

## Interview Antonio Serrano

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By Andrés Vicente for Harmonica Spain

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Photo: Robert Freeman

At the beginning it was a little hard because my father tried to teach us (my sister and me) formally as if we were in a class, and we didn't take it seriously. As soon as he turned his back we completely ignored what he was telling us. Those classes in the house corridor didn't last for too long. Once my father began to give classes at the Spanish School of Accordion (which became the Spanish School of Harmonica and Accordion) the things were different. There we were not the only students and the truth is that I believe that I learned quite a lot during that stage. The classes were quite atypical for the time. We played all together easy songs, some scales and arpeggios. Then there was an improvisation part that my father called "Instrument Dialogue" which consisted in one of us starting up playing whatever was going round his head at that moment and then the following student answered him, and so forth until all of us played. That was the part of the class I liked most. Nevertheless, the best thing of all was that there weren't any exam dates fixed ahead of time, but rather each one of us was examined when he believed he was prepared to. There was not a course structure as such. Instead there were 25 levels and in each level it was necessary to demonstrate certain knowledge and abilities. I have always believed, and I am not the only one, that the pedagogic system that my father designed and put into practice was something more than a method to play the harmonica. It was a whole philosophy on music learning, much more creative and gratifying than what the academies and conservatories offered then, and even today, in Spain.

What music did you enjoy playing with the harmonica in those days?

In the beginning, my main motivation was to play songs of programs that I saw on TV: Inspector Gadget, Un Dos Tres (a Spanish TV contest), The Pink Panther, etc...

Which were your main problems with the learning?

When I began to study classic pieces, originally written for other instruments, I always found some passages to be extremely more difficult than others. At that time I believed that if Mozart or Bach had written it, then it was necessary to respect it 100%. For that reason I spent a lot of time with the metronome trying to play those passages fluently. Many times I was not able to play them at the same speed as the rest of the piece, so I had to sacrifice the global tempo of the whole work. I don't think that this attitude made me improve a lot as musician, but it did allow me to know my instrument quite well. The technique that I have today is partly due to the blindness of trying to play with the harmonica something that was intended to be played with a violin, a flute etc... The first time I listened to Larry Adler, playing the Romanian Rhapsody by Enescu, I realized that it was much more intelligent and more musical to look for solutions that were appropriate for the instrument and at the same time respected the composer's fundamental idea. Larry has always achieved this with a mastery that nearly reaches genius..

What part did your father play in these processes?

At that time, I no longer received my father's classes. One can say that he gave me the basis so I could continue for myself. Apart from the harmonica, which I continued studying on my own, I went to several conservatories to study sol-fa, harmony, choral, piano, violin and percussion. As it is usually said, "apprentice of a lot, teacher of nothing". This is what I am, but I don't care. Furthermore, I like it, and I even recommend it. I believe that playing many instruments, even if it is just a little bit, provides many satisfactions. You cannot imagine the pleasure I get by playing in the piano a Re (D) together with a Mi (E). It is just like being blowing and drawing at the same time. It's so cool, isn't it?

Has there been any influential musician in your way of playing the harmonica or in your way of appreciating the music??

All the musicians that I have played with have influenced me in one way or another. Also those that I have listened to live or on records have had a lot of influence in my playing approach. Without thinking too much, I believe that harmonically I have been greatly influenced by my father, Larry Adler, Toots Thielemans, Stevie Wonder and Sonny Boy Williamson. In the musical side, the list is very long but Bach, Parker, Miles, Coltrane, Piazzolla, Paco de Lucía, the aforesaid harmonica players, and a long list etc comes to my mind&hellip;

As a harmonica musician:

We frequently see in debate forums different postures, both for and against single hole and tongue blocking. Then, which is your preference in using the circular or elliptic embouchure on the chromatic Harmonica? And in which circumstances?

I usually play a lot as single hole. Undoubtedly when I want to play octaves, double notes or triads, I change to an elliptic mouth. I try not to abuse the harmonic resources of the instrument because they are very difficult to fit, at least in a Jazzy context. Sometimes the difficulty lies in that there is that succession of thirds that you would want to make in which there is an impossible one (e.g., Eb and G) and without that one, the idea is incomplete. Another serious problem is the tuning. Chromatic harmonicas are tuned at 442 and in Jazz tuning is usually made at 440. If, in addition, the harmonica is not in perfect condition, the chords of 2 and 3 notes are very likely to sound out of tune. Nevertheless you just have to listen to Larry Adler to see that these "theories" collapse at once. I believe that Larry is the person who has taken the most advantage of this somewhat mysterious aspect of the chromatic harmonica.

When you play scales, arpeggios, or musical pieces, do you use only the "C"s from holes 5 and 9, or do you also use holes 4 and 8? Do you use enharmonic notes when you play certain phrases to make them smoother? (that is to say, to use B# instead of blowing in C or E# instead of drawing F). Could you tell us if regarding these two topics you use some personal technique?

First of all, I would summarize the three questions in one:

When there are several ways of playing the same note, which of them do you opt for?

Well, now that I only have one question to answer I don't know what to say. What a mess! It is difficult to answer this question because it is not only a purely technical question, but it also has a lot to do with phrasing. If we speak about phrasing we enter into a very subjective and personal topic in which each master has his own secrets. Which are my secrets? I don't even know it myself!. I'm going to play for a while to see if I can find something out...

I continue without having a convincing answer, but I have realized that I more often use the C5 and the C9 than the 4 and 8. In the holes 4 and 8 I play B #, if I come from a B (maybe to make the phrase more fluent/tied up?). I believe that the best advice that I can give on this topic, is that when scales and arpeggios are studied, different possibilities should be attempted and then each person will choose the one that sounds better for him and that is easier to play. At least that is what I did at the beginning. Little by little those decisions become unconscious, and if it is clear for you how you want play a passage, then you go automatically to the appropriate C or F. A very important thing is to know in which C you are. It is useless to say: "Ok, as there are two Cs together, I sure won't fail". Because if you're not sure about which C you have played, it is very unlikely that you will find the following note.

The Slide can receive lubrication to soften the movement of the mechanism, and this reduce the fatigue after many minutes of use. Do you use some?

To make sure that the slide moves gently, and above all, that it doesn't get blocked, the best thing is that all the parts the mouthpiece assembly is composed of are clean. A regular cleaning from time to time would be enough. Sometimes I won't clean it for a long time and it begins to fail. In those cases what I do is: at the time of playing I put some saliva on the button. This is a bad habit that of course I don't recommend to anybody, but it can get you out of trouble at that moment. The drawback that it has, apart from being a "guarrerida española" is that much of that saliva filters into the wood and in the spring area. With time, the spring goes rusty and it eventually breaks.

Many musicians of the chromatic use the thumb to move the slide, an example is Mauricio Einhorn. Others use the index finger. What is your opinion to this respect?

I use the index finger because I was taught this way, but I don't believe there is a "correct" form of working the slide. I have observed that using the last phalange of the index finger (like Larry), you have more control of the hand vibrato. On the other hand, if you use the nearest phalange of the hand (like Toots), you get less tired and you can get more speed. There being only one button, I don't think that it is so important with which finger you use to push it.

Do you apply in some occasions techniques of circular breathing, as some wind instrumentalists do?

When I

was 12 or 13 I was practicing the circular breathing, more for curiosity than for any other reason. It is a technique that can suit instruments well in which you only blow. I don't think it helps a lot when playing the harmonica. Maybe it is useful to make some effects and to "get the attention of the audience", although personally I believe that it is necessary to escape from those effects, more appropriate for a circus than music.

The maintenance that the chromatic harmonica requires are constant. What attention do you pay to yours?

The truth is that I almost don't do anything to them. The regular cleaning from time to time, I change some valves if it is necessary, and if the spring is broken and I have some spares I will change it. Apart from this, I sometimes adjust some reeds that have moved a little. To tune and change reeds is a subject that I have been postponing for a long time. I'm soooo lazy about this....

When you play the chromatic harmonica, do you use harmonicas tuned in keys other than C?

Until

recently, I have always used a chromatic in C (when I began, 4 octaves. For 6 years, 3 octaves). Now I am beginning to play with a G and with C tenor. The reason for the change is that I miss the notes that there are under the central C, and also the higher notes in the instrument sound somewhat screechy to me. So I sacrifice high-pitched notes in exchange for low ones.

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