

VIBRATO IN ALTERNATIVE STYLES

Expanding your vocabulary of vibrato styles to include those employed in non-classical music such as jazz, rock and country can enhance your playing, explains **JULIE LYONN LIEBERMAN**

Vibrato is regarded as an ornament in many styles of music, rather than an integral part of the sound, as in western European classical repertory. As such, some styles omit this ornament entirely. Depending on the style, emphasis may be placed on creating a groove with the right hand, or on left-hand slide techniques, double-stops, grace notes and turns to colour the melody. Whether you are interested in pursuing a traditional style or in broadening your skills to become

a multi-style player, it can be helpful to approach vibrato in a three-step manner:

- [1] omit vibrato from your playing altogether to ensure control over your left-hand technique
- [2] develop as many approaches to the technique as possible (see below)
- [3] when you use vibrato, do not let your left-hand fingers go on auto-pilot – select the sounds you want to create within the style(s) of your choice

REFINE LEFT-HAND CONTROL DEVELOPING NEW APPROACHES TO VIBRATO

JAZZ VIBRATO

Jazz vibrato can have a wide range of sounds: from slow and wide, to a rolling classical sound, to a fast, wide, 'hysterical' quality. It should always be practised by rolling under and then up to pitch. Set a metronome at 60 and place your second finger on a note high enough on the fingerboard that your hand is free of the scroll.

Start with a crotchet (♩) roll, hitting the targeted pitch on the metronome-tick and rolling slightly under the pitch on the next tick, then back again on the tick after that. When rolling, aim to create 'smile lines' across your finger. Then roll using quavers (♫), triplets and finally semiquavers (♯), as in **example 1**. The faster the rhythm, the narrower the roll will need to be. This exercise will enable you to develop control over width and speed, the two elements that define vibrato. Maintain a light touch while practising the rolls. For wide, 'hysterical' vibrato, you will need to skate on top of the string, using a fast motion back and forth that is powered by the forearm.

[1]

The musical notation consists of four staves in treble clef with a common time signature (C).
 - The first staff shows a single crotchet note followed by a roll (a series of notes connected by a wavy line) that returns to the original pitch.
 - The second staff shows a quaver roll, with a '3' above the first three notes indicating a triplet.
 - The third staff shows triplet quaver rolls, with a '3' above each group of three notes.
 - The fourth staff shows semiquaver rolls, with a '3' above the first three notes indicating a triplet.

REFINE LEFT-HAND CONTROL

Vibrato is created through variations in width, speed and pressure and varying points of emanation (finger, hand or arm). In classical repertory, pressure is supposedly not a factor, but many string players use far too much finger pressure down into the fingerboard. Excessive pressure precludes variations in vibrato and blocks ease in left-hand articulation, inviting reciprocal pressure from the right hand.

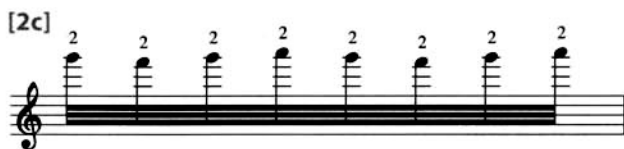
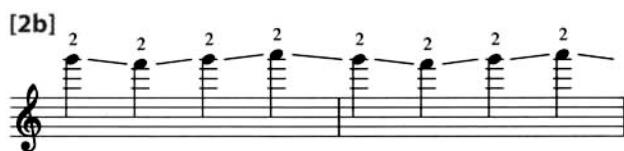
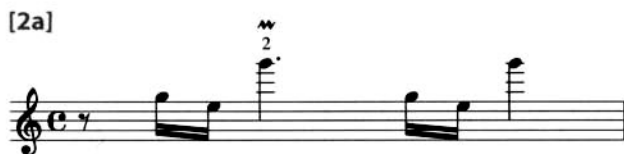
Imagine that your fingerboard is attached to a biofeedback machine and that you can watch a monitor while playing. You might be surprised by how often your touch on the fingerboard places the monitor's needle into the 'red zone'.

As you practise playing scales or melodies without vibrato, take the opportunity to learn how to control finger pressure. Think of placing each finger on the surface of the string and using gravity to allow the finger to sink down to the surface of the fingerboard, only going as far as you need to create a whole tone, and no more.

DEVELOPING NEW APPROACHES TO VIBRATO

My first violin teacher, Samuel Applebaum, taught me a practice approach to vibrato that became instrumental many years later in segueing from one variation to another. Setting the metronome at 50, he instructed me to place my finger right on top of the pitch and to roll flat and back up in a crotchet rhythm, then in a quaver rhythm, in triplets and finally in semiquavers (as explained above left). He instructed me to narrow the width of the roll as I proceeded into the faster rhythms. We gradually increased the tempos on the metronome until, *voilà*, my first wobbly attempts at vibrato emerged.

To begin to build a vocabulary of options for vibrato, practise varying how you mix and match width and speed. Rock artists use a technique called 'hysterical' vibrato. I have renamed this technique 'vibraslide', which describes the left-hand activity more accurately. By decreasing pressure into the string so that the finger skates on top of it while combining a broader width with a faster roll (in this



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SUGGESTED LISTENING

Each of the following listening references can be downloaded as a single tune on your computer from iTunes if you do not wish to purchase the entire album:

Rock

Papa John Creach with Hot Tuna

'Git Fiddler' from *Red Octopus*

RCA 82876 71223 2

Irish

Liz Carroll

'A Day and an Age' from *Lake Effect*

Green Linnet 1220

Country

Vassar Clements

'Rounder Blues' from *Grass Routes*

Rounder Records 287

Jazz

Stuff Smith

'Blue Violin' from *Cat on a Hot Fiddle*

Verve Music B000178902

case, more like a skate because the fingertip will actually slide to and fro rather than roll), you can create a dramatic performance effect. I first heard this style of vibrato performed by Papa John Creach. I've also heard it used in Klezmer fiddling! In this approach the core tone will actually be in the centre, and the finger will zigzag sharp and flat, crossing the 'eye' of the note, covering anywhere from half an inch to an inch of string length. If finger pressure is not decreased to the minimum, you will not be able to create this effect. Make sure you power this move from your forearm, not your wrist or finger. In **example 2a** (an extract from Papa John) the vibraslide is notated with a zigzag symbol; **example 2b** shows, in slow motion, what the finger is doing during the vibraslide; and **example 2c** shows what takes place at a lightning fast tempo.

Conversely, if you use a wide roll at a slow tempo, you will be able to create a more bluesy sound akin to the vibrato of a jazz singer or saxophone player. Stuff Smith used a slower, wider style of vibrato

We've all heard that no two string players have the same vibrato that vibrato is akin to snowflakes or fingerprints, unique to each individual. As you experiment with width, pressure and speed, and even variations within one note, the possibilities are infinite. For instance, fiddler Vassar Clements had an amazing timing to his vibrato. He somehow managed to start slow and wide and then narrow the width while increasing the speed in the space of a millisecond.

Many Irish fiddlers tend to use a fast, tight vibrato usually generated from finger motion without the support of the arm. Irish fiddler Liz Carroll exemplifies this approach. There's even an effect in Cape Breton fiddling called a warble, which consists of a quick, tight bounce of the finger on the string on given notes within the melody. At the opposite end of the spectrum some jazz violinists, for example Stephane Grappelli and Eddie South, use a classical, rolling vibrato on practically every note (unless, of course, they're playing fast).

Try experimenting with the variables discussed in order to gain control over a range of sounds. Catalogue the differences in sound you are able to accomplish through various combinations of width, speed and pressure. Then choose a particular combination and try to generate it just from your forearm, then your wrist and hand, and then your finger. Keep in mind that you also have permutations available through the use of a still tone (a vibrato-less note) at various points within the bowed pitch. You can multiply the possibilities even further by starting a note without vibrato, sneaking into a slow wide roll that gradually speeds up and then ending on a still tone or vice versa. In the listening examples cited it's interesting to hear how Papa John and Stuff Smith manipulate motion from still tone to a slightly wider, slower vibrato and back again. There's an unpredictable interplay of choices that create a satisfying experience for the listener.

You can also try to imitate various players based on styles that interest you. This will enable you to gain finer control while opening your ears to new, subtle possibilities. Don't limit yourself by only listening to bowed strings – it's also useful to listen to trumpet, saxophone and voice. It's nearly impossible for any of us to make moment-to-moment artistic choices if we haven't developed a wide listening and skill base. Expanding your vocabulary of touch and sound may even improve your classical vibrato. ■