

## Breathing

*By David Liebman*

It is the ultimate goal of any instrumentalist to have your instrument become an extension of your body. In order to achieve this, you need to be as relaxed as possible. Playing the saxophone isn't any different from speaking or singing. In both cases, you're controlling the shape and intensity of the air stream by using your vocal chords. Just as you impart nuance when you speak, you should do so automatically when you play your horn, so that the saxophone is truly an extension of your voice. In order for that to happen, you need to let the vocal chords do what comes naturally. You don't want to impose any tension on them that will interfere with their ability to function.

It's also important for the technical aspects of playing to happen naturally, with as little conscious effort as possible. This will facilitate musical expression, since the player will be less preoccupied with what goes into producing a sound. One key to unencumbered expression is establishing proper breath support. Breath support is necessary not only enable you to play a long phrase, but, more importantly, to support the sound- particularly in the higher register, where the notes are much more sensitive to shrillness and pitch inaccuracies. In order to achieve the highest levels of expressiveness, your breathing technique needs to be well established, so that plenty of support is always available- whether you're thinking about it or not.

Proper breathing involves three separate areas: the abdomen, the lungs (around the rib cage), and the upper lungs or shoulders (known as the clavicle). These areas work in unison, but while learning to use them, it's best to develop an awareness of each individual part. Here's an exercise I use specifically to develop deep breathing.

**The inhalation:** As you breathe, imagine the air descending the same way water drains from a sink. The air enters your wind pipe and goes all the way down to your abdomen, which then expands. This expansion occurs in all directions – forward, sideways and even toward the back. As the lungs fill up with air, you'll feel the rib cage rising slightly, followed by a slight raising of the shoulders and upper part of the lungs. This shouldn't be overt, but it's something that you should feel. When you take this one breath, you're engaging all three parts of the breathing mechanism – the abdomen, the mid-lungs, and upper lungs.

**The exhalation:** When you blow, you're essentially reversing the inhalation process – lowering your shoulders, relaxing your lungs, and finally, pulling in your stomach to force out the rest of the air. The complete breath is an expansion and contraction, in a smooth, graduated three-part motion.

Visualizing the movement of the air can be an aid to improving breath support. Sometimes it helps to imagine that the air is a color, like blue or red. Visualize it entering your wind pipe, going down into the abdomen and expanding it like a balloon. Visualize this process in reverse as you exhale. Take five to ten breaths like this twice a day. Try to reach a point where you are breathing deeply and smoothly.

After a couple weeks, add some resistance to this exercise, through one of the following methods:

*Method 1:* Lay on the floor face down. First push your abdomen downward and then pull it up so that you create space between yourself and the floor.

*Method 2:* While standing in a doorway facing the door jamb, push your abdomen against the jamb on the inhalation and pull it out on the exhalation, creating clearance between your stomach and the door jamb.

*Method 3:* Lie on your back and have pressure applied to your abdomen, either by placing books or weights on your stomach or by having someone lie on top of you and press downward against you.

When you take a breath while applying external resistance, the abdomen not only expands, but expands against a force, which increases its strength. When you take the force away, that increased strength remains.

You may not always need to take a deep breath. When you're playing pianissimo, you might take a shallow breath, using only the lung and clavicle areas. However, in order to play a longer or ,louder passage, you may suddenly need to breath from the abdomen. It's something you should always be ready for, because you never know when you're going to need it.