

Circular (or continuous) breathing is a technique many musicians use around the world, achieved when one breathes while playing, allowing performers to sustain a pitch as long as they wish. In western classical music performance it is still relatively new and not widely used or understood, but in the performance of various traditional wind instruments circular breathing has been used for quite some time. Some instruments that utilize circular breathing are the Bulgarian flute “kaval” (a long straight flute of the Balkans constructed of cane and wood), the “narh” of the Indian province of Rajasthan, the “didgeridoo” of the Australian aborigines and here in Italy, circular breathing is used to play the “launddes” from Sardinia, which is a type of double-reed bagpipe.

The opportunity to use this technique is evident primarily in music written since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when composers began using longer phrases with the intent of obtaining particular timbral effects and colors. Performers consequently had greater demands placed on them and hence needed to find a solution to execute properly these timbral effects and colors found in the repertoire. Those who don’t know this technique may disregard it as useless or have doubts about it. Circular breathing can give a performer a sense of personal satisfaction because every phrase is within their reach, no matter the length.

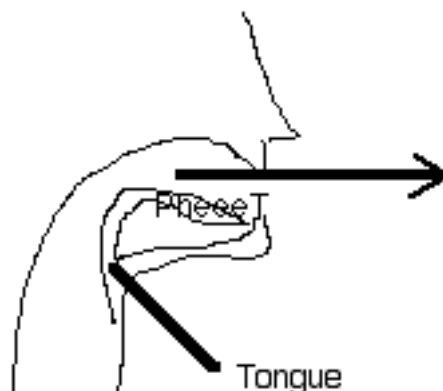
String instrumentalists and pianists are more able to see phrases in their entirety because they do not have to concern themselves with breathing. The technique of circular breathing looks to this kind of uninterrupted sustained sound of the strings and piano and aims to achieve the same result.

This article isn’t a definitive discussion on circular breathing, though it does include essentials that are useful as an introduction to the subject. Mastering this technique demands total comprehension, guided study and a good dose of will and determination.

The musicians who know circular breathing and use it today are numerous, but for most of them it is a kind of guarded secret to keep to oneself, or at the most it is passed from teacher to student. Often there is some anxiety about teaching it because the teacher wishes to remain the only one that uses it, or there can be difficulty knowing how to teach it.

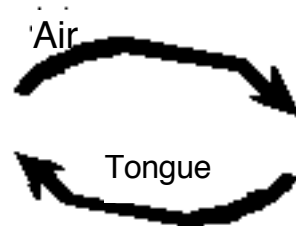
When you are a student of a great teacher it is not typical to question what is taught. As a student of Gallois I was expected to learn circular breathing. I do remember having some scepticism about learning circular breathing at the beginning, but I also had enough curiosity and desire to learn a “secret” of Gallois and thus became committed to learning the technique that gave him the ability to phrase in ways I thought were impossible. Since I am not a passive learner I devoted myself to understand fully the essence of circular breathing, and, consequently, I was able to master it.

The tongue for a wind player represents articulation. Normally wind players use the tongue without really knowing its true potential. It is true that the tongue creates articulation but the tongue can also create sound because various muscles collaborate together. How does one create sound in this way? In regular articulation, the simple staccato or “T” is used, with the tongue between the teeth and then pulled back afterwards with a fast motion. In circular breathing, the tongue pushes the air and this pushing of air produces sound. Think of the motion of the air that occurs inside a syringe, for example, with the air pushing out the bottom. But here is a question: how does the tongue push air out? The answer is all in the onomatopoeic word “Pheet”!



“Pheet” is a movement! In fact, if we pronounce this word we realize that the tongue begins its movement from the base of the throat and at the end of the word we find the tongue in the same position as the simple staccato or “T”. The secret to circular breathing, then, is in the use of the tongue. Once one understands this, then the student, through diligent practice and study, can come to quite satisfactory results.

The biggest obstacle to achieving results with circular breathing is in our mind. Why? The answer is simple: it is very tiring for us to conceptualize two counter-opposing actions at the same time.



The tongue goes out and the air enters the nose! A simple exercise: Play four short notes and breathe with the nose in between each note without producing sound on the last note.

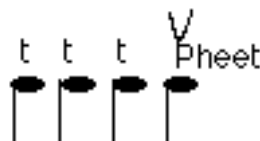


Being able to do circular breathing will come sooner if you get used to doing this step.

The breath with the nose should be short; in fact it should be as short as possible!

Another essential step is synchronizing the “Pheet” and the breath, which takes much time, concentration and patience. When doing this exercise it is advisable to use a simple articulation (T) and to do everything very slowly using only a single note. Personal experimentation is always useful and will bring a qualitative improvement.

The second exercise is the superimposition of the two actions: breathing with the nose and “Pheet”.



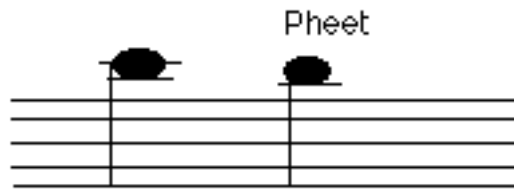
Probably at this point, nine out of ten people will be disappointed, angry or just perplexed. Many will ask if they are doing the technique correct. Like I was saying at a theoretical level it is all very simple. At the practical level one needs to spend some time. Never give up! This is the secret to achieving everything.

Those of you who at this point are able to make a sound while breathing in with the nose should know that you are getting closer to understanding circular breathing, although there is still work ahead.

How do we go about playing a longer note while we breathe in with the nose? As mentioned previously everything is connected to the tongue. The amount of air pushed out should increase when the tongue travels a longer distance. If this movement of the tongue (which should start in the throat) is done with less speed but with the same force, the “Pheet” should become longer and transforms into a sort of whistle that sounds like a “Pheee”. Don’t panic if the sound is terrible, if there is no sound at all, or if it seems you have Aeolus in your mouth!

It’s all normal and logical.

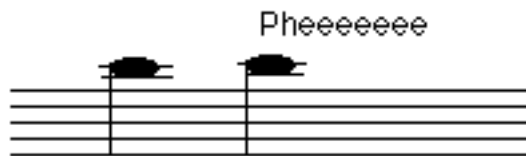
If the “Pheet” or “Pheee” somehow works, you can try to breathe on two notes of different pitches putting the “Pheee” attack on the second note.



At this point if you are able to obtain a result you are on your way to learning circular breathing. Don't expect to learn the technique in two days, at least not in practical form. Now the last step: try to circular breathe on a long note. When doing the simple articulation or T, the tongue moves backwards in the mouth. On the other hand when using "Pheet" the tongue moves forward and on the end of the "Pheet" sound the tongue remains forward in the mouth, which is the embryonic form of circular breathing. Now the "Pheet" should gradually lose all the force of the final T without losing the final push of air. This is achieved with constant study and with a progressive lowering of the tongue which allows the air to flow out more during the second half of the "Pheet" sound.

Writing and describing about the technique of circular breathing is not easy and therefore I look to the good will and the searching spirit of the reader for a more correct comprehension.

When you want to use circular breathing while playing a long note, you will notice at first that the sound will become constantly weaker until it disappears (at the end of the "Pheet"), and then after the sound will reappear. In order to avoid or limit this, I suggest that you play two notes of the same pitch and whenever you want to breathe use a very soft and fast "Pheet" (in this way the "Pheet" transforms into a "Wheee").



Remember to concentrate and to decide in advance where and how to use the "Pheet", thinking about how it fits in the context of the music, and, above all, try to anticipate the "Pheet" as much as possible so you can limit any break that occurs in the sound.

Unfortunately, as time and space are limited, it is my hope that these little suggestions can help those readers who want to understand circular breathing. I extend my apologies to the elect for trying to explain (maybe without success) THEIR secret.

Stefano Parrino 

*Translated from the Italian by Laura Lentz and Pier Giuseppe Albano*