

Chapter Three: Phrasing

The flute and tin whistle are the only instruments of traditional Irish music that are not suited to continuous playing. Players must interrupt the flow of sound in order to breathe. One could regard this as a handicap, or instead take advantage of the opportunity it presents. Skilled wind players use their breathing, either consciously or by instinct, to define clear musical phrases.

When a wind player takes a breath, one phrase ends and another begins. A breathing space is like a punctuation mark – a comma, a semicolon, a period.

Fine players of non-wind instruments often use space in a similar way, even though they are not obliged to. They know how important it is to make their instruments “sing,” and leaving space is a crucial part of producing a singing quality. For much more on these topics, see *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, particularly the parts that compare music to spoken language.

The notes that occur between two breathing spaces can be thought of as a large phrase. Within it, one can further sculpt the music into smaller groupings and flows of notes. These sub-phrases relate to one another much as words interact within a spoken phrase.

Flute and whistle players define and shape sub-phrases by using the following techniques:

- changes in the weight, flow, and pulse of the breath
- changes in loudness
- changes in tone color
- changes in the qualities of lilt
- finger articulations (cuts and strikes)
- breath articulations (tonguing and throating)
- pitch inflections (fingered slides and breath slides)
- breath vibrato
- finger vibrato
- choices of how or whether to emphasize the pulse at any given moment

Uilleann pipers and players of non-wind instruments use most of these as well, and also employ other techniques that are idiomatic to their instrument.

In this chapter we'll look at many of the techniques that help define and shape musical phrases, and examine the ways in which they are indicated in the transcriptions.

THE BREATH MARK

The breath mark – ♪ – placed above a rest, shows where I took a breath while playing the tune.

Note that there are some rests with no breath marks above them. In these cases I created a space in the music for phrasing purposes, but not for breathing purposes.

When you see a breath mark in a particular transcription, you may find it interesting to compare that moment in the music with the same location in the reference staff. You will see that I created space for breathing either by omitting a note entirely or by shortening a note. It is almost never workable for a flute or whistle player to “sneak” a quick breath between two notes of an Irish dance tune, attempting to play them “as written.”

THE NOTE AFTER A BREATH MAY FUNCTION IN A NEW WAY

When a wind player omits or shortens a note in order to take a breath, the note that comes after the breath feels different. That note is now the beginning of a new musical thought, whereas before it was a note in the midst of a phrase.

Since the space created by a breath functions like a punctuation mark, the note after the breath now serves a different function. One might even play a different pitch altogether, one that does a better or different kind of job of starting the new musical thought.

SLURRING

To *slur* is to smoothly connect a group of two or more notes such that only the first note of the group is articulated – either with the breath (flute, whistle, harmonica), with a bow direction change (fiddle), with a bellows direction change (accordion, concertina) or with a stroke of a plectrum or finger (banjo, mandolin, bouzouki, cittern, guitar). Thus a slurred group of notes is played using an uninterrupted, continuous stream of air, a single bow or bellows stroke, or a hammer-on technique. Any note within the slurred group may have a fingered articulation (cut or strike).

A slur is shown as a curved line above or below a group of notes. In fact, the line itself is referred to as a slur. Here is an example showing three slurs. The final one continues into the next measure.



Figure 24. An example of three slurs in the hornpipe, Poll Ha'penny, mm. 7-8, second time through. See pp. 44-46.

In this book's flute and whistle transcriptions, the first note of a slurred group (and *only* the first note) is articulated, using either tonguing or throating.

TONGUING AND THROATING DEFINED

To *tongue* is to use an action of the tongue to articulate or separate notes. The flute or whistle player can use her tongue to stop and to start the flow of air.

She can also do this with her glottis, the opening between the vocal cords. I call this kind of articulation *throating*. I don't use this technique a great deal myself, but many flute players find that they are naturally inclined to it.

In these transcriptions, any notes that are *not* contained within a slur are tongued or throated.

You will often see two or more consecutive tongued notes. Here is an example.



Figure 25. An example of consecutive tongued notes in the jig, The Lark on the Strand, mm. 14-15, third time through. See pp. 32-33.

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

The flute or whistle player uses tonguing to achieve a wide variety of effects: notes can be separated by conspicuous gaps, smoothly connected with very little space between, or played in any number of ways along this spectrum. (Similar gradations of connection are fundamental to fiddle bowing and the bellows work of accordion and concertina players.)

Separated notes are often tongued with a hard consonant sound like "t" or "k." To connect notes more smoothly, i.e., in a *legato* fashion, a flute or whistle player will use a softer sound like "d" or "g." *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* defines "legato" as a manner of performance "... without any perceptible interruption between the notes."¹

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, nearly imperceptible interruption in the flow when the bow changes direction. The same potential for smooth articulation exists with tonguing, especially when using multiple tonguing, which we shall explore shortly.

¹ Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 20th printing. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 396.