

Tonguing and the Quality of Attack

This section includes two main topics:

1. **Practicing the attack**
2. **Tonguing exercises**

1. Attack

Tonguing generally refers to the use of the tongue in articulation, but the very first moment of the note — the initial articulation — is often called the **attack**. I include this under “Sound Practice.”

The most widely used textbook for this is likely **Moyse: De la Sonorité**, which includes a dedicated section for attack practice.

In this exercise, you start from a single note (e.g. middle F), and descend by half steps, always returning to the first note — zigzagging outward gradually.

- **Exercise 1** is for practicing attack
- **Exercises 2 & 3** focus on slurred leaps
- **Exercise 4** is entirely slurred and demands lip flexibility

Let's focus on **Exercise 1**, dedicated to the attack.

First, I practice it without using the tongue — **just with abdominal pulses like “Huh-Huh.”** This is surprisingly difficult, especially in the middle and low registers. It's an essential warm-up because everything begins with solid abdominal support .

Once you've mastered the breath-only version, you add the tongue. Although we often say “Tu” for tonguing, it's better to think of pulling the tongue back than striking forward. Whether you say **T**, all these are produced by pulling the tongue back rather than pressing forward.

In my wind ensemble days, we were constantly told to “unify the attack” or to “make the attack more precise.” It's a fundamental challenge for all wind players.

Common Attack Mistakes and Solutions

When you see a lone eighth or quarter note marked *fortissimo*, you might be tempted to blast it out with a huge “TU!!!!” — which flips the note, makes it squeaky, or comes off as an unpleasant burst of sound.

What’s missing here is breath support.

The stronger the tongue, the more support it needs from behind — not just in volume but in stability.

My former teacher used to say: “*The French do the best tonguing.*” Possibly because the French language places more emphasis on vowels, it naturally develops a more breath-supported tonguing technique. Japanese, on the other hand, uses relatively strong consonants (but struggles with consonant clusters), so it helps to approach tonguing as *gentle and flowing*, with plenty of air — not too percussive.

2. Tonguing Exercises

How to produce a beautiful tone while tonguing

Tonguing is one of the essential components of flute playing. It’s not just about how fast the tongue can move — the strength, character, and articulation of the tongue directly influence musical expression. During the Baroque flute era, articulation (achieved through tonguing) was a primary method of adding musical expression and phrasing.

Of course, speed is still important — building tongue strength and dexterity is part of the practice.

Key Concepts: Air Support and Nasal Vowels

Even those who can produce a beautiful tone may feel frustrated when a tongued phrase comes out as a weak “pepepepe...” rather than a rich sound.

My teacher during my studies abroad was from a French-speaking region. He used to say, “*French speakers produce the most beautiful tonguing.*”

This doesn’t mean others can’t reach the same level — it’s just a helpful insight.

French, like Italian, typically alternates between consonants and vowels. However, French consonants (especially K and T) are often softer, and the language also features nasal

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vowels. These nasal sounds — pronounced through the nose — naturally broaden the oral and nasal cavities, creating resonance. I believe this contributes to the smooth, rich tonguing we often hear from French speakers.

To make tonguing sound beautiful, **air must continue flowing smoothly** over the tongue.

Another key benefit of nasal vowels is the *open space* they create in the mouth. For instance, a French speaker pronounce the "AN" with a deep nasal tone — giving it a strong, bold feeling. Try saying it yourself with a nasal “AN” and notice how your voice resonates differently.

This sensation — air moving through the nasal cavity — helps open up the mouth and throat, something also emphasized by vocalists. Since flute sound production is closely related to singing, this overlap makes sense.

So, when tonguing, I make an extra effort to ensure **the airflow continues**. I imagine the air flowing *over* the tongue, requiring enough air pressure and abdominal support to "wrap" the tongue rather than letting it cut the air.

Practice with Taffanel-Gaubert

The gold standard for scale exercises is the **Taffanel & Gaubert's "17 Daily Exercises for Flute."** The Leduc edition is the most well-known.

While many think of scale work as boring, these exercises are incredibly effective when used correctly.

They're not for beginners, but once a student can play fluently, the benefits are clear. For very skilled children, it might be usable from late elementary school, but generally it's more appropriate for middle school students and above.

The method begins with a suggested daily routine, but few people can do all of it daily. I recommend adapting it to your own schedule. The best usage tips are actually outlined in *Takeshi Koizumi's* now out-of-print book "*The Basics of Flute Playing*," which is a fantastic guide for intermediate and advanced students.

3. Practicing Articulation with Taffanel-Gaubert EJ4

Articulation means shaping the musical line using a mix of slurs, tonguing, and breath. It creates contrast and expression. In French, the word *articulation* refers both to joints in the body and to clear pronunciation — both ideas are helpful for flute players!

Imagine saying “Let’s do our best.”

- If you say it loudly and clearly, it sounds full of determination.

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- If you mumble it softly, it might sound like reluctant resignation.

Articulation can change the meaning and expression of a phrase just as much as dynamics.

Flutists who sound “professional” often have excellent articulation. And that doesn’t just mean they can tongue fast — it means they can shape and color each note with precision.

Using EJ4 for Articulation Training

This exercise asks you to play the same scale pattern with many different articulation variations.

Here are a few key points and patterns:

Articulation 1: Slurred

This is the foundation. It may look simple, but it reveals many weaknesses — poor tone, inconsistent sound width, breath control issues.

Key point: The tone must remain *even and full* throughout.

Imagine a fluffy pillow — evenly stuffed with cotton.

Now compare that to a lumpy pillow, where the stuffing has bunched up — uncomfortable and uneven. Your sound should be like the **fluffy pillow**.



To achieve this:

- Avoid tension (especially in your knees and shoulders).
- Don’t focus on “taking more breath” — instead, think “take a generous, relaxed breath” and use it fully and evenly.
- The slur mark in the music looks like a gentle curve — imagine your phrase flowing like that shape.

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Try playing slowly, at **f** or **mf**, to fully sense your tone. The slow tempo reveals all weaknesses, which is great for improvement!

Articulation 2: Two-slur Pattern

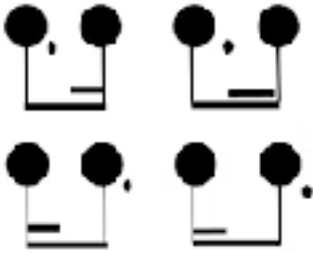
Same advice as above — keep the tone full and consistent across both notes in each slur.

Be aware of tension creeping in — especially in your legs. Many players unconsciously tighten their knees when focusing hard.

Again, imagine that soft, even “pillow” tone across the slurs, and use a flowing breath to carry the phrase.

Articulations 3 & 4: Dotted Rhythms

Each group contains one staccato note and three slurred notes. When converted into rhythm, it looks like this:



•**Dotted rhythm** — the key here is **timing**.

•Match your tongue and finger movement precisely to keep the rhythm clear.

•Especially articulation 3 (bottom line of the pattern) tends to become unbalanced — don't let the first note sound like a grace note. It must still sound like the “downbeat.”

You'll notice how differently these patterns feel at slow vs. fast tempos. Focus on evenness and precision.

Articulations 5, 6, and 7: Two Slurred Notes with Variations

These are grouped like siblings — similar, but not identical.

- Articulation 7 uses **syncopation** — be sure to bring out the off-beat feel.



For articulations 5 and 6:

- The second note in each slur is a bit shorter, not necessarily staccato, but gently detached.
- This creates contrast and flow.

Be sure to vary **dynamics and tempo** too. Try playing at **f, p**, slow and fast — it helps prepare you for using these articulations musically.

Articulations 8 & 9: Minimal Tonguing — Surprisingly Difficult!

At first glance, these seem easy. But they're tricky — especially articulation 9, which often shifts accents to the wrong beats.

Practice slowly and listen carefully. Keep the phrasing natural, and make sure the downbeat still feels like the downbeat.

My personal image for these: pulling something heavy from the ground with energy and bounce — or imagining a **rubber band** stretching and snapping with precision.

You can also imagine Renaissance-style military music — like a snare drum and bass drum driving a marching rhythm.

These kinds of musical images make the practice much more effective — and immediately applicable to real repertoire.

Articulation 10: Tongued — TTTT or TKTK

This is suitable for both **single tonguing** and **double tonguing** practice.

Let's talk briefly about both methods:

4. Single Tonguing Practice Tips

The two most important factors:

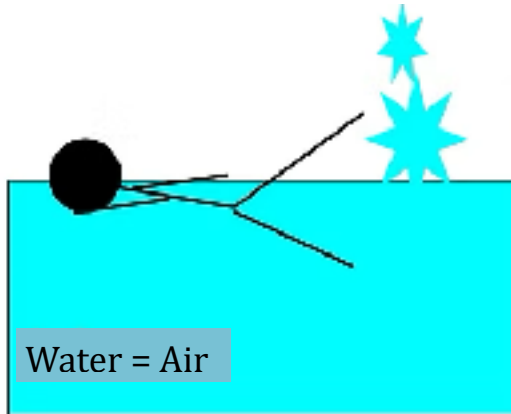
- 1. Tongue and fingers must move in perfect sync.**
Even the fastest tongue won't sound good if the fingers are late or early.
- 2. Strong, steady air support.**
Imagine doing a flutter kick under water — if your legs move but the water isn't

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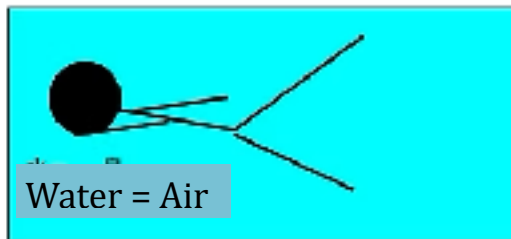
supporting you, you won't go anywhere. The same goes for flute: a stream of air must always be there for the tongue to ride on.

Practice **legato-style tonguing** first (like “Toooo-Toooo-Toooo”) instead of detached bursts (“Tut-Tut-Tut”).

This helps you feel the connection between air and tongue. Later you can shorten the tonguing while keeping the air steady.



When the kicks are intense and the feet strike the water from the air, it creates a loud splashing sound



When the kicks are inside the water (air) and it creates a smooth water movement.

5. Double Tonguing Practice Tips

The principles are the same:

- **Sync the fingers and tongue**
- **Maintain air support**

First, try saying “Te-ke-te-ke...” quickly, as a tongue exercise. (We're not using this exact pronunciation while playing, but it helps train the motion.)

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One of the biggest problems with double tonguing is the **K** syllable being too weak or too late — creating an uneven “Teh-keh, Teh-keh” that sounds like dotted rhythms.

Try alternatives like **D-G-D-G** or **De-Ge-De-Ge** to soften the articulation and allow more air to flow.

Practice whispering “Dege-dege” while exhaling to get the feel of **air moving continuously** over the tongue.

It might feel silly — but it works!

Also try:

1. Starting patterns with **K** instead of **T**: “K-T-K-T...”
2. Practicing only with **K** to strengthen it — but don’t overdo it, or you might strain your tongue or throat.

When you can keep tempo, tone, articulation, finger coordination, and breath support *all together* across registers — that’s a huge achievement! Playing through one of these exercises at speed feels as satisfying as performing a full piece.

6. High-Speed Tonguing: Practice in Short Phrases

To build speed without strain, divide long patterns into shorter phrases. For example:

Instead of:

Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-Fa-Mi-Re Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-Fa-Mi-Re Do

Practice as:

Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-Fa-Mi-Re (Rest) Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-Fa-Mi-Re
(Rest)

Shortening phrases helps maintain focus and control — and it’s less tiring. Short and frequent sessions are more effective than long, exhausting ones.

Closing Thoughts

Tonguing is *the soul* of flute playing. It brings life and clarity to the sound — just as vowels alone don’t make a word, sound without articulation lacks direction and meaning.

And because it’s so essential, **it’s also one of the hardest things to master.**

So be patient — and practice often, in small, focused sessions.

With time and care, your tonguing will become a powerful tool of musical expression.