

Keith Underwood (Part 2): On Breathing, and the Problem With Thinking of Air as the Solution to Everything.

Description

Even as a young child, I remember my very thoughtful and forward-thinking violin teacher encouraging me to learn as much from singers as I could.

I think she meant for me to listen and watch recordings, but for a time, I actually took voice lessons. That said, my only aspiration vocally was to be able to sing [The Chipmunks Christmas song](#), so my enthusiasm waned pretty quickly once I found out that I wasn't going to learn how to sing like the Chipmunks...

And then there was opera...

My parents also tried to get me interested in opera, but that did not spark much joy in 12-year-old me. All I remember is how long the productions felt...especially the ones where there were no subtitles (I'm guessing that's not the correct term for the translations that were projected above the stage, but I assume you know what I'm talking about. ?)

I think the idea was to learn from singers' breathing and phrasing. But I don't think I really grasped what I should be listening for, or how to incorporate any of this into my playing.

How to breathe...?

Because anytime I thought about breathing, my breathing would become forced and unnatural. And if I tried to think about breathing *while* playing, not only would I suddenly forget how to breathe like a normal person, but my arms and fingers would start to get all jumbled up and forget how to do their job too.

Fortunately, breathing isn't critical to playing the violin. But for wind players, breathing is of course rather essential (err...duh, Captain Obvious ?).

Yet as automatic and natural a thing as breathing is, it can be a real challenge to do it in the most efficient and effective way, especially as it relates to producing a beautifully resonant sound, articulation, phrasing, etc.

A continuation of last week's chat

In last week's chat with flutist Keith Underwood (you can [check it out here](#) if you missed it), we talked a lot

about the art of imitation, and how to improve one's playing by "stealing" secrets that we can glean from observing other musicians.

We got so into this topic, that we didn't even talk about breathing, which is one of the things that Keith is most known for! So in this week's episode, we do a deeper dive into the art of breathing.

Today's chat is definitely more flute-y and wind-centric, but I found it to be pretty fascinating even as a string player. And in the spirit of learning how to be a more attentive observer of subtle details and nuances and learning from *all* musicians, I hope you'll enjoy today's episode no matter what instrument you play, and benefit from the various takeaways and principles that can be translated and applied to your own practice and performing!

IMPORTANT NOTE: *In this episode, Keith does quite a bit of demonstrating on the flute, and used a lot of physical gestures to explain or illustrate various concepts. It's one of those situations where a picture is worth a thousand words, because many of the ideas Keith shares are difficult to communicate through words or audio alone. And I think you do lose quite a bit without the visuals to go along with the explanation.*

We hadn't planned on sharing video (so I have my glasses on, a favorite old hoodie, and a few days worth of stubble), but fortunately we do have it available, so if at all possible, I'd strongly encourage you to watch the video version of the episode below, even though the audio and transcript are also available below.

In this episode we'll explore...

- 7:40 – What flutists can learn about breathing and effective, efficient use of air from playing baroque flutes. And how producing a great sound isn't about replacing the air that's already in the flute, but getting that air to vibrate.
- 12:33 – Why Keith doesn't love the word "support," why he likes to think of the flute as being more a "compression" instrument than a wind instrument, and why he likes the word "suspension."
- 14:11 – Keith describes what he sees and hears in one of his favorite videos of a flute player on YouTube. Which takes place on The Muppet Show, believe it or not. =)
- 17:22 – The problem with focusing too much on support in the belly or diaphragm area, and how this can create unhelpful tension. And how imagining one's lungs extending above one's head can help facilitate an easier and more effortless breath that stays "fresh."
- 22:59 – Thinking about breathing like bowing a string instrument, and "retaking" the bow with your breath, to better communicate the character of the music.
- 24:24 – The problem with trying to use too much air to play loud, and how the goal is really to play "on the breath, not with the breath." Which Keith explains alongside extensive before/after demonstrations on the flute (this is where the video will help convey these concepts more clearly than the audio alone).
- 36:40 – The problem with "good posture" and how this negatively affects sound production.
- 40:43 – An example of the sort of exercise Keith created for himself just by observing Jean-Pierre Rampal play a bunch of times (on how to play with less hesitation).
- 45:36 – The choreography of Keith's hands, and the idea of a more fluid and less static approach to

the flute.

- 47:12 – Using the flute to change your embouchure rather than controlling your embouchure with your lips.
- 48:10 – How it all comes back to observing more keenly what others are doing, and experimenting with and testing these observations out, to see what comes of them, and if they help to make our playing more easy, more effortless, and more beautiful.

Notes

14:11 – Here's that Jean-Pierre Rampal performance on The Muppet Show that Keith mentioned:

[Jean-Pierre Rampal - The Little Shepherd](#)

More insights from Keith

There are lots of interviews and master classes with Keith online, but below are two videos that I enjoyed, with particularly relevant insights for flutists and other wind/brass players, but non-flutists like Glenn Gould also come up, so I think you'll find that there are principles that are applicable to other instruments as well. And if nothing else, it'll increase your appreciation and empathy for the unique challenges that your flute colleagues face, which can be a really good thing too. ?

- [Keith Underwood - Flute Perspectives & Exercises - Part 1 \(more conceptual\)](#)
- [Keith Underwood - Flute Perspectives & Exercises - Part 2 \(more specific and applied\)](#)

Where to find Keith

You can contact Keith via his [Mannes](#) or [NYU](#) faculty pages. And also find him via [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

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