

VIBRATO

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INTRODUCTION

Vibrato is, nowadays, held to be an important part of a competent string player's sound, and, in the ABRSM exam system at least, is expected to be used appropriately from around Grade 4 or 5. It is often abused, however: used too frequently, and/or without sufficient reason. We should always aim to make a good, strong sound without this device, and be able to play in tune before trying to use it.

Vibrato is most appropriately employed on longer notes, at points in the music when the mood is a bit more excited, and always with a careful ear as to its suitability. We can also vary the kind of vibrato: a slight trembling of the left arm or wrist in passagework perhaps; a bigger, more pronounced movement on longer notes, or where the dynamic is louder. We can change the speed of our vibrato – perhaps speeding up as the pitch gets higher. There is nothing worse than the violinist's equivalent of the nasty wobbling that many opera singers use in the apparent belief that it sounds more 'musical' that way. Take care: musicality is not about circus tricks like the vibrato! Having said this, a well-used and practised vibrato can sound very beautiful indeed.

PREPARATORY EXERCISES

Make your left hand into a fist shape (fingers facing you), and shake it threateningly at an imaginary person(!). See how the arm moves backwards and forwards? A small and relaxed version of this movement is what we call an **arm vibrato**. Now try holding your left elbow with the right hand, and wiggle the wrist backwards and forwards, making a circle between thumb and second finger. This is the **wrist vibrato**. Either is OK, although I'm not much good at the latter and am better at the former, and therefore can probably explain it better.

Now with the violin, making sure that your hand is in the right position, play a note G on the D string (3rd finger). This might be a good note to start using the vibrato on. Let the first finger come away from the violin a little, so that the only points of contact with the violin here are the finger depressing the string, and the tip of the (correctly bent!) thumb. Now try working the arm and wrist backwards and forwards a little, slowly at first, then, as you get used to it, gradually faster, keeping the finger on the string firmly in contact with the string. You should hear a slight wobble in the sound as a slightly different part of the finger catches the string. Usually, the movement is **BACKWARDS FROM THE NOTE**. Practise different speeds and amounts of movement and listen to the different characters of the sound. You will probably find it hard at first to keep the vibrato going consistently. Don't try and run before you can walk, and be patient!

Generally, the bigger the wobble, the more 'passionate' the sound. Also, big movements sound best at low pitches. For the next exercise, try playing a scale, and vibrate on each note. Here we have two further difficulties, changing the obviousness of the effect according to pitch, and doing it on all four fingers. Fourth-finger vibrato is the most difficult, but this can often be avoided.

Now look at the music you are learning. Try the device out on some long notes. Generally notice the following:

1. Music of the Baroque and Classical eras: only use a slight vibrato on the longest notes
2. Music of the Romantic era: this allows for it more, if only because it is often more obviously 'emotional'. Even so, take care not to over-do it, as most players mistakenly do these days.
3. Twentieth-century music coincides with the time when the vibrato started to be used continuously, so you can now use it a lot more. However, it can sound ridiculous in fast passages, and besides is often impossible in such circumstances.

FOUR TYPES OF VIBRATO

These stem from the teachings of Louis Spohr, who wrote on this subject in 1833. Later writers such as Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser (1905) agreed, and others based their ideas here. The types are as true today as then, so let me explain:

1. Gradually increasing intensity: for the crescendo
2. Gradually decreasing intensity: for the diminuendo
3. Fast (in passagework and soft passages)
4. Slow (for big notes, loud and passionate)

This isn't exactly as Spohr had it, but will do for now to help you get some variety in your own use of vibrato.

CONCLUSION

Don't over-do it, and make sure that you can play your piece securely and musically before adding it. Vibrato can end up like a nervous twitch: make sure that *you* control *it*, and not the other way round! It takes a long time to develop, so build it up very gradually, in the ways I have suggested.

Vibrato has resulted in many different viewpoints, and mine are by no means representative of the average player of the present age. However, these notes indicate my preferred approach, so please take notice!