Technique Tip: Articulation

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This article is the third in a series covering basic technique tips for the recorder.

PART 1: "Use of Air and Breath Control: The Respiratory System" / AR Spring 2021
In the first installment, we covered use of air in everyday breathing and in producing good musical tone. Exercises that did not require a recorder helped us develop solid breath support and helped us become aware of how the body feels when we use correct breathing techniques.

PART 2: "More on Breathing plus Posture and Hands" / AR Summer 2021
In the second installment, we continued breathing exercises using the recorder, followed by discussion of good posture, embouchure and hand position.

In this article, we build on those skills to work on articulation.

Tongue, air, breath and posture

Every note begins with an articulation, except when we play slurred (legato). In this article we will discuss all types of articulation. Before we start, let's take a look at one of the basic conditions for those articulations to work smoothly: the airflow.

In order to keep the tongue fast and light, we need a steady airflow that supports the tongue. Imagine that your air current is a great river, and the tongue is a little boat floating on that river. Without air, the tongue gets stuck, just like a boat gets stuck on a shallow or empty river bed.

That's why it's important to keep our breath support active, without letting it drop between each note: we must keep the core muscles engaged all the time. A typical mistake we see in school children playing the recorder, led by a teacher with insufficient knowledge of the instrument, is that they don't use the tongue to articulate—they drop the air support for each note. Even with staccato, we should not allow breath flow to decrease, but rather keep it active in the silences between the notes.

A good exercise is to slur a melody before playing it with articulations. That way you check that your breath support is consistent, laying the foundation for a light and efficient articulation.

In a previous article in this series, we covered posture in some detail. Now we move inside the mouth, while staying aware of good posture.

The tongue should be completely relaxed within the mouth, with only the tip of the tongue doing the work.

The jaw is relaxed and neutral, and does not make a chewing motion when we articulate. If you're not sure if you're moving your jaw while playing, look in the mirror to be sure.

Where on the palate should we articulate? In principle, the tongue

should not touch the front teeth, and certainly not the recorder itself.

A rule of thumb is to articulate just behind the front teeth, where the palate is lower. There is some variation regarding the precise spot, but don't articulate too much towards the back of the palate!

Noisy tongue?

How can we keep the tongue from making sounds when articulating? Sometimes we don't even notice it ourselves, but if we're not careful, the tongue can make extra noise when articulating, a kind of clicking or tapping sound. This happens when too much energy is directed towards the palate, or when the rest of the tongue is too active.

Make sure that the tongue is very relaxed in the mouth, with the jaw and throat relaxed as well.

When you articulate, think of the tongue as the paw of a cat that wants to touch a stream of water out of curiosity, but immediately pulls back. In that case, the energy is towards the back of the mouth.

The impulse of the tongue should go backwards, away from the palate, and not towards the palate. There should be a general relaxation in the jaw and throat, and most of the tongue except the tip.

With all this information in mind, let's look at the different types of articulation. First we consider a range of tonguing effects, then we move on to single and double tonguing.

▲ Relaxed posture and good embouchure are necessary for good articulation.

Legato, portato, staccato

Legato is the slurring of a number of notes in one uninterrupted stream of air, without articulating each note. It can be a great tool to work on use of air, and on the coordination between different fingerings. If the notes are not separated by articulation, this exposes all of the imperfections of unevenly moving fingers.

Staccato notes are separated from each other by playing each note as short as possible. The breath support remains active all the time, and the tongue makes the difference: instead of *Tu*, we say a very short *Tu(t),* the latter *(t)* being silent, with the tip of the tongue against the palate.

Portato or nonlegato is everything in the middle, from almost slurred but articulated, to a slightly broader version than staccato.

Single tonguing

The *T* articulation closes the gate for the airstream, momentarily cutting off the sound. It's executed with the very tip of the tongue.

The *D* is normally used to slightly interrupt, but not cut off, the airstream. This means that we hear an articulation, but the air keeps flowing out in one long solid line.

DUD FOR LOW NOTES

For low notes, the *T* articulation doesn't work: it's too harsh for these notes, causing the note to jump up an octave. In this case we use *du(d)*. It is a softer articulation, which cuts off the sound for a moment, just like a *T* would.

It also works for other notes if you want to play notes separately, but use soft articulation.

R FOR SOFT ARTICULATION

The tongued *R* is slightly softer than the *D*, because an even smaller area of the tongue is utilized.

L FOR SOFTEST ARTICULATION

The softest *L* articulation can be used to produce a 17th-century tremolo, for example (an ornamental vibrato-like effect on a single note). With an *L* articulation, the tongue allows air to pass around the sides of the tongue, so this is the only articulation where the airflow is not even interrupted.

OTHER TYPES OF ARTICULATIONS

Two types of articulation are often used in contemporary music.

- Flutter-tongue (*flatterzunge*) consists of a rolling *rrrrrrrrrrrrr* while a note is played. This, as its term implies, can be produced with the tongue, but also with the throat, depending on the native language of the speaker.
- Slap-tongue uses a *T* that is articulated very strongly with a closed throat, producing a percussive "chiff" sound. The note can be played short with this articulation. If you want to play a longer note with this technique, the throat should be opened after the "pop" of the tongue.

Double tonguing

TEKE/DEGE

Articulations using the syllables *teke* and *dege* alternate between the tip of the tongue and the back of the tongue. *Teke* is the strongest variant of this tonguing; at the softest end of the spectrum we use a very soft *dege*.

In *teke* or *dege*, try to get the *K* or *G* as far forward as possible. Instead of articulating it in the throat, you can bring it up to the back molars. The trick here is to articulate with the mouth as relaxed as possible, with the tongue "floating" on that airflow—imagining that the articulation is as far forward as possible in the mouth.

LERE & DID'L

Lere and *did'l* both work in similar ways, alternating between two positions of the tongue. The *L* allows the airflow to pass by the sides of the tongue. The *d'l* adds another part of the tongue to the *D* articulation, a slightly wider surface towards the back.

It's best to try this yourself. Sing *did'l* and feel where the tongue is if you stay on *d'l.* Also notice what happens when you go from that *d'l* to the *di*.

Singing helps because we use the same airflow that we apply when we play recorder. A steady airflow is even more important for double tonguing than for single articulation. It is essential for a light and efficient tongue.

PRACTICE DOUBLE TONGUING

In the end, double tonguing will allow you to produce faster articulation—but first your muscle memory must be formed by practicing, which takes a while. It is important that your mind is aware of what your body is doing; to achieve this, first practice these ideas slowly and with concentration.

To start and then improve, here are my suggestions with *teke/dege*, which also apply to *lere* and *did'l*:

1. Practice the articulation on one note, starting very slowly and rhythmically.
2. Practice eight strokes of the tongue (*teke-teke-teke-teke,* for example) on one note. On the ninth stroke, move to another note (perhaps up a scale).
3. Practice four strokes of the tongue (*teke-teke*) on one note, and the fifth on another note.
4. Practice two strokes of the tongue (*teke*) on one note, and the third on another note.
5. Now play a series of eight, four and two strokes of the tongue per note, in an ascending and descending scale.
6. Play a three-note ascending or descending mini-scale (for example, the notes CDE or EDC) with *tekete* or *degede*.
7. Play a sequence of these three-note patterns.
8. Do the same with sequences of five notes (for example, CDEFG and vice versa) on *teke-teke-te* or *dege-dege-de*; then try nine notes (CDEFGABCD and vice versa) with *teke-teke-teke-teke-te* or *dege-dege-dege-dege-de*.
9. Play arpeggios.
10. Play passages from a musical piece.

In the case of *teke/dege*, I strongly recommend practicing them in reverse, *kete* and *gede*. This makes the groups much more rhythmic, and helps to strengthen the weaker syllable. Also practice them in triplets—*tekete keteke* or *degede gedege*.

How to decide which articulations to use in music

Here is a very basic set of rules that provide a good starting point. These ideas can always be ignored if there

LINKS OF INTEREST:

- Lobke Sprenkeling's web site: **https://lobke.world**
- Previous articles in this series on recorder technique: **https://americanrecorder.org/american_recorder_magazine_ex.php**
- Lobke Sprenkeling's videos demonstrating this series of articles: **www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag**
- An article on historical articulations by Beverly R. Lomer and María Esther Jiméniz Capriles, **https://americanrecorder.org/docs/AR_Fall2020_body.pdf**

are musical reasons to do something different, including efforts to apply historical articulations.

T is used for:

- Repeated notes; on the lower notes, this should be *dud* so the note doesn't "squeak"
- Jumps (intervals of a third or fourth and larger)

D is used for stepwise movement—for example, in scale passages.

Thirds are officially a jump, but they are somewhat in the middle. Depending on the melody and character, they can be articulated with a *T* or a *D*.

Always look at how the notes in the music are grouped. Where are the jumps, and where are the stepwise notes? Where are the repeated notes? And what character do they have?

T is not automatically played on the strong beat of the measure. When the last note of a scale-like melody falls on a strong beat, I normally add this note to my *D* articulation: *T-d-d-d-D*.

Dotted rhythms usually place *tu* on the short note: *tu-Du, tu-Du*. Think jazzy melodies, like *The Pink Panther*.

In French Baroque music, the scale-like movement of seconds is normally articulated as *tu tu-Du tu-Du tu-Du,* with the *tu* on a weak beat of the measure and the *Du* on a strong one. This is the articulation technique for wind instruments to obtain what was called *inégalité*, literally inequality. This articulation suggests a slight irregularity among the notes, which gives the music a somewhat sensual and elegant character. It doesn't actually become real swing, and we don't really make a rhythmic difference, but the *tu tu-Du tu-Du* does insinuate a sense of slight irregularity.

A tip for practicing combinations of *T* and *D* is the study book, *The Complete Articulator*, by Kees Boeke. I recommend starting in the second part of the book, and then moving to the first. Once learned by heart, it can be used as a daily warm-up.