

# chapter 21: musical breathing

The flute and tin whistle are the only instruments of traditional Irish music that are not suited to nonstop playing.

One could see this as a disadvantage. But one could also look at it another way. Since we must create occasional small spaces in the tunes in order to breathe, we flute and tin whistle players are never allowed to forget that music itself needs a chance to breathe once in a while. We must breathe, so why not use the breathing spaces we create to enhance our phrasing and our definition of clear musical shapes?

Fine players of other instruments use space in this way too, even though most of them don't have to. Of course singers, the ones who many consider to be the most expressive musicians of all, must leave breathing spaces in their music, just as flute and whistle players must do. Insightful instrumentalists know how important it is to make their instruments "sing." A major aspect of achieving this is the creation of space.

One could overcome this apparent limitation by using circular breathing. Later in the chapter, I'll elaborate a bit on why I don't recommend this.

## THE LANGUAGE ANALOGY RESURFACES

When we speak, we leave occasional spaces, sometimes in order to breathe, sometimes to make meaning more clear, sometimes for both reasons. So it is in playing the flute or whistle. In speaking, if we want the sense of a statement to sink in, we often create a bit of space before moving on: a comma, a period. All musicians can apply this kind of subtle shaping, or punctuation, to their music. Unfortunately, many don't. For flute and whistle players, it is built into the very act of playing, so we must learn how to use breathing articulately, in ways that clarify our interpretation of the music.

## ARTICULATE AND INARTICULATE BREATHING

Articulate breathing has the effect of illuminating the phrasing and natural contours of a tune. Inarticulate breathing disrupts the music and draws attention to itself.

Often after concerts, listeners come to me and say something like, "It's amazing, you never breathe when you play!" I take this as a high compliment because, though I take frequent, deep breaths, I do so quickly, quietly, and as an integral part of my musical expression. When this is done well, a listener's attention is never drawn to the breathing but only to musical phrasing. Breathing has become my servant, not my master.

## NOTE OMISSION AND NOTE SHORTENING

We flute and whistle players must become artistic music editors. We must learn to *omit notes* and *shorten longer notes* in a musically sensitive way. One can almost never sneak a breath between the regular notes of an Irish dance tune without detracting from the music. This can only be done successfully on occasion in slow airs and other slow or moderate tunes.

It is revealing to discover that not every note of a tune is indispensable. You can leave certain notes out without compromising the tune. On the other hand, there are many notes that you must not omit, and you must learn to discern the difference.

It is very important that you omit as few notes as possible and take very quick, deep breaths.

Note omission and note-shortening choices are fluid; they change all the time, depending upon numerous factors such as varying tempos, how loud you want to play in a particular setting, whether you are sitting or standing, how well rested or tired you are (which affects how deeply you breathe), whether or not you just ate a big meal, how well focused your embouchure is on a given day, even the altitude of the locale.

Classical musicians often choose and stick with consistent breathing places in each piece of music they play. Many composers who write for wind instruments wisely incorporate rests to accommodate breathing. Leaving out any of a composer's carefully chosen notes is generally frowned upon in classical music.

Such strategies do not work with traditional Irish music. This is not flute or whistle music *per se*. Each tune is part of a vast repertoire that is shared by *all* the melodic instruments of the tradition. Each player adapts the music in certain ways to her instrument. The flute or whistle player creates breathing spots spontaneously, according to the requirements and moods of the moment. This is, after all, an improvisational music, though extemporization exists within fairly conservative limits in comparison to musical genres such as jazz.

Note omission and note shortening contribute in important ways to melodic variation. Soon I will illustrate this with some examples.

### WHAT IS A TUNE ANYWAY?

These realizations bring up such questions as: Just what is a tune? What are the “real” notes of a tune?

There is no simple answer, but an Irish tune is certainly not an established, unchanging, and unbroken sequence of notes, as you might presume by looking in the numerous printed collections that are available. It is something much more fluid and multidimensional, something large and living that music notation cannot contain. When we leave notes out, shorten notes, and change the melody in small ways that are appropriate within the language of Irish music, we are staying true to the tune and keeping it alive.

Each tune has a true essence that makes it immediately recognizable, beautiful, and whole, and it carries rich personal associations for the player. With maturity and experience one comes to intuitively grasp the spirit of a tune and shape it in one's own way.

### BREATHE BEFORE YOU HAVE TO

To breathe articulately, you must first attend to the physical requirements of deep breathing and the efficient use of your air supply. These topics are covered in depth in Chapters 5 and 6. Plentiful air, and your economic use of it, give you many breathing options.

You may have noticed that when you are about to run out of air your musical energy suffers. If you don't breathe well in the first place, or you use your air inefficiently, then you may *not* have noticed this, because you may almost always be short of air. When air becomes plentiful for you, you can play with strong, vibrant energy and breath support. It then becomes much easier to breath musically, instead of habitually breathing out of need.

### NOTE OMISSION AND NOTE SHORTENING BECOME SECOND NATURE

Like so many other technical aspects of playing this music, note omission and note shortening need to become second nature. As you establish the habit of always tuning in to your body (see *A Physical Relationship, and Much More* in Chapter 5), you will continually be aware of your air supply status. This awareness will be relegated to some sub-surface level of your mind which will keep track of your air while you are occupied with having fun playing music. When you are approaching low air supply, you will feel it in your body, and you will improvise a tasteful way to musically leave out or shorten a note, take a quick, deep breath, and continue on your merry way with a plentiful stock of air. When you do leave out a note in order to breathe, you can still hear that note in your mind's ear. If leaving out notes sometimes derails you or throws you off the tune, remember to hear the omitted notes in your mind.

These abilities will steadily improve as you become more adept at controlling your breathing and embouchure, and as your knowledge and command of the musical language deepen.

#### NEVER OMIT A NOTE THAT FALLS ON A PULSE

It is crucial that you never omit a note that falls on a primary or secondary pulse. Omitting an on-pulse note is definitely not consistent with the language of traditional Irish music and represents the epitome of inarticulate breathing. If you omit such a note, knowledgeable players, listeners and dancers will feel that you are punching a gaping hole into the flow of the tune. If you choose to do so anyway, for dramatic effect, know that you are tinkering with one of the fundamental underpinnings of the music and that many people may see this as an indication of inexperience. However, you can shorten a long note by omitting the last eighth-note segment of it, whether or not that segment falls on a pulse.

#### DEVELOP AN ABSOLUTELY DEPENDABLE SENSE OF THE PULSE

It is one thing to understand that you shouldn't omit an on-pulse note. It is quite another to know by second nature which notes those are. You must develop an absolutely reliable sense of the pulse in the tunes you play. *This is the cornerstone of choosing good breathing spots.* A rock-solid sense of the pulse makes breathing choices far easier. Never omitting on-pulse notes narrows the field of candidates for note omission by as much as one-third (in jigs and slip jigs) or one-half (in reels).

If it is difficult for you to sense the pulse of a tune when you play, this means that you need to work on internalizing the music and feeling its rhythms in your body. Learning to dance to the music is a great way to do this. Tapping your foot on the pulse helps many players. Some cannot play without tapping their foot. When tapping however, be sensitive to those around you. If you tap loudly you may be annoying others. If your loud tapping is not rhythmically accurate, there is no doubt that you are annoying others, whether or not they have the nerve to tell you.

#### BREATHING SPOTS IN *THE BANKS OF LOUGH GOWNA*

Below, you will find three settings of the jig *The Banks of Lough Gowna*. The first setting, shown on the top staff, is notated in typical fashion, with no breathing spots indicated. The second and third settings show examples of appropriate breathing places with the kinds of musical adjustments a flute or whistle player might make to incorporate these spaces tastefully into the tune. The location of these breathing spots are indicated with rests, and with the comma symbol (above the rests) that is often used to indicate a breath.

Don't forget to also take note of the variations in ornamentation and phrasing and the small melodic changes that I have incorporated into the second and third settings of the tune.

**A Part**

**B Part**

Figure 21-1. Three settings of the jig *The Banks of Lough Gowna*. The top staff shows the tune without breathing spaces. Examples of appropriate breathing spaces are shown in the second and third staves. The comma symbol above the staff indicates a breath. The indication “f. v.” in measure 5 of the second setting indicates the use of finger vibrato on the dotted quarter-note B.



These breathing places demonstrate three different breathing strategies. Let’s take a close look at them.