

Breathing for wind players and singers: practical guidance

Richard Steggall

Introduction

In a recent resource (*Music Teacher*, November 2023), we looked at the idea of ‘enhanced natural breathing’. This is, in essence, an extension of the effortless, simple breathing technique that we’re all born with, but which most of us lose over time. The theory of the technique is fairly simple to understand: we manage our breath by keeping a high sternum when exhaling, supported by a strong back and abdomen. This allows the body and the airflow to be connected to the sound we’re making, creating the control and power we need for optimum music making. The problem we have as teachers is this: how do we teach that theory to our students who range hugely in age, ability, intellect and also bodily awareness and control?

In this resource, we’ll look at practical ways to help students rediscover their natural breath and then enhance it for their musical needs. The earlier resource discussed the theory behind this, but before we continue, it’s worth repeating a paragraph from that resource to demonstrate what we’re aiming for:

Some of your students may be lucky – they may have retained their natural ability to breathe excellently and efficiently, and find that they can adapt that to making music. But you will need to take many of your students on a breathing journey. You’ll need to bring their consciousness to their breath to discover an efficient and simple way of producing the most beautiful sounds they can. Good breathing has to then become habitual, and after a consistent period of practice and awareness, it will once again return to being unconscious, as they allow themselves to focus purely on the music and sound they’re making.

What stops natural breathing?

As children mature from babies, their physiology and psychology change. A combination of nature and nurture causes each individual to react to the world around them in their own way. By the time they arrive with us as students, they will have quite varied, but also quite well set, personalities – which will be reflected in the ways they use their bodies as well as the ways in which they think. Children will range from the very shy to the extremely confident; from the very athletic to the more sedentary. It’s our job to help all our students, even if it means trying to overcome some personality traits that we don’t recognise as being ideal for musicians.

A very shy personality may be reflected in a hunched-up body – where someone is trying to make themselves appear small to attempt to go unnoticed. Similarly, an aggressive personality may be reflected in the body being held tightly. To breathe well, we need freedom of the body, and freedom of the body is a reflection of the state of mind.

In performance, if a player feels under pressure to do well, then the mind might activate a ‘fight, flight or freeze’ (or FFF) response. This was very useful when a cave-dweller found themselves in the company of a sabre-toothed tiger, but when the musician is standing on stage about to play in front of their friends and family, it’s less suitable. The FFF response causes the body to cut any unnecessary actions, including slowing digestion (giving the feeling of a tight stomach), and aims to conserve energy. It does not give the signal to the body to relax and breathe big and free – quite the opposite.

If you ask musicians how performance anxiety affects their bodies, many would say that their breathing becomes very shallow and difficult. But when a student asks how to overcome nerves, one fairly predictable reply is just to take some big breaths. To a student, the advice to just do the very thing they’re struggling to do – coupled with the knowledge that if they don’t sort it out, it will result in a sub-optimal performance – makes their fears something of a self-fulfilling prophesy. It’s a bit like asking someone to focus on their fear of heights before climbing a ladder.

Richard Steggall is a horn player, teacher and writer. He works for Bromley Youth Music Trust, where he co-created a KS2 group teaching scheme for beginners’ French horns. He is the editor of the British Horn Society’s *The Horn Player* magazine, and is the author of *Don’t Fear the Horn: A comprehensive guide to the French horn for all brass players and teachers*



DASH DASH

As a brass teacher, I know that if a student is struggling to breathe at the start of a performance, they will waste a lot of the good practice and hard work they've put in. If I haven't at least attempted to help them with this, then I have also wasted a lot of my teaching time, and have ultimately let my student down.

But this is an exciting point for a teacher. If you teach a wind instrument or the voice, then you have an opportunity to reframe your lessons around breathing. Take your students on a breathing journey. As mentioned above, some of your students may be lucky. They may need no help with any of this, and if that's the case, then feel free to ignore this advice. But a word of warning: ability on an instrument or voice does not always equate to being a great performer. If you have what you consider to be an excellent student, but who turns into a bag of nerves in an exam or concert, then think about what part of your teaching skills are missing, or haven't been used for this student. Maybe the most important part of a student's breathing work is in the next section, which – when we're too keen to progress with harder repertoire, exam preparation and so on – is unfortunately the most often skipped.

The 'breathing journey'

Mental preparation and first stages

To breathe well, your students need to feel comfortable and free of all anxiety. Any concerns about 'doing well' or being worried about making mistakes must be banished. Bodies have to be free to work, so minds have to be free too. The points below may not seem to be about breathing, but without having relaxed students, working with breath is fairly pointless.

- ▶ Always start lessons, band or choir in the most positive way you can. Consider the impact of your words and attitude on the minds and bodies of your students. Why not replace, 'Well, I hope you've done more practice than last week. Why don't you show me what you've done?', with 'Morning, legend! Thanks so much for being here. Let's start by taking some wonderful free breaths together.'
- ▶ Make sure your students are comfortable in the space they're in. In a small space, give them room to move. In a large room, explore expanding awareness into the whole room. There's also an element of child protection here. Never place yourself between your student and the door, and work in a room that has at least one window.
- ▶ Give all your students legitimacy to be where they are. Never allow your student to feel like they don't belong, or aren't good enough. Yes, they could have done more work or practice, but for now, what they're doing is enough.

Awareness expansion exercise

This exercise can be done in a group, such as a wind band, or in an individual lesson. It can also be used as a pre-performance preparation tool. You just talk through instructions of where your student/s need to focus, expanding their awareness from their own bodies to eventually connect with a much larger space.

These are examples of some of the instructions you can use. Feel free to adapt this for your own style of delivery and personal voice.

- ▶ Shut your eyes and focus on your own breathing. Don't try to change it – just be aware of the air going in and out.
- ▶ Your breath might go deep into your body, or it might stop for a bit. Whatever it does, it's all fine.
- ▶ Focus on the air just in front of your nose or mouth. Allow yourself to just breathe it in and then flow out. It might even tickle a little bit.
- ▶ You can open your eyes now if you like and focus on a spot a little bit away from you. Breathe in the air from that spot and then allow your air to flow back there as you breathe out.
- ▶ Be aware of other people in the room. Their breathe is moving around as well, and that's OK. We're all breathing together.
- ▶ Now focus on a spot at the far side of the room. Breathe in that bit of air and allow your air to flow back there. There might be people in the room who are noticing your breathe. That's OK. They are all breathing too.

You can expand this as you like, until you're breathing air from the other side of the universe. On a higher level, you can include people in your awareness who you feel might be critical of your students (examiners, etc) and allow them to breathe freely in their (imaginary) presence.

Posture

To be able to breathe well, we need a good playing position – or range of positions, as we're always (usually subtly) moving. Posture is a reflection of mental state. I've witnessed so many teachers bark the same instructions to students: 'Hold your instrument up!' is a favourite. And this isn't just something that has to be shouted across a band or orchestra once – it's then repeated again and again. So, that instruction is clearly not working on more than a very short-term basis.

If you're constantly giving students instructions to help them position themselves for optimum breathing, such as 'sit up straight', 'don't slouch' or 'uncross your legs', then try a different approach. Here are some ideas:

- ▶ Try not to give purely physical instructions, but add an emotional or imaginary element, for example: 'Pick up your trumpet like you're showing off to your little brother.'
- ▶ Let your students use their imaginations and act. 'Pretend you're a soldier. Make your back straight, rigid and tall, and be ready for action. Now be a sulky teenager. Droop your shoulders and hide your eyes away from everyone. And now try to find a position in between those two.'
- ▶ Encourage a strong back. Imagine you're a tough old farmer, effortlessly carrying a pig under each arm. Keep encouraging awareness of the back as you move through breathing exercises.
- ▶ Wobble your head on top of your spine. Can you make it almost fall off? Now try to balance it like a golf ball on a tee peg. You don't need to stick it down, or strap it on, and you can just allow it to sit there. Again, keep encouraging a balanced head as you move through the breathing exercises.
- ▶ Be aware that a slumped posture, which looks like a player has a lack of confidence, is probably caused by just that – a lack of confidence. Work on improving confidence. Allow wrong notes and mistakes. Change the focus of your student from getting the notes right to sharing their music and telling a story. Let your student be comfortable in their own ability.
- ▶ There is an argument that changing posture will bring about mental change. This is like the advice of smiling when you walk on stage, even if you're scared. This can work for some people on a short-term basis, and can even become habitual and part of a performance routine, but I'd argue that it's a temporary fix and doesn't get to the heart of the problem.
- ▶ Finally... one more call for positivity. Think of the effect, 'You've got this, and are ready to share' has mentally and physically on a student, rather than 'Good luck!' (translated by the nervous student as, 'Good luck – you're gonna need it!').

Stretching and isolating the torso

Many students believe that you breathe into the mouth or nose and that's it. When asked to take a big breath, they can contort the face or pull in the neck. The next four exercises develop awareness of the torso and the work it's doing during the breathing cycle, and also helps to 'isolate' those breathing muscles. 'Isolating' muscles means not using other (unnecessary) ones to perform a function. The classic one for wind players is squeezing their arms towards their bodies to try to force air out.

- 1 Do the twist:** stand up with your arms in the air, upper arms parallel to the floor and forearms pointing up. Keeping your feet still, as you breathe deeply, gently twist the torso around to the right and then the left, feeling the muscular stretch around the sides and back of the lungs.
- 2 Arms up:** as you inhale deeply, lift your arms high above your head, and then lower them as you exhale fully. Repeat this a couple of times. Then raise your arms again as you inhale, but on the exhale keep your arms in the raised position. Take some strong, full breaths with your arms in this position. This gives you a feeling of breathing without using your arms for assistance.
- 3 Jaw or tongue isolation:** when taking big, strong breaths, many students take patterns from the breath and move their jaw or tongue along with the airflow. A common habit is a sucking in of the tongue or jaw on the inhale and pushing out with the exhale. This habit needs to be broken as the jaw and tongue need to move independently of the air. Set up a simple pattern of breathing in and out, maybe two slow counts in and two slow counts out. Then set up a different pattern of tongue or jaw movement. For example, you could stick your tongue out for four counts and then pull it back in for four. Be creative. For something more complicated, how about moving your jaw left and right in a triplet spread across the two counts?
- 4 Neck awareness:** another common habit is to tense the neck as you either inhale fully or exhale strongly. Eventually students may gain neck awareness that they can just 'feel' when it tenses, but to start with, get students to place their hands gently on their necks. Then set up a pattern of breathing and ask them to watch for any excess tension creeping into the neck. You can also rotate the head or bend the neck as you do this. An extension of this exercise is filling up with 'sips'. Take a full breath and then hold for a second or two. Then take an extra sip in of air, and hold. And then another, and another. See how full you can get of air, while still keeping the neck as relaxed as possible.

Working the breath

We now move towards exercises to work the breath in ways that are more suited to making music. As musicians, we have to have great control over our breath management, and certain wind players will also need to be able to generate a high level of air pressure to counter a tight reed or small mouthpiece. These exercises develop both wind control and power, and should be done through the mouth.

I'm sure there are hundreds of different breathing exercises you can use, but what's important is how you do them. As we perform these exercises with our students, we should be continually watchful of the points we've worked on above:

- ▶ Be constantly positive.
- ▶ Every student must feel comfortable, and feel like they belong.
- ▶ Encourage awareness of themselves, and also of the whole room and beyond.
- ▶ Use imagination and imagery to let your students find optimum posture.
- ▶ Strong back.
- ▶ Balanced head.
- ▶ Neck, jaw and tongue isolated from torso work.

Known bodily functions

Instead of diving in with terminology that might not be understood, or misinterpreted by a student, work with uses of the breath that they will already be aware of. In music (as detailed in the previous breathing resource, [November 2023](#)) our motivation to use the breath is communication. Try to make sure there is a motivation with breathing exercises, such as feeling a temperature of breath on the hand or trying to time the breath exactly with a count.

- ▶ **Blowing out candles:** it's your birthday! Practise blowing out some candles. Move your cake further away and see how far away you can blow the candles out. What about those stubborn candles that just won't blow out? (This is all imaginary, in case you were wondering!)
- ▶ **Blowing up balloons:** exhale through a small hole in the lips to recreate the feeling of blowing up a balloon. How quickly can you blow it up? We're looking for long, strong breaths and quick inhales.
- ▶ **Warming up hands:** it's freezing outside. Blow on your hands to warm them up. Warm air is slow air.
- ▶ **Cooling down soup:** encourage the feeling of cold air. Cold air is fast air.
- ▶ **Yawn:** the body's natural way of getting an extra injection of oxygen. Promotes an excellent open-throat position, but be careful of the face and neck stretching that goes with it.
- ▶ **Jumping into a swimming pool:** someone's about to push you in the deep end. Take a huge, fast breath to maximise your survival!

Timing the breath

This is an excellent exercise to do with a wind band, since you can employ the percussion section to keep a beat. Otherwise, a speaker with a drum track or metronome works well. Great breathing as a musician is useless without timing. We now have to start coordinating the breath for our musical needs.

Timing the breath

- ▶ Set up a 4/4 beat or groove. I like a steady tempo of around 70 beats a minute.
- ▶ Start a pattern of breathing of four beats in, four beats out.
- ▶ Make sure the airflow is consistent across all four beats (watch out for a strong start and then collapsing on beats three and four).
- ▶ Focus on a sudden change of air direction on beat one. It's a simple change from out to in.

Once your students get the feel for this, then add one of these variations:

- 1 Increase the inhale: within a two-bar pattern, change the ratio of inhale to exhale length. Move to inhale for five, exhale for three. Then inhale for six, exhale for two. Then seven in, one out, even seven and a half in, half out...
- 2 Increase the exhale: the opposite of above. Move to exhale for five, inhale for three, and so on.
- 3 Add an 'air suspension': between the inhale and exhale, just shut the mouth for any number of counts. Don't hold the air tight: just allow the airflow to momentarily stop.

Moving from control to power

The following three exercises aid a smooth transition between control and power.

- 1 Air throws:** many students, particularly young beginners, need help with blowing in different ways. We start with a medium flow of air by throwing an imaginary dart. Hold your right arm (or throwing arm) out in front of you. Inhale as you pull it back. Then exhale as you throw your dart. We can do the same for a paper aeroplane. This will need a much gentler exhale. How long can you get it to glide for? Then try a bow and arrow. Hold your left arm forwards and pull back your right arm on the inhale. Then release your arrow with the maximum power of exhale you can.
- 2 Straw seconds:** blow through a straw onto your hand, so you can feel the air. Look at a stopwatch or start a metronome (60 beats a minute works well, as we're then dealing in seconds). Choose a length of time for your exhale. Inhale fully and then exhale through the straw. The aim is for your breath to be steady throughout, and for you to run out exactly at the end of the time. A short time (e.g. two seconds) will need great power, while a long time (e.g. 15 seconds) will need great control.
- 3 Paper on wall:** blow a small scrap of paper against the wall – get the paper to stick to the wall with the airflow. Try blowing close to the paper and see how long it can stick on the wall for. Try moving back and seeing how far away you can stick the paper on the wall from.

Cultivating enhanced natural breathing

At this point, it might be worth reminding yourself of the theory behind enhanced natural breathing that was detailed in the previous breathing resource ([November 2023](#)). Hopefully, if the above exercises have been successfully performed by your students, they will be well on the way to breathing in an efficient manner.

Enhanced natural breathing exercise

We're trying to cultivate a style of breathing that is of maximum use for our music making. This is best done in conjunction with your instrument or voice, as we want to focus on communication, but sometimes we have to break any habits that may creep in with our instrument. Always work on an airflow exercise before doing this. Feeling bodily movement is useless if it is not supporting airflow.

- ▶ Remember your breathing basics: strong back; balanced head; neck, jaw and tongue isolated from torso work.
- ▶ Find a good throat position (see previous resource if you need a recap on upper airways). I use 'ho' on the inhale, and think 'fo' on the exhale, with slight resistance in the lips causing the 'f'.
- ▶ Set up a simple, regular breathing pattern.
- ▶ Put one hand on the sternum and check for minimal collapse on the exhale.
- ▶ Put one hand on the abdomen just under the rib cage, to feel for expansion on the inhale.
- ▶ Alternate awareness between the hands on the inhale and exhale.

Moving onto your instrument/voice

Although breathing exercises are useful in isolation, when you move onto your instrument or voice you need to keep the ideas you've worked on. There's no point in practising breathing with a relaxed neck, for example, if the moment you pick up your instrument, you tense up. Keep the principles of good posture and always keep up the positivity.

- ▶ Focus on sound. Connect the body to the breath to the sound. The sound is your communication, and the body just helps that happen.
- ▶ Watch the moment between inhale and exhale. This is where anxiety can lurk. Be watchful for unnecessary movements just before a note is produced.
- ▶ Long notes: these are great for linking the breath to the sound.
- ▶ Dynamics: watch for tightening on the inhale and forcing the sound. Allow the air to flow!
- ▶ Pitches: again, watch for a tightened inhale as you aim for extremes of range. Keep the breath strong, not forced.