

Legato Harmonica Playing

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Against the nature

- Blow and draw mechanism

Reason for ineffective legato harmonica playing

1. The duration between the two notes is too long and result in discontinuity
2. When the changing notes are articulated too abruptly

7 combinations of legato in harmonica playing

1. Legato on same hole
2. Legato on different holes with one breath
3. Legato on different holes with both inhalation and exhalation
4. Legato on same hole with slider with one breath
5. Legato on same hole with slider with inhalation and exhalation
6. Legato on different holes with slider with one breath
7. Legato on different holes with slider with both inhalation and exhalation

In the above legato combinations, there are **three basics technique** involved.

1. Inhalation and exhalation
2. Lateral movement to alternate holes
3. Slider mechanism activation

Practice steps for **lateral movement to alternate neighborhood holes legato**:

1. Pick any two neighborhood holes on the harmonica
2. Pick only the blow or draw notes
3. Play the picked notes on the left side of the harmonica
4. Move the harmonica slowly and laterally to the left while maintaining a continuous airflow and constant shape of lip
5. Play two holes simultaneously during the laterally movement with continuous airflow and constant shape of lip
6. Play the picked notes on the right side of the harmonica

7. Move the harmonica slowly and laterally to the right while maintaining a continuous airflow and constant shape of lip
8. Play two holes simultaneously during the laterally movement with continuous airflow and constant shape of lip
9. Repeat step 3-8 while increase the speed of the lateral movement gradually until the double stop effect of steps 5 & 7 disappear

Practice steps for **slider mechanism activation legato**:

1. Pick any hole on the harmonica
2. Pick only the blow or draw notes
3. Play the single note without pressing the slider
4. Play the harmonica with a continuous airflow while pressing the slider slowly until it produces a double stop effect when the slider is partially pressed
5. Play the single note with the slider fully pressed
6. Repeat step 3-5 while increase the speed of the slider press until the double stops effect of step 4 disappear

Practice steps for **inhalation and exhalation legato**:

1. Pick any hole on the harmonica
2. Play the blow note from the lowest volume at pianississimo and increase gradually to mezzo-forte
3. Play the draw note from the lowest volume at pianississimo and increase gradually to mezzo-forte
4. Alternate between the two notes
5. Shorten the duration between the two notes
6. Speed up the crescendo from pianississimo to mezzo forte as quickly as possible

Among the three, I believe inhalation and exhalation legato should be considered the most challenging technique for legato. Meanwhile, for lateral movement and slider activation legato, it is possible to create the optimal legato on the harmonica with an illusion of having two notes connected with the absence of re-articulation. The difficulty of the legato increase when it involves combination of the three basics technique or a wider leap than a

neighborhood hole leap. However, for wider leap legato, the smoothness can also be optimized with the use of **switch corner technique**.

More reading...

Should imitation of strings legato be our end goal?

‘Try to play like how you sing.’

‘You sounded like a saxophone to me!’

‘Your solo on the piano sounds like a horn solo!’

In the musical world, it is often considered an achievement when we can create an illusion as if we are playing another instrument. It is when we can control our instrument at high level and produce sound not limited by the physical constraint of the instrument. In the world of legato, strings instrument has the advantage to create the smoothest transition between two notes. And I believe it is a healthy mentality to drill on a harmonica legato with the reference of strings legato. However, after years of practice, I have realized the imitation will never be perfect due to the fundamental difference of mechanics between the two instruments. While this impossible dream can never be satisfied, I believe harmonicist should embrace the physical constrain of the instrument and explore the instrument to its advantage. Create line that can be played easily on the harmonica, compose music and legato phrases that can be played in one breath, **articulate notes sophisticatedly if articulation can't be avoided on the harmonica**. Afterall, legato is merely a feeling of smoothness in music. And there shall never be a definite answer to what is smoothness.