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# BASICS

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## Vibrato

### Basing vibrato on freedom

The very first condition necessary for a really good vibrato is that it is based on a feeling of complete freedom and lack of tension in the arm, hand or fingers. The thing to keep in mind is that you do not need to try to develop ‘flexibility’ in your hands and fingers. You already have it most of the time. Whenever you are not playing, and you are engaged in ordinary, everyday activities, your hands are soft, relaxed and pliable. What you must do is keep that softness and flexibility when you play the violin.

Your hands are soft and pliable before you pick up the instrument; keep them like that as you go to pick up the violin and bow; then keep them soft and pliable as you move your fingers around the fingerboard and manipulate the bow. Here is a very helpful thing to do:

- Hold the violin in playing position under your chin but with your left arm by your side. If necessary use your right hand to prevent the violin from falling, holding the violin on the body of the instrument.
- Feel how soft, free and relaxed your left hand is. Raise it half way towards the neck of the violin and stop. Make sure it is exactly the same as it was when it was further away. Move closer so that it is almost touching the neck of the violin, and stop. Make sure you are still entirely soft and free.
- Move the hand into playing position. Check that it still feels the same as when you started. If somebody gently poked any part of your fingers, hand or wrist, there would be a ‘give’ there without any hint of hard resistance.
- Place a finger on a string, still keeping the same lack of muscular reaction in every other part of the hand and fingers. Slowly and gently sink the finger into the string enough to stop it. Do not react in any other part of the hand. Begin the slowest, narrowest vibrato, still without allowing any part of the hand to harden or resist for a moment. Feel a slight movement in each joint of the finger as the tip rolls backwards and forwards on the string.

Of course, you can’t do anything if you are all floppy, and good muscular action is not about that. But this is the starting point, and afterwards only a little muscular action feels like a quite a lot. There is a perfect analogy of this ‘starting from zero’ approach in the width of the vibrato.

### Basing vibrato on non-vibrato

Suppose you have quite a wide vibrato and you decide you should try making it narrower – or somebody tells you that you should. The problem is that the moment you reduce the width of the vibrato it often seems as if you are not really vibrating at all. You can’t even hear it now. So it is not long before you go back to the wider vibrato that you are used to.

Instead, try listening first to the sound of a note without any vibrato whatsoever. Listen for more than a moment: concentrate on the exact nature of the vibrato-less note, its exact pitch and tonal qualities. Sustain whole bows down and up, making a ringing resonant sound (not necessarily loud) that makes the string vibrate widely.

Then, without changing what you are doing with the bow whatsoever, add the tiniest, slightest, almost imperceptible vibrato movement. See how extremely obvious and noticeable it is in comparison with the ‘bare’, straight sound that you had before. Stop and start the vibrato and listen to the difference. Notice how the sound of the vibrato seems to come out of the sound of the string. When you add the vibrato it seems as if the note itself begins to throb, rather than the vibrato seeming to be something put on top of the principal sound. The great Hungarian violinist Sandor Vegh used to complain about people using vibrato ‘like slapping on too much make-up’. The vibrato should come *out* of the sound, not be imposed on top of it.

After playing with this minimalist vibrato, it is easy to appreciate that just a little bit more is already quite a lot, and the urge to ‘wobble’ too much vanishes.

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## Listening to your vibrato slowed-down

The American violin teacher Dorothy DeLay used to recommend that students record themselves and listen back at half speed in order to analyze their vibrato. It was easy to do at that time: you recorded on reel-to-reel tape at 7½ inches per second, and played back at ¾ inches per second. But when tape was replaced by digital recorders this facility vanished, and for many years it has not been readily possible without special gear. Now with modern computers it is so simple. Right-click on the play button in WMP and a list of playback-speed options appears. Select 'slow', and then play, and a whole new world of listening to the sound of the violin opens up.

However, when you play reel-to-reel tapes at half speed of course the pitch goes down as well. The beauty of digital sound is that when you slow it down the pitch stays the same. This means that the first thing you probably want to do is to have a close examination of your intonation at half speed (which may take some courage!). But record yourself playing something for the purposes of vibrato, and you may get quite a surprise when you hear it back at half speed. (The built-in microphone you get on any computer is normally quite sufficient for this.)

## Forward-forward and heavy-light: making the ping

The two chief factors in vibrato are speed and width. The first thing you may notice listening back at half-speed is that the vibrato is too wide, and spoils the intonation of the note in a way that you had not realised before. Another thing you may notice is that on many notes the vibrato actually consists only of one movement backward and one movement forward. In other words, it is so slow that there wasn't time to get more vibrato oscillations in before the note was over.

The perfect analogy for the speed of vibrato is the speed of trills. The more brilliant you want a trill to sound, the more notes there must be in it; and the more notes – within the same time-period – the faster the notes have to be. In your recording find those notes or fingers where you are doing only one 'wobble' of vibrato per note, and see if you can make the vibrato faster. (So first make it narrower). Then record yourself again and see if you can count more 'vibratos' in each note.

But more than just how fast or how wide, there are two fascinating areas of vibrato that you can really catch at half speed. One is the desired unevenness of the rhythm of the backwards-and-forwards movement. The feeling should be one of forward-forward-forward-forward into the in-tune note, not forward-back. The other is the desired unevenness of the finger-pressure on the string during the movement.



Ex. 1 shows an even vibrato movement where the finger rolls back from the in-tune note to a pitch very slightly flatter, and then rolls forward back to the in-tune note (never vibrate above the in-tune note). While no vibrato should be excluded from the palette of possibilities, and an even-movement vibrato like this must be appropriate sometime somewhere, the evenness makes the lower pitch of the vibrato quite evident.

Instead, a dotted rhythm within the vibrato (Ex. 2) means literally that you spend most of the time on the in-tune note itself, and much less time on the flattened pitch.

The second question is that of finger-pressure. If you rest the flat of your hand on a table top and lean on to one side of your hand and back to flat again, you can feel the pressure of your hand into the table increase and then decrease again as you go back to the flat position. It is the same with the finger on the string: as you roll forward into the in-tune note, the finger-pressure increases; as you go back, briefly, for the flattened pitch, the finger-pressure decreases. (If you do it enough you can even see the string itself go up and down with the changing finger-pressure.) Ex. 2 shows an even finger-pressure both backwards and forwards, which must be avoided if you want to avoid tension and over-work; Ex. 3 shows the finger releasing in the backward movement (marked as an x-note).

This combination of the internal rhythm of the vibrato, and the lightening finger-pressure, gives the possibility of a throbby, 'pingy' vibrato that sounds very pure, rather like a fast tremolo with the bow on one note. But of course the whole range of vibrato must extend from one extreme to the other.

Next month:  
Thirds in double-stops