

BREATHING - FLUTE ARTICLE

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One of the most important aspects of playing the flute musically, is to have sufficient breath control to play what you would like to play. It's often the case that enough breath hasn't been taken, in order to play to the end of the phrase expressively. In other words, the content of what you play is musically compromised because you have to conserve breath. Sometimes, you don't even make it to the end of the phrase! Let's face it, we've all done it! However, it has to be said that some phrases can be nearly impossible - Bach's B minor Mass, for example.

OK, so how do we manage our breath (if we don't have a friendly 2nd flute who can take over for a bit!) and more importantly, how do we practice good breath control in our pieces and studies?

Well, here are a few suggestions: Sing (or hum if you prefer) the tune through roughly to yourself in a fairly quick tempo. It doesn't matter how bad you are at singing or pitching! Using a pencil, you should get an idea where to mark in the likely places to take those breaths. Alternatively, you can play it through and do the same thing but only once you know the rhythm and the notes.

If possible, listen to some recordings and see where 'the pros' breathe. Sometimes you will be surprised, as they've worked out where to sneak extra breaths in places you wouldn't have thought of!

Once you think you've established the places where you would like to breathe, practise the piece or study in those breath mark sections. In other words, start from the first breath and stop at the next breath. If you can go from one breath mark to the next without 'dying' in between, then you can try stringing the breath mark sections together, one by one.

If you realise that you are not coping and requiring extra breaths, analyse whether you are taking in the same amount of breath as you were when you started each section independently. If not, then you will need to work on your intake of breath. Are you using your diaphragm properly? Do you think you are taking in the breath quickly enough to stay in time? Check it with your metronome. Remember, everyone can work on breathing in deeply using their diaphragm but did you know there is an extra little breath you can take on top of that? A double breath so to speak!

Oh, and finally, one golden rule in practice....don't keep playing through your piece from the beginning to the end in the hope that it will get better the next time you play it. You will be practising all those stumbles and inaccuracies and the result will be that you will be unlikely to play to a performance standard.

So, remember it's best to work in sections.