

## BREATHING AND SUPPORT

### Basic principles for breathing:

- The diaphragm plays a part in breathing, but the phrase “breathe from the diaphragm” is used incorrectly
  - the diaphragm separates the chest from the abdominal cavity
  - flattens downward and allows the lungs to fill with air into the abdominal area
  - during exhalation, the muscles in the abdominal wall and the intercostals muscles between the ribs force the air out of the lungs
  - diaphragm maintains downward push in opposition
  - **\*\*the diaphragm serves as the controller of the air column, regardless of the variable backpressure supplied by the oboe**
- good breath support comes from the combination of opposing forces of contraction of the abdominal muscles as they push the air out of the lungs and the diaphragm which maintains a downward push
- release smoothly (in or out)
- relax, do not collapse
- **exhale stale air, muscles and brain need fresh oxygen!**
- breathe **quickly and deeply**, inhaling action must be faster than exhaling action
- cold air vs. warm air (fast vs. slow)
- **lungs should not necessarily be filled to capacity on oboe - take just enough air to make the phrase, otherwise you'll have stale air left over and will have to exhale before taking another breath (i.e. stacking)**
- throat should be kept fairly open; do not lock air in with the throat
- **embouchure should not bite to create resistance, you must have a reed that will support your airstream**

### EXERCISES TO ACHIEVE GOOD BREATH SUPPORT

- cough to feel stomach muscles
- lay on back and notice how you breathe naturally; shoulders **will not** raise up
- after aerobic/physical exercise, notice how you breathe
- put hands on rib cage, thumbs in back; feel expansion
- stand with back against wall, feel lower back expansion
- exhale all air; count to 10; open mouth and feel inward rush of air
- play in chair with feet off the floor
- long tones
- blow up a balloon to feel muscles

**\*\*\*THE BETTER THE SUPPORT, THE LESS THE EMBOUCHURE HAS TO WORK AND THE MORE ROUND AND CUSHIONED IT CAN AFFORD TO BE IN ORDER FOR A GOOD TONE TO RESULT**

## POSTURE AND HAND POSITION

### POSTURE

- Shoulders should be down, relaxed, and completely free of tension
- Arms are slightly away from the body, not clamped to the ribs
- If standing, feet should be slightly apart and knees slightly bent
- Do not lean forward or backwards, distribute weight evenly on both feet
- If sitting, sit up straight, so that nothing hinders the breathing apparatus
- The head should be comfortable, as if you were looking straight ahead

### HAND POSITION

- Wrists should be fairly straight coming off the arm
- Fingers should always maintain a natural curve – **WATCH FOR STRAIGHT RING FINGER IN THE LEFT HAND!!!**
- The left index finger should be curved so that the 2<sup>nd</sup> octave key is beneath the first knuckle
- The right index finger should **almost** touch the right G# key and angled slightly downward
- Pinky fingers should remain close to their respective keys when not in use
- Watch for correct thumb position in both hands. (“Hitchhiker thumbs in particular).
- The pressure on the keys should only be enough to depress the key

### COMMON PROBLEMS WITH POSTURE AND HAND POSITION

1. Shoulders high and tense
2. Holding head down; ducking head (makes pitch flatter, low register easier to play, BUT makes pitch impossible up high, makes delicate tonguing impossible, and makes tonal focus poor)
3. Tense wrists (usually leads to pain, especially in right hand). Thumb only needs to balance oboe, not hold it up
4. Stiff, flat fingers
5. Pressing too hard
6. Left thumb parallel to the oboe instead of closer to 45-90 degrees. This throws off the entire finger position of the left hand and brings the index finger’s knuckle below the 2<sup>nd</sup> octave key.
7. **Left index finger moving too far, or not enough, to vent 1/2 hole!!**
8. Fingers not remaining poised over their respective keys

## EMBOUCHURE

- The embouchure should always look and feel as natural as possible
- A nice easy reed is a requirement for forming a good embouchure
- Practice embouchure using the reed alone
- The teeth should be about 1/2 inch apart and the embouchure should be rounded, corners drawn inward
- The embouchure provides a cushion or a pillow upon which the reed vibrates

- The main function of the embouchure is to adjust the opening of the reed to allow proper volume and pressure of air through the instrument
- The reed should be placed on the bottom lip, which should be rolled slightly in over the bottom teeth
- Always roll the lips over the teeth first, before inserting the reed (If not, there will almost always be too much reed in the mouth)
- **The teeth should never touch the reed**
- The angle of the reed should be between 30 and 45 degrees
- The chin should be pointed downward, there should be a vertical line from the lips to chin, if possible
- Place as little reed as possible in the mouth to produce the desired tone
- **Always use good breath support**
- **Always use a mirror to check proper embouchure formation!**

### **EXERCISES TO PRODUCE A GOOD EMBOUCHURE**

1. Whistle while keeping the chin pointed downward
2. Lips act as a top of a drawn drawstring bag, creating a seal around the reed
3. Sipping a thick milkshake through a straw
4. Say the German ü syllable
5. Say “Q” (very drawn out)

### **COMMON FAULTS IN EMBOUCHURE FORMATION**

1. Too much reed in the mouth
2. Reed not positioned in the center of the lips
3. Physiological problems (lips too thin/full, protruded jaw, braces)
4. Too much pressure on the reed from top to bottom produces thin, pinched sound, terrible response in the lower register, and sharpness
5. Too little pressure on the reed produces a breathy, unfocused tone, and flatness
6. BITING, not only does the sound suffer, but the reed itself will too!
7. Puffy cheeks caused by lack of control
8. Bunched-up chin
9. Angle of the oboe to the embouchure (too far out-“the trumpet pose” causes poor response and pinched tone, too far in – cuts off air supply)
10. Reed is too hard, or too soft, causing the player to compensate in unnatural ways with the embouchure

### **REEDS**

- The reed controls at least 80% of the oboe’s function, especially with regard to intonation
- Always soak the reed in water, instead of the mouth, the acids and enzymes in your saliva will break down the reed much quicker than water
- **Always consider response before tone!**

- Crowing the reed gives a good indication of how vibrant the reed is, and what the overall pitch of the reed will be – crowing position should be at the top of the thread (NOT the same as playing position which uses half as much reed or less)
- The desirable crow produced should be a “double C”, meaning you should hear two C’s an octave apart, a wild crow or a rattle in the crow means an adjustment may be necessary
- The reed should always be inserted completely into the bore of the oboe. The oboe cannot be tuned by pulling the reed out of the well – will cause a vacuum leak and make the issues worse
- Never buy fibercane reeds! A handmade reed from a professional oboist is always recommended.

## **BASIC TOOLS NEEDED TO ADJUST REEDS**

1. **A VERY SHARP KNIFE** (Landwell, Vitry)
2. Plaque (flat steel)
3. Cutting block
4. Sharpening stone (two types preferable to keep knife as sharp as possible, diamond stone, ceramic/oilstone)

## **SIMPLE TIPS FOR ADJUSTING REEDS**

### **If the reed is flat:**

- make sure the reed is pushed all the way into the oboe
- check to make sure the reed is not cracked
- clip the smallest amount possible from the tip of the reed, repeat as necessary
- push the overlap between the two blades more
- support more, faster air speed
- the reed may be too old, break it and buy or make a new one
- the reed may be too open, if so, squeeze gently and the bottom of the reed near the thread and close the opening down slightly

### **If the reed is sharp:**

- **DO NOT PULL THE REED OUT OF THE OBOE!** This will only create more problems with pitch by reducing the seal between the reed and the instrument
- check to make sure the reed is not cracked
- look inside the reed and make sure there is no buildup, if there is, with the reed wet use a pipe cleaner or run hot water through the reed to remove the buildup
- lengthen the tip and thin the very end of each corner of the tip
- sometimes taking a little off the heart where it meets the tip will help produce more vibrations and lower pitch
- too much reed in the mouth
- the reed may be too closed, longer soaking may help briefly, but the problem will continue
- the reed may be too old, if so, break it and buy or make a new one

## TECHNIQUE

- Good technique is the coordination of the technical system (fingers, keys, tongue) with the sound-generating system (airflow, embouchure, and reed)
- Technique is more than how fast you can move your fingers, in fact, speed is probably the least important aspect, evenness and controlling that speed is most important
- Control of the airstream is an essential component of solid technique
- Speed will increase as you work on the areas of relaxation, control, coordination, and airflow
- Practice technique and scales in all keys, not just the easy ones!
- It is wrong to practice bad habits faster and faster. You will simply have to relearn them and it is much more difficult to re-learn than to learn properly the first time
- Maintain relaxation of fingers and airstream in fast passages
- The fingers are not making the sound, they are simply changing the length of the oboe by covering or opening tone holes and therefore changing the pitch. Fingers should not have any effect on the airstream.
- **ABOVE ALL ELSE, PRACTICE SLOWLY!!!**

## BASIC ARTICULATION HINTS

- The tongue is used to initiate the tone
- **Tonguing is a release, not an attack.** The sound is actually produced from the release of the tongue off the reed, allowing the air to flow through the reed.
- **The air should never, ever, stop when articulating! As Marcel Tabuteau put it – “tongue on the wind”**
- The tip of the tongue should touch the tip of the reed in a up/down motion
- Practice this process very slowly. Start the air, then place the tongue on the reed, and hold it there. Slowly release the tongue to speak the note. The air should never stop throughout.
- Always practice first with the reed alone
- To stop the notes at the ends of phrases, simply pucker the lips around the reed securely and stop the source of air
- Very short, staccato or “stopped” articulation should be accomplished by replacing the tongue on the reed between each note

## INTONATION

- 80% of intonation difficulties stem from the reed
- A above middle C is one of the most stable notes to tune the oboe, half-hole D, since it is a long-bore note, also is a good note to begin on
- **Using a tuner, map out all of the intonation tendencies of your particular instrument**
- Dynamics and intonation (the louder you play, the flatter the pitch because the embouchure and throat are much more open, vice-versa, when playing soft, the tendency is to pinch, therefore raising the pitch)

- Hearing pitches relative to a fundamental is very helpful in establishing good intonation. Either with a tuner or a friend, play and hold a note and then ascend by step against the fundamental, carefully tuning the intervals
- In ensemble playing, the upper voice should tune to the lower voice
- When two or more instruments are out of tune, it is always the flattest pitch that sounds out of tune
- Second players have the responsibility to establish good pitch, but the first player is always “correct”!

## PRACTICE HINTS

### General Recommendations

1. Schedule specific practice times. Stick to your schedule, routine is so important!
2. Ask questions of your band director or private teacher. Be sure you understand what things you need to work on.
3. Work on basics. Progress only happens when fundamentals are solid.
4. Practice, don't play! Practice only what you have problems with, not the passages you can already play. There are times when you should run through everything, however.
5. Always use a metronome. Slow practice is the fastest way to improve.
6. Speed is determined by accuracy! Always work for accuracy and control ---- speed will be the natural result of slow, careful work.
7. Each category of practice carries over into the other categories. Constantly look for opportunities to apply new concepts: fingerings, tone, breathing, etc.
8. Alternate standing and sitting. Breathing feels different for each.
9. Use your mirror to check breathing, embouchure, hand position, etc.
10. **Work on reeds every day!**

### ONE HOUR OF PRACTICE COULD EQUAL =

Tone development (long tones, work with tuner)	10 minutes
Technique (Scales, arpeggios, dominants, etc.)	15 minutes
Concepts/Etudes (articulation, fingerings, hand position, etc.)	20 minutes
Repertoire (put it all together!)	15 minutes

### SOME OTHER PRACTICE HINTS

- It is the **quality**, not the **quantity** of practice time that counts. Learn to make it all count. Never simply play, but play with a purpose.
- Practice in shorter sessions, not all in one long burst. It is important to concentrate at all times and after a while it is simply impossible. Take a break and when you are refreshed, go back to work
- Develop a warm-up routine and you will be more apt to achieve consistency
- **Always mark in breaths. Fingers rely on the air. When you run out of air the fingers make mistakes.**
- Pencil in reminders; don't rely on your memory.
- Practice extremely slowly at first. Do not train bad habits.

- Use a metronome, always. Increase speed very gradually. Use the slow tempos to train the proper finger motions and patterns.
- Relax!!! If you practice tense, you will play tense.

## PHRASING/MUSICALITY

### **BASIC TOOLS**

- Ability to listen
  - attend recitals and concerts, listen to other good musicians, and those other than your own instrument (especially vocalists and string players), listen to recordings
- Control of your own instrument
  - complete range of dynamics in all registers
  - ability to make smooth crescendos and diminuendos over various time intervals
- Legato finger control
- Ability to begin tones in all registers with various emphasis
- Control of airflow and relaxation
- Use different tone colors to enhance phrasing
  - do not allow colors to affect pitch
  - slight changes in embouchure pressure
  - change speed of air column (vibrato)
  - alternate fingerings (harmonics)
- Get past the notes and express what the composer heard
- Add your personality to the piece but be cognizant of the composer's intention

### **SOME BASIC FUNDAMENTALS**

- Know or look up unfamiliar terminology
- Determine shape and/or direction of phrase
- Breathing often helps determine the direction of a phrase, but do not allow it to get in the way of a good phrase
- Analyze structure: i.e. sequences, cadences, chord types, overall form, etc.
- Look for opportunities to shape within larger phrase sections
- Search for new musical ideas. Be bold!
- **Exaggerate, Exaggerate, Exaggerate**
- Look for phrasing opportunities in fast passages as well as slow ones
- Know the historical context of the piece you are performing
- Relate your music to the music theory/history you have learned

## INSTRUMENT BRAND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Loree** – brand used by a majority of professional American oboists

**Fox** –for mature amateurs, middle and HS players; come in several different models including wood and resin plastic; excellent value especially for the Renard models

**Yamaha** – they make outstanding professional and student model oboes

**Selmer** – not as good, but okay for beginners

**Rigotaut** – another French model, not as typical as the Loree

**Covey** – good American made oboe, excellent intonation, sound is not as good as the Loree (professional model)

**Howarth** – made in England, very good quality instruments and gaining in popularity in the US

## **METHOD BOOKS**

Yamaha (Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced)

Gekeler Method for Oboe (excellent for starting beginners)

Barret Method for Oboe (the “Bible” for oboe players)

Ferling 48 Etudes (also for sax)

Sellner Method (2 volumes)

Prestini, *Raccolta de studi*

Hinke, Elementary Method for Oboe

## **REEDS**

**\*\*IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, HAVE YOUR STUDENTS, EVEN BEGINNERS, PLAY ON HANDMADE REEDS.** There are some decent machine made reeds (Jones, Fox, Emerald, Gower) that would be okay for beginners, but you should purchase reeds for intermediate students and advanced players from either your local oboist or from the sources listed below:

- North Texas Oboe Reed
- Charles Double Reed – [www.charlesmusic.com](http://www.charlesmusic.com)
- Midwest Musical Imports – [www.mmimports.com](http://www.mmimports.com)
- RDG Woodwinds – [rdgwoodwinds.com](http://rdgwoodwinds.com)
- Ann Hodge – [hodgeproductsinc.com](http://hodgeproductsinc.com)
- There are lots of new reedmakers on Etsy these days! I can’t vouch for the quality and reliability, but you could certainly give some of the more affordable ones a try.

This is not an exhaustive list, but these are the suppliers that I have found to be the most consistent. There are different strengths for these reeds, so please consult either your local oboe teacher or the supplier themselves for which one you should buy. There is a certain amount of trial and error that occurs, and you should also be prepared to adjust them as necessary. (see “Reeds section” of this handout)