

Where to Breathe

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Many articles have been written about physical aspects of breathing for wind instrument performance, but rarely is there much advice for selecting the best places to breathe. Artistic placement of breaths should be a musical element of every wind instrument performance. The placement of breaths is critical both for effective musical expression and for ease of technical performance. A truly powerful musical phrase can captivate so thoroughly that even the audience breathes with the music, whether performed on a wind, string, keyboard or any other instrument.

The object of breath placements, as with every other performance decision, should be motivated by musical considerations, i.e. what will result in the most effective musical expression. Viewed as an interpretive device rather than merely a physical necessity, breath placement becomes an integral interpretive feature of the music. This basic change in attitude about the placement of breaths can result in significant changes in one's approach to musical interpretation.

Breathing points are one of the 'building blocks' of your musical interpretation and as such should be carefully placed. As one practices a selection for notes and rhythms, the most effective breathing points should be selected. In order to arrive at an effective interpretation as well as optimum breath placement, a careful study of the full score including the accompaniment is critical. It is not enough to study only the solo part!

While it may seem obvious that a thorough understanding and interpretation of a piece of music would require knowing the complete score, this is a common shortcoming of less mature musical interpretations. The composer wrote the piece with ALL parts in mind, but many musicians interpret from only the solo line. As it relates to our topic of breath placement, the accompaniment will often dictate many of our choices. In some cases the accompaniment may help 'cover' a breath, while at other times breaths may be placed to heighten the musical effectiveness of passages in the accompanying parts.

While studying the score, one essential musical element to understand is the sequence. Most music involves the use of sequences to a greater or lesser extent. A sequence is a melodic/thematic passage that is repeated at the same or altered pitch level. Sequences are often the critical key to understanding phrase structure. After identifying all of the sequences within a passage, phrasing and breath placement generally becomes obvious. As a general rule, place breaths between sequences and avoid disturbing the individual occurrences of the sequence.

Understanding the sequence and its use is, for me, one of the most important aspects of learning to interpret music. I generally begin study of a work with an examination of the structure as shown through sequences. This gives clues to harmonic activity as well as to areas of particular musical tension. Sequences often highlight key musical elements of the composition.

Assuming that a score study has been completed, there are some general guidelines for breath placements. The following are some tips that should be helpful in quickly selecting breathing spots. They are listed in order of preference.

1. Rests: Many passages which present breath challenges are further complicated by inefficient breaths during preceding rests. Make the most of any breathing opportunities afforded by rests. Starting a passage with a good, full air supply is often the best solution to later breathing challenges. Sometimes a series of short rests may allow for several small breaths that will be more effective musically than a single large breath.

2. Phrase Endings: The examination of the score should have revealed all phrases and sub-phrases. The endings of these musical sentences are often the most effective breathing points. On tuba and euphonium, a full phrase is often too much for a single breath. In this case, the following suggestions may help.

3. Following tied or dotted notes; After longest note values: Breathing spots within phrases generally require that time be taken away from some note. For this reason, it is best to 'steal' from the longest note values. Notes that have dots or ties offer an excellent choice as they commonly represent a point of 'pause' within the flow of the musical line. Note that the 'longest note values' are relative to the specific passage - in some cases, the longest note value may be a sixteenth note or less.

4. Leave out a note: In some cases, it may be necessary to leave out a note or two within an extended technical passage. Occasionally, this is preferable and results in a more solid performance than does stretching the breath to the point of diminished control of tone and pitch. It is critical that notes not be randomly omitted, but rather the function of each note within the passage be considered and the omission carefully selected to minimize distortion of the phrase.

In your solo playing, always strive to make the breaths a natural part of the music. You will find that you are more comfortable with the playing and the audience will invariably find your performance more musically satisfying.

When performing within a section which includes multiple players, another approach to breathing is generally appropriate. In this case, it is often best to avoid 'group breaths' (everyone breathing together) except at phrase endings. This is done via the technique known as staggered breathing. There are several approaches to effective stagger breathing, but the end result should always be a continuous sound throughout the phrase that is uninterrupted by breaths.

A favorite approach to staggering the breaths is to have each player breathe after a different part of the meter. Often this will work without taking time to discuss exact breathing points. For example, the first player breaths only after beat one of any measure, the second player only after beat two, etc. When this approach is possible, it can be accomplished even during sight reading.

In smaller sections, it is possible to assign one player to breathe after the other. In a section of 2 or 3 players, this can work very well. In this case, player 'B' always waits to breathe until after player 'A'. It is important that the first player to breathe not delay the breath too long or the next players have no possibility of playing comfortably until the breath.

A third method involves studying the passage and assigning each individual player's breathing spots. This is very effective if there is enough time to work it out within the section.

Any preparation of a piece should include careful placement of breaths. Breath points should be clearly marked in the score and then consistently observed. In more demanding passages, several small breaths may be more effective than a single large breath which causes more of a disruption. In the case of passages that present more breathing challenges, it is generally wise to take extra time examining the score and also try several possible solutions to the breathing to determine the most effective solution. Learning to effectively place breaths can often be the first step on the path which leads to deeper understanding of music and ultimately a more mature and satisfying musical experience.

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