

Instead of using a hard consonant sound like “t,” try using a softer one like “d.” When saying “d” in the softest possible way, the tongue action is a gentle “flicking” of the roof of the mouth. This consonant sound comes to resemble the gentle “r” sound of Spanish. Try whispering “doo, doo, doo . . .” in this smooth and gentle way. You’ll notice that the tip of your tongue moves back in the direction of your throat with each “d,” just barely brushing the hard palate as it goes by.

Playing in this manner produces notes that are softly articulated, very connected, and smooth. This manner of playing is what classical musicians call **legato** playing. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* defines legato as a manner of performance “. . . without any perceptible interruption between the notes.”^{iv} For a wind player, the most legato playing possible is, of course, manifested in the slurring together of notes.

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 for tonguing, especially when using multiple tonguing, which we shall get to soon.

In tonguing, there are wide areas of gradation between the extremes of staccato and legato, hard and soft. All of these qualities have a place in Irish music. But to understand their proper places, you must first understand the following.

THE PASTORAL BAGPIPES, THE *PÍOB MÓR*, AND THE AESTHETIC OF LEGATO PLAYING

As has been discussed in Chapter 1, Irish flute and whistle stylings owe a great deal to the legacy of the uilleann pipes, which in turn developed out of the pastoral bagpipe and *píob mór* traditions. These older bagpipes could only play in a legato, slurred fashion, with a continuous, unbroken stream of air. Articulations were created solely by the fingers (cuts and strikes) and they did not interrupt the air flow. Flute, whistle, and uilleann pipe players didn’t use these same finger articulations out of necessity, as the pastoral pipers did, but because they were incorporating an established traditional mode of musical expression that had already evolved in the older piping traditions.

The uilleann pipes developed into an instrument with a capability very different from those of the pastoral bagpipe and *píob mór*: the ability to stop the flow of air through the chanter by covering all the finger holes while stopping the end of the chanter on the knee. This made staccato playing possible.

In fact, some uilleann pipers play in a predominantly staccato fashion. This is called *tight* or *close* piping and is exemplified by such players as Tommy Reck.^v Even pipers who play in the more common *open* or *loose*, predominantly legato style make fairly frequent use of staccato figures such as the tight triplets and quadruplets referred to at the end of Chapter 18.

Uilleann pipers, Irish flute players, and tin whistle players *all* inherited a fundamental and deeply held legato aesthetic from these ancestral bagpipe traditions and combined it with their own staccato playing capabilities to create a new synthesis: **The music, in all its variety, springs forth from an underlying foundation of legato playing. The appropriate use of staccato playing exists in relation to that foundation, and takes on its meaning in contrast to it.**

Within this broad synthesis exist many different styles of playing, some of which make extensive use of the air-interrupting articulations of tonguing and/or throating. Nonetheless, they all hearken back to this common root.

As a matter of fact, all of the contemporary melodic instruments of traditional Irish music, including the fiddle, accordion, banjo, etc., derive their styles of playing ultimately from this same legacy of the ancestral bagpipes.

CONTRAST THIS WITH THE CLASSICAL WIND PLAYER’S ORIENTATION

This legato aesthetic is fundamentally different from that of modern classical music. The classical wind player is taught that all notes are to be tongued unless there is an indication in the notated music, such as a slur, to do otherwise. Most Irish players use tonguing intuitively as a phrasing device *against a general backdrop of slurring*. Classically trained musicians who wish to learn to play traditional Irish music must come to understand this critical distinction. Tonguing is used extensively in both traditions, but in each it is thought of in a completely different way.