

Grey Larsen's Irish Tune Bank

***ADVICE FOR FLUTE AND WHISTLE PLAYERS
ON FINDING GOOD PLACES TO BREATHE
IN IRISH DANCE TUNES***

Players of other instruments:

You may want to read this too, because these ideas may help you clarify your phrasing.

All tune transcriptions in the Irish Tune Bank include my recommendations for good breathing spots. They are indicated by the comma symbol (,) above a note. In these places, flute and whistle players can omit an eighth note and use the space thus created for taking a deep breath.

Sometimes this symbol appears above and a bit to the right of a note. Soon I'll explain why.

Players of instruments other than flute and whistle may want to bear in mind that although they can, and often do, play in a non-stop manner, their music may benefit from the introduction of occasional spaces. Creating such spaces can clarify your phrasing, much as a sentence becomes more clear with the appropriate use of punctuation marks such as commas, semicolons and the like. So, it is important and useful for fiddlers, accordion players, pipers, banjo players, etc., not just flute and whistle players, to develop a sense of when and where to eloquently leave out notes. The way you create musical space is an important part of your style of variation and improvisation.

I devote many pages to these and other breathing and phrasing issues in my two books *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* and *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*. There you will find plenty of information and musical examples, as well as advice on how to get and maintain a plentiful supply of air. Even if you play an instrument other than flute or whistle, the information in these books could prove very useful for you.

In Irish dance music, it does not work for flute and whistle players to play every note of the tune, trying to "sneak" their breaths in between the notes. Trying to do so actually disrupts the music, drawing attention to one's gasping attempts to get enough air, and can throw you off the beat. Instead, you must learn to omit eighth notes, or shorten longer notes.

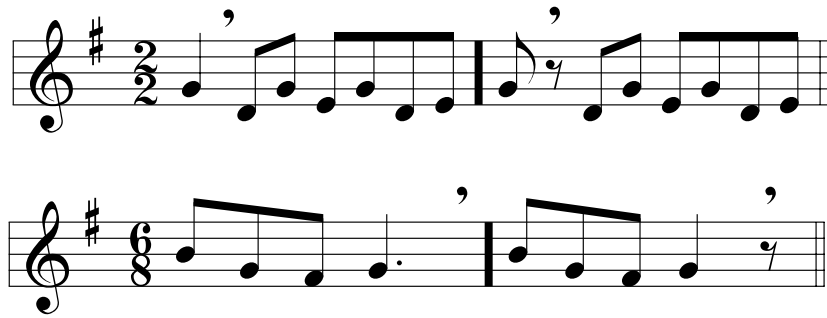
To understand how to do this, you must develop a solid, dependable sense of the pulse in the music. You'll see why this is so when you read the following strategies and observations about breathing. (A solid sense of the pulse will also enhance your musicality in many other ways.)

In each of the notated examples that follow, the first measure shows how I indicate a breathing opportunity in my transcriptions. The second bar shows literally how you create that breathing space.

1. Never omit a note that falls on a pulse, i.e. the places where you tap your foot. Some tunes, such as reels, have a primary pulse (on eighth notes 1 and 5 of the 8 eighth notes in the reel's measure) plus a secondary pulse (on eighth notes 3 and 7). Never omit notes that fall on these primary or secondary pulses. (Note that in reels, this principle eliminates 50% of all the eighth notes as candidates for omission.)

2. You can shorten longer notes (i.e. quarter notes or longer) by one eighth note, and use the space you've created for breathing. *Think of your breath as a rhythmic event with the duration of one eighth note.*

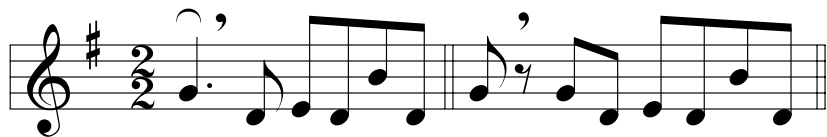
In the first example below, you can see how to shorten a quarter note in order to take a breath. In the second example, you can see how to shorten a dotted quarter note.



3. You can omit an off-pulse eighth note that seems to be a note of lesser importance. You will learn by trial and error how important such notes actually are. *Some off-pulse eighth notes are in fact essential to maintaining the integrity and shape of the melody. When you omit one of those, the melody feels broken.*

(Note: If you have difficulty understanding points 4, 5, and 6 below, please refer [*A Guide to Grey Larsen's Notation System for Irish Ornamentation*](#), a free download at the Irish Tune Bank.)

4. When a long roll begins on a pulse, you can “break” the long roll (that is, *not* play the long roll) and take a breath. By this I mean that you omit the second eighth note of the long roll that you would have otherwise played and instead take a breath in its place. When you break an on-pulse long roll in this way, you are omitting an *off-pulse* eighth note that has the same pitch as the eighth note that precedes it and the eighth note that follows it. This seems to be a foolproof breathing strategy. *When you do this, you are no longer playing a long roll, and you may find that you will want to alter the melody note or notes that come after your breath.*



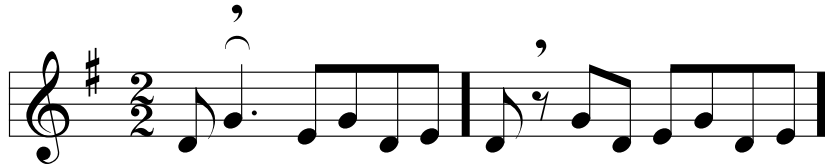
5. When a *short* roll begins on a pulse, you can “break” the short roll (that is, *not* play a short roll) and take a breath. By this I mean that you omit the second eighth note of the short roll that you would have otherwise played and take a breath in its place. When you break an on-pulse short roll this way, you are omitting an *off-pulse* eighth note, one that has the same pitch as the eighth note that precedes it. This also seems to be a foolproof breathing strategy. *When you do this, you are no longer playing a short roll, and you may find that you will want to alter the melody note or notes that come after your breath.*



6. You can also alter a roll, for breathing purposes, when it does *not* start on a pulse. (Long rolls frequently begin on off-pulse beats, but short rolls rarely do.) To do this, you leave out the first eighth note of that roll (a non-pulse eighth note) and take a breath in its place.



Or alter the melody in some other way, such as:



There is a tendency among many players to clip or cut short the last note before taking a breath. Beware of this habit. When you clip the note short, you draw the listener's attention to it, and thereby also draw attention to your breathing space. Instead, give that pre-breath note its full value. The following eighth-note of space gives you enough time to draw in a good replenishing breath, as long as your posture is good and you are breathing well from your diaphragm.

The choice of which notes to omit is a subjective one. You may disagree with some of my choices, and you may find others to your liking that I did not choose in my transcriptions.

Hopefully you will find that there are more breathing opportunities in these tunes that you had thought there would be.

You will definitely find that there are more breathing opportunities than you need. Don't use them all, just the ones you need.

Breathe before you have to. In other words, don't let your lungs become nearly empty. Since there are many places in the music where you can breathe, there's no reason to deprive your body of oxygen.

And don't pre-plan your breathing places. Your air needs will change with many factors, such as whether you are standing or sitting, the speed of the tune, your fatigue level, a full or empty stomach, etc.

With enough experience, it will become second nature to sense the many breathing opportunities in a tune as they approach. While you are gaining such experience, it can be instructive, as an exercise, to find all the breathing opportunities in a certain tune, just to become aware of them. As I have done that with these tunes, I hope that these transcriptions will help you develop your own reliable sense of where the breathing opportunities are.

This is much like learning a foreign language. In your native language, you would not take a breath in the middle of a phrase, disrupting or distorting its meaning. In time, you will gain that same instinct with the language of traditional Irish music.

Even though musical breathing is a necessity for flute and whistle players, the way you take advantage of this necessity becomes one of your most potent forms of creating variation. When you create musical space with eloquence, most people do not notice your breathing at all. Instead, their attention is drawn to the musical meaning you create through your phrasing.