# chapter 20: tonguing, multiple tonguing, and throating

## 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 flutes and whistles must pass over our tongues. The tongue is an exquisitely agile and sensitive muscle. We have already trained it to an extremely high degree through our mastery of everyday speech. We use a vast spectrum of nuance when we speak or sing.

Every time we use the consonants c, d, g, j, k, l, n, q, s, t, and z we are overtly tonguing, and we use our tongues in more subtle ways to help shape most of the other sounds of speech. Our tongues are probably more highly trained, eloquent, and sensitive than any of the other muscles we use in playing the flute or tin whistle, with the possible exception of the finger musculature.

## The Physical Action of Tonguing

The physical action of tonguing is the same in flute and tin whistle playing. To get a feel for proper flute and 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.), while 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 use them simply to help us recognize the shaping that we can give to the mouth cavity. This shaping has a significant impact on the tonal quality of the music we make. (Actually some players of older generations did occasionally voice vowel sounds while playing. Willie Clancy and Séamus Ennis were among them. For more on this see the notes to my transcriptions of their recorded performances on pp. 375 and 377 in Section 8.)

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

## Avoid Slap Tonguing

Walfrid Kujala, in *The Flutist's Progress*,[i] warns against *slap tonguing*, a term he uses to describe ". . . the ugly, percussive noise produced inside the mouth when the tongue is allowed to return to the palate contact position too quickly and violently (like pronouncing 'tooT')." Habitual slap tonguing has no place in Irish music.