

MASTERING BREATH CONTROL

Breathing Exercises for Wind Instrumentalists

Too many musicians, especially wind instrumentalists, are too often oblivious to the issue of producing sufficient energy or power to facilitate proper fundamental performance technique. Although we may practice our instrument on a regular basis, there are many facets of performance that will not be achieved until we begin to utilize other exercises in conjunction with our regular practice regimen. Complete mastery of breath control and airstream focus is imperative to achieving a superior level of performance ability. Proper mastery of breathing and breath control techniques contributes to the following areas:

- 1) **Tone quality** - proper breath support and air management, practiced regularly, will improve individual tone quality and contribute significantly to the overall tonal color of the ensemble.
- 2) **Sustaining tones** - dynamic decay (i.e. decrescendo on long tones) is inherent in less-experienced musicians and most younger musicians find it difficult to sustain pitches for long periods of time with good tone and stable pitch. These exercises, practiced regularly, will help to alleviate these problems.
- 3) **Intonation** - all musicians experience problems with intonation stability in extreme registers of the instrument and pitch instability of the middle registers is common among less-experienced musicians. A properly developed embouchure paired with a focused airstream will yield, in most instances, good tone quality and stable pitch.
- 4) **Volume** - a developed embouchure and proper breath support will enable a wind player to play at louder volumes without distortion (your dynamic threshold). Also, this will enable the player to maintain a focused sound at soft volumes as well when subtlety is demanded. This is essential to marching band directors that are looking for an open ensemble sound. (i.e. making 60 horns sound like 100)!
- 5) **Flexibility** - Playing on the airstream is a phrase used by many musicians and band directors alike. *This phrase suggests that we visualize each note 'surfing' on a stream of air.* The term flexibility refers to the ease of playing over the entire range of the instrument, including shifts from one octave to another. These quick shifts in register will be accomplished with greater ease if we refer to the analogy of playing on the airstream. One must flow through the large interval leaps!

As we can see, many benefits may be derived from proper breath control, air management, and breathing exercises. Now we will examine a few exercises that will help us achieve our goal. These exercises may be customized to fit your personal goals and time frame.

EXERCISE #1 - Preparation for Breathing Exercises

- a) Poise yourself - sit on the edge of your chair with feet flat on the floor. Back is straight - chin is up.
- b) Relax the muscles in the neck, chest, and abdomen. While doing exercises, these areas must be allowed to fully expand and contract without opposing force.
- c) Allow your palms to lie flat on your legs. (RELAX)
- d) Close your eyes - concentrate on your own breathing. You must be 'in-tune' with your breathing habits before you can change your method of breathing.

EXERCISE #2 - Breathing Warm-up (Slow tempo, Quarter = 50)

- a) Begin empty (exhale before exercise begins) - Breathe in for two (2) counts. You must be FULL of air in 2 counts! (ALWAYS BREATHE THROUGH THE MOUTH.....NOT THE NOSE).
- b) Blow out immediately for four (4) counts using an "S" sound (like a snake). Be EMPTY by count four (4). Push all air out on exhale (Use Diaphragm muscle)!
- c) Repeat exercise a minimum of six (6) times.

EXERCISE #3 - Breathing Exercise (Medium-Easy, Quarter = 72)

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for two (2) counts through the mouth. Fill up totally.
- c) Exhale for six (6) counts using an "S" sound. Push all air out on exhale!
- d) Repeat exercise a minimum of 5 times.

EXERCISE #4 - Breathing Exercise (Medium, Quarter = 72, Suggested)

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for two (2) counts through the mouth. Fill up totally.
- c) Exhale for eight (8) counts using an "S" sound. Push all air out on exhale!
- d) Repeat exercise a minimum of 5 times.

EXERCISE #5 - Expanding the Air Capacity (Quarter = 72, Suggested)

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for eight (8) counts through the mouth. Fill up totally.
- c) Hold breath for two (2) counts. (You should feel VERY full!)
- d) Sip a FAST breath for one (1) count. (Now you're VERY, VERY FULL!)
- e) Hold one (1) count.
- f) Sip a FAST breath for one (1) count.
- g) Hold one (1) count.
- h) Sip a FAST breath for one (1) count.
- i) Hold one (1) count.
- j) Exhale for eight (8) counts.....rest. Repeat exercise a minimum of two (3) times.

EXERCISE #6 - Using the Breathing Bag (Quarter = 112) (use a large bread bag)

Use of the breathing bag helps to regulate the volume of air inhaled and exhaled. When performing exercises using the bag, be aware that the constant inhalation of CO2 gas from the bag will tend to make you light-headed. If you feel extremely dizzy, stop the exercise and breathe fresh air.

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for four (4) counts through the mouth. Fill up totally. DO NOT USE BAG.
- c) Exhale for four (4) counts in the bag. Regulate the air so the bag is full on count 4.
- d) Inhale for four using the air in the bag. Completely deflate the bag by count 4.
- e) Exhale for four (4) counts in the bag. Regulate the air so the bag is full on count 4.
- f) Repeat this exercise a minimum of two (2) times.

EXERCISE #7 - Breath Velocity Exercise (Quarter = 112, Suggested)

A faster airstream is required to perform in the upper register of a wind instrument and to maintain proper tone quality and pitch. This exercise will help us to manage air velocity. Become familiar your breathing and air management techniques so you will have to ability to effectively manage all respiratory operations during performance.

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for two (2) counts through the mouth. Fill up totally.
- c) Exhale for twelve (12) counts using an "S" sound. Push all air out on exhale!
- d) ON COUNTS 9-12 OF THE EXHALE CYCLE, DOUBLE THE AIR VELOCITY. Be totally empty by count 12. Use (in 2, out 16, in 1 out 16, in 1 out 20, in 1 out 24, in 1 out 28).
- e) Repeat a minium of five (5) times.

EXERCISE #8 - Advanced Breathing Exercises (Quarter = 112, Suggested)

- a) Begin empty (exhale all air before exercise begins).
- b) Breathe in for one (1) count through the mouth. Fill up totally. **
- c) Exhale for sixteen (16) counts using an "S" sound. DOUBLE VELOCITY ON 13-16.
- d) Repeat exercise a minimum of 5 times.

**** ALWAYS FILL UP WITH AIR ON THE PREP BEAT BEFORE PLAYING ANY NOTE. IF BREATHING CORRECTLY, WE WILL HEAR A BIG BREATH IN UNISON FROM THE ENSEMBLE!**