

USE OF AIR & BREATH CONTROL

BY LOBKE SPRENKELING

For recorder players, singers and other wind players

THE BREATHING APPARATUS

What are the mechanics of breathing? How does the breathing apparatus work?

The lungs expand when we are inhaling. The body does this automatically, but for wind instruments and singing we need to have a long controlled exhale, so we need to take in a bigger quantity than in normal life and blow it out in a much slower way than in normal life.

Normally, breathing happens through activation of the diaphragm, a thin fleece attached to the lungs and to the abdominals, pulling the lungs down, while some muscles between the ribs also help the lungs expand. Just observe your natural breathing, without trying to actively breathe. You can place your hands on different places to feel it move.

The best is for this is an upright posture, head over heart, heart over pelvis. Feet under the hips, with your weight evenly distributed over both feet.

You can also try them out lying down on your back, and sitting with a straight back.

When we play an instrument, we have to work actively both on inhaling as on exhaling (controlling the quantity and quality of the air going out depending on what kind of resistance we deal with).

There are three big muscle groups that we can actively move:

1. The abdominals (core muscles)
2. The pectorals (chest muscles)
3. The intercostal muscles (the muscles connecting the ribs)

Try to isolate each type of breathing. How do they feel? Do they affect other parts of your body?

RESISTANCE

There are wind instruments that have a lot of resistance, which are reed or brass instruments. There, the breath support is used to push against that resistance.

The recorder, flute, as well as the voice, don't have a lot of resistance. In these instruments breath support is used to maintain the lungs open as long as possible so that the air doesn't just fall out, but rather flows out in a controlled, smooth manner.

Video about this subject: <https://youtu.be/1Jf0ax8Y6EQ>

USE OF AIR & BREATH CONTROL

BY LOBKE SPRENKELING

The first type of breathing, the so-called “belly breathing”, is pulling down the diaphragm, which is attached to the lungs, with the abdominals. The intestines won't have enough space with the lungs expanding downwards so they will go out. That's why your belly comes out. They also move to your sides and even your back.

The second type, “chest breathing” involves pulling up the lungs with the pectorals and even cervical muscles.

It has two disadvantages:

1. Since it involves a cervical muscle, it closes up the throat and tenses up muscles in the neck/shoulder area.
2. These muscles aren't as strong as the abdominal muscles, so the tone won't be very controlled while blowing.

EXERCISES

These first exercises are in order to make us conscious of our diaphragm and where in the body we have to work actively.

Do one or two a couple of minutes at least once a day.

Do it in front of the mirror. Can you see where it moves?

And how does it feel?

1. BREATH OF FIRE / PANTING DOG

Breath of Fire, used in Yoga, is done through the nose, while the Panting Dog is done through the mouth. Breathe in and out very rapidly, with equal emphasis on the inhale and the exhale.

2. P-T-K

Say consonants energetically like P, T, K. For example, "Tic toc tic toc"..., or "Peter! Tom! Karen!"

3. CONDENSATION

Breathe against a mirror, on which you try to leave a constant layer of condensation as long as you exhale.

This exercise helps you to practise slow and controlled blowing.

4. FORWARD BEND

Seated, you place your hands on your lower back, you bend completely forward, so you end up having a rounded spine. Let your head hang loose. When you inhale, there won't be sufficient space for the intestines to go forward (in the belly) so you will feel it move in your back. Then come up slowly vertebra by vertebra. Until which point do you still feel it move under your hands? The idea is that, in the end, you will be able to feel it when sitting upright.

LEAKING

When playing the recorder, we have to breathe in and out through the mouth. Breathing in or out through the nose is noisy. Many people who do breathe in through the mouth, leak through their nose while blowing out. So make sure that you close off your nose completely when blowing into the recorder. Leaking through the nose takes away from the sound, which is going to be airy.

5. OPENING UP

Level 1: Exhale on fffffff until you come to the end of your breath, and just open up (open the mouth with the shape of Oh or Ah). The diaphragm will need to return from its position of tension, so your lungs will automatically open and the air will naturally flow in.

Level 2: Exhale on fffffff, open up so the air streams in, and help it further on its way by inhaling a bit more by lowering the diaphragm even more (“belly breathing”). So we continue the downwards direction of the expansion of the lungs, by using the abdominals.

USE OF AIR & BREATH CONTROL

BY LOBKE SPRENKELING

From here on we practice with the recorder.

The basic tone on the recorder should be very smooth, like a lake.

Vibrato is an ornament in Early Music, and playing with a continuous vibrato would be like playing with a continuous trill. Moreover, most continuous vibrato is uncontrolled, without support from the abdominals and with some tension in the throat.

And WHEN we apply vibrato, we do it in a very controlled way:

- Air vibrato consists of blowing less, more, less, more - you get a wave form of air
- Finger vibrato (caressing or shadowing the border of the finger hole while combining this with a small crescendo-decrescendo). This is used especially in French Baroque music.

FINDING THE CENTER OF EACH TONE

Now that we know we need a smooth tone, I recommend finding the center of each tone. Each tone on the recorder has its own center, in which it resonates most. For me it is as if it sings around my head. This center should be found for each tone. That is why I strongly recommend playing long tones every day at the beginning of the practice. The best is a very slow scale made of long notes, but if you don't have the time, at least go through a few low, middle and high tones.

The recorder doesn't have much dynamics.

So imagine two horizontal lines one above the other, at a distance of one decimetre. There is a little circle in the middle: that is the center of the tone. Within the two lines the tone is in tune. Against the higher line, it sounds somewhat aggressive, forced.

Against the lower line, it sound apathetic, weak.

Some tones on the recorder have more space than others; in blowing long tones you will discover the subtle differences between each tone.

SLOW/FAST - BROAD/THIN

For low notes on the recorder, the air needs to be slower.

For high notes, it needs to be faster.

So this doesn't mean we blow "harder" or "softer", it's rather about the velocity with which the air travels.

But there is another parameter, and that is how broad the air is.

We can use broader or thinner air.

Now we have 4 possibilities:

1. Slow, broad air
2. Slow, thin air
3. High, broad air
4. High, thin air

Try them out. How do you feel this inside of the mouth?

This is somewhat comparable to using vowels for a singer.

It is very useful to work with this, in order to develop the beginning of dynamics on the recorder, as well as adapting the character of each note to what we wish to express.