



CHAMBER MUSIC

BREATHING...It's Not Just For Staying Alive!

by Tom Rosenberg

Learning to breathe is just about the very first thing every human does. It may take a little assistance, but within moments of being born, our body learns to breathe. We breathe because we have to. Breathing gives our bodies the oxygen it needs to function, and fills our lungs with air that we can exhale to create volume and inflection when speaking or singing. We breathe non-stop for our entire lives. Then, breathing is one of the very last things our body does before dying.

Breathing is such a natural part of our existence, that most of the time, we are not thinking about it.

And yet, oddly enough, it is one of the things many string players struggle mightily to learn how to do. Unlike singers and players of wind instruments, it is physically possible to play a string instrument and other instruments such as the piano without taking special breaths that are dictated by the music. String players and pianists can still make sound, articulate, change dynamics etc. without changing the way they breathe. But because playing a string instrument that way is possible, breathing that helps the music come alive is often neglected for too long as young players develop.

The inability to know how to breathe musically is a large part of what makes youth and amateur orchestras and chamber music groups seem awkward, and often a huge reason ensemble is imprecise. Additionally, because of non-musical breathing, entrances after rests are in the wrong place or on the wrong beat, and the musical mood is not conveyed from one player to another or to the audience. Giving and receiving good cues is also deeply tied to good musical breathing.

One of the most important elements to being a good ensemble player is breathing musically. Teaching it to an inexperienced group is really important, and often somewhat challenging.

Unfortunately, it is rarely discussed in orchestra rehearsals, and time cannot be spent with each individual player to work on it. Less experienced string players need to learn to breathe with the conductor, or the section leaders, but might never really learn to do so. But, it can and in my opinion needs to be discussed and worked on with each member of a chamber music ensemble.

Here are some ways to work on this. These exercises can work well both for individual players and the group together. Using a metronome to keep the beat steady and accurate is a good idea!

Exercise #1:

Using the notes of a scale and in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, everyone breathes together on one, plays a strong down-bow on 2, breathes together on 3 and plays a strong down bow on 4. | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | For added musical interest that can improve group intonation, have different members of the group start on different notes of the home key triad (i.e., C, E and G in C major) and vibrate strongly on each note of the scale, creating a beautiful and different chord that is attacked together and is in tune!

Exercise #2:

Similar to #1. But this time, everyone breathes together on the downbeat (which is an eighth rest), and plays eighth-notes for the rest of the measure. | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | Then breathe together on 1 and 3 with three eighth-notes following each breath. | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ |

Exercise #3:

Pass ON-The-Beat quarter-notes and eighth-notes around the group. Start with one quarter-note passing from player to player around the group. Each player in turn breathes on 4 and plays on 1. ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | Next, progress to a quarter-note being played on every other beat. That would mean one player breathing on beat 4 and the next on beat 2, the next on beat 4, etc. etc. ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | Then repeat this exercise with each player playing 2 eighth-notes on each beat. ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ |

Exercise #4:

Pass OFF-the beat eighth-notes around the group. The first player breathes on 1 and plays an eighth-note on the and-of-1 and on 2. | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | The next player breathes on 3 and plays an eighth-note on the and-of-3 and on 4. | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | Then the other players continue the pattern as it travels around the group. | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ |

One of the great things about doing these breathing exercises is that soon, the players begin to realize that a rest is most often not a place to rest! As I have written in a previous article, a rest is usually a very Active Unit of Silence, or also known to my students as an AUS! In a coaching, try using the word “breathe!!” whenever there is a rest that should be a preparation. It often works!

Another tool that often gets results is a brief video, these days easily made in a coaching on a phone.

Students are often surprised at how little they are breathing and moving when cueing.

Here are a few excellent examples from the repertoire where the right kind of musical breathing makes a huge difference:

Schubert, Quartet in D minor, “Death and the Maiden” 1st movement, opening bars.

This is fairly straight forward, as the entire quartet breathes together. However, to give a feeling of intensity, the first two breaths are very strong on the 4th beats, and the next three breaths are more gentle and on the 3rd beat.



**Haydn, Quartet in D minor, Opus 76 #2, “Quinten”,
1st movement, measures 122-126.**

This is another example of the entire group needing to breathe together and in the same manner, but is not quite as obvious as the Beethoven.

As the group releases the fermata note, they breathe together on the 4th beat. This gets the cascading and syncopated passage going. Then an energetic and sharp breath together on the 4th beat of measure 125 will restore the proper sense of pulse that Haydn has tried to destroy in measures 123-125.



**Beethoven, String Quartet in c minor, Opus 18 #4,
1st movement, measure 149.**

This is the famous call and response between the lower three instruments and the first violin.

In this example, the first violin breathes at a different time than the rest of the group. The first violin breathes on beat 3, while the rest of the quartet breathes on 4. All the breaths are strong and aggressive!



**Dvorak, Quartet in F major, Opus 96 “American”,
1st movement, opening 4 measures.**

The opening of this quartet not only feels wrong to the audience if proper breathing and cueing are missing, the players also might be unsure where the pulse is and come in wrong! But, if each player in turn breathes on the correct beat, it usually works perfectly.

The first violin breathes on the first beat (which is an eighth-note rest). The second violin breathes on the third beat (which is an eighth-note rest). The cello breathes on the fourth beat (which is an eighth-note rest). The viola then breathes on the fourth beat of measure two and plays that famous melody that starts on the down beat of the third measure.



Of course, there are countless other examples and ways to work on this issue which is so important and so often taught too late. Try some of these and find examples in the music your students are playing. Never stop breathing!

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