

chapter 12: tonguing

TONGUING AND SLURRING DEFINED

To **tongue**, in the musical terminology of wind instruments, means to use an action of the tongue to articulate or separate notes. You can use the tongue to stop and to start the flow of air.

To **slur** means to connect two or more notes such that only the first note of the group is articulated. A slurred group of notes is played using an uninterrupted, continuous stream of air.

All the air that we blow through our whistles must first pass over our tongues. The tongue is an exquisitely agile and sensitive organ. We have already trained it to an extremely high degree through our mastery of everyday speech.

Every time we use the consonants c, d, g, j, k, l, n, q, s, t, and z, we articulate these sounds with our tongue, and we also use our tongue in more subtle ways to help shape most of the other sounds of speech. Our tongue is a highly trained, eloquent, and sensitive organ.

THE PHYSICAL ACTION OF TONGUING

To get a feel for proper whistle tonguing, try the following.

Whisper the syllable “too” and notice where and how your tongue contacts the roof of your mouth. It should touch the hard palate just slightly behind your upper teeth, but not touching the teeth. Now take a deep breath and place your tongue back on that spot. Again, whispering “too,” pull your tongue away from the roof of your mouth, but not very far, just a fraction of an inch. This releases your reservoir of air to travel through your lips.

The way that you place and release your tongue determines the consonant of the sound (*t, d, l*, etc.) and the shape of your mouth cavity (which is also determined in large part by your tongue) determines the vowel of the sound (*oo, oh, ah, eh*, etc.). Of course, when playing Irish music you don't give voice to such vowel sounds. We refer to them here simply to help us recognize the shaping that we can give to the mouth cavity. (Actually some players of older generations did occasionally voice vowel sounds while playing. Willy Clancy was one of them. For more on this, see the notes to my transcription of his tin whistle recording of the reel *Woman of the House* in my book *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.)

When your tongue is in contact with the roof of your mouth, it prevents air from flowing through. When you pull your tongue away, air is suddenly allowed to flow. You have a great deal of subtle control over how you place, shape, and release your tongue.

RELAXATION AND ECONOMY OF MOTION

Your tongue has a resting position, just as your playing fingers do. When you pull your tongue back from the roof of your mouth, let it relax. Don't place it against your lower teeth or pull it back into your throat. The principles of relaxation and economy of motion apply here, as in every aspect of playing.

When you tongue in whistle playing, your embouchure must be prepared beforehand and it must remain stable. Articulation (performed by the tongue) and air stream shaping and direction (performed by the lips and facial muscles) are separate and distinct. Your jaw need not move at all when you tongue.

GRADATIONS OF TONGUING: SEPARATE VS. CONNECTED, HARD VS. SOFT

There are many subtle aspects of tonguing. Let's look first at how we use tonguing to interrupt and reinitiate the air stream.

When first learning to tongue, the natural inclination is to produce very separate, distinct notes. In doing so, you first whisper the letter “t” to give a clear attack to the start of the flow of air. In this action, you pull your tongue

down and away from the hard palate. Second, you replace your tongue to stop the air. After a brief pause you repeat this two-step process.

This way of playing, all with well-separated notes, is sometimes called **staccato** by classical musicians. The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines staccato more specifically as "...a manner of performance, indicated by a dot...placed over the note, calling for a reduction of its written duration...for half or more of its value."ⁱ A staccato eighth note, for example, would be sustained for at most the length of a normal sixteenth note, that is half or less of its nominal duration.

After some experience with tonguing, one discovers that it is possible to reduce the separateness of tongued notes to almost nothing, to make them very smoothly connected. To do this you use a different sort of tonguing action. Instead of using a two-step process, as described above, in which the air stream is alternately and distinctly started and stopped, you use a one-step process in which the air flow is barely interrupted at all.

Instead of using a hard consonant sound like "t," try using a softer one like "d." When saying "d" in the softest possible way, the tongue action is a gentle "flicking" of the roof of the mouth. This consonant sound comes to resemble the gentle "r" sound of Spanish. Try whispering "doo, doo, doo..." in this smooth and gentle way. You'll notice that the tip of your tongue just barely brushes the hard palate as it goes by.

Playing in this manner produces notes that are softly articulated and very smoothly connected. This manner of playing is what classical musicians call **legato** playing. The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines legato as a manner of performance "...without any perceptible interruption between the notes."ⁱⁱ ("Perceptible" is the key word here.) For a wind player, the most legato playing possible is, of course, manifested in the slurring together of notes.

Think of how a fiddler changes the direction of her bowstrokes. An experienced player can do this in an exceedingly smooth fashion, yet theoretically there is by necessity a very brief, barely perceptible interruption in the flow of sound when the bow changes direction. The same potential for smooth articulation exists for tonguing.

In tonguing, there are wide areas of gradation between the extremes of staccato and legato, hard and soft. All of these qualities have a place in Irish music. But to understand their proper places, you must first understand the following.

THE PASTORAL BAGPIPES, THE *PÍOB MÓR*, AND THE AESTHETIC OF LEGATO PLAYING

As has been discussed in Chapter 1, Irish tin whistle and flute stylings owe a great deal to the legacy of the uilleann pipes, which in turn developed out of the older pastoral bagpipe and *píob mór* traditions. These bagpipes could only play in a legato, slurred fashion, with a continuous, unbroken stream of air. Articulations were created solely by the fingers (cuts and strikes) and they did not interrupt the air flow.

Whistle, flute, and uilleann pipe players today don't use these finger articulations out of necessity, as pastoral pipers and *píob mór* players did, but because they are incorporating an established traditional mode of musical expression that had evolved in these older piping traditions.

The uilleann pipes developed into an instrument with a capability very different from those of the pastoral bagpipe and *píob mór*: the ability to stop the flow of air through the chanter by covering all the finger holes and stopping the end of the chanter on the knee. This made staccato playing possible.

In fact, some uilleann pipers play in a predominantly staccato fashion. This is called *tight* or *close* piping and is exemplified by such players as Tommy Reck.ⁱⁱⁱ

Uilleann pipers, tin whistle players, and Irish flute players *all* inherited a fundamental and deeply held legato aesthetic from these ancestral bagpipe traditions, and combined it with their own staccato playing capabilities to create a new synthesis: **The music, in all its variety, springs forth from an underlying foundation of legato playing. The appropriate use of staccato playing exists in relation to that foundation, and takes on its meaning in contrast to it.**

Within this broad synthesis exist many different styles of playing, some of which make extensive use of the air-interrupting articulations of tonguing. Nonetheless, they all hearken back to this common root.

As a matter of fact, all of the contemporary melodic instruments of traditional Irish music, including the fiddle, accordion, banjo, etc., derive their styles of playing ultimately from this same piping legacy.

CONTRAST THIS WITH THE CLASSICAL WIND PLAYERS' ORIENTATION

This legato aesthetic is essentially different from that of modern classical music. The classical wind player is taught that all notes are to be tongued unless there is an indication in the notated music, such as a slur, to do otherwise. Most Irish players use tonguing intuitively as a phrasing device *against a general backdrop of slurring*. Classically trained musicians who wish to learn to play traditional Irish music must come to understand this critical distinction. Tonguing is used extensively in both traditions, but in each it is thought of in very different ways.

A GREATER VARIETY OF ARTICULATION

It seems to me that the traditional Irish musician has a greater variety of articulation available to her than the modern classical wind player has. In classical wind playing, notes are *either* articulated *or* slurred. In Irish traditional music notes can be articulated *and* slurred, because of its fingered articulations, the cut and strike. Classical wind players do not have a common practice of fingered articulations.

THE SUBTLE USE OF TONGUING

Much of the tonguing used in Irish tin whistle playing goes unnoticed because it does not take the music away from its fundamentally legato nature.

ACHIEVING BALANCE

Within the fundamental legato aesthetic of Irish music, there is room for a wide variety of approaches to the question of playing notes in a connected or separated fashion. One should avoid rigid or arbitrary adherence to any concept of how you think you should be playing. If you play all legato or all staccato, the music will be restricted, unable to breathe.

Instead, let your choices be dictated by the music and how you feel about it, how it speaks to you, how you feel moved to express it in the moment. These choices should arise from within you, not be imposed upon the music from the outside, and not predetermined. If you approach the music in this natural way, you will find a balance of staccato and legato, connected and separated playing, that will be your own. The music will be set free and it will breathe.

SINGLE TONGUING AND MULTIPLE TONGUING

The tonguing techniques we have looked at so far fall into the category of single tonguing. In **single tonguing**, one repeatedly uses only one tongue action, represented by a single consonant sound such as "t" or "d". Though we can be quite agile with single tonguing, it is ultimately limited, especially at fast tempos.

Though this is an imperfect analogy, it is instructive to compare the movement of the tongue with the movement of a plectrum by players of the tenor banjo, guitar, or other plucked string instruments. If a tenor banjo player could only use the downstroke of her pick and never the upstroke, she would eventually tire from the repetitive and excessive movement that is required. Using both downstrokes and upstrokes is physically much more efficient and relaxing, and it allows for more agility and fluidity, especially in rapid passages.

We have a similar situation with repetitive single tonguing. Though it may not be as physically tiring as using only downstrokes on the plectrum banjo, there can be a uniformity of sound that comes from using only one tongue action over and over. **Multiple tonguing**, a way of tonguing that makes use of sequences of differing tongue articulations, yields a variety of articulations that can give the music a much more interesting sound. I address multiple tonguing in depth in my book *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.

ⁱ Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 20th printing (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 708.

ⁱⁱ Willi Apel, p. 396.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tommy Reck, *A Stone in the Field* (Danbury, Connecticut: Green Linnet Records, SIF 1008, 1977). Reck also appears on the uilleann pipe anthology *The Drones and the Chanters* (Dublin: Claddagh Records, CC11, 1971). He recorded two 78 sides for the Irish Recording Company (Dublin) in the 1950s. One of these was reissued on *From Galway to Dublin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Rounder Records, CD 1087, 1993). He also recorded two 78 sides for Gael-Linn, ca. 1959, but those have not been reissued as of this writing.