

TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CIRCULAR BREATHING
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Circular breathing is a technique that is gaining popularity among woodwind players today, including clarinet, saxophone, oboe, bassoon and even some brass instruments. It was once thought to be a trick or gimmick and mainstream performers did not accept its use. I find circular breathing to be a useful performance tool and call upon it often; it is important to note that it is not a substitute for extending ones phrasing in an unnatural manner. Performers must learn to use the technique sensibly, without interrupting the musical phrase or line. Before learning to circular breathe, it is important that performers have achieved a solid mastery of traditional, diaphragmatic breathing. Circular breathing should not merely be used as an “attention-grabber,” but rather as a tool that enhances performance and musicianship. The use of this technique should not “bump” the phrase or the sound. It should be as quiet and seamless as is possible. A general rule is that it “may be seen” but “should not be heard.” Mastery at this level is not achieved instantly. Before using the technique in an important performance setting, the performer should be comfortable in using it with ease and without sacrificing the musical line.

Circular breathing is especially useful in contemporary music. It also enables a performer to play works that are originally written for piano or stringed instruments. Use of this technique also presents an opportunity for relaxation of breathing during performance and reduces anxieties often associated with breath control. In addition to inhaling, one can also exhale while playing. This can aid tremendously in achieving long, repetitive, passages. If one can perform the inhale as well as the exhale, true mastery has been achieved.

Below are a few learning tips for mastering circular breathing:

1. Before using your instrument, envision the technique mentally. Initially it is difficult to grasp the concept of inhaling and exhaling simultaneously. Use the mouthpiece only.
2. Get a cup of water and a straw. (see demonstration)
3. Practice blowing bubbles (exhaling) and conserving your energy while “pooching” (puffing) your cheeks.
4. Practice inhaling without “pooching” the cheeks. This will reveal what is really happening in the oral cavity with the soft palate, wind way and tongue position.
5. Breathe quickly through your nose with no noise or grunt, just as you would breathe naturally.
6. Breathe rhythmically and prepare in a rhythmic manner.
7. Choose the breaths in advance and mark them in.
8. Just as in diaphragmatic breathing, do not wait to breathe until you are depleted as this will diminish your success and ease of the circular breath.
9. Practice first on long tones in your upper chalumeau or first partial. Don’t over blow the instrument, the dynamic should be mf to mp. Then extend to the other registers. Some are easier than others.
10. Practice on repetitive patterns, such as 123454321 etc. in the lower and upper chalumeau and repetitive pattern trills or 16th and 32nd figures. Create your own exercises also.

