

Vibrato

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*A faulty vibrato will always remain an unbridgeable obstacle to the attainment of higher aims. And what has been done to aid unfortunates whose career has been threatened by a deficiency in this connection? Practically nothing. The teaching body has been content to call the vibrato “natural” and “impossible to learn,”.... Should the general development of violin instruction result in making thoroughly trained **teachers** available, then there will be no more pupils with a faulty vibrato.*

- from the well-known violin technique book “*The Art of Violin Playing*” by Carl Flesch, written in 1924. That’s seventy-four years ago, and if I’m any judge of things, we’re still awaiting the arrival of “thoroughly trained teachers”!

Vibrato, which is the oscillation of a pitch around a center point, is used by instruments (and voice) to enrich tone and soothe intonation. I would not be so presumptuous to assume that I can adequately teach vibrato from a web site, but here at least are a few of my thoughts and observations.

Most fiddling is much more discreet than classical violin in the use of vibrato. In fact, there are some top players in certain genres (especially southeastern old-time) that never use it at all. One of the first things I have to do with my violin students that are new to fiddling is to get them to quit using vibrato as a habit and get them to learn to hear where it fits. There's a certain relaxed quality about most fiddling that constant use of vibrato interferes with. Usually the determining factor in the use of vibrato will be how long the note lasts. A typical fast moving fiddle tune might only have vibrato at the end of a phrase, where there's a held note. Also, certain notes are often played with a tension created by sliding into or out of them, where vibrato would detract from the subtleties of the pitch change.

More problematic is the development of a full vibrato in those who are able to attain little or no vibrato. This is one of the most difficult things to teach. The mechanics of vibrato are not particularly hard to understand. It involves a rocking motion of the hand and/or arm, parallel to the string, in a matter that oscillates the finger that's in play on the fiddle. I'll assume that readers have already gotten at least some pointers from a live teacher or player, because it really needs to be addressed visually and with some feedback.

Why some are able to do vibrato so easily, while others can't do it at all, is to me, still something of a mystery. There are many who treat it as a coordination issue -- in other words, to do it correctly, you must simply learn the proper mechanics of vibrato. I tend to think it's more complicated than that. Many players (myself included) notice a significant deterioration of vibrato when their left hand is cold. As it warms up, vibrato becomes more full and easily controlled. Of course, it's not the *understanding* of the mechanics that is affected by the cold, it's the *execution* of them. In other words, simply knowing how to do vibrato isn't enough -- there is a flexibility issue internal to the hand that is important in vibrato.

Here's an exercise that is instructive for anyone having trouble with vibrato that further illustrates this. I came up with this exercise after noticing that some of my students could use vibrato on their guitar but not on their fiddle. Here's what you do: hold your fiddle on your lap like it's a guitar or a mandolin. Play a D note with your third finger on the A string, and see if you can get a rocking motion going that will produce vibrato. Surprisingly, most people can get a pretty good vibrato motion this way - when the instrument is across the lap. In fact, many guitarists use vibrato in just this manner. Now slowly pick up the fiddle, holding it with your other hand, and begin to bring it around and up toward the chin. Continue the vibrato motion while the fiddle body is now in midair. At some point, as the left hand rotates counterclockwise with the fiddle moving toward the chin, the vibrato will usually begin to disappear. For many, by the time the fiddle is under the chin, they've entirely lost any vibrato motion. This again is indicative of some lack of internal flexibility that directly lies at the heart of the problem, and it appears related to twisting of the hand from the elbow joint. Now, move the fiddle back toward the lap position and find that rotation point where you can get some vibrato, but just barely. Practice the vibrato motion in that position, until you feel it begin to work better there. The goal would be to eventually learn vibrato closer and closer to playing position under the chin.

My experience is that most players learn vibrato from just trying to do it. Sometimes it takes years to develop it fully, however the exercise above may speed up the learning process. I do think that learning at young age is a big advantage, but there are certainly many who have developed a strong vibrato as an adult. Of course, you'll have to play lots of slow pieces to work on it.

Carl Flesch, not one to be short of words or shy away from opinions, certainly had a lot to say about vibrato. Here are some of his more interesting quotes:

When all is said and done, no distinguished violinist cares for the vibrato of his colleagues.

Every pupil originally has the kind of vibrato peculiar to the teacher under whose guidance he made his first attempts in that direction.

Incidentally, there are many violinists whose ability to vibrate is most intimately bound up with their general physical or psychological disposition and hence, so to say, presents a species of mood thermometer.

Cold fingers also exert an unfavorable influence on vibratory activity, as well as temporary or permanent emotional coolness or restraint.

The opposite to this (perfect vibrato) is one produced mainly by an awkward slow wrist movement ... During the past few years, together with the industrialization of musical activities, this banal manner has domesticated itself more especially in second rate places of amusement, so that it might be appropriately designated the "cafe and movie" vibrato. In it the tone is squeezed together to form a syrupy mush which, consequent upon the uniform, continuous application of vibration lacks all contrast and more intimate expressional possibilities, and in a short space of time becomes unendurable.