

THE BREATHINGBOOK

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Musicians move to make music. When a tuba player plays, there are many movements which must be coordinated in order to create the desired sound: the fingers must move with precision to ensure excellent technique; the tongue must move appropriately to articulate cleanly; the embouchure must move properly to produce the right pitch. Tuba players must also move air to create a resonant tone quality and the movement of the air comes from the breath support.

The quality of a tuba player's movements determines the quality of the sound. For example, tuba players with precise tongue motions play with excellent articulations, and tuba players with inexact tongue motions play with poor articulations. Similarly, tuba players who breathe well create a resonant tone quality and tuba players who do not breathe well lack resonance.

To breathe well means to breathe free of tension, and tension-free breathing occurs when we move in cooperation with how we are built. In other words, if we know how we are supposed to move to breathe, we will move freely and our sound will be resonant. If our movements do not cooperate with the reality of how we are built, our sound will be full of tension and our resonance will suffer.

Knowing about breathing movements is just like knowing about music theory or music history. Our knowledge of theory and history informs our playing and serves as a foundation upon which we can make educated musical decisions. Similarly, our understanding of breathing informs our playing and serves as a foundation upon which our music-making movements occur. A detailed understanding of theory and history provides a strong musical foundation, enabling us to make informed musical decisions. A detailed understanding of the movements of breathing provides a strong movement foundation, enabling us to breathe free of tension and to create the resonance we seek. After all, since tuba players move to make music, it makes sense to understand how to move every bit as much as it makes sense to understand how to spell chords.

When we perform, our knowledge of theory and history is not foremost in our thinking. It exists in the background, rather like the foundation of a house. Likewise, once we learn about the movements of breathing, this knowledge exists in the background, right alongside our knowledge of theory and history. It is not necessary (or helpful) to walk out on stage thinking about your diaphragm as you are about to perform!

If our knowledge of music history and music theory is inaccurate, our musical decision-making is impaired. Correspondingly, if our knowledge of breathing is inaccurate, our ability to breathe free of tension is impaired. As we learn to play tuba, sometimes we learn how to breathe metaphorically and the metaphors do not always cooperate with reality. The metaphors can create misunderstandings which cause tension in our breathing. This book is designed to teach the truth about breathing, so we can breathe free of tension. It is a book full of movement facts, not metaphors. It is a movement book, not an exercise book.

Each section in this book includes an important breathing fact with an image on the left page and a playing activity on the right page. For maximum benefit, think about the movement facts as you play the activity and you will integrate the knowledge into your playing in meaningful ways. Learn the movement facts well enough so they become part of your musical foundation, and eventually, there will be no need to focus on the breathing movements as you play. The best musicians breathe well without focusing on their breathing and devote their attention to musical thoughts as they perform.

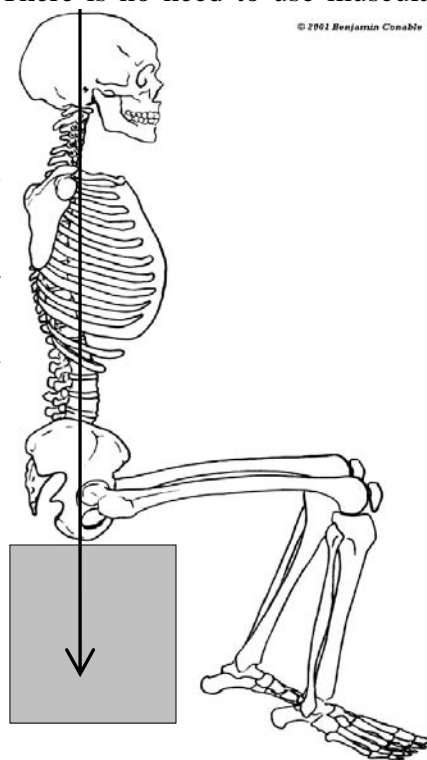
1. Be Balanced

All of the individual movements of breathing coalesce into the singular, well coordinated and organic motion of breathing. The motion of breathing is complex but it needn't be confusing, because ultimately, musicians need only cooperate with nature to breathe well. The only improvements to be made are in our cooperation with the process.

In order to breathe well, it is important to achieve muscular freedom throughout your body. One of the keys to achieving muscular freedom is to allow your bony structure to hold up your body. Your skeleton is designed to deliver your weight to the chair or floor in cooperation with gravity, and when you rely upon your bones in this way, you are balanced. There is no need to use muscular work to hold yourself up when you are balanced.

Balance is an internal, lively sensation, not the stagnant holding of a position. You can feel whether or not you are balanced when you have musical movement available to you in any direction. Try it now: as you observe the image, allow your weight to be delivered down to your chair and move in little circles on your rockers. Your rockers are the two rounded bones which make contact with your chair. Notice from the image that you don't sit on your legs; they attach to your pelvis above your rockers.

When you are balanced, your spine will be curved, as in the image. Don't try to make your spine straight. When you are balanced, you have the support of your massive lumbar spine (the bottom five large vertebrae). When you are balanced, you can use all of your muscles to create resonance because they are not being used to hold up your body.



If you sit up too straight, as though trying to make your spine straight, it is the postural equivalent of playing sharp. Try it now: sit up too straight and experience sharp sitting. Take a few breaths in this position and notice how it feels to breathe when sitting sharp. If you slump over, as though relaxing too much, it is the postural equivalent to playing flat. Try it now: slump over and experience flat sitting. Take a few breaths in this position and notice how it feels to breathe when sitting flat. If you are balanced when sitting, it's like sitting in tune. Try it now: allow your bones to support your weight and sit in tune. Breathe in this position and notice how much better it feels to breathe when sitting in tune.

Notice that being balanced is a prerequisite to breathing well. Being balanced is like being in tune—it makes everything else about your playing easier!

1. Be Balanced

▲ = Inhale
Time the inhale so it happens during this beat. Don't breathe in through the instrument.

□ = Blow
Blow air through the instrument vigorously without creating a tone. Finger the valves as though playing the indicated pitch.

♩ = 88 +

1. 

Blow Play

f

Blow Play

f

Are you balanced?

f

Sit in tune.

f

Let your bones hold you up.

f

Feel your weight being delivered through your lumbar spine.

f

Remain balanced as you blow.

f

Being balanced helps you achieve maximum resonance.

f

Now play these long tones and notice how being balanced improves your sound.

mf

Turn off the metronome.

Feel free to play additional long tones.