

# Writing for Bandoneon

## A Guide for Composers & Arrangers

*Note: These specifications refer to a specific kind of bandoneon, the “142 Rheinische”, which is the standard bandoneon in tango and in other main genres. Other models may differ.*

## General features

The bandoneon is a free reed instrument belonging to the **Concertina** family. It was invented in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century to play German folklore, but it gained great popularity in Argentina and Uruguay due to the *tango*.

The sound is produced by the movement of the **bellows** and the vibrations of 2 reeds for each note. In the bandoneon 142, the same key produces two different notes when opening (pulling) or closing (pushing) the bellows. This type of bandoneon is called **bisonoric** (or, diatonic, improperly). There are also unisonoric bandoneons (improperly called chromatic). The bandoneon can play in all tonalities.

## Range of notes

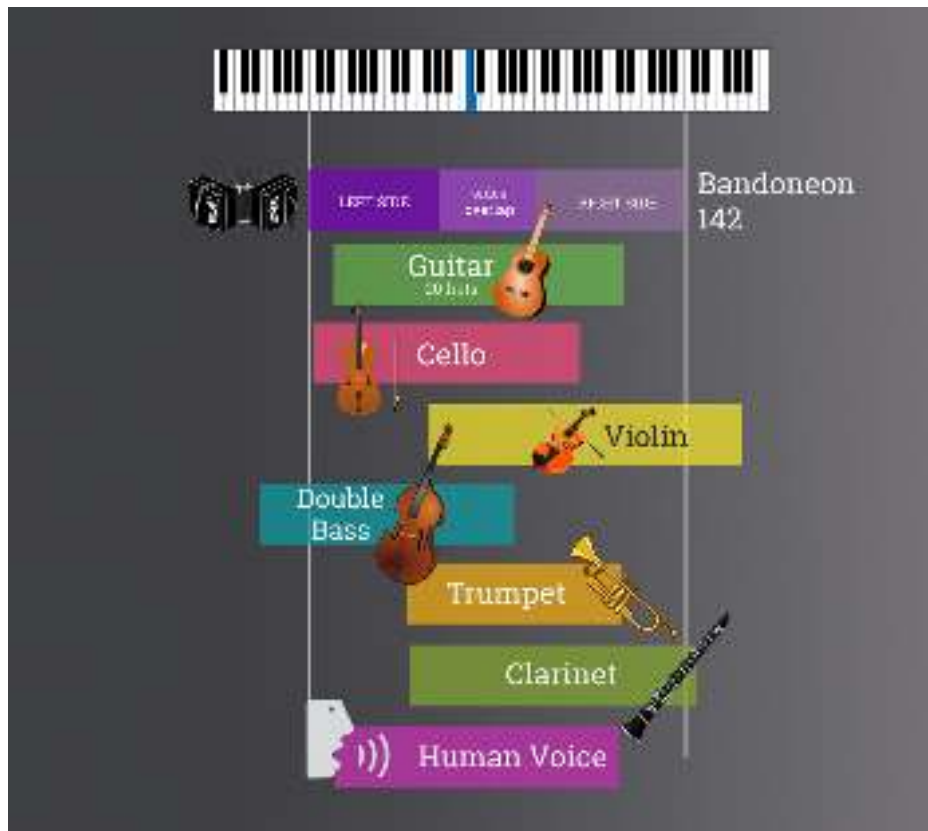
The bandoneon is a chromatic instrument with a total range of notes from C2 to A6.

**Left keyboard:** from C2 to A4 (some models have Bb4 or even B4);

**Right keyboard:** from A3 to A6;

(Actually, a standard bandoneon 142 has B6, but Bb6 is missing).

There is a partial overlap of the 2 keyboards from A3 to A4.



# Polyphony

The bandoneon is a polyphonic instrument. As it can be played with 2 hands and 4 fingers each, it permits **up to 8 notes simultaneously in a chord**. Some virtuosos can, in certain cases, play up to 5 notes with each hand.

Because of the chaotic layout of its keyboards it is possible to play **chords** made by very distant intervals with each hand. In addition to being able to play melodies accompanied by chords, the bandoneon is a **counterpoint** instrument: theoretically, it is possible to play up to four melodic lines simultaneously.

The bandoneon has sound characteristics that are similar to those of **woodwind instruments**. Composing for the bandoneon is similar to composing for a section of woodwinds, although the bandoneon is not a transposing instrument.

# Sound Volumes and Dynamics

In the bandoneon, it is possible to play from (*pppp*) to (*ffff*) . In the older instruments the pianissimo could always be louder than a pianissimo in a modern instrument.

The change of volume intensity can be soft and progressive or sudden.

The two keyboards always play at the same volume because they are directly connected by the bellows.

# Tuning

The bandoneon is generally tuned with A=442 Hz. This is the most common option for tango because of its more brilliant sound in orchestra. In general, it is the standard tuning for any bandoneon 142.

# Writing and Composing

The bandoneon's staff is the same as for the grand piano.

The bandoneon is not a transposing instrument.

The composer can specify in the score when the bandoneon player should open or close the instrument. In general, this decision is left to the player.

# Technical limits

- It is not possible to obtain extremely long and sustained notes without a small interruption between them due to the fact that the sound of the bandoneon is produced by the opening or closing of the bellows.
- Some notes are missing closing or opening.
- When playing very loud, the intonation tends to drop even by half a tone, especially in the lower notes.
- The sound of the bandoneon when pulling the bellows is a bit different than when pushing it. Similarly, the most effective sound effects are obtained by pulling the bellows, even though a technically well trained-bandoneon player can obtain very similar sound effects when closing the bellows.

# Sound and Tone

When playing a note on the bandoneon 142, the characteristic sound is produced by the simultaneous vibration of two reeds at the distance of a **perfect octave**.

A well-tuned bandoneon doesn't produce a beat effect.

The sound of the bandoneon is very "dry", with a quick attack and no sustain.

The sound of the left keyboard is slightly different from the right one due to the *cassotto*, a sound box from which the sound emanates. This gives the left keyboard a mellower and more nasal sound.

Some bandoneon players suggest that there is a significant difference in tone between the **vintage instruments** and modern instruments. This means that those who want to play a vintage sound typically use vintage instruments, similar to how guitar players prefer old Fender guitars to get that specific sound.

## Effects and Articulation

- The bandoneon can *sustain notes* at a constant volume, similar to a pipe organ.
- The volume can change progressively or suddenly.
- Due to the great responsiveness of the keyboards, the bandoneon can play legato, staccato, non legato. The *non legato* is considered as the more characteristic articulation of the bandoneon.
- A significant effect of the bandoneon is *marcato*, achieved by pulling or pushing the bellows with hits from a wrist movement, typically supported by a bounce on the leg.
- *Bellows shake* is another possible effect and technique.
- The *arrastre* is a very typical effect in tango, obtained by slightly anticipating the note and bouncing the instrument on the leg, giving the feeling that the sound is dragged and then launched with force.

## Representative genres

### Tradicional:

- Tango;
- Chamamé and folklore from Misiones and Corrientes provinces in Argentina;
- Folklore from Argentina Northeast (zamba, chacarera etc.);
- German folklore;
- Classical music.

### Contemporary:

- Tango Nuevo;
- Modern Folklore;
- Rock and Pop Music;
- Jazz;
- Others.

## Example of use in Cinema:

- Il Postino (composer: Luis Bacalov);
- Il Piccolo Diavolo (composer: Evan Lurie).

## Brands of bandoneons

The most highly regarded brands of **vintage instruments** are **Doble A** and **Premier** (both manufactured by the same company, Alfred Arnold). **ELA** instruments are also considered excellent, although their sound is often considered less resonant due to their reed supports generally being made of aluminum instead of zinc, as in the case of the Doble A. Additionally, there are excellent instruments of German craftsmanship that are relatively unknown due to their rarity, such as the Birnstock.

All the vintage instruments were produced in Germany, and those produced before the 2WW are considered the best. Instruments produced during or after 2WW are of much lower quality. The massive production of vintage instruments ceased in the 1950s.

Nowadays, there are several manufacturers of excellent **brand-new instruments**. Among the most highly regarded are **Baltazar Estol** in Argentina, **Harry Geuns** in Belgium, and **Uwe Hartenahuer** in Germany.

This document was written by Omar Caccia, a bandoneon player.  
For further information, please visit <https://www.omarcaccia.com>