

In my experience, all who have written about Irish flute and whistle ornamentation have defined the cut as a kind of grace note. Some don't even call it a cut, but just call it a *grace* or *grace note*. In addition to adopting this classical music term to define or name the cut, almost universally these writers have used grace notes to notate them.

For several reasons, the practice of equating cuts with grace notes, in both verbal description and musical notation, is very misleading. Cuts, when executed well, do not sound like grace notes.

WHY IS IT MISLEADING TO EQUATE CUTS WITH GRACE NOTES?

Grace notes, as understood in classical music traditions from the baroque to the present, have a definite pitch and are meant to be heard as such. The notated pitch determines the fingering to be used for grace notes and they are expected to be "in tune."

A well-played cut, while it does have a pitch, is an event of such short duration that the listener should not be able to discern its actual pitch. The pitch of a cut is sometimes not in the mode of the melody or even in tune with any of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. A cut fingering should be chosen for its responsiveness, clarity, and its qualitative effect, not for the pitch it produces.

Grace note notation implies that the grace note is meant to be heard as distinct from the principal note.

The cut is an articulation. It should not be heard, or thought of, as an entity distinct from its parent note.

Grace notes are understood to have a duration and must "steal time" from another note or rest. Due to the visual placement of the grace note before the principal note and before its beat, grace note notation implies that the grace note steals time from the note or beat preceding the principal note.¹

The cut is a way to attack a note. It occurs right on a beat, not before it. It's best to think of it as having no duration. Think of the cut as the leading edge of the parent note, the beginning of the parent note's envelope, or the attack of the parent note.

CUT FINGERINGS: AN IMPORTANT CHOICE IS AT HAND

In my opinion, a cut should almost always sound as well defined and crisp as possible. (I'll elaborate on this shortly.) Using the optimum fingerings is a great help in achieving this. To this end I use somewhat different fingerings than most players do. There is actually quite a bit of variance among players in their choice of cut fingerings.

In my method, for each of the notes D, E, F-sharp, G, and A, in both octaves, the lowest covered hole remains covered (i.e. the covered hole that is furthest from the embouchure or mouthpiece). You perform the cut by quickly uncovering and re-covering the next hole up. Therefore D is cut with B2, E with B1, F-sharp with T3, G with T2, and A with T1. The exception to this rule occurs when cutting B. You cut B with T1, as this is the only finger available for the job.

Why do I prefer cutting with the finger above the lowest covered hole? Cutting on the lowest covered hole, while achieving a good quick response, produces a cut that is very close in pitch to that of its parent note. This closeness of pitch lessens the definition of the cut note's attack. I feel that it is almost always better to maximize the clarity and definition of that attack. But there may be times when you would like to use a gentler sounding cut. At those times you may cut with the finger on the lowest covered hole. Note however that you cannot do this when you are descending to a cut note. In such cases that hole must be covered just to *arrive* at that note. For example, when descending from G to F-sharp and cutting the F-sharp, you cannot perform the cut with B1 because B1 must cover its hole just to get you to the F-sharp. B1 cannot do both jobs because the arrival at the note and its cut occur simultaneously. If this is hard to understand now, it will become clear as you work through this chapter.

You may wish to explore other cut fingerings and their qualitative effects. Feel free to do so but beware of the sluggish response that many of them have. This is more of a hazard on the flute than on the whistle, and the high register of the flute is particularly prone to this problem. Uilleann pipers have more options because their instrument is exquisitely responsive to nearly all such fingerings.