

# Breath Control

## Without Turning Blue

The amount of breath control we have can determine how successful we are in developing good tone quality, intonation, phrasing, technique, and musicality. For this reason it is important that we develop utmost control of the airstream.

Controlling the breath depends on air capacity, rationing of breath, and releasing the notes. A few simple exercises will help to improve each of these areas. First, however, make sure whenever taking a breath that you simultaneously open the mouth, flatten the tongue to eliminate noisy breathing, and push the abdomen out or expand the waist area to fill the lungs deeply.

### Air Capacity

The following three-step exercise is designed to increase air capacity and fill the lungs with air without tension.



Inhale on beat four, exhale on beats one, two, three, and four, hold the breath on beats one through three of the next measure, then repeat the cycle inhaling on beat four. Expand the number of sustained counts to eight beats and beyond. While exhaling make a hissing sound by blowing air through closed teeth.

### Rationing of Breath

Because the flute has no reed to slow down exhalation of air (unlike oboe or clarinet), it's important to control the release of air through the lips. Make a small opening (aperture) between the lips but keep the corners of the mouth firm. Form the lips as if you were saying the word *pooh* or blowing a kiss. The smaller the aperture, the less air escapes.

This exercise will also help develop your ability to take quick breaths. Most flutists panic when they have to take a quick breath and tense up rather than relaxing and letting the air flow in naturally. The image of pouring water into a

pitcher is helpful in demonstrating the idea of air filling into the bottom of the lungs.

There is more involved with controlling the release of air, however, than simply the shape of the embouchure. Flute players also have to learn to reserve air. Think of swimming under water from one end of a pool to the other and imagine how you would ration the air. Soft playing requires greater than normal breath support and control of both the embouchure and release of air. The idea of the chest held high helps to support, yet hold back the release of air. Last of all, you can practice stage whispers – whispering very loudly – to get a feel for supporting and projecting the air column while controlling the release of air.

### Approach and Release of Notes

It is important to always end a note properly before you take a breath. When you end a note, don't let the airstream sag. This helps the tone quality stay the same from note to note. By continuing to blow all the way through the note before taking a breath, the pitch or tone quality will not change. Try to use all of the air in your lungs. You can then take a full, relaxed breath just as you did in the first exercise for developing air capacity.



Make sure the note following the breath is at the same dynamic level (unless otherwise indicated) as the one you just played. Don't just take a breath and come in twice as loud. Remember to ration the air supply from the beginning of the phrase to the end. It's also important to mark every breath and follow them strictly. Taking breaths haphazardly is a bad habit that disturbs the musical flow. Ten minutes a day devoted to developing breath control can improve technique and musical phrasing. When you have excellent breath control, everything sounds better!