

Chapter 5

Articulation- The Winds


The problem of articulation, from the conductor's point of view, is one of knowing the capabilities of all of the wind instruments, and of establishing common concepts towards which all of his wind players strive. As with string bowing, one can learn a great deal about the articulation problems of each member of the brass and woodwind families by referring to numerous method books on each instrument, by discussing the problems with skilled performers on these instruments, and best of all, by learning to play some of the wind instruments.

The problem of imparting a like concept to all wind players in an orchestra is a much greater problem than it is with strings, due to the diverse acoustical nature of so many instruments. Not only will the trumpet player have a different technique than the oboist for approaching a certain passage, but the clarinetist may approach a passage in a manner which does not agree with that of the bass clarinetist. And there are different schools of thought on the same instruments: I have heard French horn players say never to start a note with the breath (without the tongue), and others say that such a method for starting a note is commonly used.

We will not explore methods of articulating each of the wind instruments, since this information is well documented elsewhere. Our purpose is rather to present throughout this workbook ideas on general fundamental orchestral problems as they present themselves to the conductor—in this case, articulation.

With members of a fully professional orchestra, most of the basic problems have long since been solved through previous orchestral experiences. Other orchestras will contain brass and woodwind players who have missed some of the elementary foundational techniques of wind articulation, and it is in this situation where the conductor will have to rely on his own knowledge of wind instrument articulation. The reader might wonder at this point, that if the second trumpet player, for example, after playing the trumpet for a number of years, did not learn how to produce a short staccato, how can the conductor, who is perhaps a violinist, learn such details in addition to all of the other details which he, as conductor, must learn? The answer to this question is that if the trumpet player did not learn to make a short staccato in that length of time, the young conductor has to be twice as resourceful as the trumpeter, more perceptive as a listener, and infinitely more desirous of knowing how an orchestra is made to sound good. If not, then both he and the trumpeter should question their orchestral involvement. If the conductor has sufficient talent and drive, he can quite thoroughly understand such a problem as trumpet articulation. If not, his chances of success are not bright.

STARTING AND STOPPING THE NOTE (ATTACK AND RELEASE)

A practical opening question on the subject of wind articulation is: How should the following passage be tongued? $\frac{2}{4}$  It could be tongued in three different ways, depending on tempo and the instruments involved. At an adagio tempo certain instruments start each eighth note by removing the tongue from the reed or teeth (a "tah" syllable). Other instruments use a breath attack ("hah") for starting each note. The ending of each note at this tempo is produced by discontinuing the force of air. At a somewhat faster tempo—moderato or allegretto—each player starts the note by removing the tongue from the reed or teeth, and ends the note by stopping the column of air. At a very rapid tempo the tongue serves to start and stop the note almost simultaneously. The latter is a concept which is rejected by some wind players, who claim that the notes should never be stopped with the tongue. It is true that the idea of avoiding the tongue completely in stopping a note is excellent, for it is too easy to produce a raucous effect in using the tongued release, especially with younger musicians, and this must be the principal consideration in this matter. On the other hand, rapid staccato passages most often make too much of a demand on the breathing apparatus to affect a breath or throat release. Finally, there would seem to be no right or wrong method, since our major orchestras are filled with players of both schools of thought. The conductor should above all be aware of the sound of good articulation, so that he can demand the highest standards of his players. If one wind player is not producing clean articulation, the conductor must detect this problem and undertake the necessary steps to correct it.

COMBINATIONS OF SLURRED AND STACCATO NOTES

The problem of stopping the notes with the tongue or breath appears again in connection with the ending of the final note of a slurred group such as the following group of slurred sixteenths:

EXAMPLE 12



This figure is automatically interpreted by some wind players as:

EXAMPLE 13



and by others as

EXAMPLE 14



However, the interpretation of the passage must depend on the conductor's concept of the passage, which in turn is influenced by his knowledge of what the wind instruments are capable of doing both individually and collectively.

A general rule followed by wind players in the interpretation of short groups of slurred notes, such as those of the preceding example, is that if the last of the slurred notes is followed by a staccato note, the last slurred note is clipped short with the tongue so as to leave as much space or silence as possible, in order to emphasize the approaching staccato note. The figure:

EXAMPLE 15



is consequently interpreted as

EXAMPLE 16



This interpretation applies primarily to livelier tempi, since it produces an unmusical effect when used at a slower tempo. Again the use of the tongue as a means of stopping the note is not accepted by some wind players. The important point remains, however, that the note preceding the staccato is shortened in the most clean and musical manner.

If the final slurred note is followed by a legato note or another slurred group such as:

EXAMPLE 17



The final note of the slurred group is then played

EXAMPLE 18



with only a slight interruption of the sound with the tongue.

RAPID STACCATO

A conductor should also know the limits of articulation speed of each wind player in his orchestra, as well as what the wind instrument itself can be expected to do.

Brass players and flautists, for instance, are generally capable of double tonguing (producing two notes with one complete movement of the tongue). This enables them to execute rapid staccato—especially repeated notes—at a brilliant tempo. The double reeds are capable of double tonguing only in the hands of (mouths of) highly skilled players. I have met only a few single reed players who could use a double tonguing technique, and most of them could use it effectively only in certain registers of their instruments.

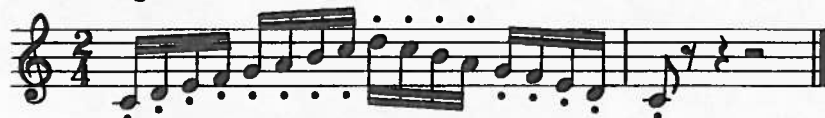
At what tempo, for example, can an orchestra perform the finale of Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony*, or Rossini's *Thieving Magpie Overture*? Many orchestras would have to play either work at such a slow tempo in order to accommodate the slow staccato of some of their wind players that it might be more musical to select another composition. Many conductors program such works in spite of the inability of their wind players to reach their expected tempo. Results:

1. The conductor becomes very angry when he discovers his wind players cannot articulate the passage at his tempo, and he blames the winds instead of his own lack of foresight.
2. The conductor must go through with the programming as planned because he discovers the problem too late. The tempo is then taken either too slowly to be exciting or too rapidly to be executed with clarity.

All of this can be avoided if the conductor makes it a point to know the articulation capabilities of his players. Which ones can double tongue? Which ones can double tongue in a clean and crisp manner throughout the range of their instruments? Of those who are limited to a single tonguing technique, which ones are severely limited in the speed of their rapid staccato? At which tempo (m.m.) can the wind section collectively produce a clean interpretation of a scale passage such as the following:

EXAMPLE 19

Allegro molto



This tempo becomes the approximate upper limit for any rapid staccato sixteenth note passage. It will range from about m.m. 112 or more with the good high school orchestra to about 126-132 in a semi-professional orchestra and about 152 or more in a professional orchestra. At which tempo can the same passage be played by individual members of the wind section? In which range does each player's articulation become unclear? If a wind player cannot produce a clean, short staccato, does the conductor recognize this fact, and prescribe remedial exercises or instructions? It is the conductor whose concept of orchestral articulation is hazy, who permits sloppy craftsmanship. A conductor who has a mental picture of George Szell's Cleveland Orchestra winds doing the scherzo of Mendelssohn's *Midsummernight's Dream* has such a lofty goal that this very goal might be forever unattainable by him. On the other hand, it will insure that he will never become complacent about his orchestral winds.