
BASICS

Vibrato

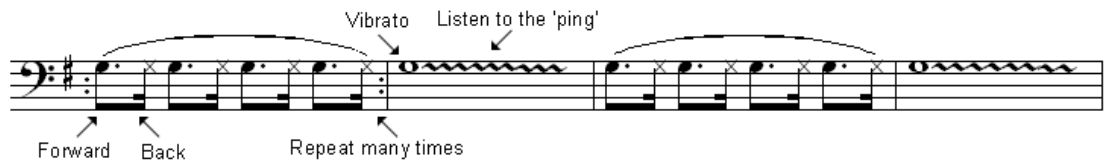
The throb of pure emotion

The quivers of vibrato, and of emotion, closely resemble each other. When you laugh or cry, you make similar physical motions in your breathing and in the muscles of your chest, stomach, solar plexus and so on. Joy and sorrow are so closely related that we sometimes 'weep with joy' or 'laugh with horror'. Sometimes you cannot tell if someone who has become hysterical is laughing or crying; and in fact, one moment they may be doing one, and in the next moment the other.

You may suffer an ice burn; or, lying in a hot bath, if you put your foot under the cold tap the cold water may feel as though it is scalding you; often, at a moment of the greatest joy or happiness, there may be a certain sense of pain or sorrow contained somewhere within it; equally, in pain there can be a feeling of pleasure.

In all music, from Bach or Beethoven to film and popular music, there are often melodies which, being in a major key, may at first seem 'happy', bright, positive and so on – as opposed to having the 'sad' qualities of the minor – and yet you cannot really tell if they are one or the other. A certain phrase may seem 'happy' and in another moment seem 'sad'; or it may contain equal elements of both at the same time. In the same way, the throb of vibrato on a string instrument is like pure emotion; but is it joy or sorrow?

I often think of a discussion I once had with a professional orchestral cellist about vibrato. I showed her how to make a pulsing, throbbing sound by rocking the finger in a dotted rhythm, and then hearing that pulsing in the fast, normal vibrato like this:



She did this a few times, and then sat back in her chair and said:

"I've just realised something: I have been playing the cello for twenty years, and before this moment I have never actually listened to the throb of the vibrato. I've always thought that if this was happening" – she made a vibrato movement with her left hand in the air – "then vibrato was ok, vibrato was taken care of. I would think about something else – what the bow was doing, or intonation or whatever. So long as the hand was shaking I gave it no further thought. Never before have I stopped and listened to, and actually heard, the pulsing in the vibrato."

It sounds extreme, expressed like that, but actually this is not so unusual. The moment you make a connection between the vibrato 'throb' and human emotion, and you listen to your vibrato, it takes on a new emotional quality as it moves from merely mechanical to truly expressive.

Changing the quality of vibrato

Change is easy to achieve since everything about vibrato comes from only a few factors. An adjustment in any one of them changes the overall quality of vibrato entirely:

- Which part of the fingertip – change between more on the tip and more on the pad
- The heaviness of the finger in the string – change between releasing more, or releasing less, during the backward movement
- The width of the movement – change between wider and narrower
- The speed of the movement – change between faster and slower
- The direction of the movement – change between more dotted (pulsing to the upper pitch of the vibrato) to a more even rhythm in the vibrato movement.

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Developing speed

The element that most players need to develop is speed. It is rare to find a player with a vibrato that is generally too fast, but common to hear one that is too slow.

Exercise 1: Using the vibrato trill as an exercise

Vibrato trills are played by positioning the tip of the upper finger of the trill very close to the string. The rocking movement of the vibrato makes the finger touch and leave the string and produces an extremely fast, brilliant effect, without you actually moving the trilling finger up and down at all.

Trilling like this is normally done only in semitone trills, and even then only in very high positions; but it is useful in first position as an exercise.

- Do not think about the movement of the arm, hand, or finger. Simply use the sound of the trill to speed up the vibrato:

Do not lift and drop the second finger - make a vibrato movement

simile

- Begin at $\text{♩} = 60$, and repeat at 70, 80, 90 and 100.
- Do the same with the other fingers:

simile

Exercise 2: Tapping with the middle joint of the thumb

It is often easier to control a tapping movement, and to speed it up, than it is to control an actual vibrato. Afterwards, the vibrato feels easier too.

- Begin with the hand in 3rd or 4th position, so that the palm of the hand is close to the end of the neck (Fig. 0).
- Moving the forearm from the elbow, tap the middle joint of the thumb against the neck block – i.e. where the neck attaches to the body of the violin – and then return to the starting position.
Also keep the forearm still and move only the hand.
- With the metronome set at 60, tap once on each beat, then 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8 times.
- Then move the metronome up to 65 or 70 and repeat.
- Continue increasing the metronome until you simply cannot tap any faster; then continue to push against that limit.
- As the speed gets faster and faster, remember to make every action smaller and smaller. Keep the left upper arm and shoulder free.



Figure 1 Tap against the neck block with the bone in the thumb