School Orchestra

Thoughts on Vibrato and Bowing

by Paul Tarabek

Vibrato

With vibrato, the primary object is to vibrate the fingers, but many players are so preoccupied with this final aim that the whole affair becomes a localized action, involving fingers and wrist only. Such players actually cannot play without vibrato and we know for sure that it is impossible to play fast passages with precision using vibrato. Furthermore, when practicing slowly and for intonation, the violinist must be able to stop the vibrato.

The ideal vibrato is a combination of balance between the arm, wrist and fingers, with the primary motivating force from the big muscles of the forearm.

From all this, it becomes clear that to have an evenly controlled vibrato the fingers must be firm on the fingerboard, so that the fingertips will not slip, but, acting as pivots, will give the sonority characteristic of violin playing. To achieve such strong fingers there is only one suggestion: double stops in every possible combination, chords, trills and a very firm hold of the violin between the chin and shoulder.

There must be variety in using vibrato. In the lower strings, it is always better, especially in slow melodies, to use a narrow, slow vibrato. The speed of the bow also influences the pitch of the sound. A fast, broad wrist vibrato in combination with fast bow speed will produce most of the time what we describe as the "goat's bleat." Dynamics can also help the vibrato. In a long, sostenuto bow crescendo, the vibrato would increase with the intensity of the bow pressure. Enesco was, in this regard, a great master.

Bowing

The recent trend in bowing is toward simplification. Economy of effort in tone production is essential for the physical and psychological well-being of the player. The attention of the player should not be focused only on the end, but rather on the means of reaching the same. The bow pressure is not produced by the fingers alone, rather through the fingers *from* the arm-shoulder. We should not work constantly against natural gravity (speaking of the down-bow motion). On the contrary, the feeling of hanging at the frog should be emphasized. One very important remark is that the position of the right hand on the bow cannot be the same in playing at the frog and at the tip. At the frog the position of the fingers should have a round appearance, especially the little finger. The contact of the index finger at the frog should be (for normal hands) in the lower part of the second joint. At the tip this contact is definitely in the upper part of the third joint and the little finger gets a straight appearance, but always relaxed.

Various theories exist regarding the change of the bow at the frog. One of the most common ways is to stop the arm motion just before finishing the stroke and conclude the stroke with a combined wrist-finger movement. This procedure gives the player a physical good feeling of smoothness and he may go a long way with this method, but it is contrary to physical laws. The bow increases speed where it should slow down. And somehow gets out of control for a split second. The spasmodic jerk of the wrist gives to the sound a sudden change in quality that can vary from an accent to a fading space. This procedure also affects the short detaché in the middle of the bow which cannot be performed with floppy fingers and wrist. Changing the bow with the arm and with coordinated minimum wrist-fingers action is no doubt the most successful style. In this the upper arm leads from the middle to the frog. The elbow turns slightly down immediately *before* completing the up-stroke, while bow and hand go up to finish without any increase of speed.

For the down bow, the elbow is already in the ideal position of "pulling down" and it proceeds until the middle, where the correct position of parallel bow and upper arm should be reached (on every single string).

Violinist Paul Tarabek teaches in Northfield and Faribault.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2001 (Vol. 4, No. 1)