

Linda Yeo

Breathing and Articulation Masterclass Overview

Before we can talk about articulation, I feel it necessary to talk about breathing. The beginning of every phrase has a breath occur before it, and how you breathe determines much of how you play the note/notes after the breath. As my father, Douglas Yeo, and his teacher, Edward Kleinhammer, say in their book, *Mastering the Trombone* (EMKO Publications), “Breathing is a NATURAL process that our body accomplishes thousands of times each day with little or no thought on our part. Believing (as I do) that all natural body functions are pleasurable, breathing while playing the trombone should also be a relaxed, comfortable and pleasurable activity. Unfortunately, many players take the beautifully natural process of breathing and, when playing the trombone, become tense and tight as they engage in a very unnatural, over-affected kind of breathing process that really has little to do with proper breathing at all” (page 13).

When we breathe, we have to remember to keep an open throat and to keep our tongue out of the way. We should breathe rather like we yawn- open lips, open throat, no tongue in the way. Remember that your tongue is much larger than the part that you see when you make a funny face and “stick out your tongue” - it goes way back into your throat. The part in your tongue that you can see is just the tip of the iceberg. Make sure that your tongue is out of the way all the way down your throat as well as in your mouth. Let’s practice just that.

Also, make sure that you get a good breath at the very beginning of a piece and during extended rests. Don’t put off breathing until the very last second. I often find myself breathing for 2 or 3 beats before a piece starts, and then making sure that I breathe along with my conductor as he gives the preparatory beats. This way I can begin a piece on the right foot.

Think open throat “Tooh” when you articulate a non-slurred note. And when you’re slurring, you can think either “Dooh” or “Nooh”. These syllables are only helpful if you get the sound that the conductor wants from your instrument at that moment.

When you play a staccato (short) note, make sure that your tongue is only involved with the beginning of the note, and not with stopping the note. We don’t want any “Tut” staccato notes. Just simply send short bursts of air towards the note and allow your air to stop naturally.

Make sure that you don’t scoop into notes, or die off at the end of notes. Football is a sport, not a good shape for a note. We want our notes to be similar to bricks in shape: the same at the beginning, middle, and end. Of course there are dynamic contrasts in pieces, and crescendos and decrescendos need to happen, but then we are shaping phrases not individual notes.

I would encourage you to record yourself at some point in the next few weeks. It doesn’t need to be a high tech kind of recording, but a simple short excerpt from an etude or a piece you’re working on for band will do. Then REALLY listen to it. Listen to how you started notes, how you ended notes, how evenly you got louder or softer. Listen to tone quality and consistency in tempo. Congratulate yourself on the things you did well, but get down to business correcting the things you did not do well.