

Improve your playing by finding comfort in your jaw

Niall O’Riordan *explores the Feldenkrais® approach*

Most of us have been told at one point or another in a lesson to relax our jaw or to create more space in our mouth. Without knowing how to relax the jaw, instructions like this have limited value unless our nervous system learns alternatives to our habitual reactions. If we don’t take the time to become aware of these habits and learn alternatives, we will continue to do what we are used to. Tension in the jaw can have negative effects on tone production, resonance, dynamic control, articulation and breathing – in short: everything. Many of us hold tension in the jaw without even being aware of it. Clenching and holding the jaw muscles is a common stress response, and it is also a reaction that many of us habitually engage in when doing a task that requires effort or concentration. For example, what are you doing right now with your jaw? Are you exerting any unnecessary effort? The first step is to become aware of our habits before we can change them. I occasionally check with myself to see if I’m using unnecessary effort there. I confess most of the time I find that I am, but I also notice that it is not as much as I used to, which is encouraging. We can all change our habits.

The jaw has a dynamic relationship with how the head and neck are organised. Tension in the jaw can be the cause of neck pain and even shoulder pain. Easing unnecessary jaw tension can also be beneficial to these areas. Jaw tension can also have significant impact on our breathing. You can explore this by inhaling through your nose while you your teeth are clenched; notice the quality of breath, especially the availability of movement in the ribs. Do the same with the jaw relaxed and notice the difference. Of course this is an extreme comparison, but it will prompt you to think about how this activity may impact on your breathing.

To explore how the jaw can impact the neck and its range of movement, clench your jaw and turn your head a little bit to the right then a little bit to the left. Notice the equality of movement in your neck, and now try it again, but with your jaw soft

The jaw, tongue and lips have a close neurological relationship and exert a strong influence over each other. These relationships develop as we begin to speak and feed. Difficulties in flute playing can arise when these relationships are prevented from working harmoniously together. This can especially happen if we begin to follow verbal instructions by teachers too literally; we can end up trying to do one thing with the jaw, one

thing with the lips and one thing with the tongue, resulting in a set of actions that are very different to the patterns that seem natural to us. This can be a tremendous source of discomfort and tension.

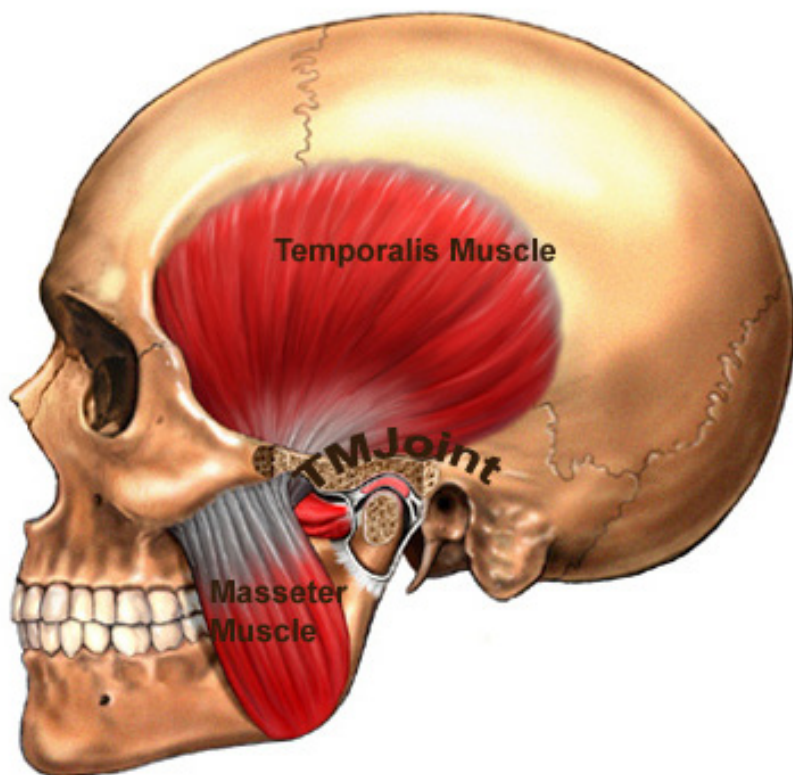
Certain movements of the lips and jaw are needed to facilitate changes in colour, dynamics and to enable flexibility between registers. There are many varied opinions in flute teaching regarding how the jaw moves, with some advocating quite a lot of movement and others discouraging it. I have found it very useful to think of the jaw as being passive and allowing it to be guided by the movements of the lips. If somebody has a very a fixed embouchure that does not have much flexibility or control, then it is likely that effort in the jaw will be employed to compensate for this. In *De La Sonorité*, Moyse described certain jaw movements, particularly for notes in the low register. This must not be misunderstood. It is my opinion that many of the movements described were to facilitate improvement of intonation problems inherent in the instrument and that these movements are, therefore, far less applicable with the advancement of flute scales and intonation since then.

The TMJ Joint

The temporomandibular joint connects the jaw to the skull and is frequently referred to as the TMJ. It can be found by placing your fingers in front of your ears and gently opening and closing your mouth, you will feel movement there. There are two TMJs, one on each side, working in unison. The name is derived from the two bones which form the joint: the upper temporal bone which is part of the cranium (skull), and the lower jaw bone called the mandible.

Jaw discomfort in its extreme can result in TMJD (temporomandibular joint disorder) which has a variety of symptoms including difficulty or discomfort with biting or chewing, clicking, popping, or grating sound when opening or closing the mouth, dull aching pain in the face, earache (particularly in the morning), headache (particularly in the morning), hearing loss, migraine (particularly in the morning), jaw pain or tenderness of the jaw, reduced ability to open or close the mouth, tinnitus, neck and shoulder pain, and dizziness.

Because of the repetitive nature of what we do, it is important that we take care of our jaw. When I first explored the Feldenkrais lesson I discuss in this article, I was really impressed by the



instant improvement in my playing, particularly my tone and flexibility. It immediately made me think of the many flute players around the world who spend a lot of time trying to improve their tone, and how easily addressing this area could set them on the right track. Practising tone exercises mindlessly is pointless. By developing sensitivity and learning how to make distinctions in the movements of the jaw, lips, and tongue, away from the flute, you will reap great rewards in your daily tone practice.

Further resources

I highly recommend the following Feldenkrais recorded lessons which address areas that are of great interest to flute players.

- *Feldenkrais TMJ Pain Relief* by Ryan Nagy (available on Spotify)
- *TMJ Heath* by David Zemach-Bersin and Mark Reese, www.feldenkraisresources.com

See overleaf for a short Feldenkrais® Awareness Through Movement® lesson on the jaw that you can try for yourself.

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A short Feldenkrais® Awareness Through Movement® Lesson

Guidelines:

Make the movements easy and use as little muscular effort as possible. If anything is uncomfortable make the movement smaller or stop. Go slowly so that you can pay attention and become aware of any unnecessary effort you are making. By reducing effort, you make it possible for your brain to make the sensory distinctions needed to improve your neuromuscular organisation. Stretching should be completely avoided, the Feldenkrais method is a process of sensory motor learning which is very different to exercise or stretching. The rest periods are very important to the process, so please take time to rest between each movement and between sections.

Depending on how long you have, this lesson should take around 15 to 20 min. When you become familiar with the movements of the lesson it is a very good idea to incorporate some of the movements into your flute practice during times of rests. A good time to do this lesson is before you go to bed at night, when your nervous system can process new information while you sleep.

1. Lie on your back on the floor. Notice how you make contact with the floor and how your body rests.
 - a) Direct your attention to how you are breathing and where you sense the movement of the breath.
 - b) Become aware of how your head rests on the floor. Gently turn your head to look left and right and notice the range of movement that feels easy
 - c) Notice the space between your teeth and how your tongue rests in your mouth and what parts of your mouth your tongue touches. Does it make contact with your front teeth?
2. Bend your knees so that your feet are flat on the floor and your knees are pointing towards the ceiling.
 - a) Begin to slowly open and close your mouth. Become aware of the range that feels easy and stay within this range. Do not stretch. Rest between movements so that each time you open your mouth you are beginning a new movement rather than opening and closing your mouth continuously.
 - b) Rest
3. Again go back to opening and closing your mouth. This time notice if the back of your head moves on the floor as you open and close your mouth. If it does it may indicate that you are engaging muscles of the neck unnecessarily
 - a) Explore this movement of the head in a very small, gentle way by opening your mouth by moving the top of your head back and forward again as if very gently nodding 'yes'. It may help to direct your gaze upwards along the ceiling.
 - b) Now open and close your mouth using your jaw, this time allowing your neck to be relaxed
 - c) Rest and notice any changes
4. Open your mouth a comfortable amount and slowly begin to bring your jaw a little bit to the right and back to centre again. Rest between movements and only stay within the range that feels comfortable and easy
 - a) It may help to place your right index finger on your chin to feel the movement
 - b) Rest and notice the difference in sensation between both sides of your face and neck
5. Repeat step 4. This time move your jaw to the left, moving it slowly and with attention.
6. Go back to opening and closing your mouth. How does it feel now? Easier?
 - a) Notice if the space between your teeth has it changed since the beginning of the lesson
 - b) How is your tongue resting in your mouth now? Where is it making contact in your mouth? Has this changed?
 - c) Turn your head to look left and right; has the movement of your jaw affected the ease with which you turn your head?
 - d) How has your breathing changed since the beginning of the lesson?
7. Take time and slowly make your way into a standing position. Notice if the work on your jaw has affected how you are standing and your balance.

More from Niall at www.niallflute.com and @Niall_ORiordan