



# CELLO

## Voluptuous Vibrato

by David Holmes

I eagerly anticipate when the time comes for a student to learn vibrato, for I am in love with vibrato. The intensity, beauty and nuance it adds to a string player's sound are truly remarkable. A student who develops a lovely vibrato suddenly sounds like they've advanced several years as a player. When, however, do we teach vibrato to the cello student? The answer will vary from teacher to teacher, but all agree that we teach vibrato *when the student is ready*. My readiness list includes a few things I look and hope for.

### Pre-vibrato skills

1. A student's left hand fingers need to be able to hold the string down with balanced arm weight, which means the thumb must be trained not to squeeze. Thumbs hate vibrato and will try to kill or mortally wound it, leaving in its wake a tight, narrow, buzzing vibrato.
2. The student needs to have developed an ability to balance on each finger independently. "Block" fingers (holding the string down with as many fingers as possible) will inhibit the development of vibrato. Train the thumb, and by extension, the arm, to "follow" the playing finger around in the pursuit of a balanced left hand. Leading with the arm when going from finger to finger can help with this skill.
3. A student needs comfort with basic shifting. Vibrato and shifting are cousins to one another. An easy shifting motion, with a light thumb and a control of the release of weight from the left hand fingers will aid in teaching vibrato.

### Introductory vibrato exercises away from the cello

1. Put your right arm on your right or left shoulder (whichever feels more comfy). Use the right forearm skin as a fingerboard for the left hand. With the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger and thumb, practice the gentle "scratching" shifting motion up and down the right arm. Next, sink into the arm with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, feeling that massage sensation, and, though no longer hearing the "scratch," keeping the same shifting arm motion going. Keep the left arm motion even, slow, large and relaxed. Go back and forth from scratch to massage, using the same arm motion for each. Change fingers and repeat. Watch for tension in shoulders and thumb, and check for an elbow that doesn't pump up and down.
2. Stand up next to a wall. Put your left elbow against the wall, at the appropriate level for vibrato. Sink a finger into the right arm, the left shoulder, or just behind the left clavicle bone, which provides a nice dent on some bodies. Practice a vibrato motion, noticing that the elbow stays in one place when vibrating correctly. Also, imagine holding a can of pop in this position and "shaking" it up by going back and forth in the air near the left ear.

Special considerations: Vibrato is not an "opening the door

knob" motion of the hand. It is a balanced interaction of the entire arm, except possibly in thumb position, where vibrato is generated more from the forearm than the entire arm. The jelly-like upper arm is a good thing to look for in first position vibrato.

### Progressive vibrato exercise with the cello (from Chicago cellist Gilda Barston)

I really like Ms. Barston's detailed and thorough steps to a healthy vibrato and have found them very useful in my studio.

1. Metronome at 72-80. Cup fingers loosely between the D and G string with thumb on fingerboard at the nut. Slide the whole hand from nut to neck and back, 1 time per beat, then 2 times per beat. Repeat 8 times each way.
2. Same as above, but while also bowing whole notes on the A-string.
3. Do #1 and #2 with each finger (thumb and 1, thumb and 2, thumb and 3, thumb and 4). Shift from nut to neck on each motion.
4. Metronome up to 100. Imagine the finger is stuck in a wad of bubble gum. Use each finger individually on D string while still bowing open A string. Keep the arm motion energetic, with fingers still between the D and G string.
5. Do #4 while bowing and fingering on D string. Keep motion slow and even, but energetic.
6. Metronome now at 112. Repeat #4 and #5 and alternate fingers randomly. Try at metronome marking of 120.
7. Walking fingers without bow, or, learning to transfer the vibrato motion from finger to finger. Vibrate on 1<sup>st</sup> finger; put 2 down while 1 is still vibrating; lift 1, so only 2 is now vibrating. Continue in this way to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers. Practice with metronome changes: 104, 112, 120.
8. Use a tonalization or scale to practice continuous vibrato.
9. Practice half-step shifts back from the D on the G string ("nauseous"). Practice a slow piece with nauseous vibrato (*Berceuse, Swan*, etc.)

### Other fun additions

Use a tennis ball on any of the above exercises, or a "vibrato machine" (example: a tic-tac container with tic-tacs that is attached to the back of the left hand with a rubber band. This creates a rhythmic percussive sound when paired with vibrato. The vibrato machine is an excellent and fun teaching aid.) Practicing half-step shifts with each finger is a helpful vibrato warm-up, as is using "nauseous" vibrato mentioned above, where the vibrato motion is so big and loose that it makes a sickly glissando sound.

### Vibrato refinement

After a student has an established vibrato, deeper layers of control can be pursued.

1. Set the metronome at 60 and fluidly change the vibrato pulses from quarters to eighths to triplets to sixteenths (and back).
2. Practice going from finger to finger on one note without a change in the vibrato's sound. The 4<sup>th</sup> finger, because of its small size, will need to widen its oscillation to match the other fingers.
3. Play on the pads of the fingers, as opposed to the tips of the fingers, to produce a more luscious vibrato. Also, pointing the nail of the playing finger toward the bridge—some might call this pronation—can help beautify one's vibrato.
4. Transferring vibrato smoothly from finger to finger: #7 above (walking fingers) is very helpful with this issue. One can also practice going from a low finger to a higher finger by dropping the higher number finger down on the string at the point that the vibrato is pulsing upward in pitch. This can be reversed when moving from a higher number finger to a lower number.

The two parameters of vibrato—width and speed—should be discussed with the student at some point early on. A general rule is that the wider a string is vibrating, the wider and faster the vibrato should be. So, the louder the tone, the faster and wider the vibrato should be. The frequency of the pitch affects what type of vibrato is necessary: C string notes will need a wider vibrato than A string notes. Very high thumb position notes will need the narrowest vibrato. Practice mixing and matching different speeds with different widths: fast with narrow, fast with wide, slow with narrow, and slow with wide. What do the results of these pairings teach us about what makes a beautiful vibrato? A student is now ready to be illuminated by *The Golden Rule of Vibrato: If thou hast time to use vibrato on a note, thou shalt use vibrato on that note.*

One other consideration is a bit controversial. I was always taught that vibrato sounds best when going from below the pitch up to the pitch, and back down again. However, in recent years, I've come to like vibrating a bit above and below the pitch rather than only below the pitch. I encourage experiments with this idea.

This brings me to one of the newer resources that we cellists have: YouTube. In researching this article, I googled “cello vibrato” and was impressed with what that search yielded. Several videos that I found interesting are CelloProfessor.com (with Jamie Fiste, the cellist at Central Michigan University). He had a new idea about the shoulder rotation in vibrato. Alan Harris, a well-known cello teacher, also has two YouTube videos on vibrato. My favorite, from the limited perusing I did, were the short, interesting, and amusing videos (over 100!) by Dave Finkel of the Emerson Quartet, covering many aspects of cello technique, including 12 videos about vibrato. Some of the titles are *Artistic use of Vibrato*, *Cufflink Vibrato*, *Vibrato Above: Good or Bad*, *Vibrato Width*, and others.

Ah, vibrato, I love thy beauteous possibilities!  
Happy teaching and playing!

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