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Trumpet in the Wind Band

Marc Reed, Column Editor

Inside Out: Breathing for Improved Musical Success

By Chip Crotts

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Trumpet in the Wind Band examines literature and performance issues associated with the trumpet's role in wind band music throughout music history. Ideas, suggestions, and submissions should be directed to: Marc Reed, Fort Lewis College Music Department, 1000 Rim Drive, Durango, CO 81301-3999; windband@trumpetguild.org

Inside Out: Breathing for Improved Musical Success

By Chip Crotts

Whether a player is trying to develop a clearer understanding of basic airflow or is learning how to increase vital capacity and relaxation, a more concentrated focus on the breath can greatly impact all aspects of one's performance. Breathing exercises can significantly benefit wind players and should be utilized regularly in practice and performance. As the most essential element of life, our basic understanding of the breathing process remains on a primarily subconscious level. As wind players, we deal with instruments that create resistance, so we must learn how to use our air to combat this element in a positive way. An excellent illustration of this is an exercise with which many trumpet players are familiar, the Bill Adam leadpipe buzzing routine. This technique demonstrates that by activating the standing waves in the leadpipe with correct air flow and support, one can overcome the instrument's natural tendencies and produce the most efficient and supported sound possible.

Virtually every fundamental aspect of wind playing can be improved and enhanced by special attention to the breath. Increased ability to sustain longer phrases, to perform with a wider range of expression, and to play with greater efficiency are but a few of the improvements that can be achieved through proper breathing studies. I use many of the following exercises directly with various Drum Corps International (DCI) groups and the Georgia Tech marching band, and these techniques produce immediate results when applied correctly. The following specific areas and concepts related to breathing can be practiced both with and without the instrument. Several are derived from traditional Yoga and Hindu teachings, while many are adapted from *The Breathing Gym* by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan. This book and its concepts have taken the music world by storm in recent years, and much can be gained from its inclusion, discussion, and study in this article.

While each of the following concepts and exercises are important enough to stand alone, combining them into a daily routine will provide greater benefit and understanding for the entire breathing process. Integrating the following techniques into a wind pedagogy program will help diagnose students' fundamental and musical issues and ultimately help musicians attain higher levels of musical achievement.

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Beginning the Day

Creating great breathing habits is a vital way to begin a practice day or rehearsal. The following exercises are ideal for calming the mind, getting into "the zone," and helping to prepare mentally for the performance at hand.

Breathing and Stretching. Incorporate breathing concepts with daily stretching to help combine muscle movement with a smooth flow of the airstream. I recommend simple trunk twists or shoulder shrugs, focusing on a smooth airflow in and out, with a deep and relaxed breath through the mouth. This helps reduce tension in the body, which is the true natural enemy of wind playing. Additional benefits can be gained by adding in an arm raise and breath, followed by a deep sigh of the air out; one to two of these exercises greatly release tension in the body.

Three-Part Breath. Better known as *Pranayama* from traditional Yoga teachings, this simple, yet effective, breath breaks the breathing process down into three phases: belly breath, mid-chest breath, and upper-chest breath. Begin by focusing on the belly breath (60% of total breath), then add the mid-chest (next 35%), and lastly the upper-chest (last 5%). These three parts combine to give the complete deep breath and should contribute to a clearer understanding of the natural flow of the human body.

Balloon Exercises. Much like the aforementioned Adam leadpipe buzzing exercise, this unique concept uses the design of a balloon to help create correct air support and immediacy of sound, which is important in all levels of performance. Take a full breath and blow into the balloon; you will notice the natural resistance in the stem. This helps to simulate what might be experienced when playing a wind instrument. There should be a continuous flow of air to properly inflate the balloon. To overcome the natural resistance of the balloon, I advocate adding a 5% burst of air at the beginning of the breath. To approach the exercise correctly, use a variety of metered count structures (12-16-8-20-6, etc.), working to expel all of the air in all of the counts. This exercise teaches the player to match air speed to the given resistance and will help achieve proper support and a more clear and immediate sound when translated to the instrument.

Form and Flow

Form and flow exercises help relate proper vowel shape to airflow. It is important to approach these exercises correctly, as they dramatically improve musical phrasing and nuancing. By doing these exercises to full capacity and total emptiness, maximum benefit and greater understanding of the breathing apparatus will be acquired. Continue the previously mentioned approach of using all the air in all of the counts with these exercises as well.

Metered Counts. Begin with a simple in-for-four, out-for-four pattern, working to pace the air evenly between the inhalation and exhalation. Create the correct oral shape by saying "whoa" and use a mental image of an open oral cavity and shape. This allows for correct inhalation and exhalation during all exercises. The goal is to maintain absolute consistency of flow, especially at the beginning and end of each count structure. Turning the air around in a circular motion is incredibly important to basic wind pedagogy. This exercise will reinforce that concept.

Visualization Aids. Visualization techniques have become a regular part of musical study in recent years. To help understand the relationship between air and sound projection, use these visual representations. These aids may provide immediate results for visual learners and will help paint both a physical and mental image of correct air usage. Each of these visualizations applies to air travel and how each breath moves farther based on speed and weight. These basic models, as described in *The Breathing Gym*, are as follows:

"Paper Airplane"—used for softer dynamics *(ppp-pp-p)*. Toss the imaginary paper airplane slowly as you blow rather gently. Complete the motion by following through with the hand, visualizing the airplane flying forward.

"Dart"—used for medium dynamics *(mp-mf)*. Visualize throwing a dart with faster air and a slightly more directional approach.

"Bow and Arrow"—used for louder Dynamics *(f-ff-fff)*. Simulate the motion of shooting an arrow by pulling back the bow on the inhalation and then shooting the arrow forward with a very fast and concentrated airstream.

The air speed should feel quite different for each of these visualizations and should provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between sound projection and the breathing process.

Therapies (Inhale and Exhale) and Strength Exercises

Therapies, another primary category in *The Breathing Gym*, provide a complementary element to "Form and Flow" studies and are used to inspire better airflow. While the previously discussed exercises focus on correct airflow and breath support, these exercises are designed to create specific problems in airflow. By suspending the air and creating more resistance, they challenge a player in different ways. Working through these challenges help to overcome these hurdles when encountered in music.

5-15-5 (Inhalation and Exhalation Therapy). A true resistance training exercise, *5-15-5* helps the player reach maximum capacity and total emptiness (the overarching goal of therapy exercises). To achieve proper results, breathe in for five counts until you reach full capacity, then continue inhalation by taking sipping breaths over the next fifteen counts. As you reach the end of the fifteen counts, immediately turn the air around and exhale to complete emptiness in five counts, while finally adding a quiet hiss to expel the remaining air in the lungs. The next breath will be very free and full, and should be a reminder of the natural involuntary breath.

Bellows Breath. This is a great exercise for charging up with energy and/or relieving stress and tension that may have crept into the body or sound of the instrument. Begin by blowing air out through the nose while simultaneously pulling in the abdomen. Allow natural inhalation to occur after each repetition. Repeat up to 22 times, allowing the abdomen to function like a bellows, blowing the air out.

Maximum Capacity/Strength Exercise. This strength exercise helps focus on expansion and contraction of the lungs to the extremes. One of my favorites is "In, Sip, Sip – Out, Push, Push." To approach this exercise correctly, one should inhale to maximum capacity for one beat while lifting the arms overhead, then sip for two beats while lifting the arms higher. Follow this with a total exhalation in one beat, pushing the arms downward. Lastly, push the last bit of air out, completing the process. Repeat several times to gain a better understanding of maximum capacity.

Using Breathing Exercises as a Diagnosis in Performance

It is important to understand how a breathing exercise informs the body of what is working correctly and incorrectly. We must treat every musical and physical problem as an opportunity for diagnosis and prescribe a specific breathing exercise to remedy the situation. Like a medical doctor, we must recognize musical symptoms and apply specific exercises to fix them. The following diagnoses will create immediate improvement.

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Wind Patterns. This concept focuses on the use of air patterns to improve and fix issues related to sound and technique. Play a short phrase on the instrument and then put the horn down and repeat this same phrase, only this time blowing the rhythmic wind pattern on the palm of the hand. Focus on flow and evenness of air while applying all musical elements possible within the given phrase. Benefits of this exercise include a more even and fluid sound through the phrase and increased ease of technique in challenging musical lines.

Air Play. This exercise transfers the wind pattern concept to the instrument, requiring the performer to "air play" the entire musical idea on the instrument, but without the actual vibration of the lips. The goal is to emulate actual performance as close as possible by using correct dynamics, articulation, consistent airflow, etc. Doing several repetitions allows players to hear if there are interruptions or issues with airflow. They also begin to realize how much air it actually takes to play a musical phrase and how to pace it more consistently. Ultimately, this exercise helps one understand the balance between muscle and air, resulting in better efficiency in practice and performance.

There is a very clear connection between enhanced breathing exercises and improved musical performance. Each area of breathing exercises provides a different opportunity to learn about and improve specific aspects of the breathing process.

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concepts to actual performance on a wind instrument can be extremely beneficial to one's musical performance.

Many of these exercises come from *The Breathing Gym,* published by Focus Music and found in either text or DVD format, and I highly recommend this source for all wind players. Pilafian and Sheridan have spent much of their careers devoted to this study and have helped take the mystery and guesswork out of the breathing process.

About the author: Chip Crotts is the director of jazz studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology (GT) in Atlanta, Georgia, and is also the brass caption manager for the Santa Clara Vanguard Drum & Bugle Corps. A Grammy-nominated trumpet player, Dr. Crotts has toured and performed with such artists as Natalie Cole, Jamie Cullum, The Temptations, Ray Charles, Boston Brass, and Maynard Ferguson. Crotts is a Yamaha performing artist and clinician.

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Breathing and stretching is a great way to begin the day, and form and flow exercises form the crux of basic air connection to the instrument. The addition of therapies and strength exercises creates resistance training, helps overcome natural problems, and expands lung capacity. Applying these breathing