

chapter 18: other multi-note ornaments

In the preceding chapters we have covered all the main body of ornamentation techniques used in Irish flute and whistle music: cuts, strikes, slides, and all of the varieties of rolls and cranns. All of the multi-note ornaments we have looked at so far, i.e. the rolls and cranns, are built upon the use of cuts and strikes.

There are a few more ornamental techniques that you should know about which do not make use of cuts or strikes. We will explore them in this chapter.

VIBRATO

Vibrato is a slight and repeating fluctuation of the pitch, tone color, and/or loudness of a sustained note. One uses it to draw attention to a note and to intensify its emotional qualities.

Today's classical musicians have by and large adopted an aesthetic in which vibrato is used as an integral aspect of normal tone production. In such playing, the absence of vibrato becomes a potent expressive technique that draws attention to a particular note or notes. Varying the qualities of the vibrato also serves to shape phrases and draw the listener's attention where the classical musician wishes to direct it.

Traditional Irish musicians hold an opposing aesthetic. They use vibrato *only as an ornamental technique*. Overall, the music is played without vibrato. This is very much the same attitude that was held by art music flutists of the baroque and classical eras. John Solum writes, in *The Early Flute*,¹

Although there was undoubtedly a great deal of variation in the amount and use of vibrato by different players on the traverso in the baroque and classical ages, the taste of the time obliged performers to regard vibrato as an ornament. It was generally used only on longer notes as an expressive device, certainly not continuously.

Irish musicians mainly employ vibrato in slow airs and other slow or moderately paced tunes. But it is occasionally used in fast tunes as well. For example, you might occasionally use it in a place where you would otherwise play a long roll.

There are two very different means of producing vibrato on the flute and whistle: *finger vibrato* and *breath vibrato*. We'll explore finger vibrato first.

FINGER VIBRATO

It seems certain that the **finger vibrato** techniques we flute and whistle players use came to us, once again, from the piping tradition. Since a piper must supply a steady, unwavering stream of air to the reeds of the instrument, she cannot create a vibrato with the air supply but only with her fingers. Baroque wind players also made use of finger vibrato for ornamental purposes, but I think it is unlikely, though possible, that the technique found its way into traditional Irish music from that source. Who knows, maybe it came to baroque flute players from their bagpiping colleagues.

The effect of finger vibrato can range from extremely subtle to very heavy, depending upon the finger or fingers used and whether or not the fingers cover their holes entirely. The gradations of color you can create with finger vibrato are nearly endless, and styles of using finger vibrato are varied and highly personal.

Note that in using finger vibrato you are always varying the pitch of the note only in a downward, or flattening direction. French baroque flutists called it *flattement* for that reason. Sometimes the amount of pitch change is so slight that we perceive a subtle oscillation in tone color more than pitch. In fact, finger vibrato does alter the tone color of the note as well as its pitch.