

Breath Support

by Susan Hess

Do you ever feel as if you have just finished a workout (out of breath and physically tired) when you put your instrument down after playing? If you have never felt this sensation, maybe you should take a serious look at how you approach playing a wind instrument. Blowing air properly through an instrument is no easy task. It takes a conscious effort to make sure that there is enough breath support and that the air is focused.

In order to produce a full, rich tone on our instruments, we must fill them effectively with air. It doesn't matter whether we are playing *pianissimo* or *fortissimo*, we still need to work hard at breathing. All dynamic ranges need the same amount of support. It is the amount of air that we allow through our mouthpieces and its rate of speed that control the dynamics. Without the support, our *pianissimos* are shaky and unstable, and our *fortissimos* are unfocused and out of control.

How do you know if you are breathing properly? Try playing a note on your instrument that requires only one hand. Take the other hand and place it on your abdomen. The abdomen should expand while inhaling, leaving more room for the lungs to fill with air. While exhaling, the muscles should be hard, so as to exert enough pressure to expend a constant, focused stream of air. If you didn't experience any expansion in your abdomen or any hardness in your muscles, chances are that you are not making full use of your lung capacity and that your sound/tone is suffering for it.

Try looking in the mirror when you play or have a friend or your band director watch while you are breathing. A telltale sign of poor breathing technique is the raising of the shoulders while inhaling. This means that your abdomen is not expanding to make room for your lungs and, therefore, you are only filling a small portion of your lungs when inhaling. It also usually creates tension in your upper body when you breathe like this. Go ahead and put your instrument down. While taking a deep breath, try imagining the air as it enters your body. Imagine that your lungs extend all the way to your pelvic area and that the expansion begins there. Imagine your lower back and abdomen filling with air. Slowly, the chest begins to expand with air. This is a more relaxing and efficient way to breathe. If you had problems imagining the expansion of your pelvic area and your abdomen, try lying down on the floor, going through the same procedures.

Once you feel comfortable with the inhalation, the exhalation is very easy. Make sure that your abdomen muscles are firm. Imagine the air leaving your abdomen first. If the air seems as if it is leaving the upper part of the chest first, chances are that the breathing is shallow. Imagine that the air is flowing through a small tunnel, about the size of your mouthpiece opening. This will aid in creating a focused air stream. Practice this both with and without your instrument. A good way to practice this without your instrument is by sitting or standing approximately one foot from a wall. Place a sheet of paper against the wall, directly across from your mouth. Try to keep the paper in place, without your hands, by blowing a focused stream of air at it. It is harder than you think!

Breath support is something of which we need to be constantly aware. It is very easy to become lazy and to just rely on our involuntary breathing system. With practice, supported breathing will become second nature. Good luck! If you have any questions, feel free to call me at **208-885-6232** or e-mail me at shess@uidaho.edu.