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CLINIC

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CONQUERING VALSALVA

BY FRANK GABRIEL CAMPOS

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CONQUERING VALSALVA

BY FRANK GABRIEL CAMPOS

One of the most misunderstood aspects of playing the trumpet is the blowing of the very concentrated, focused, or “supported” airstream that is so necessary for high-level performance. Correct breath support on the trumpet requires the air in the lungs to be moderately to highly compressed, yet the air must be free to exit the body without being locked down under pressure. Some players know how to do this, others struggle to learn it, and many never get it. It is easy to learn the wrong way to blow if we are taught as beginners to tighten the abdominal muscles rather than to blow freely. In so many cases, that is when the Valsalva maneuver is activated for the first time, and that is when the trouble begins.

Playing the trumpet while the Valsalva maneuver is activated is one of the most destructive performance habits of all. It ruins range, endurance, and sound and makes performance at the highest level difficult or impossible. It sneaks into the habits of young players under the pretense of being correct support, but it is a parasite that robs us of our full power. Though it is among the most common problems in trumpet performance, many trumpet teachers and public school teachers know little or nothing about it. It is rarely recognized as the cause of poor performance, but it is often at the root of chronic and seemingly impossible-to-solve problems. What exactly is it?¹

For our purposes, the Valsalva maneuver is the sympathetic closing of the glottis (throat) that occurs when we tense the lower abdominal muscles. For example, when we need to cough, the simultaneous contraction of the lower abdominals and the locking of the throat increase the air pressure in the lungs. That is the Valsalva maneuver. When we release the pressurized air from the locked throat, the cough happens. It all takes place automatically, in the twinkling of an eye.

The Valsalva maneuver is also activated when we lift something heavy or prepare for a punch to the abdomen. Young students with no experience might easily mistake this tight, choked feeling for correct support, especially when teachers are coaching them to tighten the belly area, which tends to lock the air in the body, rather than asking them to blow, which gets the air moving out.

The Valsalva maneuver “puts the brakes on” the airstream by constricting or completely closing the throat (glottis) in response to the contraction of the lower abdominal muscles. When playing the trumpet, however, the throat must always be naturally open and “in neutral.” In *The Art of Brass Playing*,² Philip Farkas says that the glottis should be used to control the airstream in performance, but he actually rejected this idea soon after his book was published. In correct trumpet performance, the throat is never used to “brake” the air.

When the Valsalva maneuver is activated during brass performance, the harder one tries to support the air, the tighter the throat closes. It is like stepping on a car’s accelerator and brake pedals simultaneously; the brake usually wins. In short, we do not want the Valsalva maneuver activated at all when we play a wind or brass instrument.

Unfortunately, millions of players confuse this overly tight, closed approach for correct support. It is not an easy habit to break, but there is a way.

How do we learn to support the airstream properly, especially if we have learned to do it incorrectly with the Valsalva maneuver activated? There is only one way to conquer this bad habit; it must be overcome slowly, over time. Mark Twain famously said, “Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs one step at a time.” Being rid of a bad habit, especially a deeply ingrained, completely automatic habit, is a slow process that requires all of your attention to the task.

The Valsalva maneuver is just a habit, and it can be replaced with new, correct behavior. But trying to change a bad habit into a good one is too difficult and time consuming. It is too great a battle to fight old patterns that we have practiced for years. It is easier to simply replace the bad habit with a better one. Start by developing the new habit alongside the old one. The more time you spend reinforcing the new way and the less time

reinforcing the old way, the sooner the new way will become your default.

The most effective way to develop correct breathing habits is through breathing exercises. Here are two exercises that teach the correct technique of blowing a supported airstream with

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the throat open. With regular use, they will establish a new set of breathing habits and develop great strength in the muscles of respiration.

With this or any other breathing exercises, be sure to stop immediately if you become dizzy. Practice while sitting on a bed or sofa until you know what you can handle physically. Do not push or overdo this or any other breathing exercise.

Timed Panting is the greatest exercise I know to fix chronic breathing problems, teach correct support, and strengthen the muscles used for sucking air in and blowing it out. When you pant, the throat is naturally open, exactly as needed when you play the trumpet. The more you pant, the stronger and more efficient you will become. After practicing panting for many weeks, it will be almost impossible to blow incorrectly. You will find you have trained yourself to produce a focused airstream of compressed air with a completely open and relaxed throat.

I have written about this wonderful exercise several times in the past and will continue to sing its praises.³ The exercise is as simple as it is effective: pant like a dog for as long as possible. Increase the amount you can pant non-stop every day, even if only by a second. Try panting through the nostrils (rather than through the mouth) and you will notice many more benefits.

Get in the habit of doing at least one session of panting every day, preferably right before you play your instrument. Aim for thirty seconds of continuous panting, and when you can do that, go for a minute, then two, then three minutes. After several years, I am up to six minutes of nearly continuous panting every morning. This is the single most important exercise I do in preparation for my trumpet day.

What exactly happens when we are panting? We are exercising the muscles around the lungs. These are the primary muscles of inspiration and expiration, the muscles that control sucking and blowing. Using the muscles that surround the lungs is a much more effective and efficient way to control the airstream than relying heavily on the muscles of the lower abdominal area, which are too far away from the action and more likely to trigger the Valsalva maneuver.

Try panting while holding your instrument as if playing, and when you begin to tire, notice the subtle changes your body goes through in order to keep the panting going. You may find yourself shifting into a more grounded and powerful pose. Notice that your head, neck, shoulders, and arms may be in slightly different positions than usual. The small changes that this exercise reveals may point in the direction of your next breakthrough and are worth exploring in your practice. As is true with virtually all exercises, the greatest benefits come toward the end when we are getting fatigued but still maintaining good form without forcing.

We need only establish the habit of panting every day to begin the transformation of our performance technique for the better. Improvement requires change. Change requires action.

Bud Brisbois's Exercise. The second exercise comes from Bud Brisbois, a brilliant high-note trumpeter who took over Stan Kenton's lead book after Maynard Ferguson left. Bud

was one of the top studio lead players in Los Angeles from the 1960s until he died in 1978 at the age of 41. He can be heard on over 100 recordings by major artists of the day from Frank Sinatra to the Fifth Dimension, and he was Henry Mancini's favorite trumpet player. He was the lead

player on the original themes to *The Jetsons* and *Hawaii Five-O* television shows. Brisbois was particularly noted for his uncanny accuracy and incredible control of a freakishly high upper register that extended well beyond triple high C.

I have written about Bud Brisbois's favorite breathing exercise previously.⁴ In this transcription by Kevin Seeley of a clinic from the 1970s, Brisbois describes his favorite exercise for developing and maintaining his incredible breath control and strength:

"This is the best breathing exercise I have ever known, and this works within a week. Stand in front of a mirror, without a shirt on. This takes one week, ten minutes a day. Put your hands high on your sides and take a breath and try to push your hands out as far as you can. Then count slowly as you release your air (1, 2, 3...). As soon as you are completely out of air, take another huge breath. Make sure you are watching yourself in the mirror. The first day you may be able to get up to 15 or 16, by the end of the week, you're up to 25, 30, 35, 40, some up to 50 and 60. Repeat this for ten minutes a day."⁵

This very simple exercise will produce profound results if done exactly as directed. Unfortunately, the vast majority only tries it a handful of times before dropping it, and others don't practice it exactly as Bud instructed. This exercise takes ten minutes a day, and it could take a week before noticing any changes; but when they happen, many players will experience a new feeling of support that they have never known before. Great players and teachers have often described this feeling as being like "gripping the air." Having a firm grip on the air translates into superior performance ability.

Bud Brisbois said that he viewed the lungs as balloons that are being compressed by the muscles around them. He continued, "To get this sensation for what I call the compression on the air, it's a gripping of the air from all sides, from the bottom up, from the top down, from the front in, from the back, so it's all concentrated, so you're putting pressure on it from all sides. So the higher you go, the more of this pressure you put on the air."⁶

Bud's favorite exercise brilliantly teaches us the feeling of gripping the air with the throat open. Challenge yourself to try it for one week, ten minutes a day. Take your shirt off as Bud instructed and find out for yourself why he felt this was an important thing to mention.

The bad habit of activating the Valsalva maneuver during trumpet performance can be overcome with the regular practice of these two breathing exercises. It may take many weeks of consistent application before you are moving pressurized

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About the author: Frank Gabriel Campos is professor of trumpet at Ithaca College's Whalen Center for Music and the author of *Trumpet Technique* (Oxford, 2005). An active classical and jazz soloist, he has been a member of ITG since its inception.

"Who wouldn't give up fifteen minutes a day for the promise of mastery? The road is long, so start now."

Endnotes

- 1 Frank Gabriel Campos, "The Insidious Valsalva Maneuver," *ITG Journal* 39, no. 4 (June 2015), 52.
- 2 Philip Farkas, *The Art of Brass Playing* (Rochester: Wind Music, 1989).
- 3 For more on breathing exercises, see Frank Gabriel Campos, "Wax On, Wax Off," *ITG Journal* 36, no. 1 (October 2011), 59; and Frank Gabriel Campos, "Hara and the Reverse Breath, Part 2," *ITG Journal* 35, no. 4 (May 2011), 49.
- 4 Frank Gabriel Campos, "Wedge Breathing with Bobby Shew," *ITG Journal* 36, no. 3 (March 2012), 43.
- 5 Excerpts from Kevin Seeley's transcription of a taped Bud Brisbois clinic on May 24, 1972. Available from Kevin Seeley's Bud Brisbois Facebook page.
- 6 Ibid.



air without locking the breath or restricting its flow. These exercises will give you benefits for as long as you do them and none at all if you don't do them. Who wouldn't give up fifteen minutes a day for the promise of mastery? The road is long, so start now.