

Some Thoughts on Breathing and Support

Martin Schuring, Arizona State University

Most serious troubles on the oboe begin, not with a bad reed, but with a faulty sound production technique. Every link in the oboe playing chain will weaken or even break if breathing and support are not firmly established and smoothly executed. Almost all manifestations of inappropriate tension—a tight embouchure or a clenched throat, for example—are the result of the right muscles not doing enough work. The abdominal muscles are the only muscles equipped to support the tone with power and control. If breathing and support are lazy or incorrect, some group of muscles not equipped to handle the load will have to step up and try.

It is possible to play the oboe without discomfort. Indeed, it's possible to sing through the oboe with complete ease and freedom while still meeting all of the technical and dynamic demands of the music. Breathing and support are the foundation.



Posture

Excellent posture is essential for proper breathing and blowing. An effective posture arranges the body in a straight line from the hips all the way to the head—as though suspended by a hook on top of the head. In other words, hold yourself with a straight back, shoulders above the hips, and the head above the shoulders (not stuck forward; bring the oboe to you, don't go to the oboe). If this is difficult to visualize, back up against a wall and try to touch the wall at every point between your hips and your head. It won't be possible to do it completely, but try to grow as tall as you can. Notice how unlike the “military”

upright posture this is: no out-thrust chest nor shoulders held aggressively back. This posture can be maintained either standing or sitting. Standing is preferable; sitting compresses

the abdominal region slightly and makes it easier to “cheat” breathing and support. If you stand, place your feet about as far apart as your shoulders with one foot slightly in front of the other for balance. Don't lock your knees; don't hold any tension in your legs. Imagine that your center of gravity is low (in your thighs) and your feet firmly rooted to the ground.

Once seated or standing comfortably (and straight), introduce the oboe. Hold it at about a 45 degree angle to your body, with your shoulders relaxed (not bunched up around your neck), and your elbows comfortably away from your sides—say, four to six inches. Keep your head upright above your back. If this feels new and awkward, don't worry—it will feel comfortable soon enough. Just remember to stand up really well every time you play. Without good posture, the breath has no space to occupy.

Breathing

Now that you're straight, you can take a breath. Every student has heard, “Breathe from the diaphragm!” without really knowing what that means. Where is the diaphragm? What does it do?

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Why is it important to wind playing? The diaphragm is a sheet of tissue that separates the heart and lungs from the internal organs (the stomach, intestines, etc.) By itself, it doesn't do very much. Its muscular action is usually involuntary; it pulls downward when we inhale and relaxes as we exhale. I would honestly prefer to leave the diaphragm out of the discussion altogether, since nobody can actually visualize or feel their diaphragm, but the term is so established in teaching that some discussion is unavoidable.

Rather than dwell on the diaphragm, I prefer to tell students to breathe as deeply as possible—all the way to the bottom of the lungs. The whole point of breathing in properly, after all, is to be able to blow out with power and control. We need to play with a tone that has “support,” the other word every student knows without understanding it. Support is nothing more than pushing in with the abdominal muscles. This pushing displaces the internal organs, they displace the diaphragm upwards, the diaphragm pushes against the bottom of the lungs placing their contents under pressure. The ultimate goal, however, is not to have pressure in the abdominal area, but to have air pressure at the reed, which will succeed if two things are in place: there must be air at the very bottom of the lungs, and there must be air all the way in between the bottom of the lungs and the reed. It is just as useless to breathe only with your belly as it is to breathe only with your chest. The whole mechanism needs to function like a toothpaste tube: squeeze at the bottom in order for the paste to come out the top. Our bathrooms are witness to the many ways this process can be diverted.

Breathe as deeply as possible—all the way to the bottom of the lungs. There must be air at the very bottom of the lungs, and there must be air all the way in between the bottom of the lungs and the reed. The whole mechanism needs to function like a toothpaste tube: squeeze at the bottom in order for the paste to come out the top.

So, we must breathe in a way that gets the air to the very bottom of the lungs—from the diaphragm. Everyone does this naturally sometimes—when sleeping, when laughing, coughing, gasping—when doing just about anything besides playing the oboe. The best way for the student to learn the proper sensation is to try a few of these natural things and observe how they feel, then duplicate the feeling while playing. Yawn. A really deep satisfying yawn. Feel how the air goes all the way down; feel how your stomach goes out? Laugh. Feel how your stomach moves?

Cough. Feel the same thing? Try a few more things. Gasp like you're suddenly scared to death. Pant like a dog. These should give the same sensation. There is a popular exercise which has the student lay down and place a book (or other heavy object) on their belly and make the book rise as they inhale. The flaw in this idea is that everyone can poke their belly out and make the book rise with no trouble. Combining that with a breath is also no trouble, so I've found that facility with this exercise is no assurance that the student is breathing correctly.

Panting like a dog can be embarrassing, so it's worth trying a simple exercise which almost never fails. Sit on the edge of a chair, lean forward so your hands touch the floor, and inhale. An observer should see your lower back expand; you should feel your belly expand against your legs. Repeat the breath a few times as it is likely to be a new sensation. Now, while gradually moving to an upright sitting position, continue to take slow deep breaths maintaining the same feeling. Remember to take deep, full breaths.

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Your stomach should go out first, then your chest. Don't breathe just from the belly. Many students, under the impression that they must breathe from the diaphragm, never fill up the chest at all. Remember the toothpaste tube: not filling the chest is as useless as filling only the chest. A helper or a teacher should check progress by putting his or her hands on either side of your back just below the armpits. After the stomach expands, the upper back should expand also, forcing the observer's hands apart. The idea is to expand the torso, to make it wider. Effort which forces it higher is misplaced. Evelyn Rothwell, in her excellent book *Oboe Technique*, describes the correct three-stage breath. First, the belly expands; then, the chest expands (shown by the upper back expanding also); finally, the upper chest just below the neck, rises also. At that point the stomach will probably come back in slightly, which is fine.

This is a very large breath; too much for the oboe, which needs small quantities of air under steady pressure. A breath of this size is not only unnecessary, but uncomfortable. So, before beginning to play, release a portion of the air. Not too much, just enough that you feel natural rather than inflated. The idea is to feel comfortable when you play. Breathing on the oboe while playing should not be significantly different from breathing while carrying on a normal activity. The purpose of taking the large breath is to create expansion in the upper body, thereby teaching you the proper sensation so you can also take a partial breath with the same correct technique. Our goal is to fill all parts of the lungs equally with air, whether taking a full breath or a partial one.

Keep working on it—this is really, really important! If you take a breath and it doesn't feel right, don't play. Exhale and try again. Don't ever do it wrong and you'll have a new habit within a couple of weeks.

Now that you know how to take a good breath, make sure to do it much more often than you actually need to. Breathing is not merely a chance for air, it provides relaxation. If you take a breath and play as long as you can, you'll last at least thirty seconds, probably longer. Then take another breath and do it again. Another thirty or forty seconds. You can do that about three times, then you'll pass out. Breathe often.

Breathing lets blood back into your lips and relaxes them, it provides fresh oxygen and relaxes you, and it allows for improved endurance and tone. On the oboe, you will never use all the air you inhale in a normal breath. You will always need to exhale before you inhale. Otherwise, the excess air just sits in your lungs and gets stale and makes you feel choked. Don't wait until you need a breath to take one. Exhale before playing.

Plan your breathing. The most common reason for student exhaustion is a failure to plan breathing. I don't mean just where to breathe, but how: consider whether to take a large breath or a small one, whether to exhale or inhale or both. It is frequently possible to exhale in one place, play a few more seconds, and inhale in a second place. Young students frequently fail to get through a piece only because they breathe haphazardly without regard for their stamina or the music. In order to play a piece consistently, it is essential to play it with a consistent breathing plan. Make a plan and practice it; if necessary, change it until you can play with comfort.

Blowing

This is the other half of the same thing. You have a nice big breath inside you; now what? You want to be able to expel this air with control and power. For this we need the abdominal muscles, the strongest

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muscles in the torso. To blow properly—to support—push inward and slightly upward with the stomach muscles (those around the belt buckle) while you play. This will push upward against the diaphragm, which will push upward on the lungs, and voilà, you are supporting; you are playing from the diaphragm. If this is new to you, it will take a while to get the hang of it. Keep doing it. It only takes a couple of weeks to learn a new habit.

Reeds

Naturally, the reed is an essential link in the sound production chain. If the reed is uncomfortable or reluctant, no effort to produce a free singing tone can succeed.

Play against the resistance of the reed. That means, if the reed needs, say, five pounds of air pressure to vibrate well, you should push with five pounds of pressure from the abdomen and allow that to translate, unrestricted, into five pounds of pressure at the reed. (The figure of five pounds is an arbitrarily chosen number.) Instead, many players are much less efficient than this: they push with ten or fifteen pounds (not the real numbers, remember, just an example) and then find all sorts of ways to restrict the flow with tension at the embouchure, in the throat, and in the upper chest, artificially increasing the resistance of the reed. We all know players who work very hard to make almost no sound by trying to regulate a hopeless system of opposing tensions.

Here's a simple exercise: make a slow breath attack on an easy note (the orchestra tuning "A" is a good choice). The embouchure should be set quite softly with no effort made to control either the dynamic or the tone color. The reed should speak at around mezzo-piano. Softer, and the reed will feel limited; louder, and the reed will be too hard. Do the exercise again, and after the reed speaks, increase the air slightly until the tone firms up. If that feels noticeably easier than what you're used to doing, play slow scales and long tones with the same approach until it becomes natural.

Summary

Think about breathing and blowing every time you play. Don't ever do it wrong. Soon, you'll only be able to play the right way, and you'll sound much better. If oboe playing sounds bad, it is seldom because of some detail. It is almost always because something fundamental has been forgotten. If you don't sound good, before you embark on any process of correction, take a little inventory of the fundamentals:

- Good posture
- Proper, three-stage breath
- Exhale a portion before playing
- Support well: elastic, not hard
- Stay out of your own way

If you take care of those few things, have an instrument and a reed which function well, you should sound good most of the time with little discomfort.

Martin Schuring, Associate Professor of Oboe, has held orchestral positions with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Florida Orchestra and the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra. Since 1980, Schuring has been a regular participant at the Grand Teton Music Festival, participated in the Bach Aria Festival, served as professor of oboe at the Londrina Music Festival in Brazil, and performed as principal oboe of the Orchestre Philharmonique Rhodanien and professor of oboe at the Academie Européenne de Musique in Tournon-sur-Rhône, France. He has recorded for Philips, Koch International, MMC, and Summit Records, both as soloist and as an orchestral player. As editor, Schuring has prepared a new edition of the 'Barret Oboe Method' for Kalmus. His articles on pedagogical topics have been published in several magazines. Schuring has performed at every Conference of the International Double Reed Society since 1997 and serves on its executive board. As a member of the wind trio Ocotillo Winds, and as soloist, Martin regularly performs and gives master classes at universities and concert venues throughout the country. Together with bassoon colleague Jeffrey Lyman, he hosted the 1998 IDRS Conference at Arizona State University. Mr. Schuring studied at the Curtis Institute of Music with John de Lancie.