



**EMBOUCHURE DYSTONIA
DOSSIER**

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EMBOUCHURE DYSTONIA. INTRODUCTION

Embouchure dystonia is defined as a series of involuntary muscular contractions affecting the embouchure area which are also associated to certain degree of lack of coordination of the tongue and the respiratory system that prevent from a controlled tone production.

Many musicians experience these ailments at some time or another during their lives. In some cases the dystonia can be overcome spontaneously and the affected may not be conscious of how he did it, in other cases, it may accompany the musician until retirement, varying the intensity of its manifestation during his professional life, and in others we come across the musician that "throws the towel".

It affects the advanced student and the professional, also and rarely we may see young musicians suffering from this disorder.

Nowadays, there is little information about this problem and is presented in an alarming and confusing way in some cases. I suggest prudence when looking for information about this subject in internet, given that we can find information that goes from a cautious clinical approach opened to new perspectives to the complete opposite. This disorder is generally unknown among doctors, most of them have never seen a case and have no experience on this matter, generally they are cautious and sincerely admit they do not know the disorder, but others may dare to suggest botox which can ruin the embouchure forever.

As time passes, more and more cases are known thanks to people who overcome the fear to reveal their problems and look for information to solve it.

After years of dealing with musicians with embouchure dystonia with no medication at all, my experience has brought me to the conclusion that this disorder that affects the wind musician is a consequence due to a progressive and unnoticed shift of our daily practice and a emotional behaviour associated to it. Why? Because in every single case I have been treating, the contractions or uncontrolled embouchure muscles appear when the mouthpiece gets near the embouchure, being everything normal before that moment.

We are not in front an act of muscle system disobedience, or body sabotage just because. We are not either facing neuronal or genetic alterations that go and come on their own. In fact, there are factors that give life to psychological automatisms that trigger unconsciously at the moment they were created, it is to say, the precise moment before the production of the sound, that are responsible for those jerks and general lack of coordination of embouchure and the respiratory apparatus.

Any reaction in our life starts obviously to happen at a given time, it is our conclusion or assessment on a fact that was thought of many times.

Although there is some information that pretends to make us believe that embouchure dystonia is an incurable disorder, I suggest everybody to ignore it given that experience shows the opposite, however we can be sure that those who are followers of such a claim have never solved a case.

Those affected will have to work hard to re-establish right psychological patterns responsible for the adequate muscular response. Therefore, tenacious willpower and systematic work are needed to get results.

I suggest to those affected not to abandon to emotional fits because such reactions may confuse or neutralize the result of a good work.

CURRICULUM

Joaquin Fabra studied at the Conservatorio Superior de Musica de Valencia with Joaquin Vidal obtaining the highest marks including the special end of studies prize. He has the degree of Profesor Superior de Bombardino. Later he took up trombone studies completing them at the Conservatorio Superior de Música de Sevilla where he obtains degree of Profesor Superior de Trombón.

Since 1982 he has been a member of the Banda Sinfónica Municipal de Madrid and has been principal euphonium player for 10 years. He performed as soloist accompanied by the Symphonic Band with trombone and euphonium. At present he holds the principal baritone position. Once in Madrid he studied with his close friend and renown trombonist Benjamin Esparza with whom he prepares recordings carried out by the National Radio performing several trombone concerts with accompaniment of piano. He attended private classes taught by Arnold Jacobs and Dee Stewart in The United States, as well as two courses with Michel Becket and Armin Rosin.

Besides his professional activity with the Symphonic Band he teaches private classes of performance improvement and he very specially treats wind musicians critical cases that suffer from dystonia and other abnormal conditions.

At present he is working on his research that will reflect the experience that he has been compiling and that he gathers in a whole reorganization of the musical-emotional world of the affected, as well as the re-adequacy of their musical and technical perceptions, all this with the aim to take the affected back to the natural condition.

RESEARCH

When I was very young, sometimes I could listen to other people saying that a very good musician had "lost" his lip and was incapable of playing the instrument, his sound was inarticulate or something like a stuttering difficult to identify. They also talked about the wry faces the used to make when trying to play the instrument. Of course, I rapidly forgot those comments. Some years later I lived the worst musical experience of my life that made me remember those old comments, it was a severe embouchure dystonia that nowadays is but a far and inoffensive recall.

Presently, it is unfortunately usual to get acquainted of cases of musicians that suffer from abnormal muscular disorders that affect their embouchure. However more and more people dare to open their mind and look for solutions. Embouchure dystonia has already stopped to be a taboo.

The reason of my research is obvious, I had to solve my own conflict, and I wanted to apply my knowledge to those who came to me looking for help, something that has unquestionably allowed me to draw further valuable information. So the results of my research, up to now, are the conclusion of my own experience. Firstly, being myself subject and object of the research, and secondly by the experience derived from its application to the cases that I have treated and I am treating day by day.

Unless one suffers from irreversible muscular or anatomical pathologies, or undeniable technical problems, we must immediately suspect that the problem that affects us does not share the nature of the previously exposed, but a completely different one that has much to do with the deterioration of our behaviour. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to reject contemplating it as of psychological origin, a clear and stubborn technical problem that does not find solution through discipline, mainly, if we consider that in the immense majority of the cases the conflict only arises when we want to perform and not when we imagine ourselves performing (doing everything without the instrument). This being so it is evident that certain mental conditionings impede the normal functioning of the muscular mechanisms responsible for being able to play the instrument.

Embouchure dystonia does not arise overnight. It is the culmination of a mistaken integral work, and as such, is reversible if right patterns are newly established. Getting free from those erroneous mental patterns will facilitate incredibly the come back to the natural condition.

AVAILABILITY

CLASSES

For any modality of class, anyone interested should contact the address that is indicated, if the schedule allows it. I will inform of the date for the first class.

With respect to the courses, if anybody or any organism requires them, those interested should contact the address that is indicated at least 45 days prior to the date at which the beginning is expected.

· **ONE-TO-ONE:** These classes are strictly developed in a teacher-student frame without the attendance of any listeners unless it is requested by the student and with the teacher's consent, others may be allowed to participate.

· **GROUPS :** The class will be carried out depending on the homogeneity of the group. Our concern is the students' aim to improve their performing.

If the class deals with "Muscular disorders. Embouchure Dystonia", only five people will be allowed in the class.

COURSES

Due to the existence of such varied demand, the course will be adapted to a certain demanding date schedule. Therefore, depending on the days and hours available, the content will be structured according to what is convenient.

Content:

- Introduction
- How the behavioural disorders affect the technical aspect of performing
- First steps in the acquisition of the future tendencies.
- Programming
- Educating the educator
- Distortion of the musical and physical perception
- Psychological distance and strategies to flee. The instinctive reaction
- Emotional assessment of one's condition
- Excesses: Over-attention, over-concentration, excess of responsibility
- Review of the mental surroundings of the affected
- Technique of surprise and its immediate consequences
- Imagination against will
- Temporality of the subconscious information
- Commentary on perfectionism
- Mirrors of the imagination
- Understanding
- Automatisms
- Insulting
- The art of " not doing "
- The natural condition technique approach and difficulties experienced
- The art of making music

Some points of the content may vary and other subjects might be included within others. It is therefore understood, that this information is orientative, but in no case will a considerable variation take place or diverge from the character of the content.

SYMPTOMATOLOGY

Symptoms are indicators that tell us that something is going wrong, and the intensity of its manifestation depends upon the present phase of the disorder.

Embouchure dystonia does not appear overnight, in fact we come across a phenomenon similar to the iceberg, the peak of the problem has surged to the surface with strength after an unconscious period of gestation. Normally, those who come to me looking for help are mistaken when saying to me that almost all of a sudden they started to feel something that prevented them from playing the instrument as usual, and it stands to reason given their confusion. In fact all mental response is the product of the daily assessments we make referring to the end result of our practice with the instrument. That conclusion or judgement that we have acquired based on repetitions becomes a subconscious automatism that will be activated without our permission. Once the reaction starts we can do nothing, our will power will not help us to stop it. The only thing we can do is to modify the information of the automatism.

The frozen mass of the iceberg below the surface is much bigger than the one over the surface. They are connected as a whole. Conscious and subconscious, cannot either exist separately and it would be a huge mistake not to study them as a part of a whole. If we study them as two different matters, the conclusions will take us nowhere.

So, our emotional assessment on our work definitely conditions our progress, and in the same way that an emotion can make us go red or grow pale out of shame an even activate a heart attack, also other type of emotions correctly associated to our work can create wonders or ruin that somatizes in our embouchure or respiratory system.

The symptoms experienced by the musician in the acute phase are as follows:

Incapacity to control the tongue to produce the sound

- The tongue gets stuck to the palate
- Tonguing becomes dull
- The tongue muscle suffers a lot and exhaust due to overeffort affecting the neck muscles and jaws.
- The tongue seems enormous and heavy

Incapacity to shape the embouchure

- Lips don't find their position on the mouthpiece
- The lips hit the mouthpiece involuntarily causing pain
- The muscles of the embouchure seem to function independently and chaotically creating wry faces
- When trying to produce the sound the embouchure muscles contract impeding the correct position
- Tension in the face is evident
- Tension inside the mouth can even hurt teeth structure
- Apparent loss of sensitivity in the lips and embouchure muscles

Respiratory system

- Difficulty in breathing air in and out
- Atypical tension in abdominal muscles and diaphragm
- Glottis impedes the air flow
- Sensation of respiratory anguish and chest tightness

General

- Physical and mental exhaustion shortly after starting the practice
- Deformation of embouchure muscular perception
- Loss or deterioration of the capacity to think in musical terms when practicing

Emotional

- Impotence
- Anguish
- Obsession
- Confusion
- Sleep disorders, etc.

I have cited those symptoms which are more relevant in my opinion, any way variables of them also occur.

The fact that someone identifies with some of the symptoms previously mentioned does not mean to be affected by the disorder, because what determines rightly if it is or not embouchure dystonia what is suffered is the simultaneous manifestation of most of them.

Evidently, each human being is a different world, and though the symptomatic frame of embouchure dystonia is unequivocal, the intensity of their manifestation in each phase is the direct consequence of the substantial difference of both psychological and physical factors that form it.

REPORTED CASES

José Antonio Pedro Romero Case

I live in La Vilavella (Castellón de la Plana-Spain). I have been tubist At the Castellón Municipal Band (which is a professional band), since 1986.

In January 2001 starts my problem with the tuba, I feel uneasy when producing the sound above all in the middle register. Soon after, the problem affects the whole range of the instrument and becomes really serious.

The sensations experimented were as follows:

- The embouchure position was lost
- Air leaks through corners of the lips
- Trembling tongue and sound
- Uncontrolled tongue

This sensations trigger feelings of fear and frustration.

The situation aggravates as the quality of sound gets worse, besides a considerable loss of power. The effort I apply goes much beyond of the reasonable. With a respiration I can barely resist two bars.

I practice more and more with worse results. My articulation when tonguing gets dull. When I separate the lips from the mouthpiece I find it impossible to produce the sound.

When I have to play in the band I am not able to play rhythmically, sound production comes later and I became arrhythmic. Panic preys on me and I feel impotent, uneasy and desperate.

All around the clock I devote my time to think of the sound production, embouchure position. I even analyse every single movement of the tongue in front of a mirror without observing anything abnormal. But when I set the mouthpiece on my lips, my natural embouchure seems disfigured.

I feel tired, powerless, and I get introverted. I do not even want to comment the problem to my wife.

This goes on and in may I talk to my wife and to the Band conductor. My personal situation is at that time unbearable.

A month later, my capacity to play the tuba is lost, I cannot play a single note.

On June 27th I get a temporal incapacity leave. I visit a maxillofacial surgeon and he says everything from a muscular standpoint is fine. After that I move to where after several tests I am diagnosed with Focal dystonia affecting my lips. Then I go to General Hospital in Castellón de la Plana, the neurologist says to me I suffer from focal dystonia.

Both doctors tell me they don not know a treatment to cure my malady. It is then when through Rogelio Igualada (trombonist at the Spain National Orchestra) I call to Joaquín Fabra, and start working with him. Nowadays my recovery is a fact and my dystonia is on the border of extinction. In certain aspects of my playing I am already better than before experiencing the problem. Obviously I am back to work as usual.

Frederic Broisin Case

Hello, my name is Frederic Broisin and I have been twelve years the bass trombonist at the Málaga Philharmonic orchestra (Spain).

I became a member of the orchestra very soon after finishing studies at the Paris Conservatory Superior of Music and Dance.

Everything went smoothly until a day when I started having problems to produce the sound, always with the same notes. Of course I took note of it , and as a good professional I devoted my time to solve the problem as soon as possible. But, instead of improving, things got worse.

Every time I had to play those notes I felt more restless, and that restlessness made the situation even worse.

Little by little I start feeling insecure with the hole range of the instrument and ended up missing every single note. The worse of all is that I did not know how to play. My tongue was blocked up, my air flow was blocked up....., the result was

that I stuttered at the moment of producing the sound. The fact of playing a single note had become a world of excessive attention, of hiperconcentration.

!!!!!!! I did not control my instrument !!!!!!!

I tried to practice much more, I change the trombone, the mouthpiece, the embouchure, but it was all the same or even worse, given that my patience was coming to an end and my desperation grew bigger. My lack of confidence had its impact on my private life.

I had to think things several times before doing them, I found myself distrusting friends and relatives. I had never behaved that way.

After spending a long time drowned in my own pit, I was lucky to meet Joaquín Fabra here in Spain, who knew "to change my chip", or better said, who knew to make me think in order to recover the adequate and well focused way to practice and be back to normality.

Ever since, good sensations and nice moments that used to make feel good are back.

So, I say to you that, by my own experience and as a spanish saying says, " ", when the adequate way is found. So do not throw the towel.

F. Broisin

José Antonio Pedro Romero Case

My youth was quite happy from a musical point of view. When I was sixteen I became a member of the Spanish Young National Orchestra, at the age of eighteen I enrolled the La Palma Symphony Orchestra. At the age of twenty I decided to study at Eastman university, Rochester, N.Y. in order to perfect and seriously work with the trumpet. It was a hard and productive year .

When I came back home it seemed to me that I had discovered something especial, my sound was strong and well-pitched, I hardly made any effort to play, I could practice for hours without getting tired and my high register improved very much. I finished my studies at the Valencia Conservatorium and joined the Iberoamerican Young Orchestra.

Some months later my honeymoon period seemed to come to an end. One morning I went to practice as usual, at the beginning **I was trembling and could not do anything to avoid it. I got very nervous, and felt as If I had been waiting for it.**

I am a very self demanding person and was never pleased with the result of my practice, my expectations were always higher than the results though I knew I had improved a great deal. I used to often think what could happen if I had problems. After achieving a really high level studying at Eastman University I became afraid that my achievements could disappear.

That abnormal day when I found myself trembling was the first of a series in which another uncomfortable sensations started to rise:

- I started to have a lot of trouble to produce the first note of a passage.
- I made a disproportionate effort to play.
- I got tired very quickly and felt pain in my upper lip when playing.
- I started to feel **sudden and odd involuntary movements** in my embouchure when trying to play or in the rests.
- I was nearly unable to fill my lungs with air because of tension and nervousness.

Of course all those hateful sensations appeared gradually, later I completely lost my control of the situation and became speechless, I could not play a sound with the trumpet and to add insult to injury **body spasms appeared that literally separated my lips from the mouthpiece** . If besides all these sensations we take into account the frustration, obsession and depression I was experiencing any person can imagine the filthy state of mind I was immersed in.

I did not have the least idea of what was going on with me, I thought the origin of my malady were technical problems and paid even more attention to what I had to do **to play the trumpet from a physiological standpoint and the more I tried it the worse I felt.**

I found it difficult to get to sleep and my mind was a turmoil. It was really frustrating to have been working hard all your life and when it comes the time to enjoy the result of your work, everything gets out of your hand without knowing why.

My character changed radically. I became unstable and sometimes quite aggressive.

Fortunately I am now enjoying the result of a consistent work of rehabilitation indicated by professor Joaquín Fabra.

At the moment I am a member of "5 de Bras", a brass quintet that was born in Palma de Mallorca (Spain) and is playing with great success throughout the country, and I am also preparing to another good events to come.

I never thought of abandoning the music career , not even in my worse moments and **it was not easy at all to recover from the disorder** , but as the saying goes, as you sow so shall you reap. I am now collecting the harvest.

Good luck to everybody