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# Breath is Movement, Breath is Sound: Breath in the Orff-Schulwerk

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## Breath is Movement, Breath is Sound: Breath in the Orff-Schulwerk

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As one of the most basic forms of human condition and expression, the Orff-Schulwerk is and should be concerned with breath. Indeed, breath is the underlying fabric of literally everything we do as human beings. As all other mammals on the planet, we rely on constant nourishment through oxygen. Oxygenation of our cells is taken care of in the womb through the oxygenized blood of the mother. What is often called our first (musical) expression, the *Urschrei*, normally happens right after birth: a sound produced by the baby after inhaling and thereby inflating its lungs with air for the first time, and conversely expelling air through making a sound. The air that we breathe is invisible. Breathing is thus also related to space: space outside of us and inner space. We can regulate the availability of inner space (related to our lung capacity) through breathing. In singing, speaking, and playing wind instruments, breath is directly translated into sound. Hearing is dependent on the element of air, because sound reaches the inner ear through subtle waves that ripple through the air. Listening to ourselves while we speak, sing or play an instrument creates a feedback loop through the element of air, which is in turn used to produce sound. By extension, one could state that attuning/attending to sound in general is linked to our breathing through the element of air.

The philosophical, anthropological and music-related investigation/dimension of the subject should be developed further. Owing to its essential quality, breath has been the subject of recent general (non-musical) philosophical investigation, for example by Luce Irigaray, Lenart Škof and John Durham Peters. A rigorous investigation of the role of breath in the Orff-Schulwerk (in its history and contemporary application) is pending. However, I present here some preliminary remarks that are partly based on my earlier investigations of the history of Euro-American and yoga-related breath cultivation (particularly: *prāṇāyāma*, Sanskrit for “breath control”) as laid out in *Yoga Breath* (2025). My ideas are also based on my practical work with adult (singing) students at the College for Social Pedagogy and Elementary Pedagogy in Graz, Austria.

### A few physiological preliminaries

To set some guidelines, we should briefly consider breath in its physiological dimensions. In order to provide a general understanding, I use generic mostly non-medical language. Breathing has

- *biochemical* implications: the lungs help to bring oxygen to the blood and remove carbon dioxide from the body (Brinkman et al., 2023). We can distinguish between ‘external respiration’ (breathing), i.e. the air flowing from and into our nostrils, and ‘internal respiration’, i.e. the gaseous exchange at the tissue and cellular level of the body (Calais-Germain, 2006, 15).
- *biomechanical implications:* these are the coordinated action of the respiratory muscles and the brain centre. Breathing is heavily intertwined both with the central nervous system (CNS), and the breathing mechanics of the respiratory muscles (first and foremost the dome-shaped diaphragm), the auxiliary respiratory muscles as well as organs through which the air is filtered/travels like the nose, larynx, trachea etc. The *crura* of the diaphragm even connects to the lumbar spine (vertebral muscle

fibres end at the first three lumbar vertebrae in an asymmetrical fashion) (Calais-Germain, 2006, 83). The biomechanical action of the lungs is dependent on the movement of the diaphragm to make the lungs inflate and deflate.

There are **four phases** of the breath: inhalation, pause/turning-point, exhalation, pause/turning-point.[31] Each phase of the breath can be diminished or prolonged, but inhalation and exhalation must of course go on. Examples:

- Diminishing of the pauses leads to hyperventilation.
- Exhalation is prolonged in singing and wind instrument-playing.
- Meditative states can be induced by prolongation and emphasis on various phases of the breath. In medieval Haṭhayoga the prolonged phase is exhalation, and in an advanced practice, the pause after inhalation (Sanskrit: *kumbhaka*).

As any mindful observation in everyday life can confirm, our breathing is heavily related to the expression or suppression of our **emotions**. Joy, sadness, fear, anxiety, sexual arousal, any change in attention or even the continuity/discontinuity of a train of thoughts is mirrored in our breathing.[32] A recent study has shown that a person's breathing patterns as linked to their brain states might be as individual as one's fingerprint (Basilio, 2025). Breathing is **both involuntary and voluntary**. For one, the carbon dioxide load measured at the *medulla oblongata* (a part of the brain stem) makes us breathe involuntarily ensuring survival and continuous breathing during sleep and wakefulness. However, motor functions in the brain can voluntarily change the way we breathe. As *prāṇāyāma* researcher Maria Engberg states: 'Breath is a *rare place* where the voluntary and the involuntary meet, making connection between them possible' (Engberg, 2019, 457). This gives breath a powerful role in accessing the nervous system's functions as we can "voluntarily" engage with the very basis of our survival mechanisms or "life force". The voluntary/involuntary divide can also be explored as doing/allowing in artistic practice and in producing/being produced (the more passive act of literally receiving inspiration). This leads us back to the artistic implications of the topic of breath.

**Breath in Carl Orff's Work**

To my knowledge, Carl Orff (1895–1982) did not extensively elaborate on breath in *Music for Children*, nor in other texts that illustrate his artistic and pedagogical endeavours.[33] There is, however, one passage – the opening passage in *Thoughts about Music with Children and Non-professionals* (1932) – that clearly illustrates the importance of listening to the breath as an elemental base for any music learning and production, which is worth quoting in full:

[31] I use the term "turning point" as an alternative to "pause" (or below, "stillness") as it describes the felt sense of the breath transitioning from inhalation to exhalation or vice versa. This is not always experienced as a "pause/stillness".

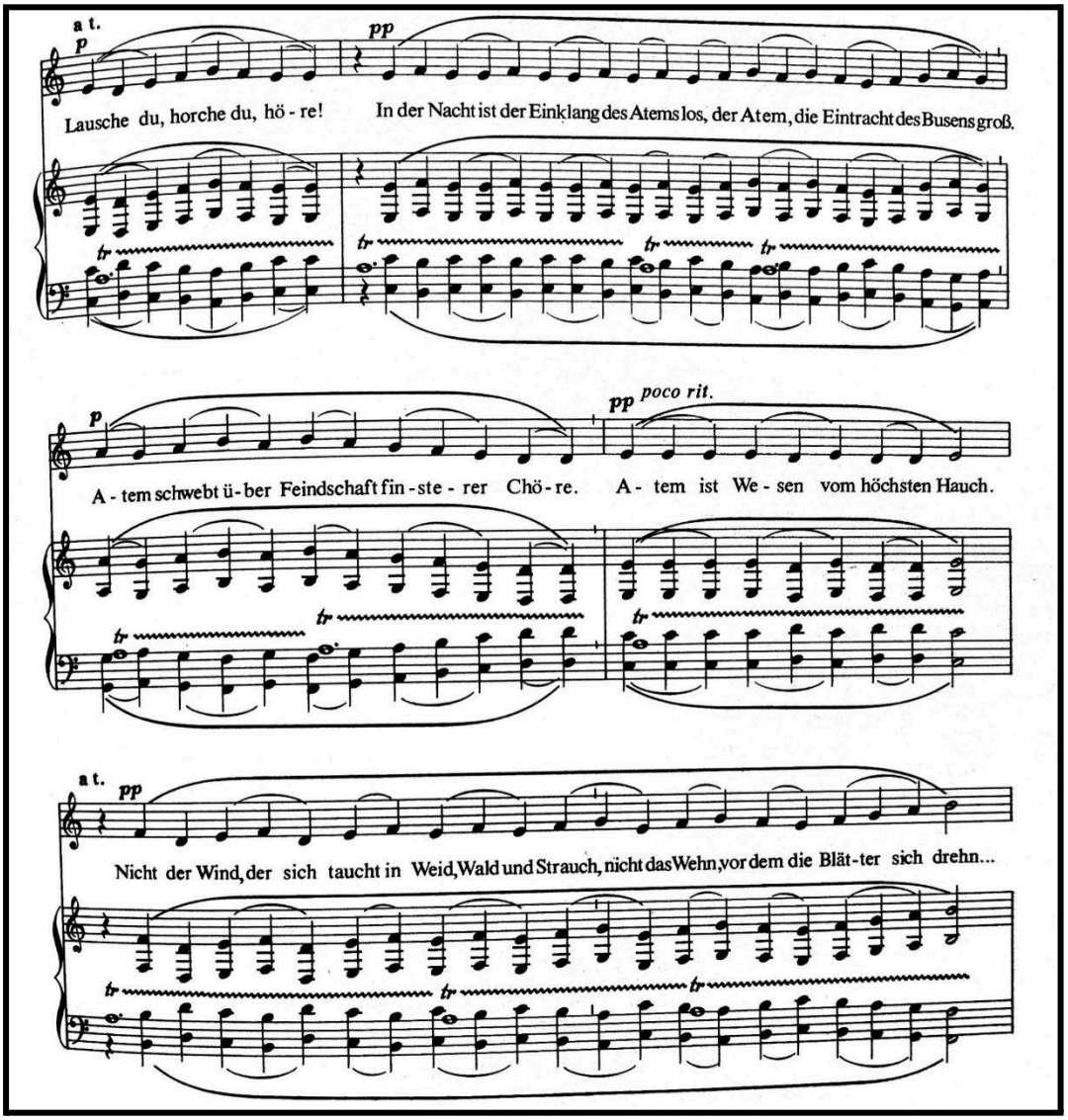
[32] This is confirmed by the Hindu tradition, which states that the "mind is tied to the breath" (e.g., among a myriad of other examples in Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.2). Note that the concept of "mind" (*manas*) in Sanskrit also includes emotions.

[33] In contrast, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) included breathing exercises in his method as well as "signes de respiration" (signs of respiration) in the graphic notation of his "marches rhythmiques" as outlined in the first volume of his *Gymnastique Rhythmique* (Méthode Jaques-Dalcroze) of 1906.

> Music begins inside human beings, and so must any instruction. Not at the instrument, not with the first finger, nor with the first position, nor with this or that chord. The starting point is one's own stillness, listening to oneself, the "being ready for music", listening to one's own heart-beat and breathing (Orff in Haselbach, 2011, 66).

Experiencing stillness as listening to oneself is described here as a prerequisite for 'being ready for music'. At the same time, this preparatory mode for actively engaging with music is equated to listening to one's own heartbeat and breathing – the very basis for our life in every moment. As Ulrike Jungmair describes in *Das Elementare*, it is a deep crisis that initiates Carl Orff's growth into a new style as a composer and innovative teaching methods (Jungmair, 2010, 97). It is maybe in this crisis that Orff discovers listening to the fundamental principles of life, and, in being deeply influenced by the poet Franz Werfel (1890–1945), can state that 'music begins inside human beings' (*Ibid*. 85-86, 97).[34] This also means that stillness and pause, the rhythm, the movement, and the subtle sound of heartbeat and breath as "heard" and experienced within oneself is then "translated" and developed into music as part of artistic and pedagogical practice. The intrinsic motivation to produce music is certainly mirrored in the manifold creations of the composer. In Orff's artistic work, the importance of listening to the natural rhythm of speech, song, and breathing is expressed through utilising an inverted comma after spoken or sung phrases that signified the time that it takes to breathe before the next phrase starts. The inverted comma was a short pause for inhalation, whereas the fermata would indicate a longer pause in his work. What is significant here is that the comma was not just placed within the singer's/speaker's sheet music, but also in the piano/accompanying part of the sheet music. To give an example, I draw again on Orff's interpretation of Werfel's *Lächeln, Atmen, Schreiten* for voice and piano:

[34] This corresponds to the second-last line of Werfel's poem *Lächeln, Atmen, Schreiten* of 1917 (a poem that relates to the smile, the breath, and the pace as basic human expressions that are particularly relevant in the adoration of a loved person). This line is *Die Welt fängt im Menschen an* ("The world begins inside human beings") that inspires Orff to say *Die Musik fängt im Menschen an* ("Music begins inside human beings") (Jungmair, 2010, 97). Orff also interpreted Werfel's poem in a piece for voice and 4-handed piano in 1920 (see below).




Carl Orff (1920) in Orff, 1975, p. 309.

As this very brief exploration has shown, Orff's impetus to engage into deep listening to one's inner world through the rhythm and movement of the breath and heartbeat – significantly drawing on the work of Franz Werfel – can launch further musings on the importance of such a way of listening within the Orff-Schulwerk. This is the trajectory that the next section of this article takes.

**Possible interpretations of breath in the Orff-Schulwerk**

Within the Orff-Schulwerk tradition several people have incorporated and taught ideas on breath. It is an intricate part of the studies at the Orff Institute and in international training courses, for example in speech training and singing classes. Gunild Keetman mentions the importance of the breath for musical phrasing in singing in her *Elementaria* (1970).

Christiane Wieblitz, Christine Schönherr, Peter Cubasch and others address the nexus of singing, reciting, and breathing in several publications. Barbara Haselbach and Christa Coogan also work with the breath as part of the dance education practice. As has been

shown, breath has always organically been integrated in music and dance teaching in the spirit of Keetman and Orff. However, based on these thoughts and the Orff quotation, I propose that we can create an even clearer structure around the use of breath within the Orff-Schulwerk. This builds on the artistic-pedagogical ideas of the Schulwerk, and also considers the phenomenology of the breath as it appears in both listening to and creating music and dance. In doing so, I propose that there are four main categories in which we can engage with the breath within the Orff-Schulwerk. In each of these categories the breath can be *experienced* and/or *used as an expressive tool* within music, speech and dance. These are

1) Breath as Pause/Stillness
2) Breath as Movement
3) Breath as Rhythm
4) Breath as Sound

In the following I will outline some ideas on understanding the breath within these categories. To explore and explain the detailed usage, the artistic meaning as well as the phenomenological and musical structure of these categories in our field could certainly fill a book. Here I give a few preliminary ideas.

1) Breath as Pause/Stillness

As suggested by Orff himself, listening to the breath means to develop attention for one's own stillness, bodily movements and presence as a preparation for music and dance. We can use the continuation of inhalation and exhalation as a means to connect with ourselves before and in music- and dance-making. I suggest that we can introduce simple listening to our breath/bodies as part of our self-awareness practices within music and dance – for ourselves as teachers, and with the groups we teach. This helps to prevent injuries, to deepen artistic practice, and to link one's own (bodily) experience to our expressive and creative outputs. It can give them additional depths, clarity, and meaning. To dive even deeper, we can listen to the breath *and its own pause/stillness*. This is part of many meditation practices, and if one chooses to do so, it can also be integrated into a creative process that starts or ends with such a self-inquiry.

2) Breath as Movement

Although most of the time we breathe subconsciously, we can also make breath movements bigger or smaller/finer. In dance, breathing movements are often combined with those of the arms and torso, and when lying on your side, the whole body can curl up around the diaphragm and expand again. In music playing, we also deeply engage with our breath movements, e.g. as impulses for starting a music piece in an ensemble, while conducting a choir or ensemble, or as part of a gesture in playing a piano piece: phrases begin and end with an intake of breath (Jordan et al. 2011, 17). But more on that in 4).

3) Breath as Rhythm

The diastolic-systolic movement/rhythm of the breath – the expansion and contraction of the lungs – is almost as fundamental to our lives and to music as the rhythm of our heartbeats.[35] The rhythm of the breath is ever-changing, and it is deeply linked to our emotions as well as the situations we are facing. In a study investigating how the breathing rhythms of orchestral musicians automatically synchronise, Laczika et al. have found that "musical rhythms and biological rhythms – especially breathing/breathing patterns – are strongly related to each other" (Laczika et al., 2013, 1). Breath can also be used as an expressive tool in music and dance performances, and there are many examples of artists who consciously use the breath as part of their range of expression.[36] It is interesting to work on the breath-expressivity of groups of students as part of performance work in elemental theatre, music, and dance.

4) Breath as Sound

This is the most obvious connection between breath and music: Breath becomes sound in all vocal expressions – including speaking, reciting, singing, sighing, yawning, etc. – and wind-instrument playing. And breath has a sound itself, as the yoga traditions attest.[37] The famous Traverso-player Barthold Kuijken explained in an interview on musically collaborating with his brothers (who don't play wind instruments) that he 'always felt that as a wind-player you are working with a different medium' (Kuijken, 2017, 04:10). This is very much the argument of this article: it is crucial to understand the medium of breath for any sound production, but especially for singers and wind-instrument players. The transformation of breath into sound requires sensitivity to all the subtle nuances of breathing – a central part of every singer's and wind-instrument player's many years of training. Breath as sound needs to integrate all the other categories mentioned above: the pause/stillness of the breath, an important prerequisite for deep and relaxed inhalation, for example before beginning to sing; breath-movements and their three-dimensional expansions and contractions that can be felt throughout the body; the rhythm of the breath as directed and often prompted by musical phrases. To develop the adaptability of the breath to these phrases takes time, training and deep listening. Just like transforming breath into sound when we strive for artistic expressiveness.

**Concluding Remarks**

There is huge potential in highlighting the role of the breath and its intricacies within the context of the Orff-Schulwerk. Based on Orff's statement of 'listening' to 'one's own stillness' in order to be ready for music-making, this paper has elaborated on the possibility of integrating breath awareness more clearly into the Orff-Schulwerk, and has offered categories for re-thinking breath in this context. This aims at the development of a more

[35] By researching musical elements in human infants' cries, Wermke & Mende (2009, 153) observe that it is likely that intrauterine rhythms as heard in the womb by the foetus (e.g. the mother's heartbeat) shape our ability to perceive and learn rhythms.

[36] For example, the choreography "(eine) zeit – atemlang" performed by Das Collectif and choreographed by Irina Pauls in Salzburg in 2009.

[37] The yoga traditions state that the outbreath sounds like „*ham*" and the inbreath like "sa" which results in the mantra "*haṃsa*" (Kraler, 2025, 78).

nuanced understanding of breath-related teaching. I argue that it can yield increased listening-spaces, creative action fuelled by various levels of perception, joy through grounding, authenticity and spontaneity in music and dance. As breath rhythms are both highly individual but also linked to group activity in music, it can be consciously used as self-exploration as well as part of a natural bond to develop in an artistic setting of a specific group. Whether we realise it or not, the elemental importance of breathing will probably lead us in this direction anyway.

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