three parts. (acoustic example)

1. In the first voice one hears the left hand, which begins in the low register of the keyboard, with a *legato* touch. In bars 5,6, and 7 a rhythmic base is generated from the point where the wide chords are pushed from the end of the previous bar. The *arrastre* or 'push' is a bandoneonistic device used frequently in tango which consists of attacking the chords approximately an eighth note before the beginning of the measure, accenting the chords by means of the bellows in the beginning beat of the measure and finishing the rhythm with a softer repetition on the second eighth note of the first beat. In the way, a syncopated rhythm is produced, very characteristic of the tango, which generally is concluded with a quarter note on the third beat.

In bars 9, 10, and 11 are shown open (widely distributed) chords but with a *legato* touch, which contour a sustained harmony very full, despite being comprised of only three notes.

In bars 13, 14 and 15 a percussive effect is produced using harmonic intervals of seconds alternating in syncopation between the medium and low registers of the left hand.

2. The second part of the example shows the expressive possibilities of the right hand by means of the utilization of different 'touches'. One uses different gradations of air on *legato* notes in order to give expression to the phrase (a possibility also in that vocal music or string instruments also exhibits) and different types of accents, *staccatos*, two note slurs, and ornamental appoggiaturas.
3. The third part of the example is a combination of both hands.

**Note:** As you would be able to appreciate in the examples of tango, the notation does not correspond exactly with the execution. This occurs because one of the key elements in the interpretation of tango is what is called *phrasing*, which is a particular way of speaking the melodies, perhaps linked possibly to the inflections of daily speech. It is a very wide theme which merits a separate detailed study.

The musical score is presented in four systems, each containing four measures. The notation includes a treble clef and a bass clef, with a 4/4 time signature. The key signature consists of three flats. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and chords. Chord symbols are indicated above the first, second, and fourth measures of the first system, and above the third and fourth measures of the third system. Measure numbers 1 through 16 are printed below the staves.

Figure 4: Fragment of OJOS NEGROS by Vicente Greco in an arrangement by Rodolfo Mederos

## Example 5

The first impression that the keyboards of the bandoneon create is that of *disorder*. With other instruments the notes are arranged in an evidently logical sense (for example, the sequence of white and black keys on the piano is absolutely transparent). With the bandoneon this order is mysterious. The notes seem not to be where one would expect them to be. To top it all off, in bisonoric bandoneons, a single key can produce different notes depending upon whether on is opening or closing the bellows. Nor is there an evident logic in this, since the sound can vary by a tone, a semitone, a fifth or not vary at all, depending on the key in question. To complete the travails of the aspiring bandoneonist, the keyboards stay out of the view of the player, (something that has caused severe neck pains to more than one person in trying to observe the fingers on the keyboard). Even if the keyboards could be seen easily, one would only see a succession of rows of keys monotonously the same, with the sole difference of some numbers - also mysterious - near the buttons, numbers worn away by time in the majority of instruments actually in use.

Such complexity- aside from discouraging a number of students - has given rise to opinions of all kinds. It is quite common to hear, (even from the lips of outstanding bandoneonists !) that the arrangement of the keyboard of the bandoneon is the work of *some crazy*. Nothing is further from the truth. The keys of the bandoneon allow all the notes to be within the reach of the hand of the instrumentalist, a fact that makes it possible to play in all of the major or minor keys more or less with the same degree of difficulty. Actually, except for the question of familiarity, playing a C major scale presents the same degree of difficulty as executing a scale in D $\flat$  major. And almost just as surely anything that can not be done with the 'opening' keyboard can be done with the 'closing' one.

This *proximity* of the notes permits, aside from the distribution of very open chords that we have already studied, the possibility of playing melodies with very widely spread intervals at a good speed, something that would be impossible on other instruments. As proof of this, try playing the third measure of (example 5) on the piano. Can it be done?

Certainly taking up the bandoneon initially is not simple. Instruments like piano or guitar allow a more rapid initial gratification. But we should consider that, with the objective of constructing an instrument that could be played in all keys, that would have 'touches' like a guitar, that could join sounds continuously like an organ, that would have a range (register) equal to that of a harpsichord, would have the possibility of varying intensities of sustained sounds like a violin, that would have different distinct 'attacks' like brass instruments and that

would have a sonorous volume similar to that of a piano - among other things - and above all that would be portable and easily transportable, what the designers and builders of the bandoneon have accomplished is almost miraculous and amply justifies the effort which the study of the instrument entails.

Example 5 is a fragment of the tango EL MARNE, by Eduardo Arolas [sound excerpt](#)

*(... theses tangos of Arolas and of Greco that I have seen danced on the sidewalk said Borges in his poem El Tango), arranged as a bandoneon solo by Leopoldo Federico and Felix Lipesker. In my opinion it is one of the best solos for bandoneon that has ever been written. The resources of the bandoneon are taken advantage of to the maximum, above all in the bandoneon's use as a tango instrument. The sound quality is *attacked*, an effect which is only possible using the opening bellows, which takes advantage of the weight of the instrument for producing accents and syncopes characteristic of the style. For the same reason, it is necessary to create some *breaths* (closing the bellows rapidly by means of the escape valve in order to return to the bellows-opening attack) like the one you hear clearly in measure 7, *breaths* that are, without exaggeration, part of the style.*

According to the publishing house Julio Korn, the original is written in 4/8 time. I thought that writing it in 4/4 would make more easily readable without changing its interpretation.



Ej. 5 "El Marne" de Eduardo Arolas  
 1 Arreglo para bandoneón solo de Federico-Lipesker

Figure 5: Excerpt of the tango EL MARNE by Eduardo Arolas, arranged for bandoneón solo by Federico-Lipesker

## Suggestions

This page has been created due to questions presented by composers willing to write for the bandoneon. Prof. Ricardo Fiorio has expressed his disposition to continue this collection of examples as those interested express their doubts. Therefore it is required to collaborate each one by expressing the questions directly to [Prof. Ricardo Fiorio](#) by e-mail.

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