Vibrato width

Area of fingertip

The width of vibrato is partly to do with the placement of the fingertip on the string:

More of the pad of the finger on the string: wider vibrato.

More of the tip of the finger on the string: narrower vibrato.

- Repeat a note or short phrase several times, each time experimenting with a different placement of the fingers. Move gradually between more on the tip and less on the tip, until finding the desired vibrato colour and expression.

Example

Correcting over-wide vibrato

Use non-vibrato as a continual reference point to prevent the vibrato becoming over-wide (and slow).

If you generally play with too wide a vibrato, when you make it narrower the vibrato may seem inaudible and expressionless in comparison, and you quickly go back to the old, wider vibrato.

Using non-vibrato as the reference point ensures that a too-wide vibrato is unlikely. Having started with non-vibrato, the slightest vibrato seems obvious and much more variety of colour comes into the playing. Experiment on one note:

- Sustain a note without vibrato about 1 centimetre from the bridge, looking for the exact proportions of speed and pressure to make the string vibrate at its best.

- Having found the best vibration of the string, add the tiniest amount of vibrato. After the straight, bare tone of non-vibrato, even this vibrato seems very clear and obvious.

Hear the vibrato in or as part of the tone itself, rather than something extra put on top of the tone. Hear the tone change from a straight, bare sound to one that ‘shimmers’ or ‘throbs’.

Afterwards, a wide vibrato seems very wide in comparison. Apply the same process to individual notes in pieces, and to complete phrases.

Example

Example
(1) Play without vibrato. Play near the bridge, adjusting the speed and pressure until the tone is ringing and even, and the string is vibrating widely.

(2) Add the narrowest vibrato and listen to the tone change from a ‘straight’ sound into one that ‘throbs’. Notice how the throbbing is part of the tone itself.

This creates a vibrato that sounds like ‘G–G–G–G–G–G’ rather than alternating between G and a lower note somewhere between F♯ and G.

Using another finger as a model

Each finger on the same hand may have its own tendency towards one particular vibrato or another, some fingers tending towards a narrower vibrato, others towards a wider vibrato.

As part of experimenting to find exactly the right quality of vibrato for a particular note, use other fingers on the same note as a point of comparison. The new finger can serve either as a model, or as an immediate way to get a new musical feeling for the note, rather than using only the vibrato that the finger naturally offers.

Violin Concerto no. 1 in G minor, op. 25, Bruch

First movement

• Use the second finger as a model for the fourth finger A♯ and A:

• Make the same vibrato on each pair of fingerings:

Next month’s BASICS returns to