



***CIRCULAR BREATHING***  
***FOR THE***  
***FLUTIST***

***ROBERT DICK***



**CIRCULAR  
BREATHING  
FOR THE  
FLUTIST**

*ROBERT DICK*

Credits:

cover/title page: Sharon Gold

design/paste-up: Lois V Vierk

music copyist: Randa Kirshbaum

photography: Peter Serling

typesetting: Kathy Duncan

© 1987 by Robert Dick

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-60128

ISBN 0-939407-01-9

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	5
Chapter I: Preliminary Observations and Basics of the Technique .....	9
Chapter II: Intermediate Phases .....	26
Chapter III: Circular Breathing in Orchestral, Recital and Concerto Repertoire .....	35
Chapter IV: Advanced Technique — Circular Breathing in Articulations and Extended Techniques .....	46
AFTERWORD .....	51

## INTRODUCTION

Circular breathing makes it possible to play the flute (or other wind instrument) continuously while inhaling. This seeming contradiction—exhaling to play while inhaling to breathe—is accomplished by storing air in the mouth and cheeks and using this air to play while inhaling through the nose. While this is considered a radically new development in Western classical music, circular breathing is an age-old technique and is the standard method of breathing for the flute in several parts of the world, including the Bulgarian *kaval* and the *narh* flutes of the Indian province of Rajasthan. Glass blowers use circular breathing to maintain continuous air pressure inside molten glass as it is being formed. Circular breathing is found in many ethnic musics, in jazz, the avant-garde and, quite often, in the orchestra. Tubaists have long used circular breathing without fanfare, as have the occasional single and double reed player. Why is the player of the Boehm flute so rarely able to circular breathe? The answers to this question lie in the realms of acoustics and pedagogy. Of all the wind instruments, including the lower brass, the flute uses the most air under the lowest pressure. Since circular breathing is made easier by playing an instrument that uses little air and provides back-pressure, (the oboe being ideal in this way), the flute is problematic. Further, the flute has no mouthpiece to support the lips and no reed to hold to help keep the embouchure shaped correctly while the cheeks are in motion. In trying to learn circular breathing, many have overestimated the importance of the coordinations involved, and focused practice on the coordinations instead of the embouchure development needed. This should be done first, and *then* the coordinations should be applied.

While all the above may seem daunting, circular breathing by no means is an exotic technique limited to the exceptional few. This book presents in detail the learning and practice methods that should enable every flutist to master circular breathing and to apply it in any repertoire. In researching the flute traditions that use circular breathing, I listened to a recording of players from Rajasthan. On first hearing of one of the pieces, I marvelled at the precision, including perfectly matched vibrati, of what I thought was a duo. Upon looking at the photos in the record jacket, I found that the “duo” was one flutist playing two end-blown flutes and circular breathing beautifully on both at once! Suddenly, the Boehm flute just didn’t seem that hard any more. The flutist wasn’t a professional either, but a shepherd.

For the player of the Boehm flute, circular breathing has musical applications in several spheres. Firstly, it makes possible performance of pieces designed to have phrase lengths longer than the normal breath length. As a composer, I find this freedom invaluable; as a performer, it is indispensable. In traditional classical repertoire, circular breathing can be used in many musically valid ways. The

orchestral repertoire is full of famous solos that have very long phrases, phrases that were originally meant to have been played in smaller orchestras, smaller concert halls and on flutes with smaller embouchure holes and correspondingly smaller sounds. With circular breathing, these phrases can be played with a full dynamic range and with freedom from the physical and emotional sense of peril that often occurs. In our solo literature, many similar situations arise. One has only to look at the Bach *Sonatas* for a wide selection of phrases that are just a few beats longer than can be freely accommodated with a normal breath. While the flute and violin were considered interchangeable in the Baroque period, many composers, particularly J.S. Bach, seemed to treat the flute as if it were a wind-powered violin, capable of virtually uninterrupted sound. In these musical situations, the flutist traditionally has had to look for a secondary spot in which to breathe, *and sometimes this secondary spot just doesn't feel right musically*—or, the flutist must face the reality of cutting down on the dynamics at some point in the phrase, going into “air saving mode” in order to get to the musically right place for the breath. Circular breathing will make it possible to place the regular breath in the musically optimal place without having to sacrifice dynamics or expression. The *traverso* does, of course, use less air than its modern counterpart, and much of the problem the current-day flutist encounters in the length of Baroque phrases is due to the change of instrument as well as purely musical issues.

The Boehm flute as interpreted by modern flutemakers features a marvelous array of sound colors and dynamics, but, compared to its nineteenth century forerunners, requires a good deal more air. Playing some of the late nineteenth century *bravura* repertoire on a flute of that period is a revelation; the phrases and air use match perfectly! Playing the same repertoire on a recent flute allows more power, but suddenly some phrases that were comfortable on the older instrument now seem too long. Once again, circular breathing is the technique that provides the freedom for musical answers to musical problems of this type.

In all aspects of our lives as human beings and as flutists, we find ourselves in an environment where the pace of change is accelerating. It is sensible to look ahead and to do our best to prepare for the future. The flute sound of the future will be yet more powerful and colorful, and more capable of projection with presence. Flutists will find themselves needing to answer technical demands of increasing orders of magnitude. Opportunities for flutists to perform as recitalists and concerto soloists will continue to expand, with the concurrent need to project to listeners who have become increasingly acclimated to the presence of recordings, and expect the live sound to match the expectations set up by recordings made with close microphone placements. In addressing these challenges, flutists who can circular breathe will find themselves with a distinct technical advantage over those who cannot.

I learned circular breathing from Aurèle Nicolet. In 1978, I had the honor of lecturing to his class in Freiburg, Germany. Afterwards, I asked about circular breathing. Nicolet uses this technique for the endless streams of sixteenth notes in the Bach *Cantatas* and in other classical repertoire. After a brief explanation of the mechanics, he asked me if I felt I understood the process. My reply being affirmative, he smiled and said “Good. It’s yours for the doing, *if you do it*”. My contribution has been to develop the step-by-step learning process. Circular breathing can now be yours for the doing. It’s well worth the effort.

Before moving on into the technique itself, I’d like to add a word about the style of writing I’ve chosen for this work. Usually, I have an intense dislike of repetition and seek to avoid it. In this book, however, I shall be functioning as teacher and coach, and therefore include the reminders that were found useful both in learning and teaching circular breathing. I have tried to be helpful without being overbearing, and, should you find the occasional line redundant, I am counting on your good graces.

## CHAPTER I

### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND BASICS OF THE TECHNIQUE

Learning circular breathing is approached on two levels. The first is to develop the embouchure so that a high quality of tone can be produced while the cheeks and corners of the mouth are moving; the second aspect is to learn the coordinations involved. The learning process of circular breathing is unlike that encountered in acquiring other techniques: it really is not hard to do, yet takes time. This is not paradoxical, it's just that a good deal of the embouchure work takes place as the lip muscles themselves are developed, and this cannot be rushed. Learning involves a commitment of approximately two years in which circular breathing must be practiced daily for ten to fifteen minutes. The two-year span is from day one until circular breathing can be used artistically, beautifully and freely. Circular breathing will gradually become usable in performance long before the two years have passed. I first used circular breathing in public in a limited way, but did so about four months after I began to practice it. The practicing of circular breathing must continue whether or not it is felt that clear progress is being made. There are plateaus in the learning process, and these occur when the focus of development, once again, is in the lip musculature. Further, the embouchure development that begins when practice is started will disappear if you decide to stop working on circular breathing "for a while". Keeping up the practice is the only route to accomplishment. Thus, before starting, several key decisions must be made. Bearing in mind that a two-year effort is not out of proportion to the musical benefits that circular breathing yields for the rest of one's flute playing career, it is vital to decide:

1. To practice circular breathing daily for ten to fifteen minutes, and to give this practice priority, so that it is not missed.
2. Not to be discouraged when—especially in the early going—it may sound (while working on circular breathing) almost as if you have never played before. All of us, quite naturally, have strong emotional links to our sound, and it is difficult to surrender this identity even if only for a short time daily. Have the strength and good humor to recall the joys of being a beginner, especially the excitement of discovery. As soon as daily practice of circular breathing is done, "identity" can instantly be restored.
3. To keep working on circular breathing even if no apparent progress is being made. Only those who give up fail to cross the plateaus in learning this technique. It can be hard to continue without the gratification of clear progress, but remember that when progress is not apparent, the lips are developing as long as the work is kept up.

## AFTERWORD

Whatever level we may be at as musicians—student or professional—we all should take the time to dream of where we would like to go in our playing, changes in sound, development of technique, pieces to learn and/or ambitions to realize. Thinking about the next days and weeks or the next decade, the important thing is to release the imagination, visualize goals, and harness the discipline, self-belief and drive needed to pursue our dreams. If I have been effective in getting one point across, I shall feel the efforts of creating the learning method and writing this book will have been well worth the time and energy spent, and that point is: the farthest flights of imagination *can be accomplished!*