COMPOSER'S HANDBOOK

FOR

THE CLASSICAL ACCORDION

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HANDBOOK FOR CLASSICAL ACCORDION NOTATION

(with sincere thanks to my colleagues Geir Draugsvoll and Erik Højsgaard who together provided the basis of this material in the Danish language)

Contents

Introduction – The Classical Accordion

The classical accordion evolved during the early part of the 20th Century and was developed and standardized in the early 1950's. It is also known as the free-bass accordion, accordéon de concert, accordéon classique, klassische akkordeon, bajan and modern concert accordion amongst other more exotic names.

The difference between a classical accordion and the more familiar traditional accordion is not clearly visible to the eye as it involves the mechanics within the left side of the instrument. (Many people relate the difference to having a button or piano keyboard on the right side of the instrument – this is incorrect - both a button accordion and a piano accordion have the potential to become a classical accordion.)

The classical accordion has the possibility to switch from the well known but rather restrictive 'oom-pah pah' pre-fixed chord system in the left hand to a single tone manual keyboard – creating a mirror image of the right hand. The potential of having two single-tone manuals, both with a tonal range of well over seven octaves, has created a whole new repertoire for the instrument from Baroque transcriptions through to the growing number of original works written by today's leading composers.

Classical accordions are today predominantly made with chromatic button keyboards on both sides of the instrument due to the superior tonal range and technical possibilities this allows. The majority of composers have written with this specific instrument in mind. The shape and form of it is also inspired by the traditional Russian 'bajan' which gives the player a more ergonomic playing position. Having played on both the piano accordion (from 1971-1984) and the classical (button) accordion since 1983

The accordion has during the last few decades established itself in international music life. This can best be documented by the large number of works written for the instrument by many of today's most prominent composers including Gubaidulina, Denisov, Berio, Kagel, Huber, Birtwistle, Adés, Yun, Lindberg, Globokar, Nørgård, Tüür, Aho, Beamish etc

In short the increasingly expanding original repertoire together with its acceptance as a legitimate instrument for study at most European Music Academies is paving the way for an exciting future for the classical accordion.

Notation

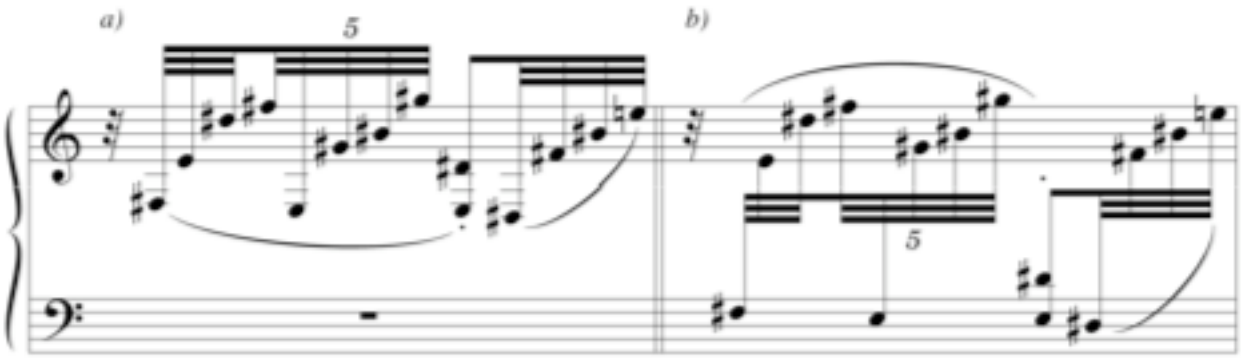
The classical accordion with its single-tone bass keyboard is a relatively recent development and therefore does raise certain questions regarding notation. Even though a standardization of notation exists it is more often than not the case that this is misunderstood or disregarded! The main reason for this could be the fact that there does not exist any handbook on how to compose for the instrument. This handbook has been created to give a short, precise and informative overview of the notation possibilities

A classical accordion score should always be written in *exact pitch notation* (see page 22).
The two keyboards should be notated on two staves, where the right hand is on the upper stave and the left hand on the lower stave:

Right-hand

Left-hand

It should be noted however that *cross staff* notation (i.e. notes belong to one stave which through practicality is notated in another stave) is NOT idiomatic for the classical accordion.
In the following example *a)* should be chosen instead of *b)*

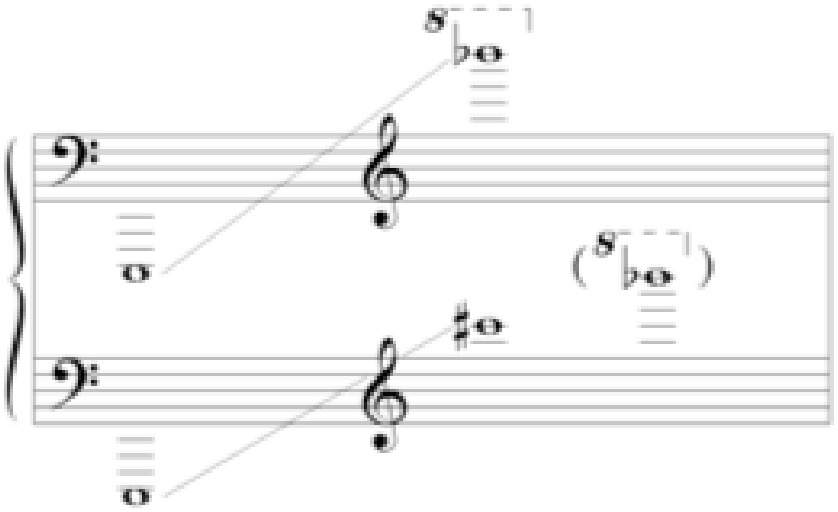


Tonal Range

This varies slightly from instrument to instrument (size, maker etc), but the majority of concert instruments made today have the following tonal range:

Right-hand: Contra E → b-flat’’’’
Left-hand: Contra E → c-sharp’’’

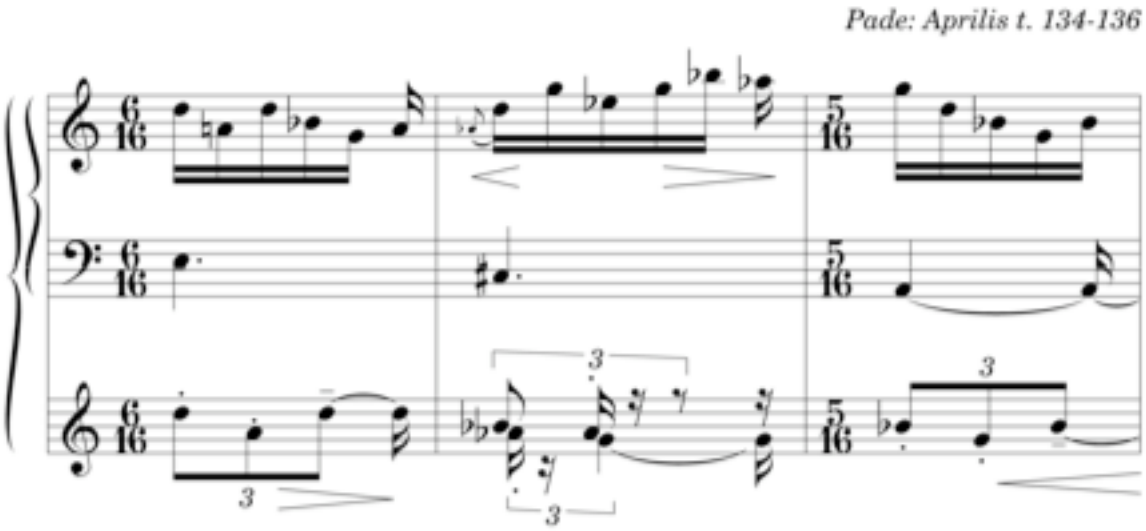
A growing number of instruments now have registration possibilities in the left-hand which extends the tonal range from Contra E to b-flat’’’’, which creates two identical keyboards in tonal range:



The Keyboards

Right-hand
On button-instruments the right-hand can play chords stretching over nearly 3 octaves It is however recommended that chords in general to not expand over 2.5 octaves in range. On piano-keyboard instruments it is normal to stretch up to a1 octave and a fourth:

Right-hand



Left-hand

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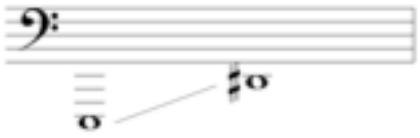
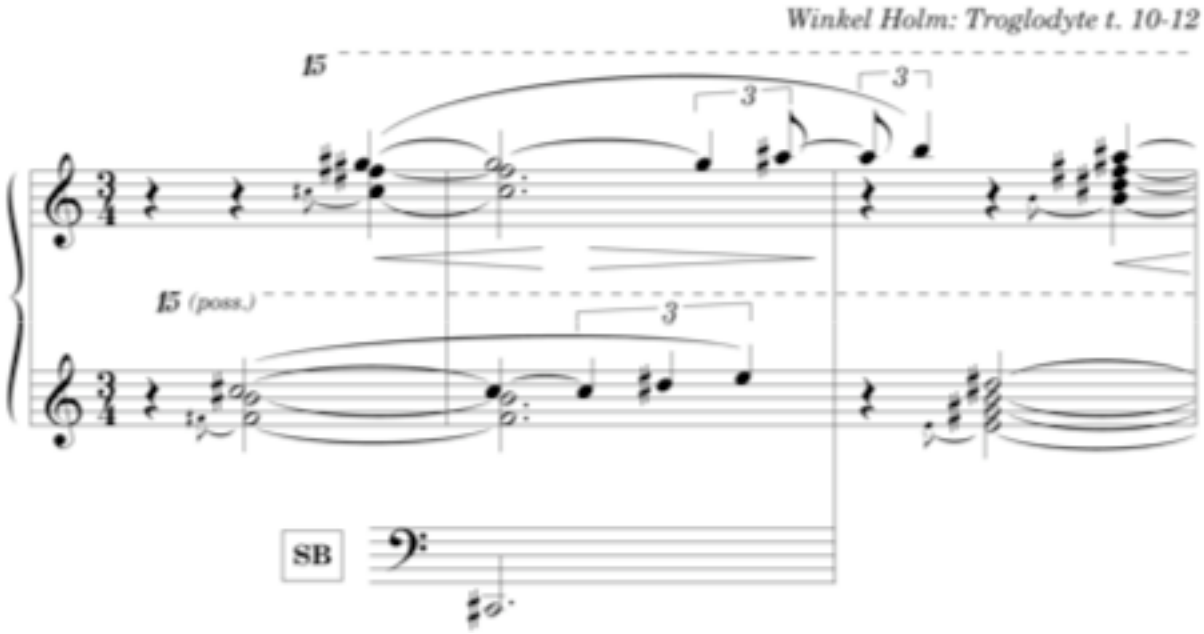
Left-hand: Single-tone keyboard (Free-bass)
The left hand side of the instrument is constructed in a way that makes it very difficult to use the thumb. Therefore it is recommended to use chords with only 4 notes. The player does not have the same technical possibilities as in the right hand mainly because the left hand moves the bellows and is restricted in hand movement. Virtuosic passages and large jumps are not idiomatic in the left hand. It is normal to play chords stretching up to 1 octave and a fourth.

However the very deepest octave can be played over the whole keyboard as this octave also exists in the two inner-rows:



Therefore it is possible to spread a chord as much as you like, if the deepest octave is use and the other tones are kept within a 1 octave + fourth radius:



If the two inner-rows are to be used then this should be notated with:

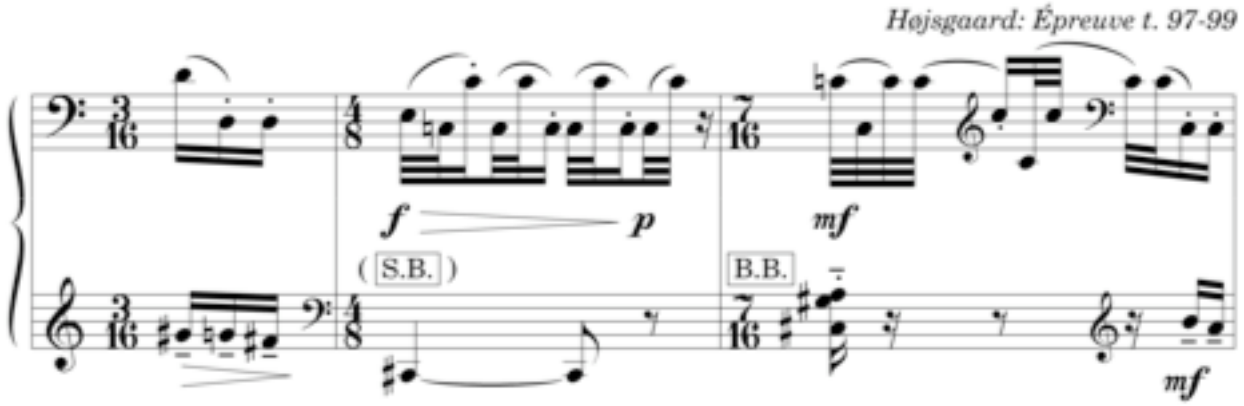
S.B.

or, to show that the chord system is not to be used:

(S.B.)

and when returning to the melody bass manual:

B.B.

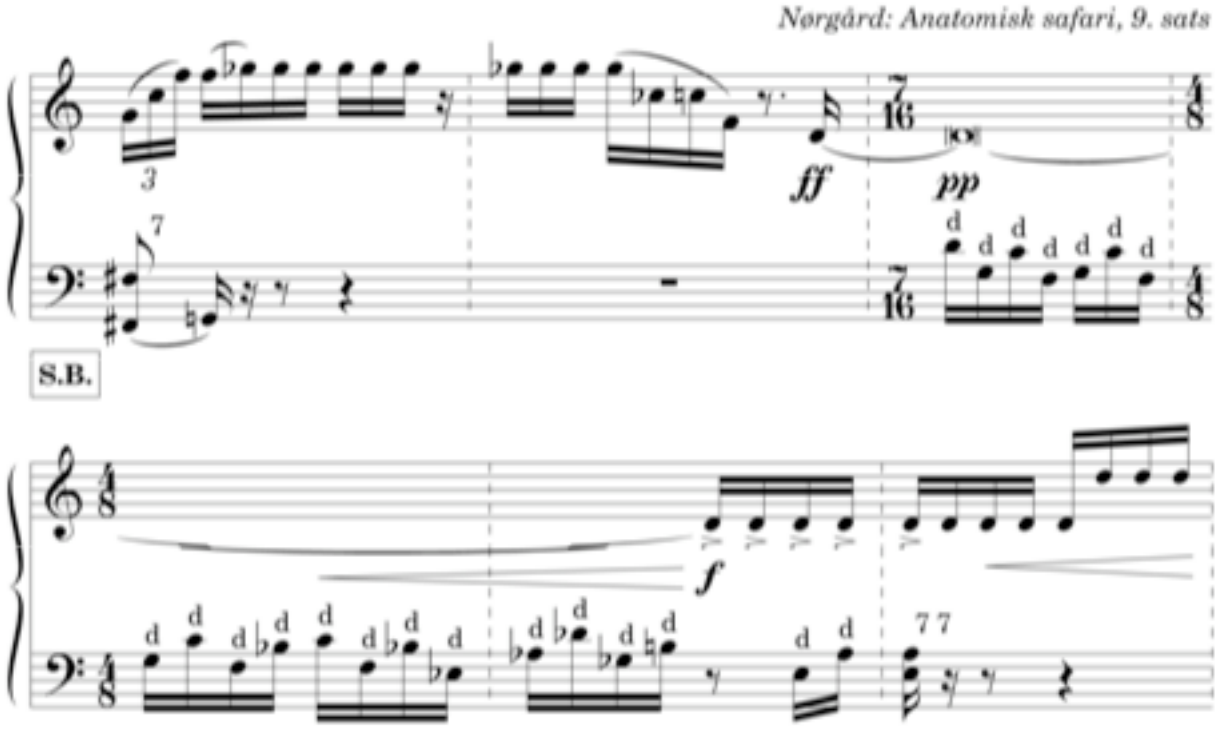


If passages are to be played over the tonal range of c-sharp’’’, then the player must change to the 2-foot register. With the 2-foot register it is possible to in the tonal area. N.B it usually takes 1 second to change to and from all registers in the left-hand and this transition-time should be taken into account.

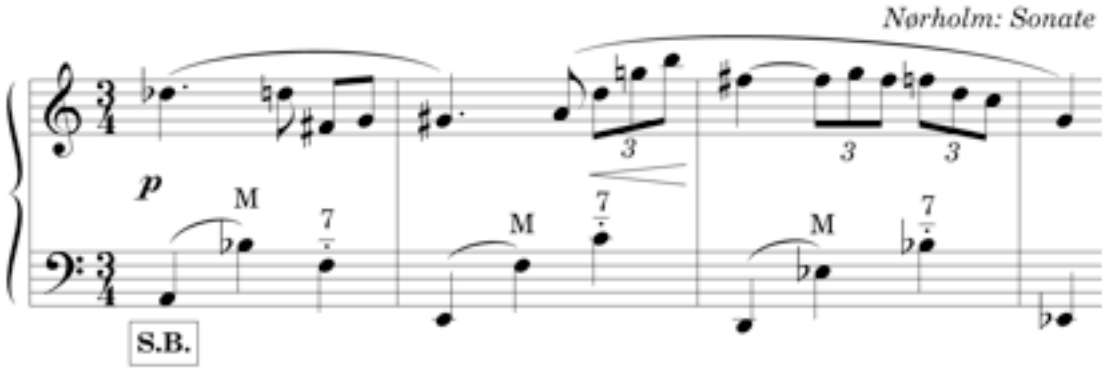
Left-hand: Standard-bass keyboard (pre-fixed chords)
The Standard-bass keyboard is notated with

S.B.

In addition to the single-tone keyboard there is a possibility with the help of a mechanical switch to change the keyboard completely to the so-called standard bass system with pre-fixed Major, minor, Dominant 7th and diminished chords.
Symbols for those chords are:
Major: M
Minor: m
Dominant 7th: 7
Diminished 7^{th}: d or dim



In combination with the chords it is also possible to play single bass tones creating the well-known *oom-pah-pah* effect.



Sound

The instrument and has no resonance effect. Contrary to most keyboard instruments the accordion's sound is most closely related to the woodwind family.

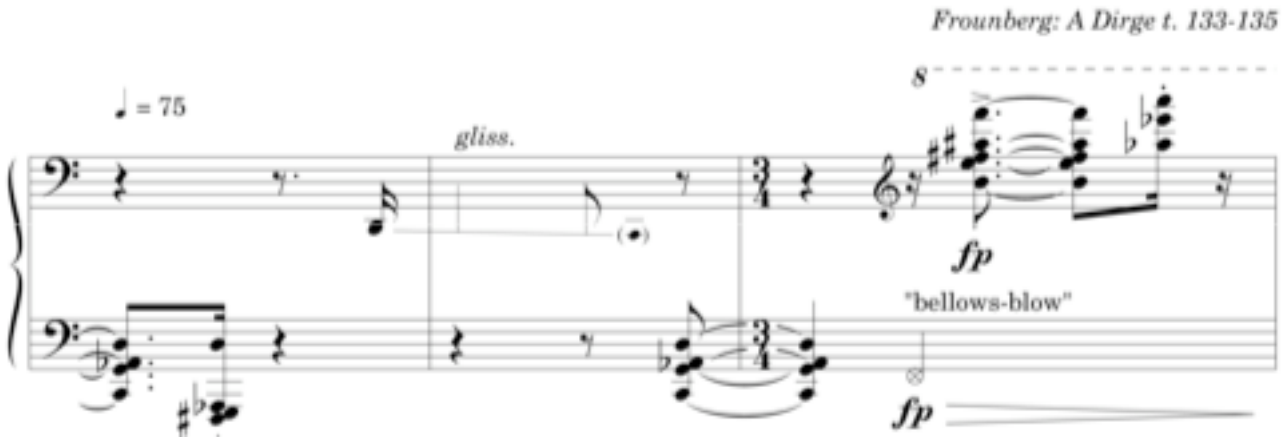
Dynamics

The accordion has only one below and therefore in principle the same dynamic at any one time applies to both keyboards. This can be counteracted by the use of different registration on both keyboards to favour one keyboard or to create the balance desired. The instruments reeds have small sound chambers, and these have as mentioned before no resonance effect. Therefore even though the instrument can sound expressive and loud in smaller halls, it cannot carry sound any distance in the largest of concert halls or in drier acoustics.

The bellows controls both keyboards dynamics at the same time and in general the lower note dominates. This can be changed to a degree through the use of registers.

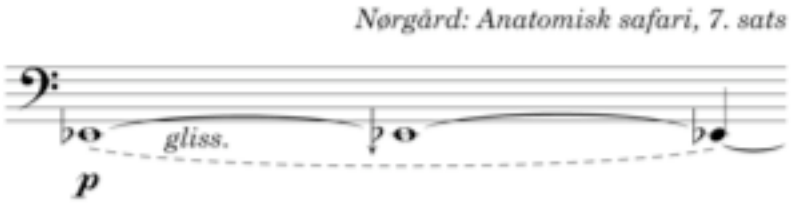
Glissando

Tone-glissandi function best in the right hand. It should be notated whether the tone the glissando ends on should be played. If not then a note (reduced in size and in brackets) should be notated to show where the glissando should end.

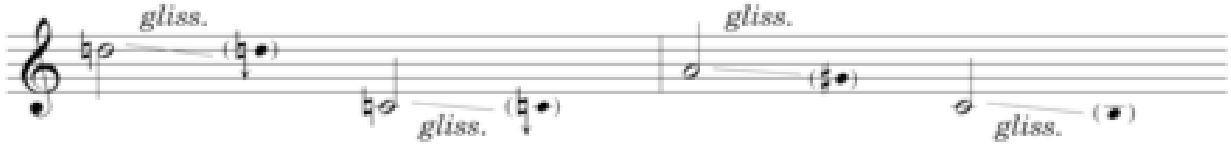


An upward glissando needs time to prepare and is limited in it's effect and range. It is therefore much more common and practical to produce glissandi downwards.

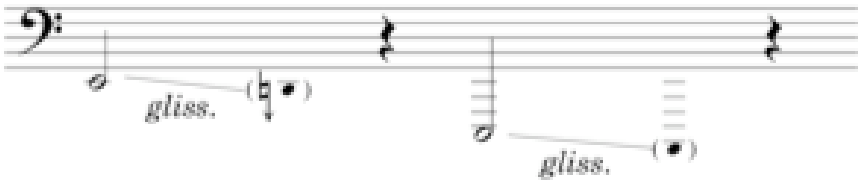
However a downward glissando can be continuously followed by the glissando going back to the original tone:



As a rule writing glissandi above d'' should be avoided. It is extremely rare for tones in this register to bend further than a diminished second. The range of a glissando will vary depending on the instrument. In the high register from c' – d'' a glissando can be experienced as a quarter tone and should be notated accordingly:

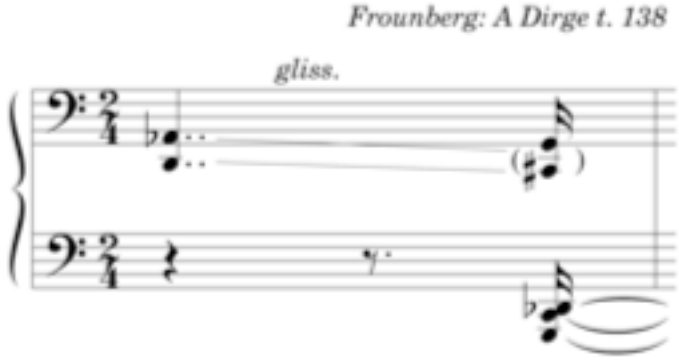


In the deepest register it is possible to make a very controlled glissando around a major third. The ending of the glissando should be specified clearly either with a tone in brackets or without any pitch:



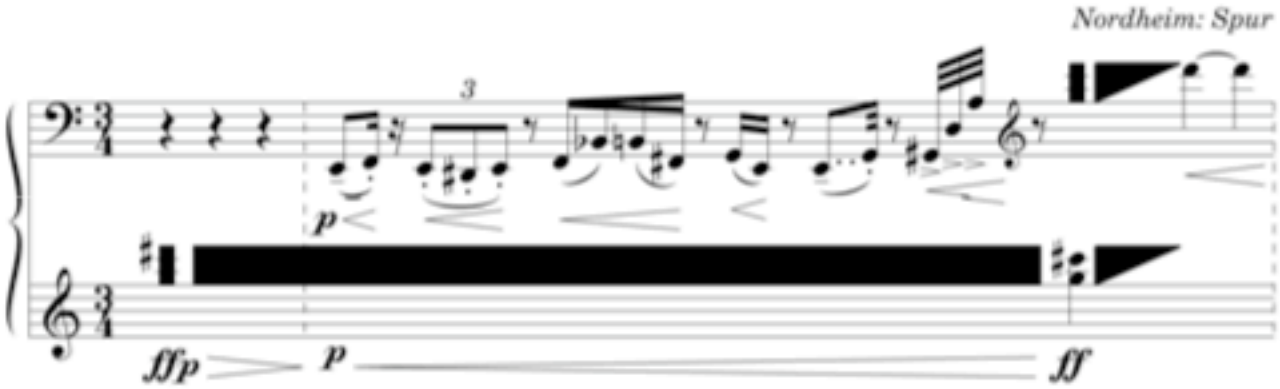
Writing glissandi in the lefthand above c' should be avoided. The deeper tonal range dramatically improves the glissando effect, although less so than in the right hand. Common for both keyboards is the fact that preparation time is a key factor to take into account.

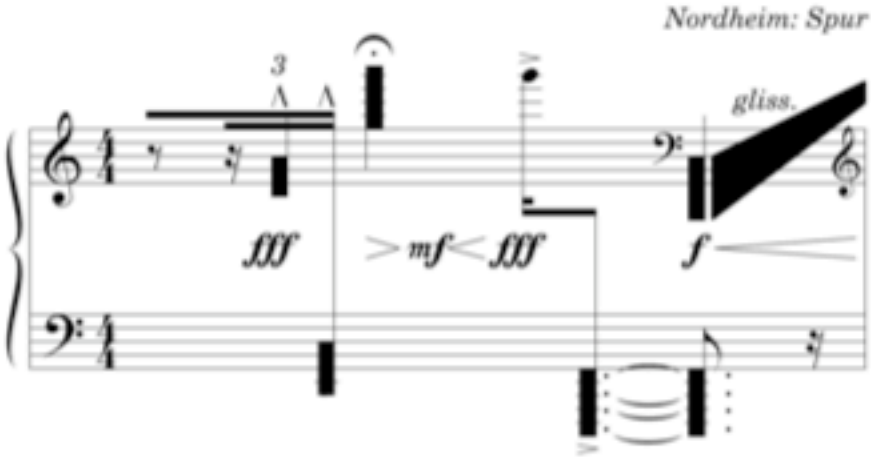
Glissandi can be performed with max. two tones at any one time:



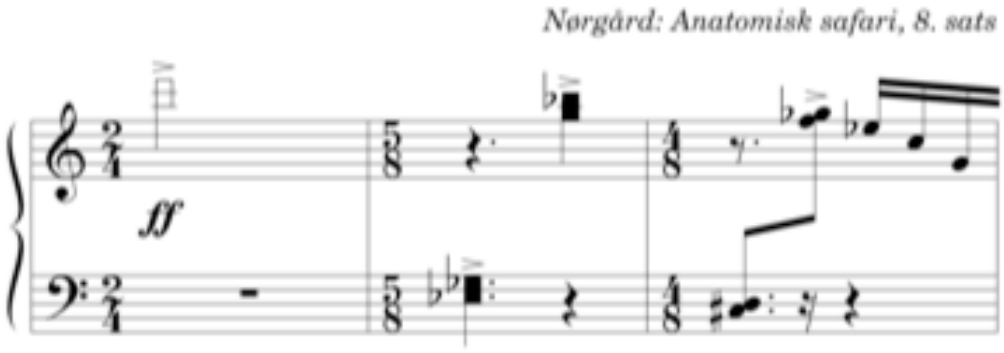
Clusters

Clusters are notated with black (filled) rectangles within the highest and deepest tonal range of the cluster:





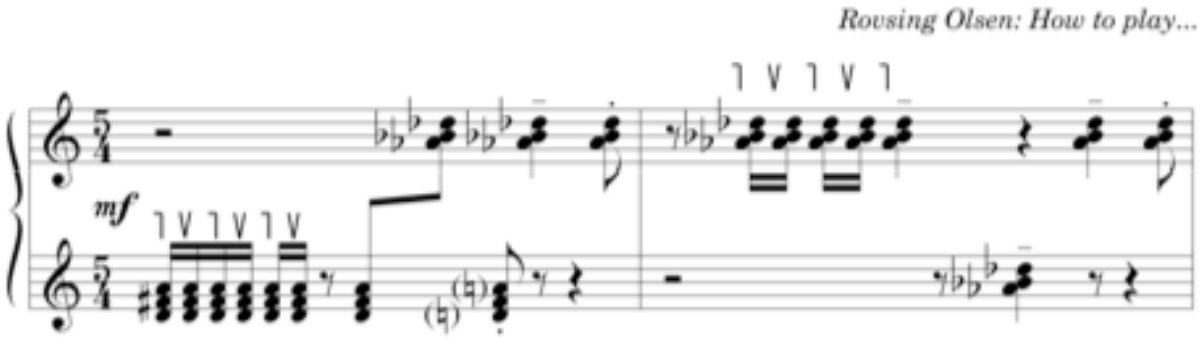
A cluster can be notated with a white rectangle if the length of the note is longer than minim:



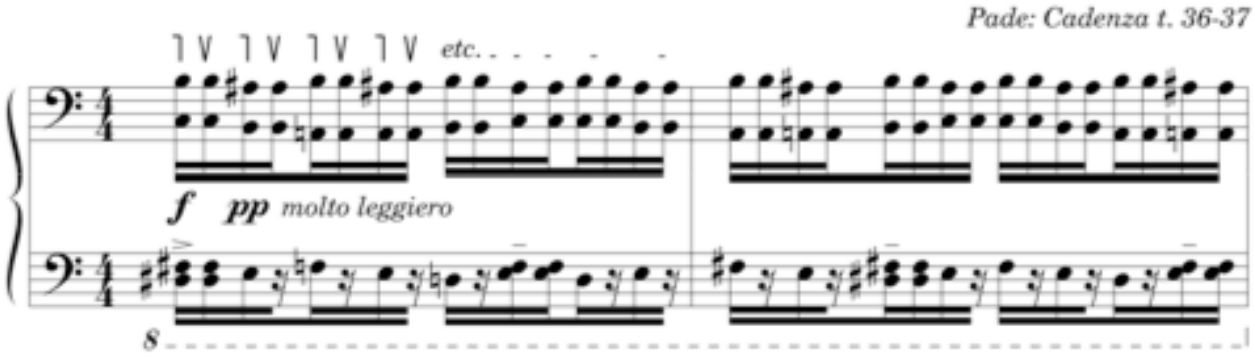
Bellows shake

Bellows shake (rhythmic bellow-movement) can be notated with the following symbols for the out and in movements of the bellows:

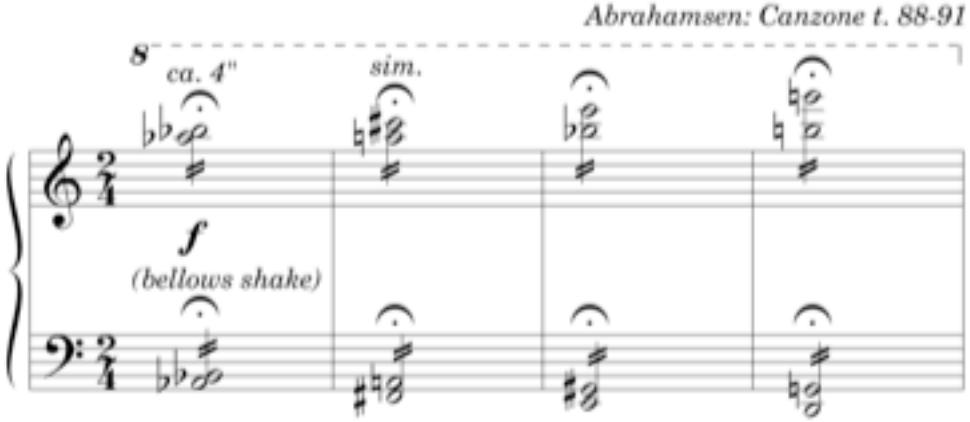
= out = in



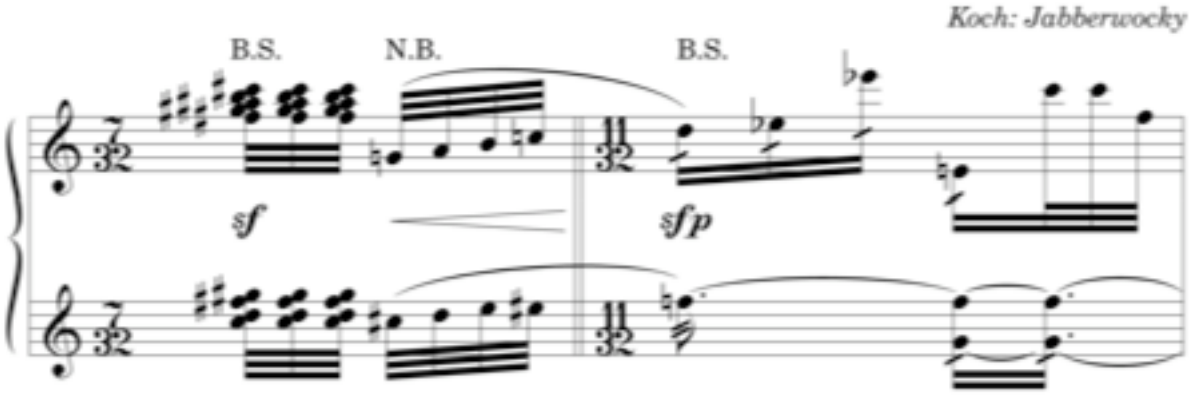
A prolonged bellow shake is notated as *sim. B.S.*, *B.S. sempre*, *B.S. etc.* or something similar:



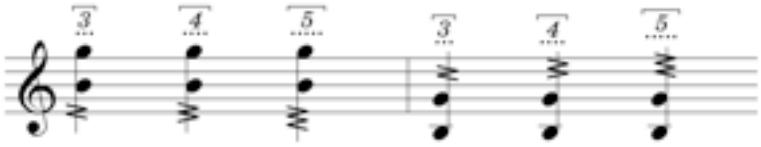
If the effect is to be played as fast as possible then a tremolo is notated under B.S.



To change from B.S. to normal bellows is notated with N.B. (natural bellows).

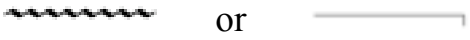


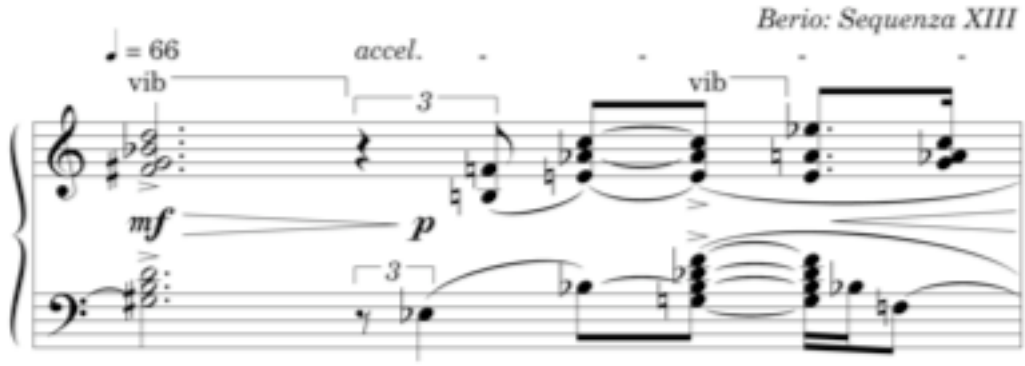
Ricochet is a bellow-movement, which is similar to bellow-shakes. The number of tones used in a ricochet is typically from 3-5. Ricochet is notated as follows:

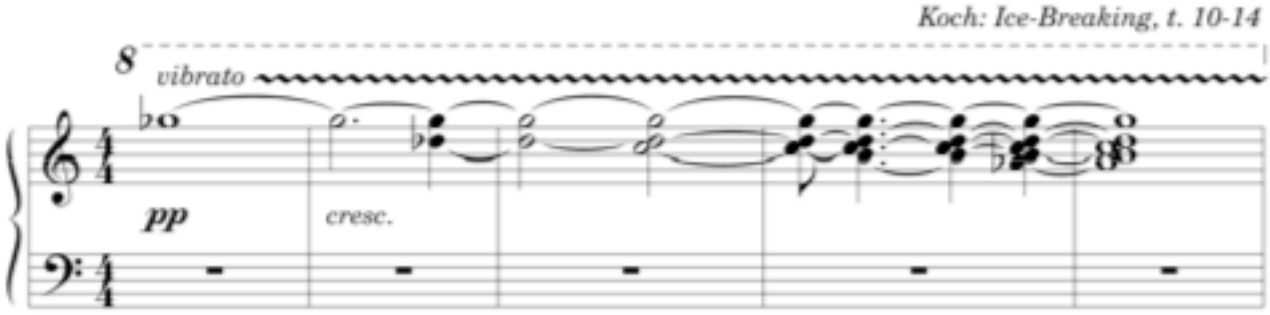


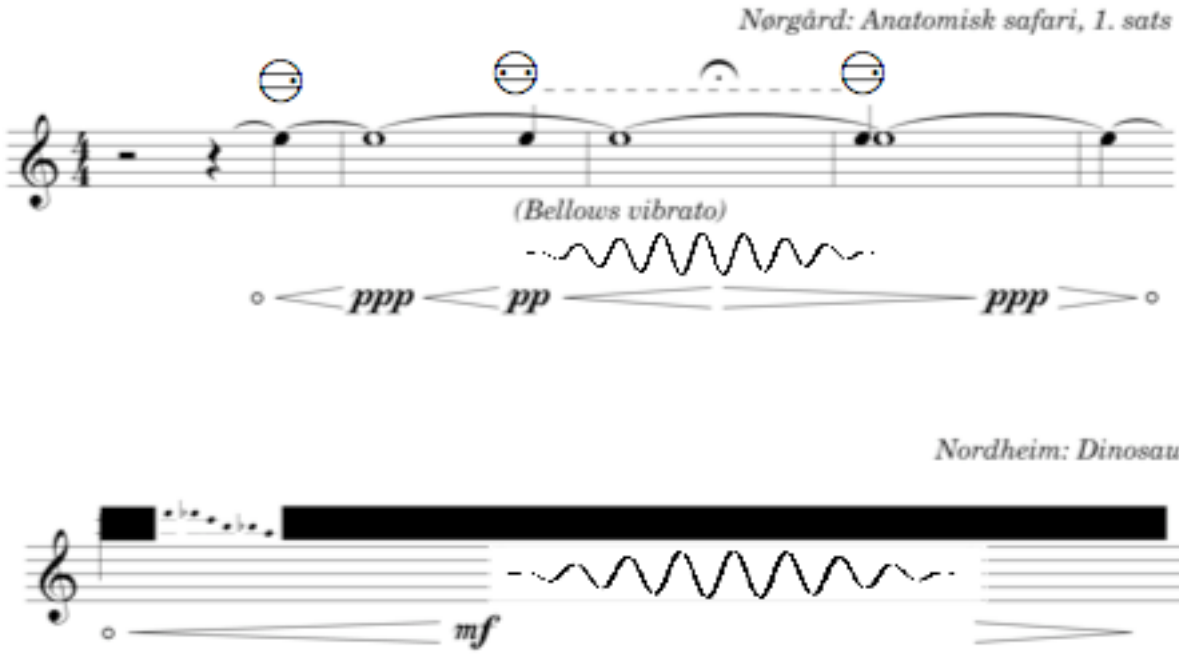
Vibrato

Vibrato can be notated like:

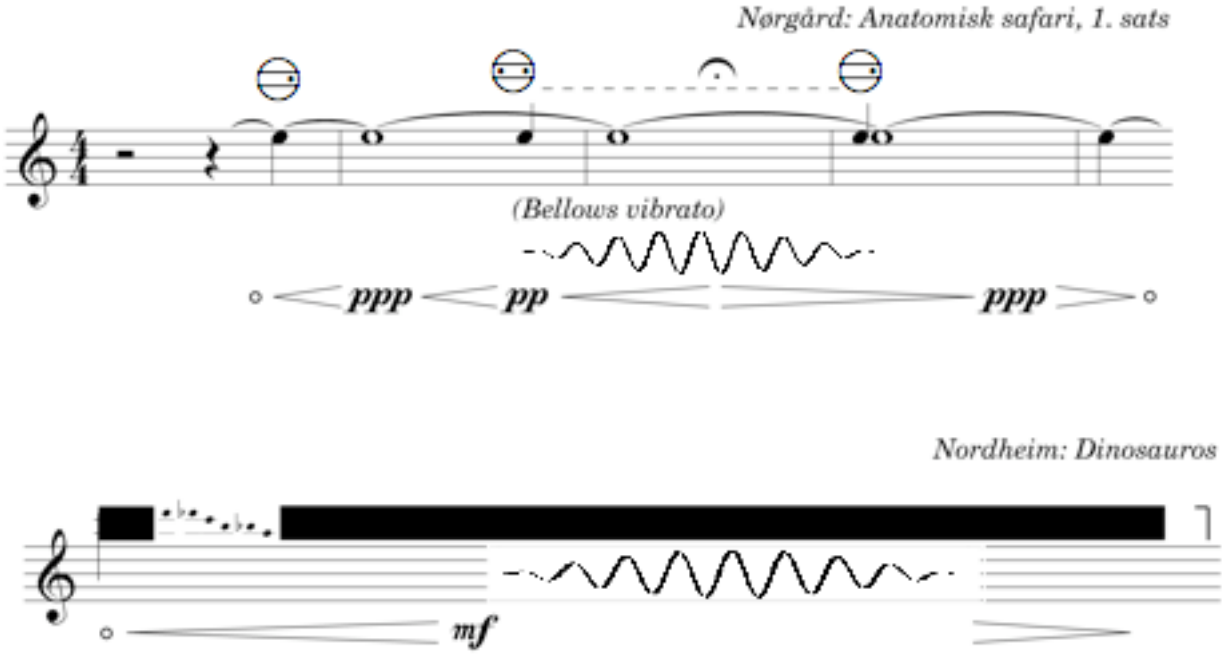
 or







It is also possible to notate precisely the vibratos range and depth:

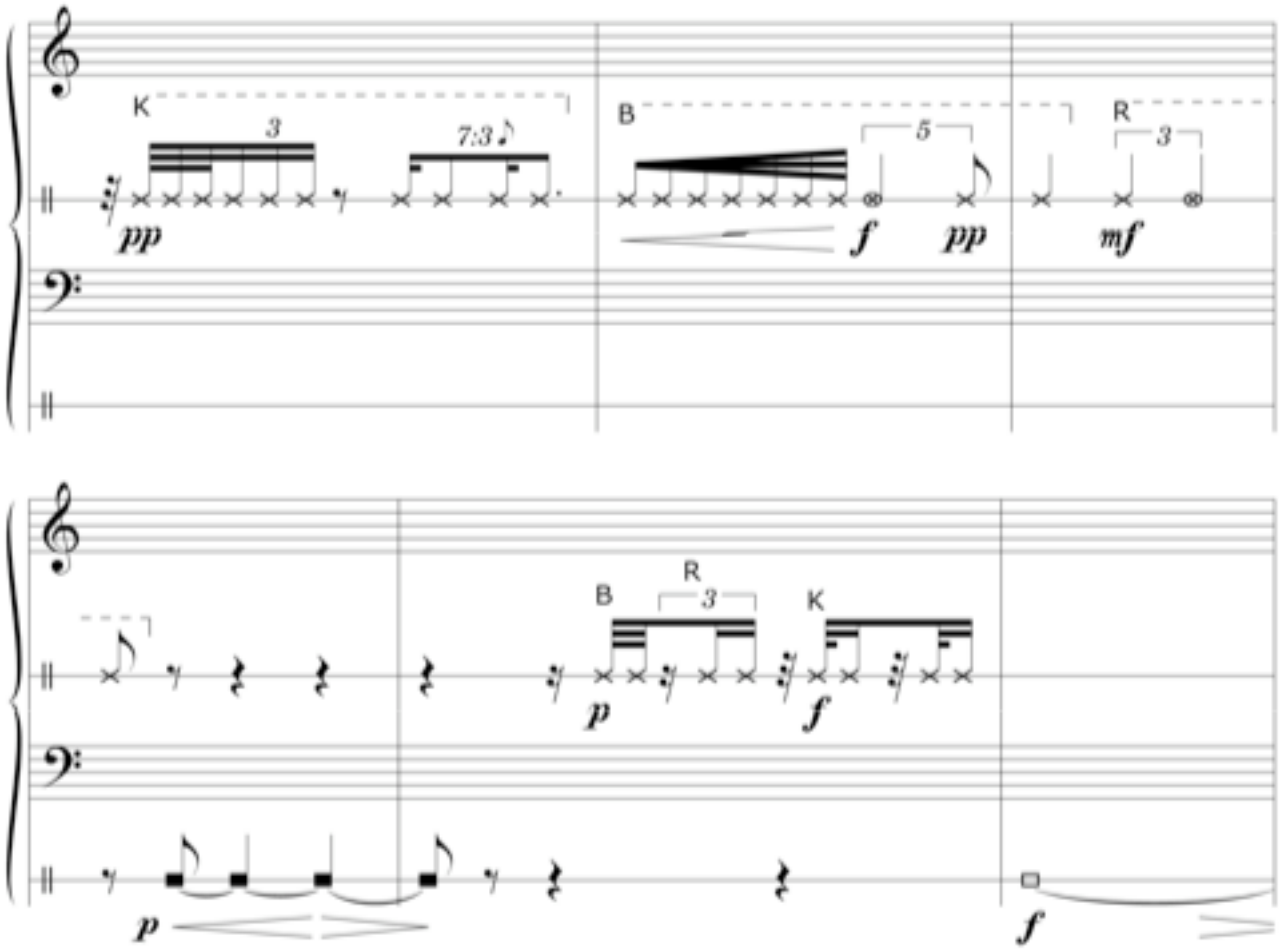


Pitchless sounds

There are four types of pitchless sounds that are often used: air button, button noise, hitting of the bellows and change of register clicking.

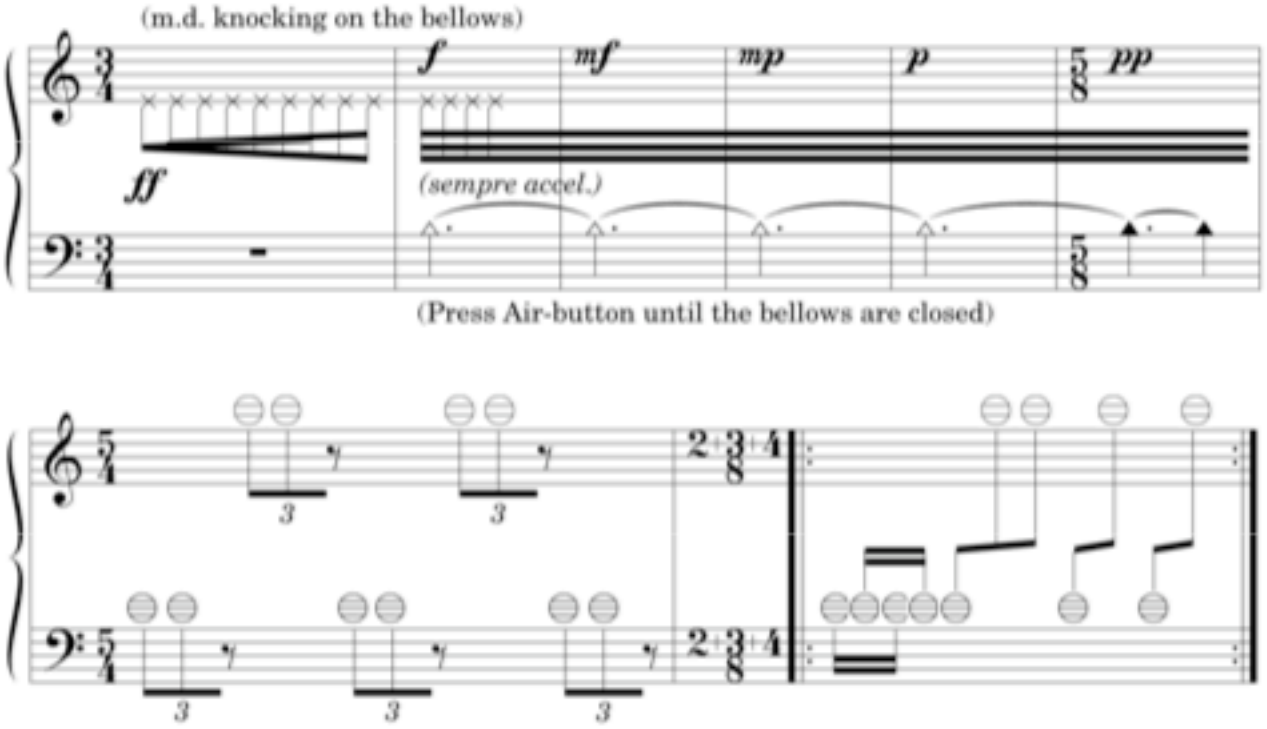
The air noise is performed with the left hand where the air button is situated and most of the other noises are made with the right hand. Therefore it can be practical to notate the air sounds in the left hand and other pitchless noises in the right hand.
Alternative noteheads can be used and are idiomatic especially if the use of a normal five-lined stave is preferred. Air sound is often notated in many different ways – a rectangular notehead is recommended.

Capital letters can be used to inform which pitchless sound is to be used: K (Keyboard), B (Bellows), R (Register). Those sounds are often notated with an ‘x’ as the notehead, a notation which is also used with other instruments. The ‘x’ can also be encircled so that the length of a minim and longer can be notated precisely.

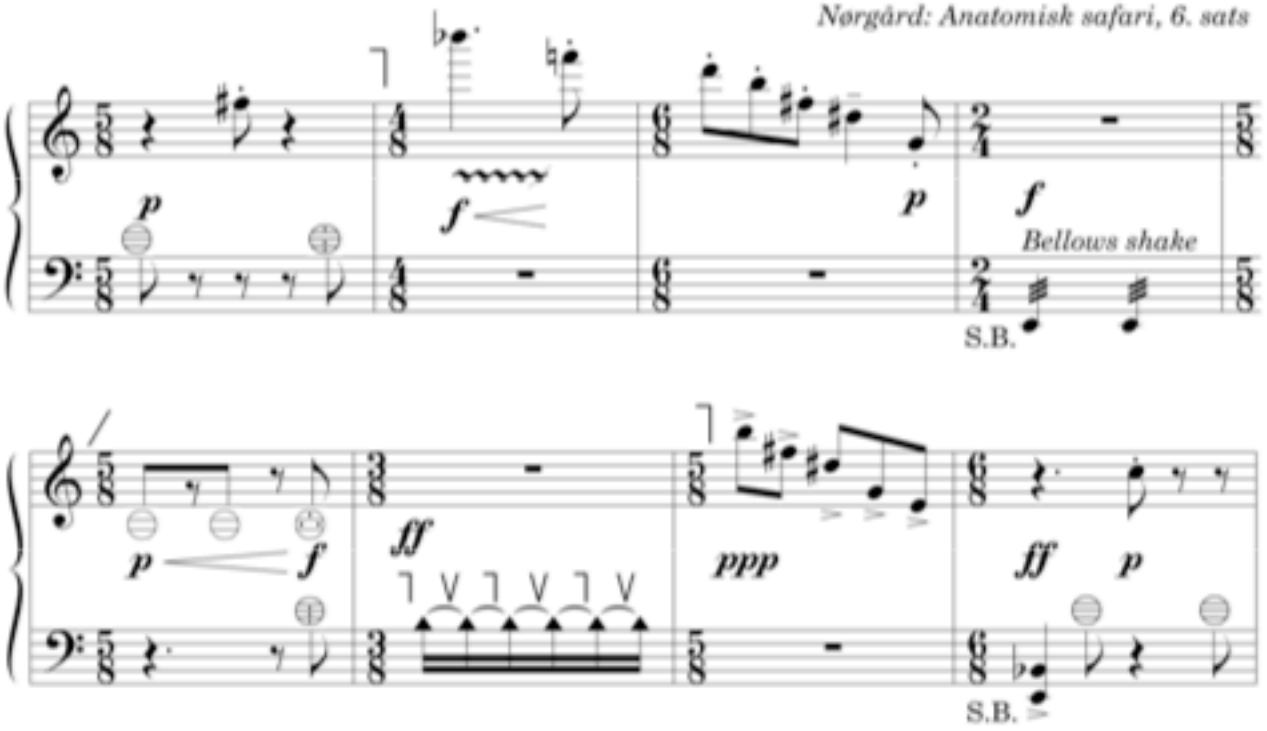


The following examples underline the need for a universal notation:

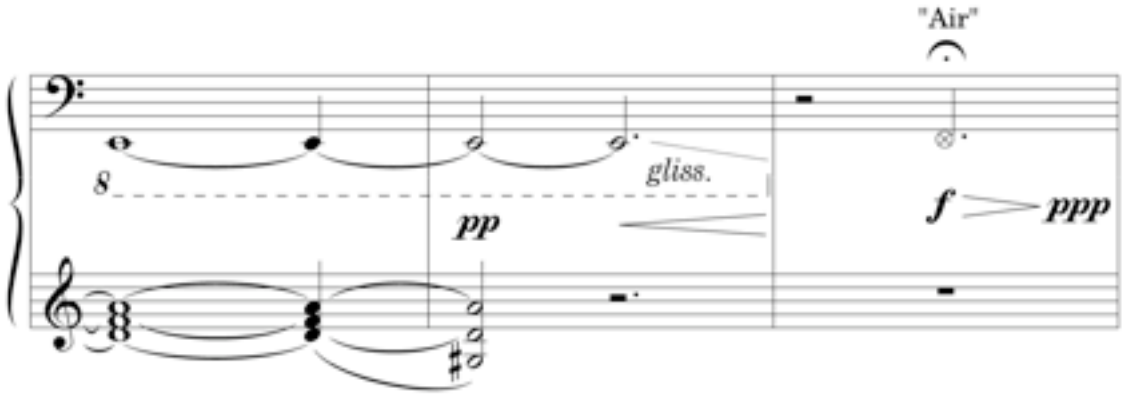
Nordheim: Dinosauros



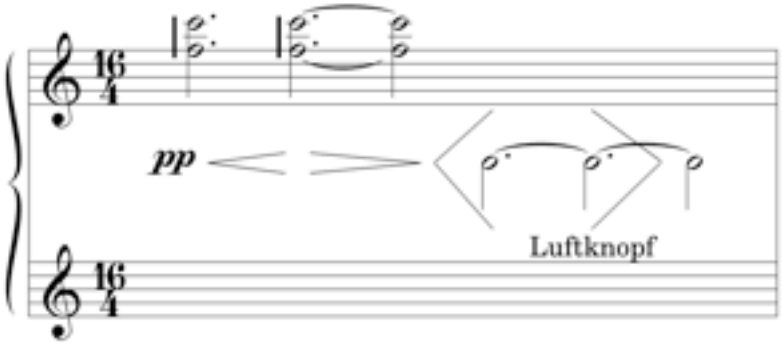
Nørgård: Anatomisk safari, 6. sats



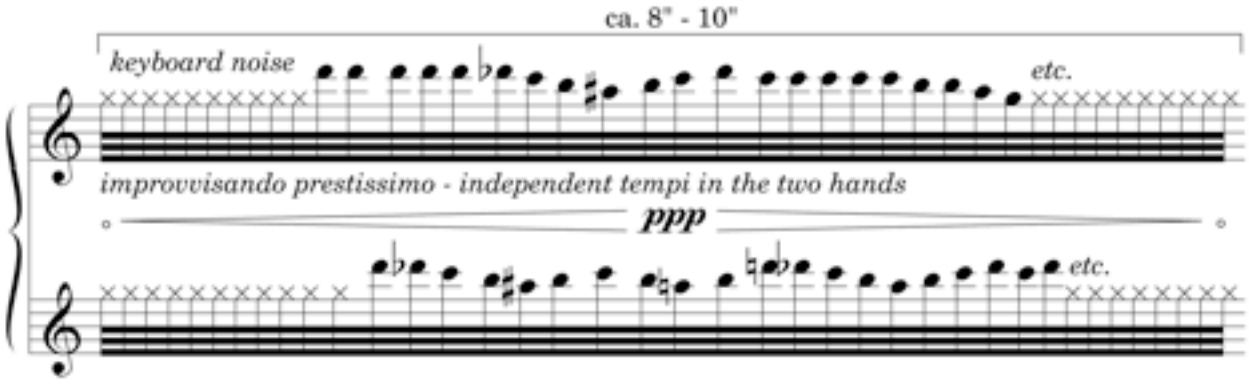
Koch: Jabberwocky t. 145-147



Gubaidulina: Et Exspecto

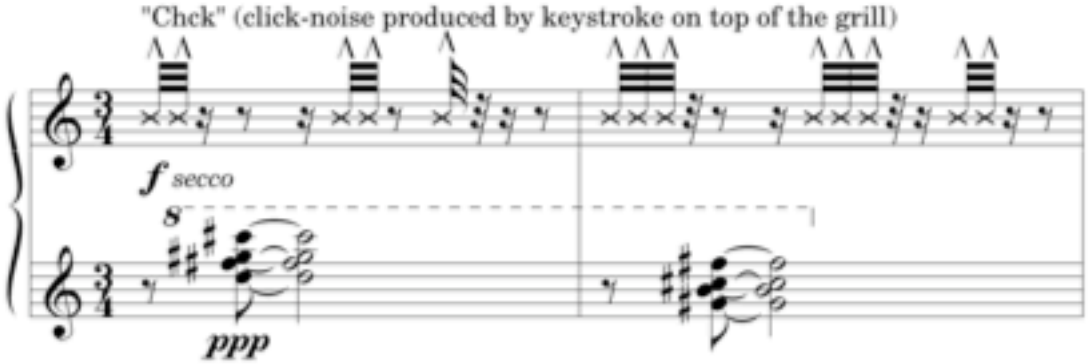


Nørgård: Anatomisk safari, 4. sats

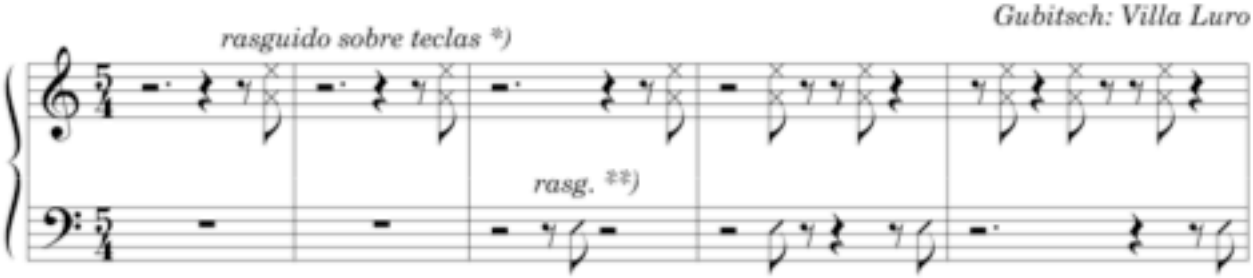


Murray Schafer: La testa d'Adriane

Winkel Holm: Troglodyte t. 2-3



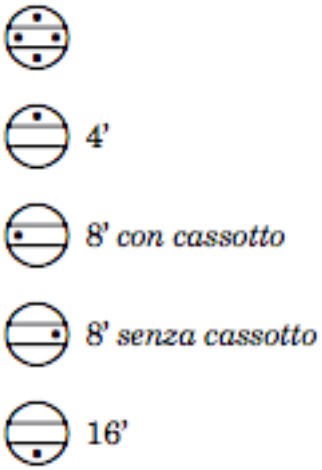
Gubitsch: Villa Luro



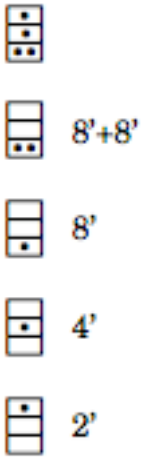
*) Tap on the fingerboard with the nails of the right hand (like a rasgado)
**) Tap on the resonating chamber with the left forefinger (imitation of bongo)

Registration

Registers are similar to the stops of an organ. In the right hand a circle split in 3 layers is used as the register symbol and always notated above the stave:



In the left hand a 3-layered vertical standing rectangle symbol is more favoured than the triangular symbol and is always notated under the stave:

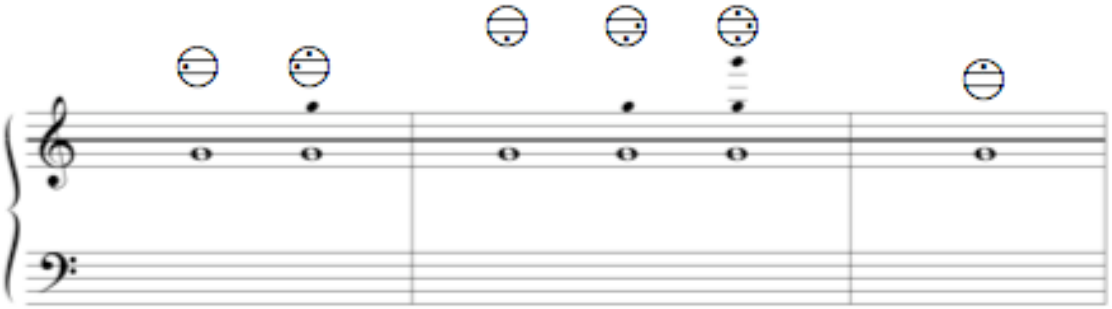


Exact pitch notation

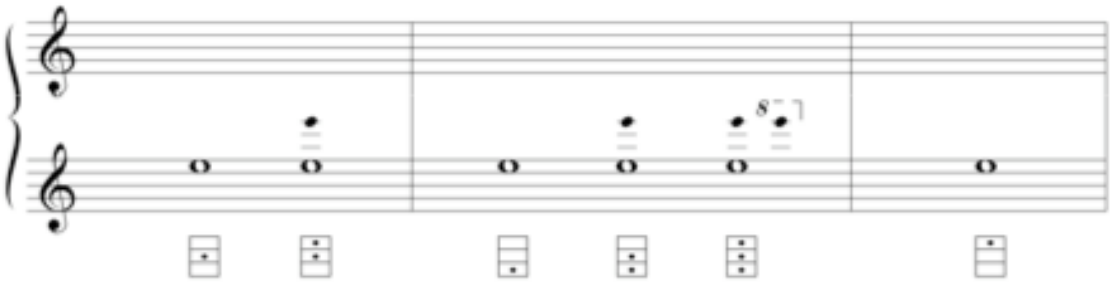
Accordion music scored in ‘exact pitch notation means that a tone – just like on the piano – should be played where it sounds no matter what register is used. This means that the use of octave signs above the 16’register is unnecessary.

The examples below show which octaves sound with a single reed playing and with the different combinations of reeds:

Right-hand



Left-hand



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Universal Edition

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Nordheim, Arne - *Spur (1975)*
Edition Wilhelm Hansen

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Edition Wilhelm Hansen

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