

Piano Accordion vs. Chromatic Button Accordion

Which is best, piano accordion (PA), or five row chromatic button accordion (CBA)? This is a question which is often debated in newsgroups. The question should perhaps rather be: which type of instrument is best for a certain individual. This document tries to help those who are new to the accordion, or those who play one kind but wonder if switching to the other kind would be an improvement. No matter what kind one chooses, having chosen the "wrong type" can never be an excuse for playing badly since both are highly versatile systems. Each system, in the hands of a talented musician, can produce great music.

Below, you will find a number of categories where PA and CBA is compared. You can read through each category and give points to the system you think wins a category. When you have finished, you can add all points and see which system will best fit your needs. Don't, however, let this test be the only thing that decides your choice of instrument. There may be more issues than those covered here; feel free to add your own categories. Also remember that this test cannot replace the experience you get from trying out these different instruments in real life, and preferably for an extended period. However, if you play PA and would like to get an idea of how a CBA feels to play, try using your computer keyboard as a substitute. The keys are not perfectly aligned, but close enough.

For each of the categories below, you should first decide which system, PA or CBA, you think wins the category. Then give points from 0 to 10 to the winner of this category, and always 0 points to the other system. Before you give any points, you should ask yourself how important the category is to you. If a category has no importance whatsoever to you, then the score for the system you favor would be 0 (and the other system would get 0 as well). If the category is extremely important, then give 10 points to the one you favor (and 0 to the other).

1. General aspects

The PA is straightforward in that there is a one-to-one correspondence between notes and keys. That is, for each individual note there is only one corresponding key. Also, notes are arranged so that for each half-step, you move one step up or down on the keyboard. A CBA is intuitive in that buttons are uniformly distributed. This means that a fifth, for example, or any other interval, can always be easily found, and that melody and chord patterns can remain the same when played in different keys. The duplicate rows must be used in order to fully exploit the uniform qualities of a CBA. When you want to play a certain note on a PA, you probably first determine whether it is a white or black key, while for the CBA you tend to associate a certain note with a certain row.

2. Range

CBAs can have a greater range in the right hand compared to a PA, without having to use the register switches. In some music, mainly classical music, this may be an advantage, but in most cases you will seldom "run out of notes" provided that an appropriate register has been chosen for the piece to be played. The CBA can have a maximum range of 64 notes in the right hand, and the PA can have a maximum of 45 notes. Some accordions have chin switches that makes it easier to switch from one register to another while playing.

3. Uniform chords

Chords on a CBA can be played with uniform fingering patterns if you make use of the duplicate rows. A C major chord, for example, can have the same fingering pattern as a D major chord. On a PA it takes a little longer to learn these things. Some people prefer to use only the first three rows of a CBA, but then the chords lose some of their uniform qualities. Uniform chords can also be helpful when you play harmonies from chord symbols.

4. Fingering options

The duplicate rows of a CBA allow you to use alternate ways to finger both chords and melodies. The question is whether this makes things easier since on a PA you don't have to constantly choose between these fingering options. With some music that contains chord progressions, it may take some time before you have calculated the best way to play these chords on a CBA. Then you also have to remember how you solved any tricky situations when you perform the music again, since some combinations otherwise could be difficult to finger. However, as you become more experienced with the CBA layout, these things probably become more automated. You could, of course, choose to use only the first three rows of a CBA, but this makes some chords, melodies and musical ornaments somewhat uncomfortable to play.

5. Reaching notes far apart

This is easier on a CBA, and you can easily reach notes two octaves apart. The more frequent use of your thumb on a PA can to some degree compensate for this lack of reach. On a CBA you can fill in lower notes, with your right hand, that may otherwise not be available from the stradella bass. If the thumb and little finger simultaneously depress buttons on the third row of a CBA, the protruding fingers between them may be forced to play notes from the duplicate rows. Another important factor to consider is the size of your hands. If you have small hands, the CBA could be preferable, although there are also PAs with less wide keys. These PAs become smaller, but some parts of the white keys may become too narrow unless you have slender fingers. Until you have developed your muscle memory well enough, it is easy to play the wrong white key on a PA when greater intervals are to be reached. Since you associate a certain note on a CBA with its particular row, you are choosing from a more limited number of candidates in that row; meaning less risk for mistakes.

6. Legato

Unlike the piano, the accordion does not have a pedal that can sustain notes. Therefore it's important to be able to play notes "legato", that is, uninterrupted, or seamless. The fact that piano keys are elongated, and thus have larger surfaces than buttons, means that it's easier to do finger switches (that is, to momentarily depress one key with two fingers to keep a note sounding while your hand changes its position), and this makes the PA very well adapted for some types of legato playing. If you employ the duplicate rows of a CBA when playing chord progressions, you may sometimes find that you have to let go of some notes while switching to another position, unless you carefully plan ahead. Furthermore, the thumb on a PA can be used as a sort of pivot as the index finger reaches over the thumb. This technique can also be used on the CBA, provided that you are willing to sometimes use the duplicate rows. It would be fair to say that the PA is generally better for legato playing, even when just playing melodies, but with time, as you improve, you can also develop techniques for the CBA that will overcome these problems.

7. Speed

On a five row CBA, you may have more than one way to finger a melody line, since many notes are being duplicated in the fourth and fifth row. This allows you to find quick and easy "paths" to follow along the buttons. Also, if the music contains a lot of long jumps, this may be speeded up by the fact that buttons are closer together. The PA has its keys laid out vertically, which means that you don't have to move your fingers back and forth horizontally, which in many cases can speed things up. Piano keys have big surfaces, so you don't have to always put your finger in exactly the right horizontal position. When playing a CBA, you sometimes have to twist your wrist and fingers, which could potentially cause delays. On a CBA, you can play very fast runs that take advantage of the uniform properties of the CBA layout (a free-bass PA player with a chromatic free-bass may be able to do some of these uniform runs with the left hand). Regardless of system, ultimately it's the musicians skill that sets the limits of what you can do in terms of speed.

8. Ergonomics

The PA has the advantage that you can slide individual fingers along the keys, which provides very relaxed finger and wrist positions. You don't have to move your fingers back and forth horizontally to the same extent as you do on a CBA. With the CBA you often have to twist your wrist and fingers into somewhat less natural positions, especially when you play chords. On the other hand, since you often have to reach farther on a PA, you may have to stretch out a bit more, whereas on a CBA your fingers come closer together and everything is within easy reach without much arm movement. CBA players usually keep their palm slightly cup-shaped, which for some people, especially if you have big hands, could put a strain on your hand. Some parts of the white keys on a PA can be narrow if you have big fingers. This becomes apparent when your thumb plays a black key in a chord, and even more so when the little finger is also playing a black key. There could be a tendency, when playing PA, of having to hold your right arm slightly higher up when playing the medium/clarinet reeds, but much of this depends also on the size of the instrument; CBAs are often smaller. Using your thumb on a CBA generally means that you depress the buttons more with your thumb-nail than with the side of your thumb. This is because the thumb rotates when it is held closer to the other fingers. Pressing with your thumb-nail may be less comfortable until, eventually, you get used to it. Some CBA players (usually B-system) do not use the thumb at all, but then reach is limited.

9. Reading sheet music

The distances between white keys on the PA are directly proportional to distances between noteheads in standard notation. If two noteheads are piled up, with one on top of the other, this means that you should play a white key, skip one white key, and play the next white key. If one of these notes is sharp or flat, you still reference the same white key, and then adjust your finger to hit the corresponding black key. This means that the PA is well suited to sheet music. However, if you become very experienced, you will detect a major or minor triad when you see it, and since the CBA has uniform fingering for the corresponding chord, this could facilitate playing as well. If you like to play from sheet music that you are reading for the first time, containing not just melody lines, the PA is more direct. Here, the CBA often requires some planning, or alternatively, that you are very experienced and know intuitively where to go with your fingers. For people who cannot remember things easily and always need sheet music, the PA could therefore be a better choice. For people who like to remember patterns or think in terms of intervals, the CBA could be a better choice.

10. Accordion size and weight

CBAs are often smaller than PAs, but weight does not seem to differ that much between comparable accordions. The keyboard also sticks out less on a CBA. It's worth to remember though, that the size of an instrument affects its sound. Furthermore, some people prefer having the instrument right up under their chin. Some people appreciate that a CBA can have a good range even on a very compact instrument.

11. Compatibility when playing other instruments

If you already play the piano or a keyboard, it may be easier to adjust to PA. What you learn on the PA can also be useful if you aspire to play piano or keyboard in the future. It should be said though, that there are people who play piano and still prefer buttons for the accordion.

12. Availability of instruments, teachers and literature

Which type is predominant in your country? Will you be able to find a used instrument of the desired kind? If you need a teacher, can you find one who can teach on the chosen type? Can you find good tutoring literature in a language that you understand?

13. Choosing a chromatic system

CBAs exist mainly in two different versions: CBA-B and CBA-C, and they are basically mirror versions of each other. In any particular country, one type may be more predominant than the other. In any case, choosing to play CBA means that you also have to choose between the two systems. It could be fortunate to have this option, or a dilemma.

14. Free-bass compatibility

If you ever aspire to play an instrument that features free-bass, then it is often claimed that the CBA is more natural since the chromatic free-bass in the left hand is usually a mirror version of the right hand system. One could perhaps also claim that it is easier to have two completely different systems, as on a free-bass PA, than to have a system which is a mirror version of the other. PA and CBA-C normally have the C system chromatic free-bass, but there are other systems out there as well. PA players are more often seen to play more than one note at a time in their right hand, compared to CBA players. When you play free-bass, the ability to play chord progressions and multiple parts in your right hand is very important. Reading such music is also easier on a PA. So, although you may find that many free-bass players play CBA, the PA is actually an ideal free-bass instrument.

15. Dummy buttons

All right hand buttons you see on a CBA may not be available to be played upon. Sometimes, but not always, CBAs have these dummy buttons in the upper end for cosmetic reasons. On a PA, all keys you see are always available to be played upon.

16. Transposing

Transposing is difficult on a PA if you, for example, accompany a singer who can't sing in a particular range. This is easier on a CBA since you have duplicate rows that allow you to use the same fingering patterns, but it also means that you must try not to associate a certain button on the accordion with a certain note.

17. Glissandi

Glissandi can be done on either white keys or black keys on a PA. Since such glissandi are often used on pianos, they are well established as a musical effect. The white key glissando is also easy because the keys don't have wide gaps between them. On a CBA you can easily do diminished glissandi (minor thirds). There are other possible glissandi on both systems that will not be covered here.

18. Playing in different styles

Some music is associated with a certain type of accordion although you can play any genre of music on both PA and CBA. For example, CBA-C has traditionally been used by most musette players. The legato possibilities of PAs may appeal to jazz musicians. Russian music has traditionally been performed on CBA-B. If music is originally written for the type of accordion you own, then it may be more easily performed on that instrument. Especially glissandi, or reaching notes far apart, may be impossible if you don't have the appropriate type. Some classical/serious music may be written especially for the CBA, but consider also the fact that much of the music we have today was originally written by piano players. In rock music you often slide your finger from a black key to a white key on the piano. Usually it means that a minor third becomes a major third. This technique would be difficult on a CBA-C, but possible on a CBA-B.

19. Action

Each key of a PA is directly attached to its valve pad, and together they act as one unit. This gives a firm and direct feeling, and any rattle (present mostly in some of the older CBAs) is avoided. Modern high quality CBAs have very good and quiet actions too, only more complicated. The key depression depth is generally greater on a CBA. This provides good control over the valve pad as it is just about to open up, thus yielding a touch that is typical for the CBA. It can also be appreciated that each button on the CBA has the same feel to it. The PA allows you to choose the point along the keys where the finger is applied, thus affecting the key depression depth.

20. Barring

Barring is a term used when playing the guitar. It means that you depress more than one string on the fretboard with just one finger. Translated to the accordion it would mean: depressing more than one button with just one finger. This technique may perhaps not be used that often. You can, for instance, depress C and D simultaneously with your thumb on PA. The CBA seems to have more barring options than the PA. The uniform CBA layout always gives the same result for a certain type of barring, but note that there is a difference between CBA-B and CBA-C.

21. Sound

There is perhaps a slightly different mechanical sound when keys and buttons, respectively, are depressed or released, and this sound could also be considered an integral part of the overall sound. PAs are generally bigger, and this can make the sound boomier because lower frequencies are boosted. The differences in the arrangement of the reeds, between CBA and PA, can have an influence on the sound. Sound is, undoubtedly, a very complicated matter, and subject to personal taste. Other factors than those touched upon here may be more important; not to mention the artistic level of the performer.

22. Looks

Which one has the best looks?

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