

ARTICULATION

BY LOBKE SPRENKELING

For recorder players and other wind players

TONGUE & AIR

Every note begins with an articulation, except when we play slurred. In this article we will discuss all types of articulation, but before we start, let's have a look at a prerequisite for articulation to work well: the air stream.

In order for the tongue to be agile, we need a steady air stream. Imagine it as a big river, and the tongue as a little boat floating on the river. Without air, the tongue gets stuck, just like a boat on a shallow or empty river bed.

That is why we keep our breath support active, without dropping it between the notes: we must keep the core muscles engaged all the time. A typical mistake we see in children playing the school recorder is that they don't articulate and they start and drop their air stream for each note. Even in staccato we must not drop our breath support.

A good exercise, before getting into any type of articulation, is to slur a melody before playing it with articulations. In this way you check if your breath support is consistent, laying the base for a light and efficient articulation.

LEGATO, PORTATO, STACCATO

Legato, or slurring, is a continuous use of the air with no articulation at all, uniting all notes in one big air stream. It is good for working on our use of the air and the coordination between the different fingerings.

Staccato is separating the notes from each other by playing each note as short as possible. The air support maintains active, it's the tongue that makes the difference: instead of "Tu", we say a very short silent "Tut" with the tip of the tongue maintained against the palate.

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

POSTURE

The tongue must be totally relaxed within the mouth, with only the tip of the tongue doing the work.

The jaw is relaxed and neutral and does not move in a chewing movement when we articulate. Check in the mirror that it doesn't!

Where on the palate should we articulate?

In principle we should not touch the teeth or the instrument.

Our rule of thumb is to articulate behind the teeth. There is some room to choose from, but don't articulate too much towards the back of the palate!

Video about this subject: <https://youtu.be/uD0TxT5a9EY>

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SINGLE TONGUING

T AND D

The T closes the gate for the air stream, cutting off momentarily the sound. It is with the very tip of the tongue.

The D is normally used to interrupt but not cut off the air stream. This means that we hear an articulation, but the air keeps flowing out.

R

The tongue R is a bit softer than the D, because it's using even less tongue.

DUD

The T doesn't work for low notes: it's too sharp and the note will jump up an octave.

In this case we use Dud. It is a softer articulation, that does cut off momentarily the sound, just as a T would.

It also works for middle tones, if you wish to cut off the air stream but use soft articulation.

L

The L is the softest - we can use it to obtain a tremolo, for example, in this case the historical ornamental effect on a single note.

DOUBLE TONGUING

TEKE/DEGE

Teke and Dege alternate between the tip of the tongue and the back of the tongue. Teke is the strongest and on the softest side of the spectrum we arrive at a very soft Dege.

In teke-dege, try to get the K or G as much forward as you can. Instead of pronouncing it back in the throat, you can articulate it as far as the back teeth.

LERE & DID'L

Lere and Did'l work in similar ways, both alternating between two postures of the tongue. The L allows the air stream to pass by the sides of the tongue. The d'l uses a different part of the tongue than the d.

NOISY TONGUE?

How to prevent a tongue from being noisy when articulating? Sometimes we don't even notice it, but if we aren't careful, the tongue can make extra noise when articulating, a kind of clicking or ticking noise.

This happens when there is too much energy going towards the palate, or if the rest of the tongue is too active.

So make sure the tongue lies in the mouth like a piece of meat, with the jaw relaxed.

When you articulate, think of the tongue as the paw of a cat that touches a stream of water but immediately pulls back. There, the energy is towards the back.

So the inertia of the tongue should be away from the palate, not towards the palate.

A steady air stream is even more important for double articulation than it is for single articulation! It contributes to a light and efficient tongue.

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HOW TO PRACTISE DOUBLE TONGUING

In the end, double tonguing will bring you to an even faster articulation, but first your muscle memory has to be formed, which takes a while. So where to start and how to improve? Here is my suggestion:

1. Practise the articulation on one note, starting really slow and rhythmical
2. Practise 8 on one note with the ninth on another note
3. Practise 4 on one note with the fifth on another note
4. Practise 2 on one note with the third on another note
5. Now play series of 8, 4, 2 notes on a scale
6. Play an upward or downward mini-scale of 3 notes (so that's one double tonguing + the note you are going to land on)
7. Play a series of these mini-scales of 3 notes
8. Do the same with 4 and 8
9. Play arpeggios or passages from a pieces

In the case of teke/dege it is highly recommended to practise them inverted (kete and gede). This will make the groups much more rhythmical. Then practise it in motives of three, so that it becomes Tekete Keteke, or Degede Gedege.

HOW TO DECIDE ARTICULATIONS FOR A PIECE

Here is a very basic orienting set of rules, which is good to use as a starting point. It can always be ignored if there are musical reasons!

T is used for:

- Repeated notes; on the lower notes this has to be **Dud**
- Jumps (can be from a third or fourth on)

D is used for secondary movement (scales). Thirds are somewhat in the middle, so depending on the melody and character, they could be articulated with a T or a D.

Always look for how the music is grouped. Where are the jumps and where are the closely knitted lines of seconds? Where are the repeated notes? And what character do they have?

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

Dotted rhythms are normally Tu, tu-Du, tu-Du. Think of jazzy melodies, like the Pink Panther.

In French Baroque music, the scale-like movement of seconds are normally articulated as Tu tu-Du tu-Du tu-Du, with the Tu on a weak beat and the Du on a strong beat. This is the articulation technique for wind instruments to get what they called "inégalité", literally meaning inequality. It suggests a slight irregularity between notes, which gives the music a somewhat sensual, elegant character. It doesn't actually become really swing, and we might not actually make a rhythmical difference, but the Tu tu-Du tu-Du does insinuate a slight irregularity.

A tip for practising combinations of T and D, is the wonderful étude book "The Complete Articulator" by Kees Boeke. It can be used, once learned by heart, as our daily warming-up.