

Chapter Three: Breathing and Phrasing

The tin whistle and flute are the only instruments of traditional Irish music that are not suited to continuous playing. We 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. Since we must create breathing spaces, why not use these spaces to define clear musical phrases? That's exactly what skilled whistle players do, either consciously or by instinct.

Of course, singers must create breathing spaces as well.

When we create a breathing space, we end one musical phrase and begin another. A breathing space is like a punctuation mark – a comma, a semicolon, a period.

Fine players of non-wind instruments use space in a similar way, even though they are not obliged to. They know how important it is to make their instruments “sing.” 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*.

ARTICULATE AND INARTICULATE BREATHING

Articulate breathing illuminates the phrasing and natural contours of a tune. **Inarticulate breathing** disrupts the music and draws attention to itself. When your breathing is articulate, listeners naturally attend to the phrasing of the music, often not noticing your breathing at all. The location of an articulate breath is governed by musical choice more than the necessity to get more oxygen.

A BREATH IS A SILENT NOTE

In slow airs and other slow tunes, one can often take a quick breath between consecutive notes without disrupting the flow of the music. But with dance tunes it almost never works to play all the notes “as written,” grabbing very quick breaths in between them. When you attempt this, you end up cheating certain notes of their full duration. This well-intentioned but ineffective strategy rarely affords you enough time to get the air you need, and your energy suffers as a result. You will likely end up breathing inarticulately and too frequently, disrupting the music and drawing attention to your attempts at getting enough air. The steadiness of the music's pulse can be affected as well.

Like the sounding of each note, the taking of a breath should be, in and of itself, a rhythmic event, with a specific and accurate duration.

CREATING A BREATHING SPACE

Whistle and flute players create a space for breathing by:

- entirely omitting an eighth note of the melody, or
- shortening a longer note by the increment of one eighth note

Think of breathing places as *silent eighth notes*, or eighth-note rests.

An exception can occur in polkas, in which we sometimes create breathing spaces by omitting sixteenth notes. For more on this, see “The Special Case of Polkas” on p. 38.

MAKING SPONTANEOUS CHOICES

Breathing choices are best when they are fluid and changeable, not predetermined. Why? For two reasons.

1. Your air needs will continually vary, depending upon many factors and conditions of the moment: the speed of the tune, whether you are sitting or standing, how well rested or tired you are (which affects how deeply you breathe), whether or not you recently ate a large meal, even the altitude of the locale. Your need for oxygen should determine when you will prepare to create a breathing place.

2. Spontaneity of breathing is a fundamental tool for creating variation in traditional Irish music. When your breathing choices become spontaneously variable, so does the phrasing of your music. This makes for a more vital experience, for the listener and for you.

Classical wind players often predetermine the breathing places in each piece of music they play. Classical composers who write for wind instruments typically incorporate rests into their music to provide breathing opportunities for the player. Omitting any of a composer's carefully chosen notes is generally discouraged.

With traditional Irish dance music, whistle players *must* omit or shorten notes. There are no built-in accommodations for breathing. Each tune is shared by all the melodic instruments of the tradition (wind and non-wind), and each player adapts the music to her instrument in particular ways.

SOME NOTES ARE ESSENTIAL, OTHERS ARE NOT

It is revealing to discover that not every note of a tune is indispensable. You can leave certain notes out without compromising the tune. In fact omitting such notes can create pleasing variations.

On the other hand, there are many notes that you must *not* omit, and you must learn to discern the difference. I advise you to omit as few notes as possible when you take a breath, and make your breaths quick and deep.

SO, HOW CAN WE DEFINE A TUNE?

There is no simple answer to this question, but a traditional Irish tune is certainly not an established, unchangeable and unbroken sequence of notes, as one might presume by looking in printed collections. It is something much more fluid and multidimensional, something large and living that music notation cannot contain. When you leave notes out, shorten notes, and change the melody in small ways that are appropriate within the language of the tradition, you are staying true to the tune and keeping it vital.

BREATHE BEFORE YOU HAVE TO

To breathe articulately, you must first attend to the physical requirements of deep breathing and the efficient use of your air supply. I cover these subjects in depth in *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* and *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*.

You may have noticed that when you get close to running out of air, your energies (mental, physical, and musical) begin to suffer. Make sure you don't let your lungs get this empty. Breathe before you have to.

If you are not used to taking deep breaths you may not have noticed how your energy can be undermined by an inadequate supply of air. Perhaps you are almost always short of air, breathing when you have to instead of when you might choose to. When air becomes plentiful, you can play with strong, vibrant energy. You can breathe articulately, breathing for phrasing rather than from an urgent need for oxygen.

NOTE OMISSION AND NOTE SHORTENING BECOME SECOND NATURE

Like so many other technical aspects of playing Irish music, note omission and note shortening will become second nature with enough practice and attention. As you establish a habit of always tuning in to your body, you will continually become more aware of your momentary air supply status. More and more, you will relegate this awareness to a subsurface level of your mind, which will keep track of your air while you are having fun playing music. When you are approaching low air supply, you will feel it in your body, and you will improvise a musical way to leave out or shorten a note, take a quick, deep breath, and continue on your merry way with a plentiful stock of air.

When you leave out an eighth note in order to breathe, you may choose to still hear that note in your mind's ear. You might even finger the note. These strategies might help if leaving out notes sometimes throws you off the tune or off the beat. However, I feel it's important to let go of these devices as you become more accustomed to creating breathing spaces.

NEVER OMIT A NOTE THAT FALLS ON A PULSE

Omitting an on-pulse note is inconsistent with the language of traditional Irish music, and represents the epitome of inarticulate breathing. If you omit such a note, knowledgeable players, listeners, and dancers may feel that you are punching a gaping hole into the flow of the tune. If you choose to do so anyway, for dramatic effect, know that you are tinkering with one of the fundamental underpinnings of the music and that some people will hear this as an indication of inexperience.

WELL, ALMOST NEVER ...

There are two minor exceptions to the rule just given. They are discussed under “Breathing Strategy #1: Shortening a Long Note” on p. 35 and “Breathing in Slow-Moving Tunes” on p. 39.

SO, WHERE IS THE PULSE?

In reels, jigs, slides, hornpipes, polkas, schottisches, flings, barn dances, germans, strathspeys and marches there is a pattern of two strong recurring rhythmic pulses per measure, which is counted “one, two; one, two”; etc. These types of tunes are in **duple meter**. Most people tap their feet to these pulses, and “one” usually gets a bit more stress than “two.”

In slip jigs, hop jigs, mazurkas and waltzes, there is a pattern of three strong recurring pulses per measure, which is counted “one, two, three; one, two, three”; and so on, with “one” getting a bit more stress than “two” or “three.” These types of tunes are in **triple meter**.

In each tune type, the pulse is subdivided into smaller units of time. In reels, each pulse is subdivided into four equal parts, usually notated as eighth notes, and in jigs, each pulse is subdivided into three eighth-note parts. In the terminology of music theory, reels are in a **simple duple meter** and jigs are in a **compound duple meter**.

In reels, then, there are eight eighth-note beats per measure. The pulse we have been talking about falls on the first and fifth of these eighth-note beats. But the third and seventh beats carry some special weight too, though not as much as the first and fifth. Thus, there are two pulses existing concurrently in reels, the **primary pulse**, on one and five, and a **secondary pulse**, on three and seven.

In jigs, the pulse falls on the first and fourth eighth-note beats and there is no secondary pulse. To keep things relatively simple we will only look at reels and jigs here.

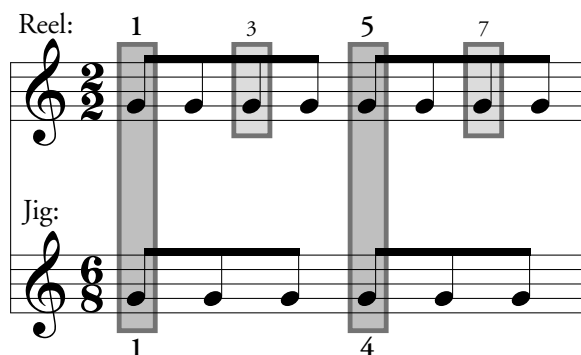


Figure 37. The pulse and its subdivisions in a reel and a jig. The darker shaded areas show the two pulses of the jig and the two primary pulses of the reel. The lighter shaded areas show the two secondary pulses of the reel. Large numbers show the pulse in the jig and the primary pulse in the reel. Slighter numbers show the secondary pulse in the reel.

DEVELOP AN ABSOLUTELY DEPENDABLE SENSE OF THE PULSE

It is one thing to understand that you shouldn't omit an on-pulse note. It is quite another to know, instinctively, which notes those are.

You must develop an absolutely reliable sense of the pulse in the tunes you play. This is the cornerstone of choosing good breathing spots, and, therefore, of playing with flexible and vital phrasing.

A rock-solid sense of the pulse makes breathing choices far simpler. By never omitting on-pulse notes, you narrow the field of potential breathing places by as much as one-half (in reels and hornpipes) or one-third (in jigs, slides, slip jigs and hop jigs). None of the shaded notes in Figure 37 should be omitted. (See previous page.)

If it is difficult for you to sense the pulse of a tune, you may need to work on internalizing the music and feeling its rhythms in your body. Learning to dance to the music is a great way to do this.

Tapping your foot on the pulse helps many players as well.

If you do tap your foot, be sensitive to those around you. If you tap loudly you may be annoying others. If your loud tapping is not rhythmically accurate, there is no doubt that you are annoying others, whether or not they have the nerve to tell you. Tapping your toe inside your shoe can be a good alternative.

BREATHING OPPORTUNITIES ARE OFTEN PLENTIFUL

If you are not used to creating breathing places in the manner I've been describing, you may be surprised at how many are indicated in these transcriptions. In most tunes there are more breathing opportunities than you will need, and using them all would make the tune sound too fragmented. As you listen to the CDs that come with this book, you'll hear, for each tune, one example of how I chose to use just a few of these breathing opportunities.

You'll also notice that many tunes have a breathing place indicated very near their beginning. You would breathe there only if you had already played the tune, gone back to the start to repeat it, and then needed some air.

THE BREATHING SUGGESTIONS ARE *ONLY* SUGGESTIONS

Remember, breathing choices are subjective, and you may not concur with all of mine. Feel free to create breathing places that feel right to you, within the bounds of the strategies we are discussing in these pages.

As mentioned on p. 9, *300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments* contains "blank slate" versions of these tune transcriptions, ones that do *not* include suggestions for breathing, ornamentation or alterations to the register of notes. Using these, you can more easily make note of your own breathing ideas.

THE BREATH MARK

As mentioned on p. 25, the breath mark – ♪ – is widely used in classical music to indicate a place one may take a breath (or for non-wind players, a place to create a brief space in the music). In that tradition, a breath mark is usually placed slightly above the top line of the staff, in between two notes or above a rest. This shows the wind player that she may take a quick breath between the two notes, taking a bit of time away from the end of the first of those notes to do so, or that the rest provides a good place to breathe.

Since it is almost never workable to "sneak" a quick breath this way between two notes of an Irish dance tune, I use the breath mark in a different way.

I place a breath mark directly *above* a notehead to indicate either:

1. that an eighth note can be entirely omitted, or
2. that a note longer than an eighth note can have an eighth-note's worth of time removed *from its beginning* in order to create a breathing space. For an example of this, see Figure 47 on p. 36.

I place a breath mark above and somewhat to the *right* of the notehead to indicate that the note can have an eighth-note's worth of time removed *from its end* in order to create a breathing space.

On the next page you will find three examples of breathing places created by shortening notes in this way.

HOW THE BREATH MARK IS USED IN THIS BOOK

1. In the case of an **eighth note** that can be omitted, the breath mark is placed directly over its notehead, as shown below.

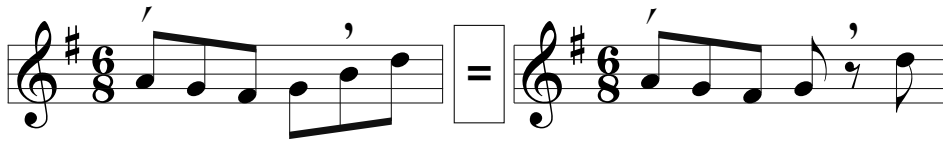


Figure 38. The last measure of the first B-part of tune 1, *Out on the Ocean*, showing how an eighth note can be omitted to create a breathing place. CD #2, track 73. You will find the complete tune on p. 46.

2. In the case of a **quarter note** that can be shortened to an eighth note, the breath mark is placed above the midpoint of the duration of the quarter note.

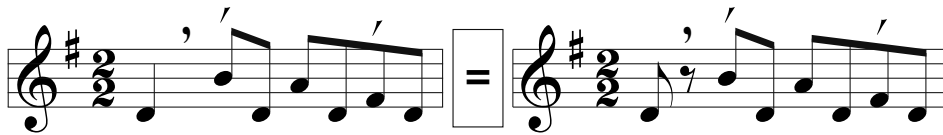


Figure 39. Measure 3 from tune 33, *The Piper's Despair*, showing how a quarter note can be shortened to an eighth note to create a breathing place. CD #2, track 74. You will find the complete tune on p. 59.

3. In the case of a **dotted quarter note** that can be shortened to a quarter note, the breath mark is placed at the two-thirds point of the duration of the dotted quarter note.

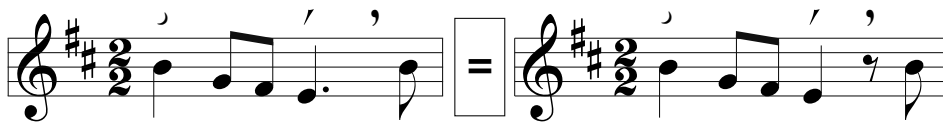


Figure 40. Measure 2 from tune 90, *The Return from Fingal*, showing how a dotted quarter note can be shortened to a quarter note to create a breathing place. CD #2, track 75. You will find the complete tune on p. 79.

4. In the case of **half notes or longer notes**, the breath mark is placed near the end of that note's duration to indicate shortening that note by one eighth note. Below is an example where a dotted quarter note, which is tied to a quarter note, is shortened.

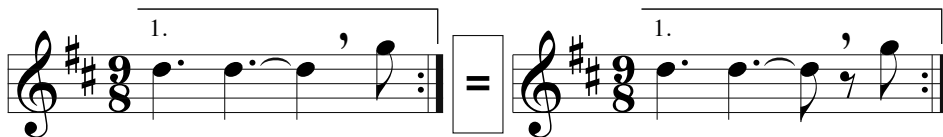


Figure 41. The first ending of the B-part from tune 85, *the hop jig Top It Off*, showing how a dotted quarter note, which is tied to a quarter note, can be shortened to a dotted quarter note tied to an eighth note to create a breathing place. CD #2, track 76. You will find the complete tune on p. 77.

I also use the breath mark to indicate where you can alter long and short rolls to create good breathing spaces. I'll explain this, and show examples, on the following three pages.

FIVE BREATHING STRATEGIES

Below are five strategies for finding and choosing breathing spots. For further discussion of these issues, with more musical examples, see *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle* and *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox*.

(It should be noted, however, that since the publication of those earlier books I have reconfigured the way I organize these breathing strategies. The following is therefore a somewhat revised and updated approach to the subject.)

BREATHING STRATEGY #1: SHORTENING A LONG NOTE

In all Irish dance tune types (except the polka) the pulse is subdivided into eighth notes. And in most tunes, you will find some notes that are longer than an eighth note.

You can often shorten such longer notes by an increment of one eighth note's duration, using the resulting space for breathing, without disrupting the flow of the tune.

Three examples of this strategy are shown in Figures 39, 40 and 41 on the previous page.

When shortening a dotted quarter note by one eighth note, the breathing place thus created sometimes falls on a pulse. This is one of only two situations I am aware of in which it is appropriate to breathe on a pulse. (For the other, see "Breathing in Slow-Moving Tunes" on p. 39.) In fact, Figure 40, on the previous page, shows an example of this kind of appropriate on-pulse breathing, occurring in that case on the secondary pulse of a march.

Here are two more examples:

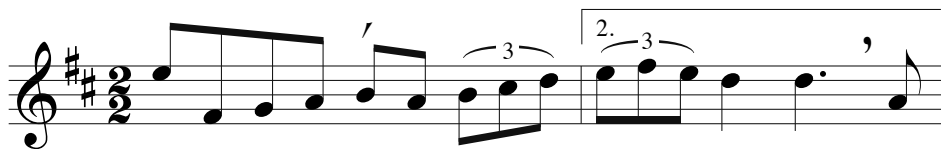


Figure 42. The second ending of the A-part from tune 118, the hornpipe McDermott's. The breathing space shown falls on the secondary pulse. CD #2, track 77. You will find the complete tune on p. 94.

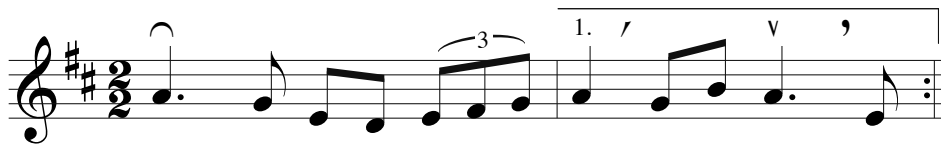


Figure 43. The first ending of the B-part of tune 78, the hornpipe The Humours of Ballyconnell. The breathing space shown falls on the secondary pulse. CD #2, track 78. You will find the complete tune on p. 74.

BREATHING STRATEGY #2: BREAKING A LONG ROLL

This strategy works only when the first note of the long roll is an *on-pulse* note. In these cases, the second note of the roll, by necessity, falls on a weaker, off-pulse beat, no matter what type of tune you are playing. The second note of such a roll can therefore be omitted without disrupting the flow of the music.

Of course, when you do this you no longer have a roll, so you can use whatever articulations you like with the notes that remain.

Here is an example:

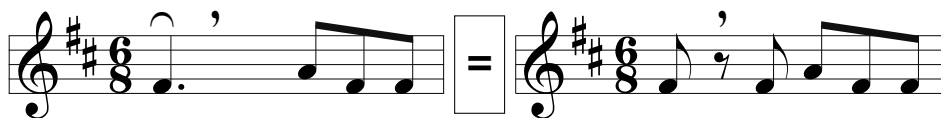


Figure 44. Breaking the long roll in the first measure of tune 6, The Rambling Pitchfork. CD #2, track 79. You will find the complete tune on p. 48.