



## Musical Musings: Circular Breathing

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**T**he promise of an unlimited breath support might sound as unattainable as the Holy Grail or unrealistic as a perpetual motion machine. Yet there is a technique, long employed by glass blowers, that offers a continuous stream of air. Circular breathing, sometimes termed “sniff breathing,” enables a performer to sustain phrases or notes of very long duration well beyond the lung capacity of any musician. This is a technique that could be useful to you and is well worth the effort to master.

The process of circular breathing can be broken into four steps. Each step needs to be mastered before you can progress to the next:

1) Inflate the cheeks. It is very important that the embouchure surrounding the reed remain undisturbed. The cheeks should be allowed to relax and inflate while leaving the embouchure in place. Practice this first step by inflating and deflating your cheeks while sustaining a note. Experiment with different pitches; maintain pitch stability on all pitches.

2) Play a tone only with air from the cheeks. For this step start a note, inflate the cheeks and then stop the air from the lungs but continue the note with the air from the cheeks. The air from your cheeks will only sustain the tone for a brief time.

3) Breath in through your nose while sustaining a note with the air from your cheeks. At first you will not be able to sustain the tone for the duration of your breath. Gradually work to take a quick breath that is only the length of the note you can sustain with air from your cheeks.

4) Re-engage the air from your lungs. This final step is difficult to master without a breath accent or other noticeable change occurring.

Initially circular breathing may be practiced with a narrow straw and a cup of water. At first squeeze the straw so that very little air escapes. Blowing into a glass of water will allow one to observe the stream of air. Bassoonists can practice circular breathing on a bassoon bocal by sealing off the large end with a finger and blowing through the reed end of the bocal. Only a little stream of air will escape from the whisper key hole. Placing a finger above the whisper keyhole will allow one to tell if there is a steady stream of air. One you have mastered the straw or bocal then circular breathing on your instrument.

As you experiment with circular breathing you will discover that certain registers lend themselves easily and others are difficult. The more air needed to sustain a tone the more difficult it is to circular breathe on the note. Oboists will find it easier to circular breathe than bassoonists. Bassoonists will find it easier to circular breathe in the upper register than the lower register.

Circular breathing lends itself best to passages with moving notes. Re-engaging the air (step 4) during a note change helps to hide any breath accent. Although I could use circular breathing frequently I find that musicality still demands breaths in the music. These breaths are an important part of phrasing and signaling musical groupings to the listener.

One thing I have not yet mastered is tonguing while circular breathing. Perhaps a reader has done this. Please let us know if this is successful.

