



# VIOLIN

## Breathe Your Way Out of Your Lizard Brain

### Expression in Violin and Singing Part 2

by Katie Gustafson and Nicole Warner

UrbanDictionary.com defines “lizard brain” as “that part of the brain that senses danger; where instincts and gut feelings originate; subconscious or involuntary processes.” The lizard brain is our tendency to *react* rather than to make thoughtful, calculated actions, and it can affect our music-making more than we might care to admit. We can attribute stage fright and its corresponding adrenaline symptoms to lizard brain, as well as careless physical habits. I would even argue that sloppy execution and lack of “mindfulness” could be attributed to the automatic, reactive habits of lizard brain. The solution to these problems is not simple, but I discovered a good strategy in my voice lessons with Nicole Warner.

In Part 1 of our series on applying useful vocal pedagogy to violin teaching (Spring 2014 issue), Nicole and I discussed the importance of developing body awareness in young musicians. My voice lessons with Nicole called attention to muscle tension and posture issues that I did not realize that I had. With her help, I found that I could improve my singing with better awareness of my full height and with relaxed movement. I quickly began to feel more *at home* in my own body. These ideas translated beautifully to violin instruction, and have helped many of my students with similar problems. But as personally groundbreaking as body awareness was, it was nothing compared to my breathing epiphany.

The amount of time string players spend thinking about breathing is almost zero. We use breath demonstratively to cue prep beats—aka “the sniff”—but little beyond this. In fact, many of my students have confessed that when focusing very hard, they often *hold* their breath. This deprives our brain and muscles of a continuous oxygen supply, decreasing responsiveness and focus, and increasing feelings of tension. Conscious breathing can produce the opposite (and far more pleasing) result. It refocuses the mind, settles the nerves and relaxes the muscles. All of these are terribly important to longevity in string playing, since musi-

cians routinely face high-pressure situations.

In order to equip our students with the ability to do good work in the practice room *and* stressful performances, try adding breathing techniques to your everyday teaching toolbox. Here are a few starters to try.

#### 1. Breathe low and slow.

Culturally we are taught to breathe into our lungs so that our rib cages expand and contract. This chest breathing is high and shallow. Many people even move their shoulders when they breathe, which is unnecessary. Compare this with how babies breathe—with their bellies; this natural breathing literally makes their belly buttons go up and down as they breathe. Babies simply allow their lungs to fill, which *naturally* pushes the diaphragm down and out. (The diaphragm is the muscle that lies under the lungs and causes the stomach to move out when the lungs are filled with air.) This diaphragmatic breathing is low in the torso.

As we mature, we subconsciously strive for the culturally ideal “flat tummy” by holding in our stomachs and we begin to breathe “high,” as runners are taught. However, this is not actually our natural state of breathing, since the diaphragm muscles require your belly to expand and contract. Deep, relaxing breath is a habit that must be relearned. Try it yourself: place your hands on your belly and feel it expand while you take 5–10 low, slow breaths.

#### 2. Mix Breathing With Visual Aids.

Visual aids can help people mentally understand the kinesthetic experience of low breathing. If you refer to your visual aid repeatedly, it can create continuity from lesson to lesson as well as tapping into multiple learning modalities. For example, imagine a picture of the laughing Buddha, his clothes loose and flowing and his belly full, with a smile on his face; it’s an instantaneous and positive image for many students. It’s one thing to have a student breathe as if they were creating a Buddha Belly and

then move onto the next part of the lesson; it’s another experience to practice a Buddha Belly breath three times at the beginning of a lesson *while looking at* a picture of the



laughing Buddha up on the wall, a visual aid which then reinforces the new practice of the low breath. Consciously making the connection between the breathing and the photo over weeks and months of lessons can create a long-term change in breathing patterns. Another visual aid that can be used first to create a kinesthetic experience and then reinforced over time is the idea of inhaling as if you could inhale in the shape of a circle, using all 360 degrees of your expanding tummy. You could hang up a picture of a colorful circle or perhaps a circle with arrows pointing outward from it, which you would then associate with the kinesthetic experience.

#### 3. Model for your students.

Whether we realize it or not, our students watch what we do, and imitate. If we make a conscious effort to incorporate slow breathing as a relaxation technique in lessons, students will follow suit. This cannot only improve the *technique* that we model for our students, but it also improves the atmosphere of the lesson. We sometimes come to lessons carrying all the mental

baggage of a difficult and stressful day. If we make a point of slowing down, taking a few breaths, and leading our students to do the same, we are equipping them to cope well with stress in other areas of their lives.

Once you have begun to cultivate the usefulness of breathing, you can apply it in many areas of your lessons. Start by taking some lesson time to teach your students how to breath well, and explain how it affects their bodies. Then use opportune moments during lessons to help your students apply their new skills. Here are a few examples in lessons where I found it helpful to incorporate breathing skills.

First, use breathing to alleviate mental fatigue. When a student must repeat a difficult passage many times, ask your student to take a deep breath in between each repetition. This will help keep their mind more fresh, and slow them down enough to avoid sloppy, hasty repetitions.

Second, use breathing to help students prepare for the start of a song or phrase. I had one student who was in such a hurry to begin playing that he would “pounce” on the song, beginning with a dramatic bow crash followed by some very creative rhythms. As entertaining as this was, I had to reign in the wild stallion. I asked him to take two deep breaths, and then count off one measure in tempo before he began

playing. After making a habit of this, he began approaching his entrances with more thoughtfulness.

Third, when preparing for an audition or recital, have your student do a practice performance where they practice using deep breathing to calm their nerves and steady their hands. If you are hosting a recital, you can follow up on this by meeting up with them as they warm up. As you give them the pre-game pep talk, remind them to fall back on the breathing preparation from your lessons.

Nicole recently shared with me a personal situation when low, slow breathing helped her in a professional audition:

“Sometimes in auditions singers are asked to demonstrate their range—we sing down to the basement notes and then up to the highest notes our voices can create. Doing this recently in an audition, I was very nervous and I could hear how my nerves could be heard as a slightly scratchy sound in my voice. The more this strange scratchy sound showed up, the more nervous I became, and then the scratchy sound showed up more... on and on went the vicious cycle.

“Knowing how to breathe low and slow, I took an extra long breath

between keys and in my mind I could see myself throwing the nervousness off my body—because the low and slow breath is associated with calm in my mind and *in my body*; it was like pressing the reset button. The slightly scratchy sound disappeared, the warmth came back, and my shoulders relaxed. It had been well worth the breathing practice to handle my nerves in an important audition and to stay focused on the task at hand.”

The benefits of low, slow breathing are not just for singers. String players face so many of the same situations that it makes sense to employ similar strategies to keep ourselves mentally and physically ready to play. Try a few of these strategies as an experiment to see how it affects your work with students. I hope you will find it as useful as I did.

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