
BASICS

Continuous vibrato

The modern approach to vibrato is that every note in a phrase should be vibrated, unless too fast to be practical, each note melting seamlessly into the next. There is much debate about the use of vibrato in earlier centuries. Some are convinced that before Fritz Kreisler, in the early twentieth century, vibrato was used only sparingly, on certain long or important notes, and in most cases used like an ornament.

Others argue that the natural phenomenon of vibrato – and not just the occasional use of it – has been around for as long as people have been playing string instruments. They point to Geminiani's *Art of Playing on the Violin* (London, 1751). After describing vibrato (You must press the Finger strongly upon the String of the Instrument, and move the Wrist in and out slowly and equally), Geminiani describes the various qualities that vibrato may lend to long notes (Majesty, Dignity, Affliction, Fear). However, then he goes on to say that ‘when it is made on short notes, it only contributes to make their Sound more agreeable and for this Reason it should be made use of as often as possible.’

There is also debate about the merits of continuous vibrato, due to the fact that over-use would cause many moments of left hand insecurity in intonation, shifting, evenness of finger action and so on. It is also true that when heard in context (and especially from a slight distance) notes played without vibrato often sound perfectly natural and acceptable. Another argument against too much vibrato is that if you do something all the time you cease to notice it, and that the best way to bring out a note with vibrato is to lessen (or stop altogether) the vibrato before and after the note in question.

However, assuming its judicious use there are two aspects to continuous vibrato:

- 1 Every note in a phrase should be vibrated, unless too fast to be practical – or for artistic reasons. Non-continuous vibrato, the vibrato stopping at random on odd notes for no reason, could be represented like this:

Example

Instead, every note in such a passage should receive vibrato – some notes more, some less, some faster, some slower, SOME WIDER SOME NARROWER – unless a deliberate musical effect or expression is desired.

- 2 The vibrato must not be late starting at the beginning of each note, or stop at the end of each note. Even if THERE IS VIBRATO ON EVERY NOTE, and IT is continuous in that sense, if the vibrato starts and stops on a note it is not the same as a truly continuous vibrato WHICH CONTINUES BETWEEN NOTES.

Example

Non-continuous vibrato, the vibrato halting as the fingers drop or lift, could be represented as follows:

BASICS

EXERCISE: Moving fingers in slow motion

Example 3 shows a traditional continuous vibrato exercise in which you encourage the two sets of actions – those of moving the finger and those of vibrato – to be entirely independent.

Example

- Drop or lift the finger extremely slowly – as though you do not want anyone to notice that the finger is moving. Keep the vibrato going without allowing it to stop even for a fraction of a second as the finger approaches the string, or begins to leave it.
- Lowering a finger, when it gets close enough to the string each forward movement of the vibrato touches the string slightly. This produces a fuzzy, distorted sound. The sound gradually improves as the finger stops the note more fully.
- Lifting off the same thing happens: as the finger begins to release the string there is an in-between stage where each backward movement of the vibrato causes the sound to break, until the finger is finally completely clear of the string.
- Make this stage – between the finger just beginning to touch or leave the string and it fully stopping it or being clear of it – as long as possible by continuing to move the finger extremely slowly.
- When descending from, say, fourth finger to third finger, make sure that the lower finger is already on the string. Both fingers vibrate together as the upper finger slowly lifts. This is shown as an x-note.

Play the same pattern on the other strings.

Applying the exercise to the repertoire

- Lift and drop the fingers unnaturally slowly while vibrating without stopping. The jagged line represents the 'fuzz' caused by the finger leaving or approaching the string.

Example

After practising like this for only a few moments, continuous vibrato will feel easy and natural.