



VIOLIN

Vibrato – How Can We Start It?

by Elizabeth Ericksen

Because of my own difficulties learning vibrato, I have always been interested in any articles or workshops that deal with this issue. This article will present a number of ideas for teaching vibrato.

For myself, I was lucky that I studied violin with Paul Rolland,[†] who developed a number of the exercises that are now regularly used to teach vibrato. One of the most valuable teaching tools I learned from him was the importance of persistence in dealing with a major technical problem. Every lesson started with 5-10 minutes of vibrato work. If there was any improvement, there was rejoicing. I had an extremely tight and jerky vibrato. The first time that I was able to put three shakes together in a row without jerking felt like a milestone. This came after about two months of lessons. It took about a year of this kind of work before I had a consistent, workable vibrato and another year after that before I was able to vary my vibrato speed and width.

It is of vital importance to start teaching vibrato right from the first lesson.

You do this by teaching shifting motions as soon as the student can hold the violin or viola. Mr. Rolland developed an exercise called the “Shuttle Game.” As soon as the instrument is in place, have the student shift up and down from 1st to 5th position with the fingers over the fingerboard like an umbrella. When the student is ready, have them use the left hand 4th finger, plucking in Low, Middle, and High positions, making sure the left thumb travels along with the hand. This exercise also helps promote shifting.

Another exercise that Mr. Rolland promoted was tapping on the left bout of the violin. If done correctly, tapping can help a student “feel” what a vibrato motion is like.

Make sure that the student has a rebound when tapping and doesn't just tap down on the violin. You can say the violin is a hot stove and the hand naturally hops back from the violin after tapping. The rebound is what mimics the vibrato movement. Mary Horozaniecki talks about hearing a “ping” in vibrato—the motion that creates “ping” is the rebound.

An exercise I learned from Mimi Zweig's workshop is for the teacher to help the student play a note with vibrato. Have the student place 2nd or 3rd finger on the fingerboard. The teacher stands at the peg box of the violin and places a finger of the left hand on the nail of the student's finger to hold the finger in place. Then the teacher lightly holds the middle joint of the student's finger and creates a vibrato, with the student bowing on the instrument. This helps the student feel and hear the “ping” and also feel the passive motion of the finger joints during vibrato.

Next you can have the student add the bow to the “Shuttle Game” (leave off the plucking at this point). This is an important step because it can be difficult to move up and down the violin while at the same time bowing sideways. After this, put fingers on the strings (without the bow) and “Polish the Strings.” When the student looks comfortable with “Polishing,” you can add the bow as the student glides up and down the instrument playing harmonics. Mr. Rolland called this “Ghost Tones” and it is a fun exercise to play around Halloween. These exercises can be done in a group—even cellos and basses can join in.

Now you are ready to combine the two motions: “Shuttle Game” and “Polishing the String.” At first try this with no bow. With fingers lightly on the string, allowing the thumb to move with the hand, travel up and down the instrument – 1st to 5th position, 2nd to 5th, 3rd to 5th, 3rd to 4th. As the slide gets smaller, the speed increases. Next, try the same exercise but anchor the thumb. Gradually, add weight to the finger so that it lightly presses the string down—start with 2nd and 3rd fingers, then add 1st and eventually 4th. Add bow to the above exercises.

Jennifer Mischa wrote an article *Easing Into Vibrato* in the *American String Teacher* (Nov, 2003, pp. 84-87) that describes this in an orchestra setting. Another exercise you can try is to use vibrato on harmonics and gradually add weight to the finger.

It is important to remember that a single vibrato impulse is a rebound. With the hand in 3rd or 4th position and using 3rd or 2nd finger, have the student play one vibrato impulse, then 2, then 3, then 4... up to 20 oscillations. If the vibrato breaks down, have the student stop, release the arm (swing the arm to the left) and try again. Never continue without stopping if the vibrato goes “haywire”—it is not going to get better at that point. Later you can have the student add 1st and then 4th fingers.

In *Viva Vibrato* (Kjos, 1997), Gerry Fischbach and Robert Frost introduced the “WaWa” Exercise. Each “Wa” is a single vibrato impulse with a rebound. They suggest starting in 3rd position with 2nd finger (E on the A string for violin and A on the D string for viola) and then High 3rd finger (F# on the A, B on the D). At first the exercise is: WaWa Rest – WaWa Rest – WaWa Rest – WaWa Rest. Next the student plays: WaWa WaWa WaWa WaWa Rest. Later add 1st finger (D on the A, G on the D) and then 4th finger (G on the A, C on the D). Then they have students play an exercise on all 4 strings:

1st – High 2nd – High 3rd – 4th – 4th – 3rd – 2nd – 1st (playing “WaWa” – 4 times on each note).

Play this exercise 4 times each day, each time increasing the metronome. Start at ♩ = 80 (with the ♩ equaling one “Wa”). You can use whatever increments you feel work for your student. The important thing is to start and end each day two markings faster than the previous day. *Viva Vibrato* has two suggested metronome charts that you can use for this exercise, but you can also make your own, with smaller increments if you want. When the student gets to about ♩ = 150, switch to ♩ = 70 and continue in the same way until reaching ♩ = 180. Dr. Fischbach says that an artistic vibrato is approximately ♩ = 180 or 6 cycles per second.

[†] More information on Paul Rolland's approach is in *Teaching of Action in String Playing* by Paul Rolland and Marla A. Mutschler, University of Illinois String Research Associates, Urbana, IL: 1974. Book and DVD available at: www.peterrolland.com and www.paulrolland.net

When I started teaching, I thought that since I had fixed my own vibrato, I would be able to help everyone learn vibrato. Over the years, I have found that in fact there are many different ways in which a vibrato can go “rogue;” and I have had to learn to change my approach depending on the situation. In the next article, I will talk about some of the problems that come up

and some suggestions for “rehabilitating” a difficult vibrato.

Thanks for ideas in this article also go to Mary Horozaniecki, Mimi Zweig and Nancy Kredel.

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