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INTRODUCTION

Circular Breathing is a technique employed in wind performance when a breath is necessary, but breaking the continuity of the musical phrase is not warranted or desired. It allows the performer to take the needed breath without stopping the sound, and thus continuing the phrase far beyond normal breathing limits.

This feat is neither as mystical nor as difficult as it might first appear. It should be viewed in the same manner as tonguing, vibrato, range, or any other skill one practices to reach higher goals in performance. It, like any of the other techniques mentioned, must be practiced with much dedication before successful and useable results will be realized.

There seems to be no documentation of the origin of Circular Breathing. Yet, we might not be too far off in the assumption that it was discovered by the first Indian snake charmer. He probably found very early in his career that if the sound stopped, he got bit, and out of the instinctive desire to live a long life, invented "circular breathing." Whatever its actual origin, it is widely used today by all wind players in all types of music and currently is finding its greatest popularity in American jazz. Trumpet artists Clark Terry and Maynard Ferguson, trombonists Urbie Green and Bill Watrous, and reed players Grover Washington, Jr., Sonny Rollins, Don Menza and James Moody all have demonstrated a remarkable ability of using Circular Breathing to great musical advantage. Yet this partial list does not do justice to the large number of Jazz players who successfully use this technique, not to mention all the classical and commercial performers.

Most people view circular breathing as a gimmick, and I must admit that it is usually approached as such in the beginning. But performers like those already mentioned have proven that once mastered, it can add exciting new dimensions to wind performance. It is with this in mind that this text is written and intended.

BREATHING (Prelude)

A study of circular breathing cannot be undertaken if normal breathing habits necessary for wind performance have not been established. For this reason, a discussion of proper breathing habits is appropriate.

It should be remembered that no matter how much importance one places on the embouchure, technique, the mouthpiece or the instrument, no sound is created without air. The breathing process and its ultimate control is the single most important item in wind performance and one that has a decided effect on all of its other phases.

It seems rather obvious to state that most people take breathing for granted. It is a natural body function, necessary to sustain life. But the type of breathing necessary for wind performance is not a natural function. It requires a reversal of common breathing practice and therefore must be learned. Examine first the normal breath: about 60% of a single breath cycle is consumed in inhalation, about 20% in exhalation, and the final 20% in a rest period. Stated another way, if a normal breath cycle were five seconds in length, three seconds would be spent inhaling, one second exhaling, and one second for rest.

Breathing for performance requires a drastic reversal of this "natural" process. The inhaling of air is done instantaneously, while exhaling is sustained over an elongated and always differing period of time. The rest portion of the cycle may not even exist. The exhalation of air in itself has some additional marked differences. In the normal breath, air is released with great intensity at first, followed by a sudden relaxation of intensity. The same release of air during performance requires the air to be expelled over a long period of time, with a consistent intensity. The actual consistency would be controlled by length of phrase and the dynamics, range, articulations and a multitude of other demands and considerations.

The question then is how might we best accomplish this instantaneous intake of air and its highly controlled release? The breaths one might take can be divided into four basic types. They are described here as the "high" breath, the "middle" breath, the "low" breath and the "total" breath. (Breathing is often discussed in this fashion in the teaching of Yoga, and although a complete study of Yoga breathing might prove valuable, it is my intention to delve only into the physical ramifications and not those spiritually related areas.)

Embouchure Rejuvenation

Another factor that makes "playing forever" impractical if not impossible, is that of embouchure rejuvenation. Periodically during any performance, the mouth-piece must be removed from the embouchure to alleviate the pressure on the lips. This allows blood to circulate freely again through the embouchure muscles. Failure to do this can lead to musical as well as physical problems.

Circular Breathing and Vibrato

The continuation or addition of vibrato during the circular breath is an interesting prospect. Before a discussion of steps to aid in its development, it would be best to identify some of the limitations.

Since circular breathing requires a break in the diaphragm support of sound, diaphragm vibrato is not possible. Along these same lines, a throat vibrato is very impractical. Although it would seem that a vibrato of this origin might be possible, the control and consistency problems would prove almost impossible to overcome.

The only practical alternative in circular breathing is a jaw vibrato, although a pressure vibrato is also a possibility for brass players. Those who normally use a diaphragm or throat vibrato must learn to transfer smoothly into and out of a jaw or pressure vibrato during the cycle.

Before one can begin to develop vibrato during circular breathing, the use of puffed cheeks must be greatly reduced. As previously stated, puffed cheeks cause embouchure distortion. For a controlled vibrato, the embouchure must remain constant. The problem is a matter of centering your concentration on the production of vibrato as opposed to the circular breathing steps, and developing the control necessary to make it useful.

Start with a very slow vibrato. It serves no purpose to start with a normal vibrato that will only slow and disintegrate during the circular breath cycle. Strive instead for a smooth, consistent undulation throughout. As your consistency improves, increase the speed. The desirable results will be achieved faster with less frustration if you follow these suggestions. It should be noted that those who use a pressure vibrato will not need to be concerned about this. In fact, the addition of this form of vibrato should cause only a slight coordination problem. The question is what kind of pressure (more or less than usual) is needed during the cycle.