Too Much Tongue in Tonguing

by Donald Peck

Imagine yourself at an orchestra concert: every time the violinists begin to play a new phrase they raise their bows two feet above their violins. At the specified moment they bring them crashing down viciously on the strings to make the attack. Ridiculous? Yes—very. In fact, that doesn’t really happen; but that is exactly the effect you hear when listening to some wind players.

In the early days woodwind instruments were quite imperfect. In order to get them to speak—to respond—the player had to tongue violently, using a sharp attack. But this is no longer necessary and is certainly unmusical. Our modern instruments are very well designed—almost perfect. We need only give them the merest attack to back up the air. The air pressure makes the volume (dynamic level) of the tone, not the tongue. You can’t play fortissimo with the tongue; you can only play fortissimo with the air. And if you do play fortissimo with the air you may still tongue pianissimo.

A sharp attack with the tongue is not desirable. Instead of tonguing with a t sound, you should begin the syllable with a d sound (de, do, di). The tongue should always be “at ease” in the mouth—very relaxed and natural—never tight or tense. It must never stop the note or cut off the air. Once the attack is given, the tongue stays out of the way. It must not return to the roof of the mouth until it is time for the next d syllable.

Tonguing on a wind instrument is directly comparable to bowing on a string instrument. The use of the tongue is merely the way a wind player achieves a slur or a non-slip (nuance marks). String players achieve this with the many forms of bowing. They do not lift or stop the bow when they change the bow. They keep the bow moving as much as possible and just change the direction. In wind playing you keep the air moving constantly, like the bow, and merely make a small, gentle change with the tongue (the d syllable) behind or through the air. The air does not stop because you are tonguing; it must keep moving.

The length of the note you play has nothing to do with the tongue, or the attack of the note. The length depends only on how much air you give at any one time. If you want a short note you give air of short duration. If you want a long note you give more extended air. There may be any type of attack for any length of note. You may have a very short note (that is, giving very little air) with a soft attack or a crisp attack. You may have a very long note (continuous air) with a sharp attack or a soft attack. The attack has nothing whatsoever to do with the length of the note. The type of attack which you choose to use should depend on what is required by the music—the style or mood.

This also applies to staccato. Staccato does not mean short—as short as possible. It means shorter than written. If you have a staccato 32nd note, it would certainly be much shorter than a staccato 8th note or quarter note. Some players see staccato and immediately attack viciously—very sharply—and play as short as they possibly can. This is distracting and therefore detracts from the
music. The type of staccato used depends on the mood of the music. The staccato 8th note in a serenade or romance will certainly not be as short or sharp as a staccato 8th note in a march. A march 8th note will be crisp and shorter than one in a romance or serenade. Certainly in a serenade the attack of a staccato note will be very soft—very gentle—no matter what the dynamic level. Remember, the volume comes from the air only and also has nothing whatsoever to do with attack.

In fact, for an attack, one need not use the tongue at all—merely release the air to make the sound begin (as a violinist rests the bow on the string and gently starts to move it—"Start on the string," they say). Take a BIG breath. Build up the support in the diaphragm. Shape the embouchure and release the air into the flute—as if to say "who." The tone seems to appear from nowhere, to listeners in the hall.

When tonguing rapid passages (e.g., 16th notes) there is no need to tongue them especially short or crisp even if they are marked staccato, because a 16th note in a fast tempo is a note of very short duration anyway. If you play the notes fast with the fingers and you use a natural tongue with continuous air, you will have an effect much like a string player bowing the same fast notes. The string player merely makes the bow change—up, down, up, down. That is the sound you strive for on a wind instrument. The violinist does not lift his bow off the string after every 16th note and come crashing back down, nor should you simulate such an attack with your tongue. I repeat, the notes are already short enough by the fact that the duration of the 16th note is short.

If the passage is so fast, or the type of sound you desire suggests that you should use double-tonguing instead of single-tonguing, the process involved is basically the same. That is, instead of using a t sound followed by a k sound, you should use a d syllable and a g syllable such as de-ge or do-go.

To practice double-tonguing I suggest Exercise #21 from Joachim Andersen, Twenty-Four Progressive Studies for Flute, op. 33. I play it slower than specified—perhaps \( \text{d} = 58 \) —so as to hear the tone.

At first play it with the tongued notes (beats 2 and 3) slurred together to make a half-note. Listen to the tone quality and "feel" the lip position and throat cavity. Then go back and tongue the notes as written (de-ge). But be sure that the lips and the throat are exactly the same as when you slurred, and that the tone is the same as the slurred 16th notes on beats 1 and 4. Same air! Same tone! Same player!
We mustn't be two flute players—one who tongues, and one who slurs, the tongued one often being weaker. As mentioned, the tone must come from the air, not the force on the tongue.

When triple-tonguing, I suggest two types for different effects. If a triplet sound is to be stressed, use "de-ge-de/de-ge-de." This is especially good to use if each note to be played is a different note. But if several notes are repeated for a series of triplets or sextuplets it is much smoother to use the syllables "de-ge-de/ge-de-ge." A good example of this is found in the accompaniment section of Prelude to Act 3 of Lobengrin by Wagner.

This latter tonguing is always smoother even when the note is changing, but it sometimes is difficult to synchronize the syllables with the fingers.

A good exercise for triple-tonguing practice is Joachim Andersen's, Twenty-Four Études Techniques, op. 63 no. 4.

Run some of it slurred at first to hear the sound, and to fix the embouchure and phrasing. Then play it EXACTLY the same, but add the tongue. In the first section use "de-ge-de/de-ge-de." At bar 33 (the recapitulation) change to "de-ge-de/ge-de-ge" in order to learn this useful alternate triple-tongue. Don't forget to crescendo and decrescendo and to phrase (with the air) just as you do when you slur. Tongued passages should not be monochromatic or dull.

Tonguing should never be obtrusive or superimposed on the performance. People do not go to concerts to hear tonguing, they go to hear music. Tonguing is only a part of the technique of playing an instrument and should never be an isolated device; it must fit in. It is merely an implement to help convey the composer's instructions and musical message.
CREDITS
© 1998 by The Instrumentalist Publishing Co.; reprinted by permission. Subscribe to Flute Talk (200 Northfield Road, Northfield, Illinois) for 1 year, 10 issues, $15 (U.S. delivery) or call (847)446-8550.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
DONALD PECK is currently celebrating his fortieth year as Principal Flutist of the Chicago Symphony. A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music where he studied with William Kincaid, Peck subsequently played with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., and then spent three years in the United States Marine Band. He served as Principal Flute of the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra for two years before accepting Fritz Reiner’s invitation to join the Chicago Symphony, and his guest engagements have taken him to the Casals Festival, the Carmel Bach Festival, the Victoria International Festival in Canada, the Grand Teton Festival in Wyoming, and to Europe, Japan, and Australia. In 1985 he gave the world premiere of Morton Gould’s Flute Concerto with the Chicago Symphony under Sir Georg Solti. He has recorded many works on numerous labels and has edited many works for flute. Additionally, Peck is a member of the faculty of DePaul University.