

Circular Breathing
a Method
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Circular breathing is a technique that allows the wind instrumentalist to maintain sound for long periods of time by inhaling through the nose while maintaining air flow through the instrument, using the cheeks as "bellows". The procedure involves four distinct stages:

1. As the performer runs low on air, the cheeks are puffed.
2. Air from the cheeks is pushed with the cheek muscles and tongue through the instrument and used to maintain the sound while the performer inhales through the nose.
3. As the air decreases in the cheeks and sufficient air is brought into the lungs through the nose, the performer "switches" back to air in the lungs.
4. The cheeks are brought back to their normal embouchure position.

The process of "switching" from air in the lungs to air in the cheeks and back again is circular breathing. There are many methods to teach this "feeling". The following is one method used to learn this technique as well as several exercises that I feel particularly helpful. As in any new technique, circular breathing must be practiced on a **daily basis** for success. In addition, it is very important to begin work with the instrument in the mouth as soon as possible during study. Exercises are important, but are not helpful if the student cannot achieve the desired result with the instrument.

Preliminary study is done in 8 steps:

1. Puff the cheeks and breath normally with the cheeks extended. This will help get the "feel" of breathing with the cheeks extended.
2. Puff the cheeks and create a small aperture in the lips and let air escape through the lips while inhaling and exhaling normally through the nose. By controlling the muscles in the cheeks, try to maintain an air stream for three to five seconds.
3. Place a straw in a glass of water and repeat step two with the straw in the water. Sufficient air and air pressure should be used to force air from the straw to create bubbles in the water. This step should be repeated many times until the process feels somewhat natural.
4. While the air is being forced from the cheeks, inhale quickly and deeply through the nose. While the cheeks are still slightly puffed, begin to

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exhale through the mouth and empty the lungs. Try to keep the air stream and bubbles as constant and even as possible. Repeat several times.

5. Repeat step four but do not empty the lungs. As the lungs begin to empty again puff the cheeks. While the air is being forced from the cheeks, inhale quickly and deeply through the nose. After a small amount of air has been inhaled, "switch back" to air used from the lungs. Repeat several times. This is the process that is used while circular breathing.
6. Place only the mouthpiece and barrel into the mouth. Practice holding a pitch as steady as possible by alternating a normal embouchure with an embouchure with the cheeks puffed. One will notice the firmness necessary in the corners of the mouth and support needed from the upper lip area.
7. Repeat steps **four** and **five** with the mouthpiece and barrel **only** inserted in the mouth. The student is likely to squeak quite a bit during these first few attempts. The student will also probably notice a "bump" in the sound while changing from the sound produced by the air in the cheeks to the sound produced by the air in the lungs. This is natural. Exercises later will be used to try to eliminate or smooth this bump as much as possible for each individual.
8. The remainder instrument should now be added. It is important to begin using the entire clarinet as soon as possible. The result will not be as smooth a sound as might be expected, but it is important to "become accustomed" to the resistance offered by the clarinet as soon as possible. The student should not be as concerned with getting a great sound as long as one that is usable is attained.

The following exercises prove very useful in beginning circular breathing study. It is important to remember that this technique **does** take time to develop. Most performers take several months of study prior to any public performance attempt.

The most workable register is the upper chalumeau. It is also easier to mask the bump in the sound if you breath during passages of moving notes. See examples 1-3. The student is encouraged to compose other similar exercises.

The upper clarion register is the most difficult for circular breathing. Motion of the soft tissue in the mouth and throat that is involved during inhalation through the nose causes a scoop in the pitch that is very difficult to control. During the early stages of study, **G** on the top of the staff is the upper limit for successful circular breathing. Articulation is also difficult while circular breathing and should not be attempted until the student is very comfortable slurring.

Music Examples

Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

Continue to.....