

Simply Breathe

Having a basic understanding of how the body breathes can greatly enhance the way a flautist organises his/her breathing. Oddly enough, many flautists don't know how their bodies breathe. One fundamental principal needs to be comprehended to develop relaxed, effective breathing.

A common misconception is that when we inhale our body gets bigger because of the air filling us up. It is in fact the other way around. Our bodies get bigger and draw the air in. Much in the same way as a set of bellows draws air into the nozzle as the user pulls the handles apart.

To put in simply, a flautist needs to get bigger to inhale and get smaller to exhale.

'our bodies expand therefore we fill up with air'

There are four main areas of the body that expand to draw air into the lungs. The ribs, diaphragm, abdominal wall and pelvic floor. Lets look at them in turn.

Place your right hand under your left arm and spread your fingers across your ribs. Now inhale and feel the excursion of the ribs as you inhale. The ribs swing outwards and upwards as you inhale, causing the size of the chest cavity to increase. The action of the ribs is much like the handle of a bucket if the bucket is held sideways. Try grabbing just one rib and feeling how it travels when you inhale and exhale.

The diaphragm is a dome shape and separates your chest cavity from your abdominal cavity. It is the bottom part of the chest cavity and the front edge of the dome sits higher at the front than at the back. As you inhale the dome shape flattens out slightly increasing the size of the chest cavity in the downward direction. As you exhale the diaphragm returns to it's domed shape. It is not possible to voluntarily control your diaphragm; you can only think 'inhale' and then the diaphragm will do it's job. If you tuck your fingers in under your bottom ribs at the front and inhale you can feel the muscles stretching your diaphragm out a little.

As your diaphragm expands downwards all your gizzards below start to get squashed. This is where the abdominal wall comes into play by expanding and making a bit more room for your gizzards to get out of the way of your descending diaphragm. Your abdominal wall is primarily what we call your stomach muscles or where you wish your six pack was. Place your hands flat onto your stomach and inhale. If you are breathing well for flute playing, your stomach will expand. Dig your fingers into your waist line and inhale. Your waistline should also expand sideways. Place your hands on your lower back, either side of your spine, and with an effective breath you will feel some outward expansion there too.

At this point some of you may well be saying 'but my stomach goes in when I breath in'. This unfortunately means that your breathing is not optimal for flute playing. Your breath is probably quite high in your body; known as a clavicular breath because it is focused up around the clavicle or collar bones. With some self exploration and practice you will learn how to optimise your breathing by allowing your abdominal wall to expand as you breath in; an abdominal breath.

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Finally we get to the pelvic floor. The pelvic floor is the group of muscles that sit in your pelvis and form the base of your torso, supporting everything above them. In German the pelvis is 'das becken' which means 'the basin'. Think of your pelvic floor as a basin made of muscle stopping all your innards from spilling out onto the floor! As your innards are squashed downwards by the movement of the diaphragm these pelvic floor muscles also give a little to allow for more expansion of your body.

It's tricky to experience your pelvic floor moving but if you place your hands on your hips and inhale, you can get a sense of the muscles within your pelvis relaxing. You can sense your 'downstairs' muscles giving slightly. Almost a sense of expanding into the tops of your legs.

So putting it all together, your ribs expand sideways and upwards, your diaphragm descends downwards, your abdominal wall expands outwards and your pelvic floor relaxes and descends as you inhale. Your body breathes from the top downwards but really it is a combined action of the ribs, diaphragm, abdominal wall and pelvic floor designed to expand your body, creating a negative pressure in your chest cavity and drawing air into your lungs.

As flautists, the more we can relax when we need to inhale and let our miraculous bodies do the job they are so good at doing, the better our air intake will be.

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