

The Tremolo

Learning to Play

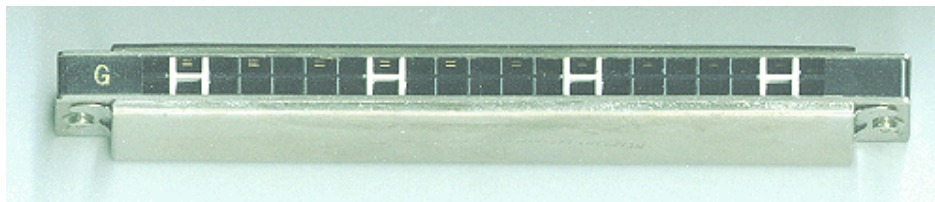
by Jonathan E. Brickman with lots of help

[click to return](#)

By popular request, this page is begun: a basic primer on playing the tremolo harmonica. This primer attempts to cover the so-called [solo system](#) tremolo and its [relatives](#), generally excepting the [Richter system](#). But if anyone would like to contribute instruction or instruction-related comments for Richter-tuned tremolo, this [would be very welcome](#).

We now also have the [Forum](#) for you, where you will find very experienced persons eager to answer your questions and send you to YouTube videos and other resources.

Tremolo harmonicas come in a few different shapes and sizes. However, all of them look more or less like this one:



The above photo was taken of a Suzuki Humming Tremolo, a very good harmonica, and definitely recommended. Suzuki Humming Tremolos have one advantage over most others: the markings, which on this harmonica refers to the tonic notes. The instrument pictured above happens to be in the key of G, and therefore the tonic notes, the white notes, are the G's. If you blow into one of the white holes in a Suzuki Humming Tremolo keyed to G, you will hear the note G. But the rest is a little different. Read on!

The tonic notes are important, because songs in general often begin, end, or both begin and end, on the tonic note of the key in which they are played and sung. The “[key](#)” of a song, for those who have never heard of such an animal, is basically the particular set of do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do notes which a song is to be played. A good explanation of the origin and need for do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do is outside the purview of this document; however, I have three ways for you to get a sufficient idea: look into [the general music theory applied to many instruments](#); see [a good Wikipedia entry](#); or see the movie “The Sound Of Music”, you'll know the spot when you see it :-).

It is worthwhile to note that the majority of tremolos advertised are in the key of C, whereas the above-pictured is in the key of G. If you want to play tremolo in most circumstances, you will need multiple instruments, in multiple keys, to match the people you are working with, unless of course you are the only sound to be heard! More on that later on.

Basic Learning

The whole note-finding problem on playing tremolo can be summarized thusly.

1. You will have at least one complete “octave” on any tremolo. The standard voice nomenclature do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do constitutes one "octave", defined as the eight consecutive notes of one scale. However, the tonic (the first note) is repeated, so even though we count it as an octave, we may think of it as seven notes plus the start of the next octave. Every tremolo I have seen so far has at least sixteen notes, which (on solo/scale-tuned only) means two octaves plus a little. On the above tremolo, which has twenty-one notes, you can visually see three whole octaves, plus a little. You will, either soon or gradually, need to come to recognize both an octave, and the progressive notes of a scale.

Click here for a MIDI file, which plays notes alternating slowly between piano middle C and one octave above piano middle C.

Click here for a MIDI file, which plays notes running the whole C major scale, from piano middle C to one octave above, and back down again.

2. On the tremolo, each vertical pair of holes is one (1) note. Any one vertical pair of holes will accept air moving in both directions (in and out, or blow and draw), but any one pair will only make a sound with exactly one of the two directions of air-movement. When a vertical pair is played together, the “tremolo” effect is heard, because it is for this purpose that the two vertically-paired reeds are off-tuned very slightly.

3. You will have to acquire a feel for which note (do-re-mi...) is needed for the start of any song that you play. This is “relative pitch”, a very learnable skill. It is **not** “perfect pitch”, which is thought to be an unlearned, created, capability in only a proportion of human beings.

4. Once you have identified the first note of a song – either by trial and error, or by skill, or (as is very common) a combination of both – you will find that you need the next note, and must find it, and so on. It is therefore useful to practice playing up and down the scale of the harmonica you are learning on, because it is thus that we train your memory to remember where the notes you need are. It is recommended that all early practice be a combination of one or more runs through the scale, and one or more attempts to put together a song. Even one attempt of both per day will produce good learning over time.

5. Give yourself permission to play with many different lip-shapes, and to tilt the instrument every which way. You will find that changing the angle helps you get the notes and chords you want more easily, more rapidly, and more clearly.

6. Many early tremolo learners press the instrument hard against their lips. Don't! It won't hurt the instrument, but it will rub your lips too much. Gentle pressure is all you need. Your lips are very efficient at controlling air, even without much pressure at all. If your lips feel scrubbed, be gentler! You may also find it profitable to moisten the areas of the instrument over which your lips must slide.

7. Initially, don't try to play along with radio – learn by trying to play simple songs you know by heart. Playing along with radio gets into ensemble skills, which I think is better to learn later.

Physical Positions of Notes

By far the easiest way to learn tremolo, is by pure trial and error (and you will find yourself helped a lot if you pray, if you try it!), building memory of the sound of the scale and a song. It is much harder to try to match up note names and hole positions. **I strongly urge you to not try to study physical note-positions when first learning,** because if you do, you will be trying to route music first through your intellect, which is

frankly the wrong way if you want to maximize joy and minimize frustration. You will play better and sooner if you don't.

However, some are heavily bound by the intellect-trap, and can learn only with geometry and labels. So, for these people alone, here are some geometry and labels for the Suzuki Humming Tremolo in G major. All solo-tuned tremolos are very similar to this, but absolutely identical, not! You will have to do much time-consuming experimentation, if you must go this route. The diagram below expresses the layout of the leftmost nine (9) vertical pairs of holes in the above-pictured Suzuki Humming Tremolo, key of G. In music argot, G' is one octave above G. So, the G to the right – G' – is the high G immediately above the G on the left:

A (re) (draw)	G (do) (blow)	C (fa) (draw)	B (mi) (blow)	E (la) (draw)	D (so) (blow)	F# (ti) (draw)	G' (do) (blow)	A' (re) (draw)
A (re) (draw)	G (do) (blow)	C (fa) (draw)	B (mi) (blow)	E (la) (draw)	D (so) (blow)	F# (ti) (draw)	G' (do) (blow)	A' (re) (draw)

If you find yourself very confused by the above diagram, don't worry: you have just learned why learning to play tremolo by eye is not preferred. The geometry of the tremolo is often bizarre to the diagrammatic eye, but it is a tremendous joy to the freed-up player. It produces tremendous ease in isolating particular notes and chords, and so there is no demand of extreme precision of lip-movement, as is the case with 10- or 12-holers.

Of course, you might be one of those rare geniuses who can turn on and off your diagrammatical eye at will, and simply shunt only certain minimal but useful elements of the highly overpopulated visual panorama to your carefully maintained sensorium/motivatorium complex. If you are one of these marvelous folks, I would very much appreciate it if you would contribute additions and/or changes to this text, because I cannot do what you do!

It may help to know that I was playing tremolo for a solid year, before I learned of the pair-inverted layout of all tremolo harmonicas, from [Pat Missin's excellent writings](#), and fairly obvious above, where B is after C, D is after E, et cetera. Richter too is pair-inverted, but it's even more confusing, because most of the whole scales are not there.

If you study the chart, you will notice that the "ti" note (A' in the key of G) breaks the pattern on the extreme right. The answer is that there is a reversal of next-door note pairs on the next octave to the right, and then a re-reversal to the original order on the third octave. Again, the situation is simple: to the common diagrammatic eye, such as my own, this is a mess; but to the freed-up player, this is a pure joy, immensely intuitive, and amazingly easy to isolate the notes that you want and do not want.

I do hope that if you have been intellectualizing your music, you will now know yourself justly encouraged to try and try and try again to do differently! I once saw a person who had no musical practice or training whatsoever, go from blank to really good on ten-holer, in two weeks. What method of learning do you think he used?????

But there is a related development in tremolo recently, and a promise was made to cover it, so here it is. On Hohner's new Echo Celeste tremolo, there is a numbering system, where each number corresponds to two holes. Diagramming this, we have:

notes:	G	D	C	F	E	A	G	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	C	B	E	D	G	F	C	A	E	B

airflow:	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓
numbers:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12								

This writer guesses that this number system was made in rough correspondence with the standard hole numbers present on Hohner ten/twelves. It fits, because each single hole on a ten/twelve plays two notes, one draw, one blow. And it is known that many learn to play ten/twelve using the numbers.

Adapting the Hohner numbering system for tremolo does sound very good and helpful...until one remembers that all Hohner ten/twelves are Richter-tuned. Whereas the Hohner Echo Celeste is definitely solo-tuned. In other words, the systems don't match: the many books of harmonica notation using hole numbers will not work with the Hohner Echo Celeste, unless there are books I have never heard of, specially made with solo tuning in mind. Perhaps there is a tremolo player who will learn or is learning using these numbers; if you are he or she, [please email me](#) or [post to the forum](#) and tell us what you did, so that we can help others!

Issues Arising

1. Very quickly, you will find that some notes you need for some songs are not available. The question then is, "What do I do?" In early learning, the answer is, "Choose another song." "When The Saints Go Marching In" and "Yankee Doodle" are two very good ones to start with, and there are thousands and thousands more.

2. Of course, the above does not solve the problem, it just dodges it. The answer really is, "You will need to have more than one tremolo, in multiple keys, ready to play as needed, to solve the problem." If the reason is not obvious, imagine a piano. The key of C is all white keys. The key of G is one black key and the rest white keys. There are lots of others, including some which use all black keys. The notes hit by the black keys are called "half-tones", because they are halfway between most (not all, you will probably remember) of the white keys (the "full tones" of the C scale). For instance, the black-keyed note immediately to the right of C on a piano is "C sharp" (usually written C#). There is no black key to the left of C on a piano, but the black-keyed note immediately to the left of the B on a piano is "B flat" (usually written Bb). Sharps to the right, and flats to the left: sharps a little higher, flats a little lower. And then there's minor keys...

3. A song in a minor key is usually 'sad', or 'meditative'; but not all minor-keyed songs are thusly, and not all of the vice-versa is true, either. "Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho" is a great example of a song in which a minor-keyed tremolo is essential. You can substitute certain majors for certain minors; this is the "related major" method of operating. If you find you have a song in A minor, you can use a C major; just count one and one-half steps up from the minor to the major. So from Am, we say B, that's one step because there is a black key in between; then B to C, no black key; and C is it for Am.

Ensemble Skills

A less obvious skill needed especially with tremolo, is key-finding. It is needed as a skill unless your instrument is to be the only voice present: if you sidle up to a group and want to play with, don't even bother to try asking them to tell you their key! Half the time they will tell you wrongly, and the other half of the time they don't know and don't care, and you're breaking their flow, which is a bad thing whether you like it or not. It is up to you to know your array of tremolos, and to find the one that you have (if any) which best fits the moment, without disturbing them. One good way to do this is to play very gently with a hand over one of your ears. That way you will hear yourself but not disturb them,

while you are getting situated, and while you are figuring out whether you have something that works with them. Sometimes you will not have a proper instrument – some people love weird keys (like, say, F sharp, or D sharp minor) and unless you have spent a whole lot of \$\$\$ and time delving through a 38-key set, you will always be missing something. In addition, horns in general and many jazz-oriented and traditional hymnody groups, often need keys which are somewhat off the beaten track of others, including things like B flat and E flat. If it's a good group, however, they will sooner or later ask you what you've got, and when that happens you need to be able to reel off a few common keys (C, B flat, G, D, E...), because (for instance) many guitarists know G and B best of all and struggle in C, many horns focus on Bb, and vocalists' needs can be quite specific and often change for every song. So key choice does have to be a consensus, a happy compromise.

And you will have to learn the skills of differentiating major and minor, too. But there is more. In any worthwhile ensemble, the others will sometimes do all sorts of things which (especially early on) may feel a little like torture to you. They will throw in “accidentals”, which really means changing the key of a song for just one note! They will also key-change on the fly, following some famous recording they remember well, which you just somehow missed when it shook the world in 1974. So it boils down to (1) handling of multiple keys very very well indeed, and (2) blending into the group. If they nod at you in solo-time, and you know or can invent a solo to play, go for it! At any other time, let the soloists solo if there is soloing to be done, and blend – play the good part that's not there yet. A well-played tremolo can be the saxophone that's not there, or the backup singers that aren't there, or the trumpet that isn't there, or really almost anything, as long as the player is well-prepared – and if you do this well, or even mostly well, you will be very much appreciated; tremolo does blend very well, and yet also contributes a strong life-tone to the moment.

And then, of course, if all of the parts are represented, you can think about making up your own part. But blend!!!!!! A stand-out soloist, characteristic of ten-holer, twelve-holer, or chromatic, is appreciated only sometimes; a person who can take up (or create) the part which everyone there realizes should be there but isn't, is always appreciated. Such people are gladly handed solos when the right time comes, because they have helped everyone else first.

Different Tremolos

The above picture is of a Suzuki Humming Tremolo simply because it is the only instrument I know of where the tonic notes are marked, and so it is more self-explanatory than most. It might be assumed by some that all solo-tuned tremolos have their tonic and other notes in exactly the same position; however, this is not true. Approximately, yes; exactly, no. It is essential that the player learn to feel his or her way around the scale, to develop his or her sense of what part of the scale is needed at any given time. The first thing any tremolo player should do, on approaching an instrument strange to him or her, is gauge where the tonic should be according to general memory, try it, and adjust memory for the one instrument to compensate. The rest is rather easily built from there.

Miscellany

There are other tremolo skills out there, most of which I do does not have. Some tremolo players use a C stacked on top of a C#, and focus on individual notes. A contributor to the big-harmonica email list contributed [this tutorial on stacking](#). Others are known to use with tremolo the “bending” techniques more commonly used with ten-

holer and twelve-holer harmonicas. My focus is almost entirely ensemble and direct vocal accompaniment, which means lots of two-, three-, and four-note chord-running, often with one note primary and the other(s) secondary in emphasis. But if anyone would like to contribute a tutorial on bending, I will be most happy to post it. Meanwhile, we do have [this worthwhile page on bending from Pat Missin](#).

[click to return](#)

