

Chapter Two: Ornamentation

With the publication of *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*¹ in 2003, I proposed a new system of understanding and notating Irish flute and tin whistle ornamentation. Since the tunes in *Down the Back Lane* are played on flute and whistle, I use this system to show, very specifically, the ornamentation used. However, I believe these notation techniques can be used very well, with some adaptation, for non-wind instruments.

We'll look only at the ornamentation techniques that are used in this book's transcriptions. A chart of these appears on p. 21.

Ornaments that do not appear in the chart include certain varieties of condensed rolls and cranns as well as double cut rolls. For a full exploration of ornamentation, please refer to *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*.

WHAT IS ORNAMENTATION?

When I speak of ornamentation in traditional Irish instrumental music, I am referring to ways of altering or embellishing pieces of a melody that are between one and three eighth-note beats long. These alterations and embellishments are created mainly through the use of special articulations (cuts and strikes) and inflections (slides), not through the addition of extra, ornamental notes.

The modern classical musician's view of ornamentation is quite different. *Ornamentation, A Question & Answer Manual*, a book written to help classical musicians understand ornamentation from the baroque era through the present, offers this definition: "Ornamentation is the practice of adding notes to a melody to allow music to be more expressive."²

Classical musicians who are newcomers to traditional Irish music naturally tend to bring this kind of thinking with them. However, as long as one overlays this "added note" model onto Irish ornamentation, it will be harder to gain fluency in the language of Irish music.

TOO MUCH BORROWING FROM CLASSICAL MUSIC

Most people who have attempted to codify traditional Irish dance music have borrowed concepts and notation practices from classical music. This works fairly well in some areas and not well at all in others.

Ornamentation is one of the areas in which such borrowing has not served us well. Over many years of teaching I have met a great number of players who are mystified by Irish ornamentation techniques. Most of them have not had personal access to good players. Struck by the beauty of what they hear but missing key knowledge, they often turn to books in their search for insight. I feel that most books published before *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* borrowed too much from the language and notation of classical music in an attempt to define and describe traditional Irish ornamentation. While some of these efforts at explanation are helpful, many of them create and perpetuate misunderstandings.

GRACE NOTES VS. ARTICULATIONS

Most of the confusion has arisen from the liberal and often vague employment of the *grace note*, as a term, a concept and a notation practice. I feel that this has severely limited our thinking, and that such use of grace notes is the chief cause of misunderstandings about Irish ornamentation.

Using the concept of the *articulation*, instead of the grace note, allows us to understand ornamentation much more clearly. For our purposes, I define an articulation as *the extremely brief sound that defines the beginning or attack of a note*. To articulate a note is to create or define its first moment of sound.

¹ Grey Larsen, *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2003).

² Valery Lloyd and Carole L. Bigler, *Ornamentation, A Question & Answer Manual* (Van Nuys, California: Alfred Publishing Co., 1995), p. 8.

TWO WAYS TO ARTICULATE A NOTE

With the flute and whistle, we can articulate a note in two ways. One is to briefly stop and restart the flow of air that we direct into the instrument. We do this with our tongue or glottis and call it *tonguing* or *throating*. (The latter is my term for using articulations formed in the throat.) When we restart the flow of air, we give the sound an attack by an action of our tongue or glottis. We perceive this attack as the beginning, or articulation, of a new note. We can call these *breath articulations*.

A very different way to articulate a note is through the use of a finger movement.

Imagine these two scenarios:

- You are playing a note on flute, whistle or uilleann pipes. Without interrupting the flow of air in any way, you lift a finger completely off its hole, and, as quickly as possible, put it back down. The air has continued to flow through the instrument without interruption.
- You are playing a note on flute, whistle or uilleann pipes. Without interrupting the flow of air in any way, you throw a finger at its finger hole, allowing the finger to bounce back as quickly as possible. Again, the air has continued to flow through the instrument without interruption.

The first scenario yields a *fingered articulation* called a *cut*. By lifting and replacing a finger, you are, technically speaking, creating an additional note. But if that note is brief enough we cannot discern its pitch or duration. We perceive it not as a note, but, instead, as the articulation of the note that follows it. *It is critically important to understand this phenomenon of perception.*

The second scenario yields a fingered articulation called a *strike* (also known as a *tip*, *tap*, *slap*, or *pat*). By bouncing a finger off of its hole, you are, technically speaking, creating an additional note. But if that note is brief enough, we will not discern its pitch or duration. As with the cut, we perceive it not as a note but as the articulation of the note that follows it.

On the fiddle, cuts and strikes are produced similarly, by very rapid lifting or striking movements of left hand fingers. Accordion and concertina players also produce cuts and strikes with very rapid finger movements.

ROOTED IN BAGPIPE TRADITIONS

I believe that most Irish ornamentation techniques, regardless of instrument, have their origins in the tradition of the *uilleann pipes*, the current bellows-blown bagpipe of Ireland, whose techniques in turn developed from those of the older *pastoral bagpipe* and *píob mór* (Great Irish Warpipes) traditions. The capabilities and limitations of these two antecedent bagpipes shed important light upon why many ornamentation techniques have evolved as they have.

While playing a tune on one of these older forms of bagpipes, there was no way to stop and restart the flow of air, i.e., there was nothing analogous to tonguing or throating on flute and whistle, changing bow direction on fiddle or bellows direction on accordion and concertina. Therefore, when playing two notes of the same pitch in succession, these pipers had to use a fingered articulation to establish the beginning of such a repeated note. These fingered articulations have come down to us as the cut and the strike. They in turn give rise to the multi-note ornaments that make use of cuts and strikes, namely *rolls* and *cranns*. (Very similar finger articulation techniques have evolved within other bagpipe traditions around the world.)

Bear in mind that cuts and strikes are not used only on repeated notes. They are often used when ascending or descending to a note.

A CUT NOTATION

Since a cut is an articulation, I notate it as a slash placed over its parent note.



Figure 3. A note that is articulated with a cut.

This is a simple, clean notation that reflects the reality of the cut's sound and function. There is only one note here, not two. There is no indication or implication of pitch or duration for the cut. The application of this symbol is similar to that of other commonly used symbols, such as staccato markings or accents, which are placed above the notes they affect.

MID-NOTE CUTS

Sometimes we want to place a cut in the midst of a note instead of at its start (in effect dividing the note into two). I call this kind of cut a *mid-note cut*. In Irish tunes that have a regular pulse, it usually sounds best to place the mid-note cut squarely on a subdivision of that pulse.

Here is an example of a mid-note cut placed halfway through a quarter note.



Figure 4. The fifth measure of the jig, *Child of My Heart*, third time through, showing a mid-note cut. See pp. 30-31.

In Figure 4, above, note that the cut symbol is not placed directly above the quarter note, but to its right, halfway between it and the next note. This is meant to show that the cut occurs at a point exactly halfway through the duration of the quarter note. This would sound the same as what is shown below in Figure 5.



Figure 5. The same measure from *Child of My Heart*, notated a bit differently. Here the measure begins with two tied eighth notes instead of a quarter note. The cut articulates the second of these eighth notes.

A STRIKE NOTATION

Since a strike is an articulation, I notate it by placing a V over its parent note.

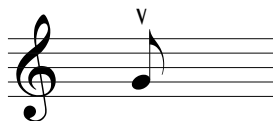


Figure 6. A note that is articulated with a strike.

This is a simple, clean notation that reflects the reality of the strike's sound and function. Neither pitch nor duration are indicated or implied. There is only one note here, not two. Just like the cut, and for the same reasons, the strike is not a grace note. (Please don't confuse this symbol with the up-bow indication for bowed string instruments.)