

## The Sound Comes Off the Top of the Breath

*This is something Mr. Adam said to me many times over my 8 years of full time study with him at Indiana University, and in the many years after that when I would go to visit him. I mentioned this notion on the Bill Adam Facebook page, and noted that his words of wisdom might mean different things to different people. So what follows is my take on the meaning of that phrase, and how I try to employ that in my own playing and as I try to convey it to my students in my own teaching. Implicit here is that I have taken what he taught me and put my own spin on it; not that it is “better,” but that I believe that is what he would want me to do. He did not want us to try to be him – he wanted us to be our own selves.*

*As my first generation colleagues and I share our personal take on all of this collected wisdom, we weave quite an incredibly valuable resource of shared knowledge. So, I hope you find this useful in your own playing and teaching.*

The sound cannot come off the top of the breath if there is no “top” of the breath. We are often taught that the air comes in and turns around, hopefully smoothly, and then blows out. That sounds good on the surface, but in my opinion that is too complicated. I much prefer that the air come “up and out,” originating at our Ki or Chi (an area @2” below the navel and inward toward the spine about 2”) as in Aikido. If we imagine the breath coming in from there, and filling up like a bucket of water until it fills all the way to our collarbones, we now have a complete breath. As the breath reaches the top, it keeps going up and out, no change of direction, but as it hits the mouthpiece that breath simply becomes sound. It is all one, smooth, one-direction motion or activity.

If the complete inhale (as I have described) is achieved, the sound we desire comes off the top of that reservoir of air.

If the complete inhale is not achieved, which in my experience is absolutely chronic, even among pretty good players, now we have to muscle the breath to get it going. Too many frustrated players (including plenty of professionals I know) are worried about what their chops feel like, or they think they need a new horn or mouthpiece, or they think they have to save their chops for some perceived challenge, when their real problem is they do not take in a full breath. In fact, they are therefore muscling the breath. This muscling of the breath is so insidious and so reflexive that we often do not even know we are doing it! But once that happens we are no longer “in phase” and no longer operating in freedom. Now we are in a battle; tone suffers, response suffers, endurance suffers, we can no longer smoothly negotiate large intervals, and more.

Nothing good comes from muscling the breath.

It is far better to achieve the complete inhale as described and learn to have the sound come from the “top of the breath.”

I will add that the first breath is the easiest. It takes more ability and more mental discipline to have subsequent breaths be as full and complete as that first one. Mastery occurs in simplicity. Mastery occurs in repetition; in your daily routine. Do not expect mastery on a difficult piece of music if you do not have mastery in simplicity. Getchell, flow studies, all of the elements of a good routine, are great vehicles for this. Carry that achieved mastery to your concertos, audition repertoire, to the gig, wherever your challenges are.

Finally, THE number one bulls-eye is always the imagination of that fabulous tone in a musical context. That must be so real in our minds that there is no room for anything else. The awareness of the breath becomes a facet of the imagination of the sound – all one thought. When we achieve that “one thought” we are on the right path.