A GUIDE TO TEACHING VIBRATO: AN ECLECTIC APPROACH

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OMEA Conference
January 16, 2015
Eugene, OR

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“If we consider that the goal of our violinistic-artistic endeavors is the complete realization of the feelings which a particular piece of music evokes in us, the vibrato is the most important means of achieving this end.”

Carl Flesh

Early Writings on Vibrato

Leopold Mozart: A Treatise On The Fundamental Principles Of Violin Playing (1756)

For if we strike a slack or a bell sharply, we hear after the stroke a certain wave like undulation of the struck note. And this trembling after-sound is called tremolo…Take a pains to imitate this natural quivering on the violin, when the finger is pressed down on the string, and one makes a small movement with the whole hand; which however must not move sideways but forwards toward the bridge and backward towards the scroll.

Louis Spohr: A Violin School (1831)
...(width of tremolo) should only be slight, in order that the deviation from purity of tone (intonation) may scarcely be observed by the ear.

James Winram: *Violin Playing and Violin Adjustment* (1908)

*There should be no close shake (vibrato) in exercises or scales, other than melodic exercises, and it should be judiciously used at all times, as it is possible to have too much of a good thing.*

**Beginning/Intermediate String Pedagogy Approaches to Teaching Vibrato**

**Paul Rolland:**

- Proposed that while the driving force comes from the hand, forearm, upper arm, even the shoulder, it is the movement of the fingertip that is the ultimate cause of vibrated sounds.
- Provided description of characteristics of “good vibrato”:
  - The speed and width of the vibrato movements are regular (reasonably even).
  - The average speed of the vibrato is about 6 and ½ cycles per second.
  - The average width (amplitude) of the vibrato is a quarter-tone.
- Suggested that teaching vibrato movements should start from the onset of the instruction.

**George Bornoff:**

- Proposed that vibrato originates from the tip of the finger: the finger pulls the wrist, rather than wrist pushes the finger.
- Emphasized that the finger needs to pass the vertical position to develop flexibility in the knuckles of the left hand.
- Explained an important rule for all four instruments: As the length of the string decreases the speed of the vibrato increases.
- Known for three clearly defined/explained stages of teaching vibrato: (a) preliminary exercises, (b) Controlled Oscillations and (c) Continuous Oscillations.

**Shinichi Suzuki:**
Proposed “Two Tone Vibrato”
Proposed that while fingertip movement is propelled by the wrist and forearm, the fingertip pad **first roles forward than backward.**
Suggested teaching vibrato **after several years of instruction** (in Book 4 – around Vivaldi a-minor Concerto)

Kato Havas:
- Advocated “natural vibrato” versus “forced vibrato”
- Explained that when fingers are very lightly placed on the string **“small column (or cushion) of air” remains in between the string and fingerboard.** When the bow is drawn across the string this column of air vibrates.

Advanced String Pedagogy Approaches to Teaching Vibrato

Ivan Galamian:
- Explained the relationship between vibrato and the dynamics of the bow: intense and wider vibrato is more appropriate for forte dynamics (arm vibrato) and narrower and slower vibrato is more appropriate for piano dynamics (finger and wrist vibrato).
- Additionally, **vibrato need to reflects musical style** (vibrato in Mozart vs. vibrato in Brahms)
- Explained that the shape of player’s finger has important influence on type of vibrato.
- Proposed that the **hand and not the finger leads the movement of vibrato.** (Many beginners have difficulty with hand vibrato because finger leads it.)
- Proposed that finger vibrato be taught the last as it is the most difficult to acquire.
- Known for sequence in which the beginning student rests the scroll on the music stand or against the wall. When wrist starts moving properly in third position vibrato is transferred to lower positions with an intermediate step in which teacher inserts two-three fingers between student’s hand and instrument.

Samuel Fisher:
- Proposed only two types of vibrato: (a) arm vibrato and (b) hand vibrato. Finger vibrato is a part of arm or hand vibrato.
- Proposed that first step in development of vibrato is to not to concentrate on vibrato itself but to concentrate on balance and lightness of the hand.
- Suggested practicing vibrato rhythms with metronome: begin at 60, 65, 70 bpm.
With each increase of speed the vibrato becomes narrower.

- Explained that *continuous vibrato* has **two aspects to it**:
  - Every note in the phrase needs to be vibrated (unless too fast): some notes are vibrated more some less, some faster, some slower, some wider, some narrower
  - Vibrato should not start late at the beginning of the note and should not stop before the end of the note: should continue between notes
- Known for suggestion to practice vibrato **from every angle**: arm vibrato, hand vibrato, the rotation of the forearm, individual movements of the three parts of finger, the different parts of the fingertip, every possible combination of width and speed, dynamics, etc.

**Carl Flesh:**

- Proposed that vibrato’s character, liveliness and duration **depicts a player’s personality**.
- Defined “**totally satisfying vibrato**” as the combination of finger, hand and forearm movements.
- Known for suggestion that even theoretically vibrato should be used only when musical reasons justify it. He observed that the great violinists **use vibrato all the time** but their vibrato **varies in speed and width** allowing for expression of feeling ranging from the softest, almost inaudible to the more passionate and intense.

**STEPS FOR TEACHING VIBRATO**

“We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”

Jerome Bruner, 1960

**Pre-Requisites:**

(a) Proper body posture: legs need to act as a platform for upper body; upper body and shoulders need to act as a platform for instrument.
(b) Left-hand frame established
(c) Soft and relaxed left arm, hand and thumb
(d) Fluency in shifting from lower to middle positions

(a) Exercises for establishing proper body posture:
  - Rolland steps
  - Suzuki steps
  - Havas steps
  - Kampter steps

(b) Exercises for forming left-hand frame:
• Geminiani chord (violin: 1st finger on F natural, 2nd on C natural, 3rd on G and 4th on D) & Leopold Mozart exercise
  • Left hand pizzicato (Pinkie Plucks in low, middle and high positions) and strumming
  • Double stops (in advance stage)

(c) Exercises for relaxing left arm, hand and thumb:
  • Relaxation exercises:
  •  Swinging left arm before playing
  •  Dropping left arm down while playing (e.g., in "Twinkles")
  •  Relaxing the arm by doing “Ski Jumps” and “Shuttles”
  •  Relaxing the wrists by moving it in and out
  •  Relaxing the thumb by tapping it against the neck, as well as moving it back and forth
  •  Tapping exercises:
  •   With the hand in the middle position and thumb under the neck, tap with the curved third finger on the top of the upper board to the left of the lowest string rhythms of the choice while imagining a ping-pong ball bouncing back.
  •  Tap rhythms of choice on each string while imagining fingers touching a hot-stove
  •  Combine “Tapping” rhythms in low, middle and high positions with the “Shuttle” exercises.

(d) Early shifting exercises:
  •  Ghosts (harmonic glissandos)
  •  Octave Harmonics
  •  Matching harmonics
  •  "Twinkle, Twinkle" with harmonics
  •  Up the Scale with Au Claire de Lune

Developing Vibrato:

Finger Vibrato:
  •  Beginning Stage (no instrument - no bow):
    •  Calisthenics Knuckles: flattening and bending the first knuckle of each left hand finger; needs to be rhythmical in motion (adapted from Rebecca Henry-Paul Rolland)
    •  Jelly Knuckles: “flyby” first knuckle (adapted from Rebecca Henry-Paul Rolland)
  •  Intermediate Stage (yes instrument-no bow):
    •  Calisthenics Knuckles: on top of the instrument; order of fingers: third, second, first and fourth finger (order of fingers adapted from Judy Bossuat)
• Place finger on string and alternate stretching and bending the finger while doing Dinner Rhythms (Dinner Rhythms adapted from Judy Bossuat)

• Advanced Stage (yes instrument-yes bow):
  • Pulsating or bouncing fingers as if altering harmonics and stopped tones while doing Dinner Rhythms on each finger; later play one-octave scales with pulsating fingers; it will sound like harmonics; try to keep bow hand unaffected by left hand (Carl Flesh; adapted by Paul Rolland)
  • Pre-Measured Wiggle Exercises: must be with teacher’s help for a long time (Paul Rolland; adapted by Rebecca Henry)
    • Just wiggle:
      • Scroll on teacher’s shoulder
      • Student plays "Twinkle" while sliding on Magic X
    • Focused wiggles:
      • Teacher is wiggling the student’s finger with the right hand on top (three fingers) of the student’s finger
      • Student’s thumb away from instrument and wiggle
      • Students’ thumb on neck
      • Teacher shakes student’s finger (with two fingers); try to find good sound (fast, wiggly)
  • Substitution of lower finger for higher (adapted from Ivan Galamian)
  • Chromatic scales with sliding fingerings (adapted from Ivan Galamian)

Wrist (Hand) Vibrato:
• Beginning Stage (no instrument-no bow)
  • Egg Shaker exercise with Dinner Rhythms (adapted from Judy Bossuat)
  • Relaxed wrist exercise Dinner Rhythms (adapted from Paul Rolland)

• Intermediate Stage (yes instrument-no bow):
  • Tapping exercises (adapted from Paul Rolland):
    • With the hand in the middle position and thumb under the neck, tap with the curved third finger on the top of the upper board to the left of the lowest string rhythms the choice while imagining ping-pong ball bouncing back.
• Tap rhythms of choice on each string while imagining fingers touching the hot-stove
  • “Rivarde Exercise” (Carl Flesh & adapted by Paul Rolland)
    • Hand in middle position with lower part of the palm touching instrument’s shoulder
      • Third finger lightly touching the string (harmonic touch)
        • Slant the hand back towards the scroll, press the third finger and propel hand forward, then let it fall back immediately, then rest. This is a single vibrato cycle.
          • Practice with all of the fingers in patterns of two, three, four and five full cycles followed by rests.
  • Advanced Stage (yes instrument-yes bow):
    • Controlled Oscillations
      • Dinner Rhythms with harmonics touched in middle position (developed by Dijana Ihas)
        • Bornoff’s sequence with little more pressure (adapted from George Bornoff)
    • Continuous Oscillations
    • Bornoff’s sequence (adapted from George Bornoff)
    • Fisher’s rhythms (adapted from Samuel Fisher)

Arm Vibrato:
• Beginning stage (no instrument-no bow):
  • See-Saw exercise (developed by Dijana Ihas)
  • Coordination exercise (adapted from Rebecca Henry & Paul Rolland)
    • Both hands are opening
    • Parallel motion
    • Left hand goes down & up while bow is moving slowly
    • Right hand tremolo left hand glissando
  • Intermediate stage (yes instrument-no bow):
    • Polishing string exercise (adapted from Paul Rolland)
      • Instrument in “rest position”
        • With tissue paper “polish” the strings in the low, middle and high positions while keeping the base of the first finger close to the instrument’s neck
          • Repeat without the tissue paper.
          • Repeat in “shotgun” position.
          • Repeat in “playing” position.
    • Sliding on Magic X exercise (start with instrument in rest position)
• Big motions
• Smaller and smaller
• Stop fingers while thumb is still moving
• Opposite: thumb stops while fingers are still moving
(fingers off)
• Thumb and fingers are anchored while continuing balanced swinging

• Advanced stage (yes instrument-yes bow):
  • *Ghost Exercise*: harmonics and stop anywhere; same pressure on harmonics and vibrato *(Paul Rolland; adapted by Rebecca Henry)*
• Play open A or D string with slow bow while sliding on Magic X. *(Paul Rolland; adapted by Rebecca Henry)*
• Twinkle Theme (and all other beginning songs) while sliding on Magic X on every open D and A string *(Paul Rolland; adapted by Rebecca Henry)*
• *Finger-Open String Exercise & Open-Finger Exercise* (Paul Rolland)
  • In 3rd position
    • Two notes per bow - *legato*
    • 1st-open 1st open, 2nd open 2nd open, 3rd open 3rd open, 4th open 4th open; and back starting with 4th
    • Release elbow during open string
  • Variation (*Open-Finger*): Open 1, open 2, etc. like above
    • One note (half note) per bow
    • Quarter note up bow and half note down bow;
    • Slurred quarter and half note
    • Both elbows swing into it
• Playing familiar tunes with vibrato
• Starting with assigned notes only
• Hatikvah

Remediating vibrato:

• Problem: the student’s vibrato is too wide and therefore not applicable for soft dynamics.
  • Remedy for controlling width of vibrato:
    • If the student has too wide a vibrato, practice fast vertical motions with each finger in 3rd position; fingers go very fast down and up (like thrill vibrato) *(adapted from Samuel Fisher)*
• Problem: student always plays with the same speed of the vibrato and therefore is not able to vibrate notes in faster passages.
  • Remedy for controlling speed of vibrato:
• Practice scales in long note values with crescendo to decrescendo and all kinds of dynamic combinations (adapted from Rebecca Henry & Paul Rolland)

• Problem: student vibrates only some notes or student starts the note without vibrato, adds some vibrato and stops vibrating again.
  • Remedy for developing continuous vibrato:
    • Walking Fingers (adapted from Rebecca Henry)
    • Scales in quarter notes (bowing pattern: first note separated, other notes slurred); vibrate in between notes; release finger before transferring to next
    • Bornoff’s Continuous Oscillations exercises
  • Problem: student avoids vibrating even though she/he has technical facilities to do so.
    • Remedy for encouraging student to incorporate vibrato in their playing:
      • Assign a few special notes in the piece that the student must vibrate and then expand to other notes

References


