

My brief description of Deschamps Accordion Technique

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This is an entry in the journal of my experience spending one month studying accordion with the famous accordion pedagogue Frederic Deschamps. You can see all of the posts in this series here. A very special thank you to Craig Hollingsworth for editing this for me.

Would you like a beautiful sound from your accordion? Would you like fast and clean technique in both hands? Would you love to tap deeper into your emotions and let them be expressed in every aspect of your music?

I know I would, and I imagine so would most accordionists. The technique of Frederic Deschamps can give you all of these, and much more. (If you want to hear Deschamps explain these ideas in his own words, see <https://accordionlife.com/course/deschamps-technique/> .

What is the Deschamps Technique?

The technique is the invention of French accordionist and pedagogue Frederic Deschamps, and from his work preparing for the 1992 Coupe Mondial. In preparation for the Coupe Mondial, Deschamps made discoveries and systems to apply those discoveries.

Although this is called the Deschamps Technique, I find that the term “technique” for me connotes only one or a couple movements, whereas my experience is that the Deschamps Technique is a whole cycle or eco-system for the relationship between the accordionist and the accordion.

Of course, his work is not 100% new and builds off an approach to the accordion referred to as ‘accordion wind instrument approach’, as well as his observations and experiences with other accordionists.

The ‘accordion wind instrument’ approach is something that I can’t find very much about online. I know from talking to Fred that one of the early major pedagogues of this approach was André Thepax. There must be books or articles written on the subject, but I can’t find them with my English only Google skills. When I do get ahold of stuff, I’ll write about it and publish here on RebelReed. This approach works equally well for all accordions: piano, button, chromatic, diatonic, stradella, free bass, C system, B system.

Please note that these posts are like a journal of my time, and will probably express my progression of understanding the Deschamps Technique. So it’s possible that my understanding will change a bit as I grow into this technique.

Parts of the Deschamps Technique

First, the technique is an entire system which only works when ALL the parts are used together. You need to do this, and this, and this and this all together to get the desired outcome. It is movement, a philosophy of sound, a practice method, and approach to the find yourself in the emotions of the piece. Here is a summary list of the parts of the system:

- Control of many parts of the body with an emphasis on channeling that movement toward the accordion (I want to say ‘all parts’ but we haven’t used the earlobe yet)
- Beautiful sound
- Bellows tension and the keyboard surface
- Emotional qualities

I’ll just go into a few of the main points in this post.

1. Many Parts of the Body

“The fingers do too much.” I remember distinctly Fred telling me this in my first Skype lesson with him. He went on to say that the fingers are not only pressing the keys, but they are also finding the notes, crossing over, tucking under, making articulations. All of that is too much to ask the fingers to do. Additionally, the traditional shape of the hand with fingers mostly extended is not as strong a shape as it could be. To fix this play with your fingers flexed in a cat’s paw type shape and keep flexed so they remain rigid.

Additionally, do not practice pressing every key from this shape, but instead move your entire forearm into the keyboard, and make a small movement to bring one finger out to make contact with the keyboard.

The head never turns, but makes tiny fast movements left to right to help create the energy for playing fast rhythms. The chin never tilts down. The eyebrows (!) are used to create an intuitive connection between the emotions and the bellows: raising of eyebrows creates more tension. A beautiful face is deliberately cultivated to help with the expression of the eyebrows.



Abbildung 1: Here you can see the hand position, the elbow and the raising of the hip so the butt can lift.

Both elbows stick out from your body and serve to straighten your spine as they engage both muscles of the back. The left elbow manages the bellows and the right allows the forearm to bounce up and down on the keyboard when needed. The arms are fairly flexed most of the time. These movements cause the shoulders to come forward.

The neck will draw the head to the left to help the body control the bellows.

The hips and butt raise to tilt the accordion so the keys/buttons come to the fingers instead of the fingers to the keys/buttons.

2. Beautiful Sound

In order to create this beautiful sound, you must only push the piano key or button down a small part of the way. Really, only part of the way down...all the time? YES! He calls this 'playing on the surface' of the keys or buttons.

When you try this out on your accordion, which you should do, you will only hear a small difference between the two sounds. But when you hear someone playing entirely like this with bellows support, speed, control and accuracy, the beauty is undeniable. The harsh aspect of the accordion completely goes away. I haven't heard Fred's explanation of what makes the harshness to go away, but it seems to me it reduces some of the overtones that are present from the reeds. As well each note instead of just beginning immediately and ending immediately, has subtle and delicate crescendo to begin and decrescendo to end.

3. Bellows tension and the keyboard surface

When you take your first lesson with Fred, he has you do an exercise where you repeatedly press (approximately half a second in duration) a key or button with the same force and slowly increase the pressure of the bellows. Going from very soft to very loud. You need to observe what happens to the keyboard and what happens to the sound. (You should try this too, see the written exercise below.)



Abbildung 2: Exercise from Dechamps' Book

What you should notice is with the key or button is that at first it is very soft and easy to press down, but as you pull with more and stronger force the button or key becomes harder and harder to press down. You also need to notice that even though you are pressing the same brief duration for each note, the notes become shorter and more staccato the harder you pull.

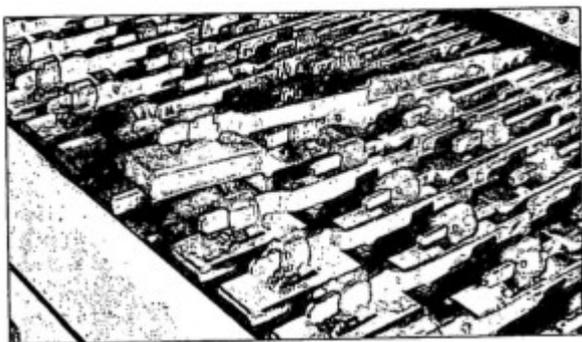


Abbildung 3: The valves of the accordion that get sucked in while pulling

Both the increasing hardness and the increasing shortness result because you are effectively sucking closed the valve that covers up the hole for the note while putting pressure consistently on the bellows to open. The harder you pull the harder the valve gets stuck, and that extra pressure from the suction makes the keyboard harder and harder. When you finally release the key and you are pulling hard, the valve that covers the key shuts closed both from the force of the spring and also from the suction of the wind. The harder that suction, the faster the note will be. If you do the same exercise while closing the

bellows you will find that the pressure helps to push the valve off the note.

In summary: more pressure opening bellows = faster end of note, more pressure closing bellows = faster beginning of note.

As Fred has explained to me very eloquently many times (I'll share more about this in another post), every note has three parts: beginning, middle and end. The additional pressure in either direction will make a faster note, because it will create a faster beginning or a faster ending to the note. So the theory is, more air = faster notes.

When there is sufficient resistance in the keyboard/buttons we can use them like a bouncy surface to move on.

Playing Fast

This is used for playing fast passages because between the combination of the bouncing arm, and the resistant keyboard/buttons, you have a surface that will push your finger back off, it pushes you along, which makes it easier to play fast. Fred calls this 'being ejected'.

Rubato Phrases

When playing a rubato phrase, variations in pressure help the fingers to stay in a gentle slow part or move faster to a more emotional part of the phrase. It's like you put small pressure on the bellows when you want slower and softer notes, and as you accelerate faster you put a little more and a little more pressure which make the keys/buttons move faster. This pushes you along, either from a faster note beginning or the note closing faster which brings the key or button up, propelling your finger off of the note and onto the next one.

A slightly less resistant keyboard is useful for playing smoothly/slowly and a slightly more resistant keyboard is useful for playing more detached and faster.

4. Emotional Qualities

I feel least confident explaining this part of the technique, but I'll share how it seems to me now.

Fred always says we need to show our emotion on our face, which is very much tied to the eyebrows. The movement of our eyebrows is an intuitive body movement when we sing. The eyebrows generally follow the contour of our musical pitch, they rise as the pitch goes up which creates a tension and an emotional feeling. This tension translates to the bellows, it just does intuitively. It is a brilliant way of intuitively getting perfect and artistic bellows control in a very human and emotional way.

That's all of this post about the parts of the technique, I'll write more about my experiences with corrections, materials, the practice process and more.



Abbildung 4: Dallas Vietty - accordionist and educator

Dallas Vietty is a Philadelphia based jazz accordionist and accordion educator. As a musician he performs around the United States. His past projects have allowed him to perform at some of the top music venues: Jazz at Lincoln Center NYC, Iridium NYC, Kimmel Center Philadelphia, Catalina's Los Angeles to name a few. As an educator Dallas is a pioneer in online accordion education through his learning website rebelreed.com. He is also one of the most in demand workshop and music camp instructors for accordion.