



## CELLO

### Take a Breather

by David Holmes

About 25 years ago (could it really have been *that* long ago?!!) I was making a recording of the Lalo concerto for an audition. After the first take I turned to my pianist and said, “Well that felt awful!” She responded with a very simple but important question: “Were you breathing while you were playing?” Well I must have been. I didn’t pass out! Of course the breathing she was speaking of was of a more consistent and deep kind than I was doing under the stressful circumstances of a taping. Just opening that door of awareness to my own breathing immediately made the second take that day so much better.

The knowledge and practice of controlled breathing as a tool of centering the mind has been used by various cultures for thousands of years. The awareness of and indeed the skill involved in breathing while playing an instrument is perhaps the biggest single relaxation and comfort tool at our immediate disposal. With such complete physical and psychological involvement in the process of playing, often one of the first things to vacate the premises is consistent breathing, by which I mean an uninterrupted flow of air through inhaling or exhaling. Anxiety, even in a small dose, often causes physical tension that results in a lack of air flow, but, conversely, a constant air flow decreases anxiety and physical tension. After all, one of the primary goals for our selves and for our students is to play with intensity, but not to play tensely. The breath can be our ally toward that goal.

A few standing stretches prior to practicing can get our bodies prepared for playing cello. One can do any type of stretches one wants, but a variety for a few minutes is desirable. Working the body from torso to fingers (large to small muscles) might be a direction to proceed with warm-ups. Stretches promote deeper breathing and an increased blood flow that raises the temperature of muscle fiber thereby preparing the body for action. Similar to athletes, stretching for musicians is an important discipline that can also help avoid injury. Kids usually like these physical activities,

which is a plus as well (hey, they’re probably not getting enough physical education at school anyway). Adding more stretches in the middle of a long lesson or group class can help alleviate any mounting tension and provide a rejuvenating psychological break.

We often use the breath to cue others in chamber music, so perhaps we could cue ourselves in practice or initiate a habit of breathing in and out a couple of times before playing. When I do this “pre-breath” I notice a release of physical tension, in shoulders, arms, and even hips. One added benefit is posture related: one can’t take a full breath unless the back is tall and the head is balanced over the torso. This is easily and convincingly illustrated to students by having them take a full breath while in a slumped position (not possible!) and another while in an upright, tall position (ah, that’s better!). Tanya Carey’s recent book, *Cello Playing is Easy; Part 1: Warm-ups*, suggests a simple test for a balanced head with a “yes” (nod), “no” (right to left) and “maybe” (slight head tilt toward both shoulders). If these head motions come easily balance is achieved and breathing naturally can proceed.

Scales, pieces, or studies that have been deeply ingrained can provide a good starting point for incorporating some breathing awareness during cello playing, as can something as simple as open strings. At first, controlled breathing while playing can feel like rubbing one’s tummy while patting one’s head, but practice helps. One teacher I have observed (Amy Barston) has what she calls the “relaxation scale,” which starts slowly (whole notes on each scale degree) and gradually increases in speed and notes per bow as the player breathes out through the mouth on the down bow and in through the nose on the up bow. The intake of breath on the up-bow counters the tendency of bodies to slump as the bow arm falls toward the cello. Amy, who is an awesome cellist, swears by this routine and does it religiously in her daily practice and is convinced it really helped her heal when she had tendonitis once.

Introducing the breath into cello teaching can be a backdoor solution to a number of tension issues: “Johnny, *please* sit up tall when you play” (said with nasal, nagging voice) could become, “See if we can find the body position that helps you breathe the deepest, Johnny.” “Janey, would you *pleeeeeeeze* keep you shoulders relaxed,” could become, “Take a deep breath and when you exhale, feel like all the tension is leaving your body,” which may sound a bit, well, Californian, but it works.

Asking a student to sing their pieces gives them an immediate connection to their expressiveness and activates their musical breath. Having a student sing and play simultaneously can also connect the breath of the music with what’s coming out of the cello, which can be an important ear opener, at least for the students who will actually sing willingly in lessons. A few students just find the idea of singing in front of others too repellent to overcome.

A noticeable lack of body movement is usually a sign of tension in a cello player. Initiating breathing and body motion can be an antidote to this. For cellists the side-to-side motion of the torso seems quite natural. When feeling uncomfortable or dissatisfied for some mysterious reason when practicing, a gentle sway to the sides can unlock hips, enhance breathing and connect us to our playing in a way that being totally still cannot. For a very long note (the last note of *The Swan*, for instance) “similar” motion between the body and the bow can give a more consistent sound, more playing ease, and an increased length to a note (imagine two trains—your body and your bow—on parallel tracks moving in the same direction). For more vigorous passages—like the opening of Dvorak Concerto—and for a bow that needs velocity the “contrary” motion between bow and body (trains traveling in opposite directions) can be very effective. Initiating these torso movements can be accomplished from the back or from “steering” with the feet, an image which conjures up the notion of bicycling.

Other helpful hints that can aid the

breathing process are to relax the tongue, the toes (I have observed a number of my barefooted students curling their toes!), unclench teeth, open the throat, and yes, release that tummy (don't hold it in; just accept that it's there even if it used to be smaller). Tanya Carey repeatedly suggests smiling while playing as a tension reducer, which I have to admit does help, but I'm just not capable of being *that* happy while practicing. I however did see Yo-yo Ma perform the entire Haydn D concerto with

an unwavering, beatific smile on his face. Maybe he knew about the tension reducing properties inherent in a smile. Of course, if I played like him, perhaps I too would never quit smiling.

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