



VIOLIN

Vibrato — How Can We Fix It?

by Elizabeth Ericksen

In the last issue, I presented some ideas on how to start teaching vibrato. Often, however, we are working with students who already have a vibrato, and there are problems. This can happen even with your own students. Children grow and as they grow, they need help adjusting to the changes in their arms and bodies. The motions don't feel the same anymore because the arm is longer, the hand is bigger, and the instrument is larger.

Some of the common problems with vibrato are:

- The motion is side to side instead of in the direction of the string
- The motion is too tight—usually from tightening the forearm
- The motion is jerky
- The joints in the fingers don't flex
- There is no “ping” (rebound)
- The motion is too wide
- The motion is too narrow

Here are some exercises and ideas that are useful in Vibrato Rehab.

Polish the String

This exercise helps students learn to feel the correct direction of the vibrato. The student “hangs” the thumb from the neck of the violin/viola and then “polishes” the string. They can use a handkerchief to help the fingers slide up and down the string if that is helpful. They can do this exercise in the following positions, in order:

- Banjo Position (Rest Position)
- Archery Position—Right Shoulder (hold the violin/viola as if it was an archery bow with the right hand holding the bout of the instrument. Let the left hand hang from the thumb and “polish”)
- Archery Position—Left Shoulder
- Instrument Under the Chin

Door Knocking

This exercise is done without the instrument. Have the students stand in front of a wall with both palms facing them. Knock backwards against the wall. Use both hands

at first and then try dropping the right hand and only knocking with the left hand. This exercise is especially helpful if a student has a jerky vibrato and is right handed. Often the right hand can do the motion and is able to “help” the left hand feel a more even motion. This exercise and the next can also help students release tension in the forearm.

Add a Shaker

Have the students hold a shaker in the palms of their hands with palms facing them. Students can start with a shaker in each hand at first and then try dropping the right hand. You can make a shaker by filling a pill canister with rice or dried beans. Sometimes you can find mini-maracas at a party store—these work very well for vibrato.

Joints of Fingers don't Move

Go back to the exercise in part I of this article where the teacher helps the student vibrate by holding the middle joint of the finger and shakes the finger for the student. Paul Rolland used this approach on me, and Mimi Zweig also uses it extensively. I found it very helpful to me and also when working with students.

In *Viva Vibrato*, there is an exercise called **Palm Pats**. The student places the palm of the left hand in 4th position against the ribs of the instrument with the curved fingers on top of the instrument. Then let the hand fall back and forth, allowing the finger joints to move. This can be done with all the fingers or just one or two.

No “Ping” or Rebound

This is usually because the student is making the motion too evenly—back and forth are equal. The student needs to understand that a single vibrato impulse is a rebound. This is why knocking or tapping is a helpful step; as long as the motion is a rebound. The student can try one vibrato impulse—then 2—then 3—adding one impulse at a time up to 20. If the vibrato goes awry, stop, relax the arm, and try again. The impulse can be forward or backward, whichever feels easier.

Another motion to try is the “Tap and Hold.” Try tapping several times on the

string in 4th position and then letting the tip of the finger stay “glued” to the string while continuing the motion.

Width of Vibrato

The width of the vibrato needs to vary depending on the dynamics and style of the piece. You can do this by having the students change how they place their finger on the string. If the vibrato needs to be wider, place the finger on its pad as much as possible; this allows for a broader arc. If the vibrato needs to be narrower, place the finger on its tip—it is easier to produce a thinner vibrato this way. (My thanks to Mary West for this tip.)

Helping students work on and fix their vibrato can have a number of benefits. The primary one being the increased ability to create a beautiful sound. Working on vibrato can also lead to more looseness and freedom in playing their instrument. Fixing a vibrato is often a long process, that involves daily practice by the student as well as weekly attention from the teacher; the persistence that you help them develop can have long-term effects in all aspects of their life.

Fischbach, Gerald R. and Frost, Robert S.:

Viva Vibrato. San Diego: Kjos, 1997
Mischa, Jennifer. “Easing Into Vibrato”, *American String Teacher*, Nov. 2003, pp. 84-87.
Rolland, Paul and Mutschler, Marla A.: *Teaching of Action in String Playing*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois String Research Associates, 1974. Book and DVD available at: www.peterrolland.com and www.paulrolland.net
Thanks also to Mary Horozaniecki, Nancy Kredel, Mary West, and Mimi Zweig.

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