

chapter 7: cuts

The first and most important single-note ornament to learn is the **cut**. The cut is by far the most-used ornament in this music and we will spend quite a bit of time exploring the many contexts in which we can use it. Other names sometimes heard for the cut are *chip*, *grace*, *grace note*, and *upper grace note*.

The movement of the cut is a very small and quick lift of a finger completely off its hole and the immediate replacement of that finger. When executed well, the movement of the cut can be almost invisible. The finger barely needs to lift from the hole, though it does completely uncover it. It is very important to keep your hands relaxed when learning and using cuts. Don't fall prey to the temptation to tense up while trying to make your cuts quick and crisp.

The sound of the well-executed cut is extremely brief, so brief that a listener does not perceive it as having an identifiable pitch, duration, or rhythmic identity. The well-played cut is therefore not perceived as a *note* but as an *articulation*.

The cut forms the attack of a note and gives that note emphasis. I call the note that it articulates its *parent note*. Though a good cut doesn't seem to have a pitch, it in fact does, and that pitch is always higher than that of its parent note. This higher pitch is part of what gives the cut its unique qualitative identity. A cut is a *pitched articulation*.

A cut can range from being very subtle to very emphatic, depending upon the melodic context, the quality of the breath used, and whether or not (or how) you tongue, throat, or slide at the same time you cut. (Slides are described in Chapter 9.)

CORRECTING A MAJOR MISCONCEPTION

Unfortunately, everything I have seen in print regarding cuts supports the idea that cuts are to be thought of and perceived as notes unto themselves. However, this notion doesn't fit with what one hears when listening to a good player using cuts.

Though it may seem like a small or subtle distinction at first, regarding cuts as articulations leads to a completely different and more accurate understanding of their nature and function. It is well worth the time and effort to delve deeply into this matter and understand it well since the cut is such a critical element of the language of traditional Irish music, and since the way we think about music has a tremendous impact on how we play it. Often with Irish music it is very important to pay close attention to the details. The cut is a tiny thing, yet it can convey a great deal in energy and expression when it is executed well.

TRY SOME CUTS

First, try some cuts. Play a low G. (Later on you can do this same exercise on high G.) While holding a low G, and without tonguing or throating at all, try to create little "blips" in the sound by lifting and quickly replacing the T2 finger, keeping the T3 finger down. Keep the finger lift as small and quick as you can, and make sure to keep your hand and body relaxed. (For a key to these fingering indications see Figure 5-1 on p. 65 and Figure 6-4 on p. 86.)

These blips have a pitch somewhere around B. The exact pitch will vary from instrument to instrument. It's just fine for it to be out of tune. Ultimately, when you're more experienced, your cuts will be so quick that the ear won't perceive them as having an identifiable pitch.

Keep a steady, slow beat by setting a metronome at a comfortable tempo somewhere around 60 beats per minute, or by tapping your foot, and try to place the blips exactly on those beats, not before and not after.

This is not easy. If you are new to this your blips are probably not very short. Most likely you can hear each one's beginning and ending and easily discern its pitch. So which do you place on the beat, the beginning or end of the blip? For now make sure the end is on the beat, and as you practice, keep drawing the beginning closer and closer into the beat. See Figures 7-1 through 7-4.