

Flute - Zilla Strikes Again

by Lyn McLarin

Do you enjoy a good disaster film? How about the ones with big horrible monsters (besides the actors I mean)? Did you ever stop to think that when you play your flute, particularly as you practice to improve, you are actually starring in your own MONSTER MOVIE?

I speak, of course, of your very own Diaphragm Monster, that ornery little critter who seems so lively and irascible and oh-so-slippery to control...but who when tamed is just the sweetest purriest little pussycat of a musical helper you could hope to find. Appearing NOW in a practice room near you: FLUTE-ZILLA!!!! THRILL to the exquisite pianissimo high F sharp; GASP at the escaping burps (and worse malodorous things); WHIMPER for a cruelly flattening phrase; DESPAIR at the insanely bulbous bulges; COWER from the monstrous missile accents; CHEER as a warm vibrato finally bubbles up to the throat without the parasitic goats; APPLAUD as a rainbow of shimmering colors caresses a phrase; MARVEL when the double tonguing is crystal clear; CRINGE as the hiccups start; starring the DIAPHRAGM MONSTER and muscley minions of an abdominal persuasion.

HeeHee...But hang on a minute, this could get even more personal! Sure, it often seems as if those muscles, so important to our fluting control, ARE some kind of monster from outer space (especially when you get hiccups out of the blue in the middle of a performance!). But it's not very responsible for us to imagine that things are beyond our control, is it? Sooo...Remember, anyone, how in "The A Team" Hannibal works on a monster movie set? In absolutely the worst costumes ever velcroed together? Well, let's get a little weird here (as if we aren't already completely bonkers for getting this far) and imagine that you are INSIDE the Diaphragm Monster, it is YOU working those controls! But of course, from the inside everything is a little different from what it seems at, say, embouchure level. When you are taking in the breath to play a note, for instance, you have to switch to manual control so you can push out those elastic muscles FROM THE INSIDE to inflate the lung-vacuum as full as possible (whew! My arms hurt from all that pushing)...and then KEEP the muscles taut while turning some other control knobs that push in other mysterious ways and get the air shooting outwards. (erm..this means you are BLOWING)

If you lose hold of the wrong bits of muscle the whole shebang deflates too quickly (returns, if you like, to "automatic control", i.e. everyday breathing as opposed to fluting support) and the airspeed goes wildly erratic..with all too familiar results on the "outside" (going flat, losing sound altogether). Or, if you get it all working smoothly for a few seconds and then forget to check the pressure gauge, some of those odd burps or bulges or unwanted accents rocket out onto the innocent phrase... (Have you ever tried to accent just one note in a phrase and hit the next one instead? Well, that's an example of a Sloppy Diaphragm Monster belching away).

I sometimes imagine the student fluter as akin to the newbie computer user: all that power, all those exciting ideas rushing through your mind and one by one you try the different programs and keep "crashing" the music! Just remember that besides being our amazingly recalcitrant breathing master, the Diaphragm Monster and its attendant abdominal cronies ALSO have a hand in: vomiting, coughing, hiccupping, burping, stitch-in-the-side, sobbing.... Disgusting, isn't it? But it's good to get to know our individual physical sensations as they affect our fluting. What a teacher calls "support" might actually feel to you more like a frozen cough...or even cramps! If you can readily "translate" scientific directions into "what it feels like to ME", why, then you will progress faster!

Well, guess it's back to the outside world now...but one last and rather important point about all the above larking about: You might have the best playing posture in the world. You might have the most sensitively developed embouchure in the universe. ..but if you do not tame the Diaphragm Monster none of your air will even get that far! q

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