

chapter 9: slides

NOT AN ARTICULATION

The **slide** is quite different from the cut and strike in several ways. First, it is not an articulation. It is an *inflection*. It is not played or heard as an “instantaneous” event like the cut and strike are. It is a continuous, moving alteration of a note’s pitch. Some people refer to this as a *slur* or *smear*, but slur has another, more widely accepted meaning, as explained in Chapter 20. It is therefore best not to use the word slur for a slide. In the classical world, the slide is often referred to as a *portamento*.

For now, when I speak of the slide I am referring to a musical gesture that is accomplished using a finger technique. Note that pitch slides can also be accomplished by breath techniques, quite independent of the fingers. I’ll get to that subject at the end of this chapter. Fingered slides, however, offer much more in speed and agility.

The cut and strike create the attacks of their parent notes and are therefore fixed in their temporal relationships to them. The slide exists independent of these considerations. The concept of a parent note is not always useful in regard to the slide. A slide can begin before the attack of a note, or after. It can be very brief or very long. It can be a way to move from one note to another and can therefore affect both notes. The slide is the free spirit of single-note ornaments and, as such, it can get carried away if you don’t watch out, giving your playing a slurpy, even drunken feeling.

Slides can rise or fall in pitch. Rising slides are used much more often in Irish music than falling slides.

THE PHYSICAL MOVEMENT OF THE SLIDE

When you slide you are gradually, and sometimes only partially, covering or uncovering a finger hole in such a way that the pitch of the note you are playing at that moment rises or falls gradually. By the way, the word *slide* refers to what happens to the *pitch* of the affected note or notes, not necessarily what the finger *does* to achieve that sound. Sometimes you do slide the finger off the hole, but other times you may tilt, rock, or roll it slightly instead.

Sliding is easy and natural on the tin whistle, simple-system flute and uilleann pipes since the fingers come into direct contact with the finger holes. Sliding is possible, but not as natural, on open-hole Boehm-system flutes, because of the key mechanisms that intervene between the fingers and the tone holes themselves. Sliding is virtually impossible on the closed-hole Boehm-system flute. This difference is certainly one of the reasons why the simple-system flute is preferred by almost all Irish flute players. For more information on this see Appendix B.

AN ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE

The finger movement of the slide should be one that leaves your hand in good playing position once the slide is complete. We will keep returning to that principle as we look at different kinds of slides.

TWO CLASSES OF SLIDES

Slides fall into two classes according to:

1. their relationship to the melody
2. the fingerings they require