LEARNING TO PLAY THE HARMONICA

INTRODUCTION - Congratulations, you are about to learn how to play one of the most portable and popular musical instruments in the world - the harmonica! In addition to its compact size, the harmonica is also extremely versatile and can be used to play nearly any style of music. You’ve probably heard the sound of the harmonica in recordings by Beck, Moby, Blues Traveler, Sheryl Crow, and Alanis Morissette as well as old-school musicians like Aerosmith, Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young and Bob Dylan. The harmonica can be used to expand your musical creativity - the only limit is your imagination!

Did you know? Harmonica is used in all styles of music - rock, blues, jazz, country and pop as well as classical and even in hip-hop. The harmonica has many nicknames, such as the French harp, blues harp, tin sandwich, mouth organ, or its most common name, the “harp.”

TYPES OF HARMONICAS - There are two basic types of harmonica. One type is called a diatonic harmonica - this is the most common type of harmonica and probably the one that you are using for this exercise. This harmonica is based on the diatonic scale - an eight-note scale that you probably have learned as “do re mi fa sol la ti do.” This harp will produce two full chords when inhaling or exhaling. The other type of harmonica is known as a chromatic harmonica. The chromatic harmonica is like two harmonicas combined into one and produces all of the notes of the chromatic scale. It is also a larger harmonica that usually has a button on one end. If you compared these two harmonicas to a piano, then the diatonic harmonica would represent the white keys on the piano and the chromatic harmonica would represent both the white and black keys on the piano.

Did you know? Advanced techniques on the diatonic harmonica, such as bending and overblows, can allow the diatonic harmonica to be played in a fully chromatic way similar to the chromatic harmonica.

LEARNING TO PLAY - Now let’s get you started on your way to becoming the next great harp player! If your harmonica comes in a case (and it’s a good idea to keep your harp in there to keep it protected from dust and other foreign elements), open up the case and take out your harp. There are two basic ways of playing harmonica: tongue blocking and lip blocking. We’re going to discuss the lip blocking or “lipping” style, which is often an easier style for beginners to master.

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**Step 1** Place your harp in your left hand (between your thumb and your first finger) with the numbers facing up. Now place your lips over the mouthpiece in a relaxed fashion, covering 3-4 holes. If you inhale softly, you should hear a chord being played. If you only hear one or two notes, imagine that you’re taking a bite out of a sandwich, then open wider and try again. You want to maintain a loose, relaxed feel with your lips to keep from leaking air.

**Step 2** Next, try a “blow chord.” Place your lips over the mouthpiece, again covering 3-4 holes, and blow out softly. You should now be hearing a nice chord as well. If not, pretend that you’re blowing on a spoon full of too-hot soup and keep that idea in mind while you place your lips over the mouthpiece and try again.

**Step 3** Now, try to blow a single note: this is a little like sipping soda through a straw. Imagine you’re sipping through the straw and center your lips over a single hole. Remember to keep your lips as relaxed as possible. Now inhale softly over the note. You should be hearing a nice clean single draw note. If you’re hearing more than one note, try pursing your lips closed a little more. Once you achieve this on the draw note, try the same thing on a blow note. Now you’re well on your way to harp mastery! It’s all a downhill slope from here.

**Additional Tips:** To the right is pictured a very common method of harmonica tablature (a way of writing out music), which explains how to play the song “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In.” When you see an arrow pointing down with a number above it, this means you draw (inhale) on that note. You can find the numbers on the topside of your harp. For a blow note, just look for a number with an arrow pointed up on your paper.

When you can read harmonica tablature, you are ready to go on to more advanced techniques such as **bending** (a way of altering the notes in the holes to achieve more than one note), **warbles** (where you shake the harp or your head from side to side very quickly giving you an organ like sound) and **hand tremolos** (opening and closing of your hands around the harp to achieve different sound effects). To learn these advanced techniques, you might want to find a qualified instructor or read some harmonica instruction books. Remember, it doesn’t take a lot of wind to play harp. Start softly, keeping your lips as relaxed as possible. If you hear what sounds like leaking air, then your lips are too tight. Finally, when you start playing, it’s better to play a couple of times a day rather than for one long extended period, in order to give the muscles you’re using a chance to relax and develop in a natural progression.
Please note: The harmonica tablature previously referenced has been excerpted from a Hohner harmonica informational handout that is included with a beginner model harmonica.

Did you know? It can be very healthy for you to play harmonica - it is an aerobic instrument that is used in therapy and rehabilitative programs for patients with asthma and emphysema.

Harmonica History - Here’s a little background on the harmonica. It’s based on one of the oldest instruments known in history, the Chinese sheng. There are written documents describing the sheng dated as early as 1636, but the more common harmonica we see today is closer to an instrument developed in 1825 by a Bohemian named Richter. Later, a man named Matthias Hohner made the first mass-produced harmonicas in Germany in 1867 and started exporting them to the United States. This stimulated the harmonica’s popularity in America, where it became an important instrument during the early part of the twentieth century. Many players formed harmonica bands consisting of three or more musicians playing all types of harmonicas - diatonic, chromatic as well as chord and bass harmonicas.

The harmonica had several periods of resurgence during the twentieth century. One period was during the 1950s, which included pop artists like The Harmonicats and blues artists such as Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson, and which continued into the latter decades through artists such as Bob Dylan, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen and The Blues Brothers. Also, the harmonica is used in the contemporary music scene by such current performers as John Popper (Blues Traveler) and Beck.

Did you know? Astronaut Wally Schirra brought the harmonica to new heights when he made the harmonica the first instrument played in outer space on December 16, 1965. Wally had smuggled aboard a miniature harmonica and played Jingle Bells on it just in time for the Christmas season!

The Harmonica & Blues Music - Blues history is abundant with heroes of the harmonica, including such greats as Little Walter Jacobs, Big Walter Horton, John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson (I), Aleck Rice Miller a.k.a. Sonny Boy Williamson (II), Jimmy Reed, Slim Harpo, and Papa Lightfoot as well as such blues legends as Blues Birdhead, Jaybird Coleman and Rhythm Willie. Current keepers of the flame include Kim Wilson (of the Fabulous Thunderbirds), Rod Piazza and genre-bending players such as Howard Levy (master of the overblow), Canadian Carlos Del Junco and Blues Traveler leader John Popper.

Good luck with the harmonica and remember to keep the true spirit of playing music foremost in your mind:

Have fun while exploring your creativity!