

DALLAS BRASS

To Breathe Or Not To Breathe

by Michael Levine

WHY KIDS DON'T BREATHE

What beginners discover is that they really *don't* need to take any extra breath to make a sound on their instrument. They can make a sound and get by with whatever breath they have on hand at the moment. Besides, they are inundated with so many other things to think about – holding the instrument, embouchure, different pitches, counting, fingerings, articulation – why bother thinking about good breathing when sound is already coming out of the instrument?

The advantages of good breathing, for example, having a beautiful sound or playing complete phrases, just don't seem to concern the beginner. Most beginners are happy just to be able to *recognize* the tune they are trying to play, no matter how poor the sound or how chopped up the phrase might be. And, understandably, many band directors are equally happy with the same result. After all, it's not as if this isn't a valid accomplishment!

The breathing will come later. Or will it? It becomes the age-old problem of having to break a bad habit that has been reinforced. In this case, the absence of good breathing is engrained every time the student plays or practices!

You might say that inadequate breathing (for making music) has been reinforced from the moment the child was born. We take some 20,000 shallow breaths every day of our lives! This is all the more reason it is important to establish from the beginning that breathing to “play” is different from breathing to “live”.

To play great you must breathe great.

Part of the breath training is developing a mindset about the *importance* of breathing. I like to explain that the physical instrument that we hold in our hands is only HALF the instrument (the second half). The first half is *our body*. We generate the fuel supply to operate the instrument. The instrument in our hands is the car, but our body is both the engine *and* fuel supply.

Characteristics of a good breath

- **Keep upper body relaxed (avoid raising shoulders)**
- **Have an open throat (like cooling a hot French fry)**
- **Fill from the bottom (breathe low)**

THREE STEPS TO BETTER BREATHING

STEP 1: WARMING UP THE BODY

Wind players are also athletes – we use our fingers, lips, tongue, slide arm...but before any of that comes our *breathing mechanism*.

In sports, warming up the body is top priority – stretching, running (breathing, too, for that matter). **The band director can communicate and reinforce the importance of the breath, by starting every rehearsal with at least one breathing exercise (and one stretching exercise). Even if it's for *one* minute! It gives the message to the students that this is the *proper* way to begin to play.** First things first – like teaching that the seat belt goes on before putting the car in drive! So step one is starting out by warming up the body – getting the air going – away from the instrument.

NOTE: It's not just a matter of *warming up* the breathing mechanism, but *developing* it as well. Continued breathing exercises can help expand the amount of air one is able to take in, make breathing more efficient, develop a higher tolerance for hyperventilation and in essence make us better breathers.

The Dallas Brass **WindMaster** is an invaluable tool to warm up and develop the breath. Also, see Dallas Brass article entitled **BREATHING EXERCISES**

STEP 2: POSTURE

Step two is insisting on good posture. Posture is positioning the body. Take any sport. A batter in baseball has an entire ritual before every pitch to stay loose and to prepare to swing. Posture is *everything* in the batter's stance; football players waiting for the snap; basketball players waiting for a free throw to be shot; tennis player making or receiving a serve. Every position in every sport starts with posture.

The musician's posture is to sit or stand tall (and to stay relaxed as we play). This posture simply enables us to access our air supply most efficiently.

STEP 3: BREATHING WHILE PLAYING

Step three is to make sure that good breathing is incorporated into the actual playing of the instrument. The key is a proper inhalation – every single time we breathe to play a note or phrase. In a single band rehearsal each student has hundreds of chances for good breaths.

Even with a good warm-up (step one), it still doesn't mean that we will continue to breathe well while playing. And with all the other things to think about, we have to insist that breathing comes first! *You can't drive the golf ball without the back swing!* That back swing is like our breath. It gives us fuel and momentum.

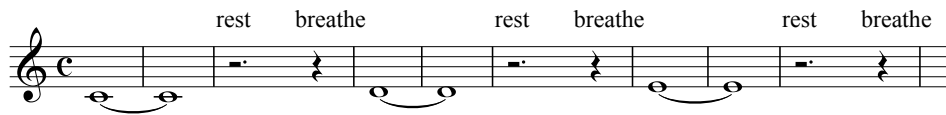
TIME TO BREATHE

Developing good breathing *while playing* is the bottom line. It's important to understand that the challenge of good breathing changes in the context of the music. In some situations we have plenty of time to take a good breath; other times we literally have no time at all. I think of breathing in three basic scenarios. Following are examples of each.

The word “rest” may be confusing to students. Any time we are not playing a note it is called a “rest”. Well, many of those *so-called* rests are actually times to be *taking breaths*!

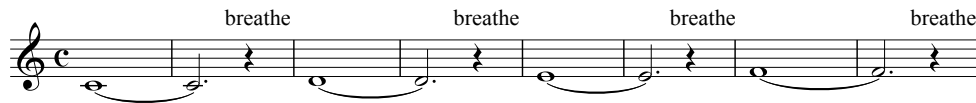
Scenario I. Following a long ‘rest’ (a measure or more).

In this situation, the body can truly rest in preparation for the next breath. Then the breath can more easily be taken in a relaxed fashion over one or two (or more) beats.



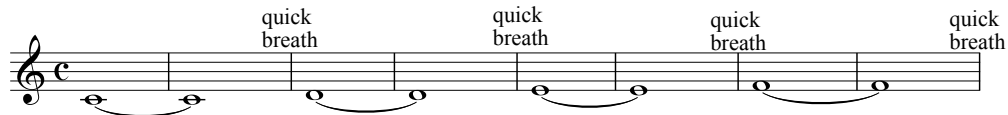
Scenario II. Following a short ‘rest’ (one or two beats).

There is no resting period, but there is plenty of time to breathe.



Scenario III. No ‘rest’.

We need to grab the breath as quickly and efficiently as possible!



Individually, and as a band, we must practice all three of these scenarios. In scenario one, the problem is often that of *forgetting* to breathe or perhaps being lazy. It's transitioning back into action after 'sitting on the bench'! Scenario two is similar. Maybe with one or two beats, we feel we want to rest, when we really only have time to breathe again. Scenario three is the greatest challenge. We need to avoid over-clipping the last note before the breath; breathe quickly, yet stay relaxed so we can get as much air as possible.

Do the above and following exercises, making the breath the focal point. As the inhalation becomes quicker, focus on keeping it relaxed and open. Breathe low. All of this becomes more challenging when there is less time to breathe. Every breath we take must be a good one.

