Developing Violin Vibrato
by Jerie Lucktenberg

All intermediate string students should develop a beautiful vibrato. Through teacher demonstrations and listening to performances by great artists, young students will develop a concept of good sound. Violists and violinists often struggle to learn vibrato although in third position by the third book. All things considered, it is better to begin vibrato training too soon than too later. The left hand should remain flexible, particularly in the joints nearest the nails. Flexibility combined with strength at the knuckles is the basis for a well-controlled vibrato.

In the first half of the 18th century the great Baroque performers enhanced the expressive qualities of compositions by using vibrato as an ornament. In the early part of this century, Jascha Heifetz used a steady, rapid vibrato. More recently Isaac Stern and Itzhak Perlman vary the speed and width of the vibrato for a wider palette of tone colors. Too often students use vibrato to mask intonation problems instead of for artistic purposes. Some students develop an even vibrato and use it without ever exploring the different tones and timbres that can range from luscious warmth to shimmering lustre.

When asked to describe how vibrato should affect a pitch, the majority of young violinists incorrectly reply that it ought to move above and below the pitch. The ear will invariably pick the highest pitch in a vibrato cycle, so if tone goes both above and below the pitch, listeners will perceive the note as sharp. A correct vibrato should go from the pitch to below and back up. With lower strings and lower pitches, a wider vibrato is appropriate; higher pitches should have a narrower and faster motion because pitches are closer together in the higher registers. Many students have not discovered these nuances and tend to sound sharp.

Vibrato entails coordination of hand, arm, and finger. Students should master and combine all three to produce different moods, using slower technique for slow passages, and increasing speed and width to build excitement.

Players should learn hand vibrato first because it is the most relaxed, with an impulse from the back of the arm. Students can begin by setting the hand in third position with the thumb placed against the ribs of the instrument so the wrist cannot move back and forth. Then they should wave the left hand toward the face without touching the strings. The thumb should remain stationary with the fingers loose and relaxed. Make sure that the base of the first finger moves freely along the neck rather than clamping to it in opposition to thumb pressure. Clutching the instrument between the thumb and base of the first finger commonly prevents the development of a beautiful vibrato.

As a reflexive, cyclical motion produces good vibrato. Students can begin by simply waving the hand slowly; when fingers are placed on the string, slow-motion practice will train muscles correctly. The fingertip should roll easily and consistently along the length of the string without...
turning or rotating the hand. Because good vibrato begins and ends on the desired pitch, the striking finger should land on the note in a curved position and roll backward, flattening the joint nearest the nail and returning to the curved position.

Long fingernails make good vibrato technique nearly impossible. Give students the choice of clipping the nails immediately or returning for a lesson when the left hand nails are as short as possible.

To strengthen muscles and build vibrato speed, students should begin with the index finger in third position on D with the finger curved at both joints, indicated by a \( \natural \), and C\# with the finger rolled back into a flattened-joint position, indicated by a \( \flat \). The other fingers should be in a relaxed playing position. I use rhythms to develop control and to provide repetition with variety.

After establishing the correct motion of the index finger, students should practice this rhythmic routine on each finger, even the pinky, beginning with the more comfortable strings. In crossing to the lower strings, the left elbow should move further to the left and under the instrument; the opposite occurs on the higher strings. This elbow motion is important in maintaining a balanced hand and can only happen if there is mobility in the left shoulder, rather than a tight grip between shoulder and jaw. The motion of the left elbow when changing strings parallels the lifting and lowering of the right elbow, which should keep the right upper arm on a plane with the bow. The right arm should move higher for the lower strings and relax nearer to the body when approaching the E string. When students are proficient on this exercise, they should increase the vibrato speed.

Students should learn to change bow direction without stopping the vibrato and maintain a continuous flowing vibrato while switching fingers. A helpful exercise is to repeat each note of a scale, slurring to the next note, and listening carefully for continuity in the vibrato. Keeping the next finger close to the string helps solve difficulties when moving to the next pitch.

As the vibrato gets faster, it will cover a smaller range, perhaps only a quarter tone below D before returning to the pitch.

When students master these motions with all fingers and strings, they are ready for another approach to the reflexive vibrato. Starting with the fingertip touching the string without pressure, they should depress the string to initiate vibrato. Allow the finger to rock back and forth a few times before stopping naturally. Practice with the bow after a few initial experiments. Coordinate the vibrato with the start of the bow stroke, and do not force a continuing vibrato. Encourage players to feel a quick and easy vibrato impulse. A sustained vibrato will develop as a series of these impulses. Some students begin or end vibrato with a spasmodic motion but can conquer this problem by using a simple etude played with a measured vibrato on alternating notes.
ought to be well-balanced in relation to the thumb so that the hand and arm can swing smoothly. Even minor adjustments in left elbow position can significantly alter hand balance. Place the elbow where the relationship between the finger and thumb allows for the most relaxed movement of the fingertips. It may be necessary for some students to abandon vibrato entirely to practice some corrective exercises.

Ultimately, achieving a beautiful vibrato is a challenge for violinists and violists, particularly because these instruments demand an unnatural playing position. However, the laborious early steps will produce great strides towards advanced playing and may give students the motivation to continue their studies.

New Violin
Meisel Stringed Instruments added a new student violin, model 6107, to its line. This violin features a flamed maple back, closely grained spruce top, and ebony hardware. The student outfit, available in 1/8 to full size, includes a Glasser bow and thermoplastic case with valance.

Sight-Reading Book

At this point students should add arm movement to the hand vibrato. This technique involves a slight push of the forearm from the elbow to coincide with the forward roll of the fingertip to add intensity to the sound. This is essential for high-position playing, where the thumb and fingertips are often the only contact points.

Another less common factor in vibrato is pressing the string to the fingerboard and releasing the pressure without losing contact with the string. The base of the finger should not touch the neck of the instrument during this practice. The downward pressure should coincide with the forward roll of the finger, and the slight release should coincide with the backward motion and flattening of the joint. When combined with hand-and-arm vibrato, this motion enhances the sound without applying great pressure. The alternating pressure and release should not squeeze the string unnecessarily, and the slight release of pressure coincides with the backward rolling motion and the flattening of the joint.

The part of the fingertip that lands on the string also affects quality. At the fingertips skin tends to be thin, with little flesh between it and the bone. Cells are likely to form there in direct relation to the time spent practicing. A vibrato produced at that point may have a brilliant but thin sound; vibrato on the fleshy part of the finger tends to have a warmer, richer quality.

Some students develop a good vibrato simply by imitating the teacher, yet others fall into bad habits because they do not observe the techniques involved. A student once had some vibrato problems that were explained by the way he learned to play with vibrato. His high school orchestra director had simply told him to put a finger on the string and shake it.

Many vibrato problems stem from excessive tension. In addressing these difficulties teachers should identify the sources of tension. The finger