

METHOD
FOR
CHROMATIC HARMONICA

For all skill levels

by Max De Aloe

New Expanded Edition!
100 extra pages with transcriptions
of solos by Toots Thielemans

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*For my sons Federico and Pietro
and for all harmonica students*

Translation from Italian by
Mary Riccardi

**Audio available for free
download at SherMusic.com**

Recorded Dec. 2011 and Dec. 2020

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In addition to using the 57 backing tracks presented in this method book, you can find some exercises performed by Max De Aloe on his YouTube channel, ChromaticHarmonica

Go to: <https://www.youtube.com/c/ChromaticHarmonica1>

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Max De Aloe is one of the most active jazz harmonicists on the European scene. His works number fifteen albums as a leader and more than forty as a sideman, as well as solo shows, soundtracks for theater performances and documentary films, and creative collaborations with poets, writers and directors.

He has worked with Adam Nussbaum, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Paul Wertico, John Helliwell (Supertramp), Mike Melillo, Bill Carrothers, Eliot Zigmund, Don Friedman, Hendrik Meurkens, Paolo Fresu, Garrison Fewell, Enrico Rava, Franco Cerri, Enrico Pieranunzi, Dado Moroni and countless others. He has participated in various music seasons and festivals all over the world (Madagascar, Mozambique, SouthAfrica, Zimbabwe, Brazil, China, Hong Kong, Denmark, Germany, France, Switzerland, Poland, Finland, Spain, etc).



In the last five years he was the recipient of the Jazz It Award, given by Jazzit magazine, for best Italian musician in the category of various instruments (cello, harp, banjo, harmonica, mandolin, etc.). He also won the Orpheus Award 2015 in the jazz category with his CD Borderline.

His professional activities are split between playing and teaching. He runs his own music school which he founded in 1995 (Centro Espressione Musicale) in Gallarate (Milan) where he teaches jazz improvisation, modern piano, accordion and above all chromatic harmonica.

He was an instructor at the Accademia d'Arti e Mestieri dello spettacolo of Milan's prestigious La Scala theater.

Discography as a leader:

- Max De Aloe – **La danza di Matisse** (Splasch Records CDH 701.2) – 1999
- Max De Aloe – **Racconti Controvento** (Abeat ABJZ003) – 2001
- Max De Aloe – **L'anima delle cose** (Abeat ABJZ0019) – 2003
- Max De Aloe Quartetto Crocevia – **Crocevia** (Abeat ABJZ 0044) – 2006
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Lirico Incanto** (Abeat ABJZ 0060) – 2008
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Road Movie-Live at Sonvico in Jazz** (Barnum for Art 001) – 2009
- Max De Aloe/Bill Carrothers – **Apnea** (Abeat ABJZ 0072) – 2009
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Bradipo** (Abeat ABJZ 0070) – 2010
- Max De Aloe – **Un controcanto in tasca – DVD** – (Abeat ABJZ 500) – 2011
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Björk on the moon** – (Abeat Records ABJZ 105) – 2012
- Max De Aloe/Marcella Carboni – **Pop Harp** – (Abeat Records ABJZ 114) – 2013
- Max De Aloe/Marlise Goidanich – **Mutamenti** – (Barnum for Art 002) – 2013
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Borderline** – (Abeat Records ABJZ 141) – 2014
- Max De Aloe Baltic Trio – **Valo** (Abeat Records ABJA 169) – 2017
- Max De Aloe/G. Coscia/D. Di Bonaventura – **Sospiri Sospesi** – (Barnum BFA CD 003) – 2018
- Max De Aloe – **Sonnambuli** (Barnum for Art BFA CD 007) – 2018
- Max De Aloe Quartet – **Just for one day** – (Barnum for Art BFA CD 017) – 2020

Introduction

This method book is the result of over thirty years' individual study of the chromatic harmonica and an equal amount of time devoted to instructing many students on harmonica playing. It also owes to numerous collaborations with a variety of musicians who have taught me a great deal.

After a long period of studying the piano, I stumbled on the chromatic harmonica while still very young. It was a chance encounter that was to change more than just my musical life. I have had a great love affair with the chromatic harmonica ever since which seems stronger with every passing day, like a long happy marriage founded on passion, complicity, amusement and joy with moments of yielding and sacrifice.

I believe that coming to the chromatic harmonica with good knowledge of music in place and a fair amount of live performance experience helped me realize immediately that most existing method books for chromatic harmonica do fail to put forth an in-depth study of the instrument. Most method books didn't (and still don't) make use of staves, ignoring the practice of notated music entirely. Do you know of any method books for saxophone, trumpet, piano, or any other instrument that don't make use of musical notation? Why is this typically the case with the chromatic harmonica? I have, therefore, had to put together my own didactical approach, used first on myself, then on my students, which, while similar to the methodology used for more traditional instruments, hopefully offers up a dynamic and modern perspective.

A central influence during my formative years was the help and musical expertise of a great teacher, Willi Burger, one of the world's major classical virtuosi of the chromatic harmonica. In addition, the knowledge gained through seminars taught by other musicians, mainly pianists, trumpeters and arrangers, was also key. I have always strived to work with musicians more skilled and talented than myself in order to learn from them.

In this method book the chromatic harmonica is treated as a musical instrument—rightly so—in all respects. Tablatures (certainly more useful to the diatonic harmonica), will not be used nor aperture numbers placed above notes. The study course is an accessible one devised for everybody but will inevitably present some challenges as it progresses which require diligence.

For example, a good soccer coach knows that the player should know the rules of the game, acquire a good overview of the playing field, have good breathing technique, athletic preparation, ball technique, know how to kick both on the left and right, with his head, stop, run, kick penalties, respect the other players, be ready to yield, be prepared to make sacrifices but also know how to enjoy himself while playing.

The same holds true for a good teacher with regard to a student wishing to learn an instrument. The study and practice of a musical instrument is manifold: it works on different levels and

touches upon different subjects – music theory, solfège, harmony, instrumental technique, reading skills, rhythmic proficiency and independence, speed, developing a good sound, possible improvisational skills and much more. My aim in compiling this method book has been to devise a course of study for the student where he/she can gradually “train” various technical aspects of playing in context, above all as they relate to the difficulties of the chromatic harmonica, an instrument which is not as easy as it might seem. Step by step, key by key, each exercises attempts to accustom the student to having a complete overview of the instrument through exercises and tunes chosen for various purposes.

Naturally a method book cannot contain absolutely everything. In the following pages, we will often just touch on ideas that can be expanded on with the help of other method books and pieces. For example, I have intentionally omitted examining music theory and harmony as well as rhythmic, melodic and vocal solfège, but I reference texts where all these can be learned and studied in more detail.

Considering my own musical education, the pedagogy I have adopted is obviously oriented towards jazz music, although the basis of study is perfectly suited to all genres of music. Furthermore, I have avoided delving into the world of jazz improvisational technique, as this is already dealt with in highly effective method books common to all instruments. I’ve only just touched on jazz improvisation technique, bringing back some phrases and solos by great jazz masters such as Toots Thielemans. I am sure that everyone who completes this study book will have acquired a good base from which to take on any manual of improvisation techniques.

Naturally, every method cannot state «absolute truth» with respect to its subject. This book inevitably contains a conception of music and the instrument that is a reflection of myself. There may also likely be mistakes and inaccuracies, but I am positive that if the following suggestions are adopted step by step, much will be learned about the chromatic harmonica. At least this is my hope. My one great wish is that this book succeeds in helping whoever wishes to deepen his/her knowledge of and passion for a fascinating instrument, and that in the end, he/she can really draw enjoyment from it.

In conclusion I feel I must state that beyond the study of an instrument, it is important to listen to great amounts of music with care and passion. It may seem like a banal suggestion, but I have often encountered students wishing to play jazz music who rarely listened to it. It would be like studying to become a film director without ever watching a film. Let’s not limit ourselves then to only listening to harmonica players. Ours is an instrument still largely to be discovered, therefore we have much to learn from all other instrumentalists and from music in its totality. Let’s widen our scope on music as much as possible, encompassing all different genres, historic periods and—above all—let’s enjoy ourselves.

Good luck to everyone and enjoy your studies.

Max De Aloe

Chapter One

The Chromatic Harmonica: Basics

The harmonica is classified in the so-called free reed instrument family, which includes, among the most important, the accordion, bandoneon, concertina, reed organ and harmonium. The free reed is a screwed or riveted metal blade set into vibration by air pressure produced by the mouth or by bellows. The pitch of the reed is determined by its length, shape and thickness.

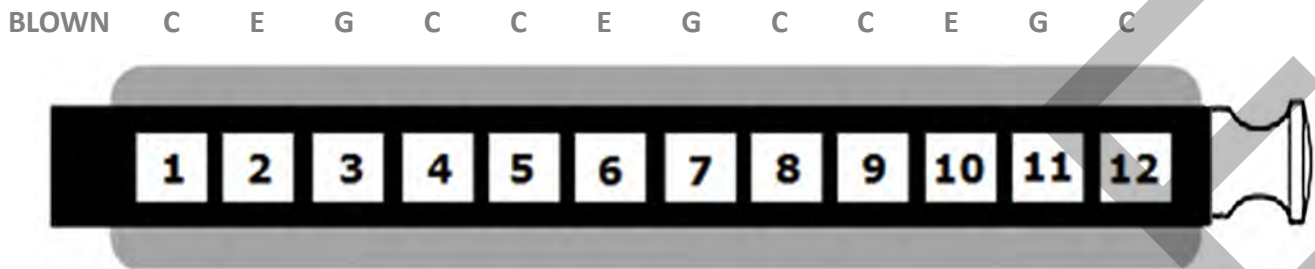
There are mainly two types of harmonica: the diatonic harmonica and the chromatic harmonica.

The diatonic is the most popular and is built to play in only one key, though techniques such as bending and over-bending make it possible to play the entire chromatic scale.

The chromatic harmonica is distinguished by its larger size and by a button on its right side called the slide. The chromatic harmonica can produce all notes (for the sake of simplicity: all the white and black keys on a piano) from a range of two and a half octaves (10-hole chromatic harmonica) to over four octaves (16-hole chromatic harmonica), depending on the model. Substantially, such a small instrument can produce the same amount of notes or larger found in most other musical instruments.

This method book is intended for the 12-hole chromatic harmonica (three octave range), since this is the instrument most harmonica players use. The skill acquired from this method book can be easily transferred to a 10-hole chromatic harmonica (which lacks the last two holes of a three-octave-harmonica) or a 16-hole chromatic harmonica (featuring an extra octave below middle C). Let's first understand how the notes are positioned on the harmonica. It is important to note that some notes on the harmonica are played only by blowing and others only by drawing air. When the slide is pressed, it is possible to transpose a note one half-step higher. In the beginning, we will learn to play without operating the slide, introducing it later on in the fifth chapter, once the initial challenges of positioning are no longer an issue.

□ DIAGRAM OF THE NOTES ON A 12-HOLE CHROMATIC HARMONICA



- hole 1: C blown – D drawn (Middle C is located on the first hole)
- hole 2: E blown – F drawn
- hole 3: G blown – A drawn
- hole 4: B drawn – C blown

From the fifth hole on, the same sequence follows one octave higher

- hole 5 : C blown – D drawn
- hole 6 : E blown – F drawn
- hole 7 : G blown – A drawn
- hole 8 : B drawn – C blown

The same applies from hole 9 to hole 12.

- hole 9 : C blown – D drawn
- hole 10 : E blown – F drawn
- hole 11 : G blown – A drawn
- hole 12 : B drawn – C blown

Pressing the slide, as shown below, raises each note a half-step. With the exception of the 12th hole, where a high D sounds while drawing and pressing the slide



Next is Jacaranda Tree, here in a version in the key of Bb and C. There is also an improvisation in Bb.

8.15

JACARANDA TREE

(Bb version) SONG

Max De Aloe

Musical score for 'Jacaranda Tree' (Bb version) in 3/4 time. The score consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1-4 with chords Bb7, Eb7, and Bb7. The second staff contains measures 5-8 with chords Eb7, Eo7, Bb7, D#7, and G7. The third staff contains measures 9-12 with chords C-7, F7, Bb7, G7, C-7, and F7. The piece ends with a double bar line.

8.16

JACARANDA TREE

(c version) SONG

Max De Aloe

Musical score for 'Jacaranda Tree' (c version) in 3/4 time. The score consists of three staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1-4 with chords C7, F7, and C7. The second staff contains measures 5-8 with chords F7, F#o7, C7, E#7, and A7. The third staff contains measures 9-12 with chords D-7, G7, C7, A7, D-7, and G7. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Chapter Fourteen

Scales

This chapter is entirely dedicated to scales. For each key, you will find the major scale and its relative minor. In addition, pentatonic and blues scales in both major and minor keys are presented here.

All the major, pentatonic and blues scales are a first step toward the technique of improvisation and should certainly peak our curiosity.

It's important to practice scales well and practice them often.

Even as we improve and become more expert, it's imperative that we keep practicing our scales. In this way, we can apply all the various scales and technical exercises set out in the method book. There are countless possibilities for technical exercises; we can even invent our own, taking cues from the areas where we feel most challenged technically.

C

C major



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A natural minor



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A melodic minor



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A jazz melodic minor



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4, A4, Bb4, Ab4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A harmonic minor



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G#4, A4, Bb4, Ab4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

C major pentatonic



A musical staff in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A minor pentatonic



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

C major blues



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, Eb4, E4, F4, G4, Ab4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, Ab4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

A minor blues



A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: A3, B3, C4, Db4, D4, E4, F4, G4, Ab4, Bb4, A3, B3, C4, B3, A3. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.