

THE VIBRATO THING

by David Montgomery

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The Question: if, when and where to apply modern, "continuous" vibrato to older works, and still prevent high-brow performance sophisticates from kicking metaphysical sand in your face [1].

The Good News: they don't know much more about it than you do.

The Problem: The essence of this topic concerns the similarities and differences between

- 1.) a late-renaissance / baroque ornament (shaking, *Bebung*, tremolo) that could be applied or withheld at will, and
- 2.) a more natural way of producing general sound (vibrato, *ondeggiando*.)

The two biggest causes of misunderstanding here are generated by people, including respectable scholars, who write that "vibrato" was "once an ornament." It wasn't. "Tremolo" (*Bebung*, etc.) was once an ornament, and, yes, it was used only on long notes, but it was not vibrato. Furthermore, an "ornament" is something that stands out against the texture of the music - a fleeting, expressive enhancement, a trill, a mordent, a turn, (a ring upon the finger, a diamond stud in the tongue, a jewel nestled into the bellybutton) - but not an ongoing, abstract aspect of sound itself.

This subject is complicated and cannot easily be encapsulated; for readers interested in the details I recommend two major studies: Frederick Neumann's [Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music](#) (1978), and Greta Moens-Haenen's [Das Vibrato in der Musik des Barock](#) (1988). Specifically for violinists, David Boyden's [The History of Violin Playing](#) (1965), and Robin Stowell's [Violin Technique and Performance Practice in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries](#) (1985), also deal seriously with this issue. Additionally, one might consult [The New Groves Dictionary](#), but only as a last resort.

The major problem with most modern accounts is one of definition and choice of terminology, and this observation applies even to the otherwise excellent works mentioned above. From about the end of the 16th century, pedagogical treatises were written in four major vernaculars: English, French, German and Italian. A wide diversity of terms and concepts for "tremolo" evolved, some of them peculiar to a single

author and/or place, some of them universal in spirit, some of them mixed. Seeking not to confuse readers, modern authors often choose a single term - usually "vibrato" - to cover what they assume to be the "basic concept," and they deal with other terms and concepts only on a piecemeal or "need-to-know" basis.

Unfortunately, this approach fails to identify and distinguish between individual techniques. For example, for winds: breath undulation, tapping, shaking, quarter-holing, key repetition, etc., or for strings: one-finger stopping, two-finger stopping, and rhythmic pulsation with the bow, not to mention the results (measured or unmeasured repetition of a single tone, regular fluctuations in volume, beating cancellation, slight pitch variation, significant pitch variation, actual trill to another tone, etc.). The bewildering confusion of historical terms (Bebung, tremolo, flatterment, battement, balancement, pincement, étouffement, vibrato, sting, shaking, ondeggiando, trillo, trilletto, mordente fresco, etc.) and their equally diverse symbols [see Neumann's impressive glossary, pp. 576-604] do not lend themselves to simplification.

In addition to problems of terminology, the sources are often simply misinterpreted. When we read in the letters of W. A. Mozart [to his father, 6.12.1778] that the aging singer Joseph Nikolaus Meissner was "shaking" his voice at regular intervals, we know that Mozart was describing the *Bebung* ornament:

"As you know, Meissner has the terrible habit that with purposeful effort his voice shakes [zittert], marking off long notes in quarter and even eighth-intervals. I have never been able to abide this in him, and it is also really abominable. It is completely contrary to Nature to sing like that. The human voice trembles without help, but in such a manner and proportion that it is beautiful, that is the nature of the voice" [2].

This passage is often cited as Mozart's opposition to a continuous "vibrato", but of course it is no such thing. At the very worst, it would seem that poor Meissner was merely trying to count off his long notes, using his gullet instead of his foot to keep time. At the very best, it appears that he was after something in the way of a *Bebung* (quite distinct from vibrato,) but lending it no elegance [3].

While Mozart criticised Meissner's clumsy application of *Bebung*, he seemed quite satisfied with the natural pitch-changing vibrato attendant to vocal production. Nine years later, when Mozart heard the famous oboist J.C. Fischer, he was equally displeased [letter to Leopold, 4.4.1787]:

"His (the oboist Fischer's) tone is nasal and his *tenuta* (*tenuto*) is like the tremulant stop on the organ" [4].

The term "*tenuto*" here refers to an extended cadential note, usually graced with a *Bebung* (tremolo) [see Leopold's example, Ch. 11: ¶17]. Readers who examine Moens-Haenen's book on "vibrato" in the Baroque period (see above), will find this citation in German [p. 124], but with the curious term "*temata*" instead of "*tenuta*". She doesn't seem to notice that she has miscopied the word, and that the citation in this form has no meaning whatsoever. She then writes that the exact interpretation of the

quote is "unclear" (boy, I'll say!), but that, "arguably", Mozart opposed (excessive) "vibrato" on long notes! And so, she has used "vibrato" to mean "tremolo", she would have J.C. Fischer vibrating away on a soft red fruit (you say "temata", and I say "vibrata"; let's call the whole thing off...), and thus she wends her tortuous way - incredibly, but inexorably - to a completely wrong conclusion [5]. Moens-Haenen, incidentally, is the author of the latest New Grove Dictionary article entitled "Vibrato".

Where it did not mean "trill" (which is another wrinkle entirely,) the word "tremolo" once referred to a single-pitch ornament achieved by regular interruptions or cancellations of a sound-continuum, as opposed to a pitch-changing vibrato. Violinists could execute it with left-hand stopping (including a light, regular pressure-and-release of the string in the same place) as well as with the bow (back and forth, and also in one direction). Beethoven still remembered the device from his youth, and in one of his greatest artistic flashbacks, he recreated it in the Piano Sonata, Op. 110:



This extraordinary moment in the introduction to the Adagio-and-Fugue is part of a time and memory manipulation quite similar to the opening of the Finale of the Ninth Symphony. It is certainly not to be taken as proof that the messa di voce with *Bebung* was still alive in 1821 - quite the opposite. But we know that the device indeed was still practiced by singers and instrumental virtuosi in Leopold Mozart's time, particularly at mid-century, when he wrote his famous treatise. When we read his description of the tremolo effect as being like the sound emanating from a "struck bell" [Ch.11: ¶1], we know that he, like Wolfgang (above), was talking about the still-fashionable single-pitch phenomenon, not about a pitch-changing undulation. And yet, in the very next paragraph [Ch.11: ¶2], Leopold's actual technical instruction for producing a "tremolo" is to place the finger firmly on the string and rock the hand back and forth along the direction of the string - an unequivocal description of vibrato as we know it today. So even the most revered of historical sources can be self-contradicting.

What's wrong here? Why this confusion? Surely Leopold Mozart knew the difference between "tremolo" and "vibrato"? Without a doubt. But we - the modern readership - probably want things to be much neater than they actually were. Let's not forget that, for string players, vibrato never had been a "natural" thing, as it clearly was for singers. String players imitated singers, by hook or crook. They imitated the singer's ornamentation (including messa di voce on cadential notes, along with the tremolo alone on other long notes) as well as the basic sound (simple vibrato). Some methods of producing

vibrato on a stringed instrument, being artificial in the first place, could, without much modification - produce a tremolo as well. Once the *messa di voce* fell out of fashion, the tremolo naturally took on further functions. (To complicate matters further, we should remember also that for some historical authors, at least one form of "tremolo" had been a simple trill.) The word for one device was commonly used for another - especially if similar techniques were involved - and few authors of those days had the courtesy or foresight to spare us the confusion. They were not writing for future generations.

In addition to the discourtesy of living and describing life as it came, authors of the past, before copyright law, also borrowed, sometimes willy-nilly, from earlier sources. This regrettable habit now creates constant problems for readers. The most blatant example occurs in Mozart's Versuch [Ch.11], where he has translated and incorporated Tartini's examples and text (including the word "tremolo") quite literally, but there were many others. This kind of boilerplate pilfering was common among the historical writers. Rather than confirm "schools of thought" or ongoing traditions, such repetition introduces uncertainty for modern readers, particularly where it appears to have caused a musical term or concept to outlive its own time.

A good example is the "struck bell" image, which survived at least a century, all the way from Villaneuve in Paris (1733) [6], to Tartini in Padua (early 1750s) [7], to L. Mozart in Salzburg (1756) [8], and to Spohr in Vienna (1832)! [9]. Villaneuve was talking about tremolo, but by 1832 tremolo [Bebung] no longer existed, even in the Italian opera (whence it had arisen), and Spohr was simply talking about vibrato. The victim of his own pedagogical pilfering, then, Spohr also took over the old adage concerning tremolo, that it was to be used only on certain long notes. Thus, he actually recommended that vibrato (the modern concept) be applied only on certain long notes! This hybrid wisdom was then adopted by teachers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Joachim and Auer repeated it, as did Carl Flesch, who in 1924 was still saying "tremolo" when he meant "vibrato".

And so, while for the Mozarts the term tremolo (in the sense of a *Bebung*) still denoted something real, albeit repugnant and old-fashioned to young Wolfgang, for the generation of Beethoven and Schubert it was a thing of the past. Some of it - especially the left-hand variety - must have softened back into the consistency of an already extant vibrato technique. A talent for the measured bow-tremolo, which had produced a series of gentle interruptions in the stroke, probably proved quite handy in the execution of extended portando figures, which became common in the early 19th century. A good example is the murmuring portando accompaniment, played by the 2nd violin and viola in the first variation of the second movement in Schubert's D-minor String Quartet "Death and the Maiden" D810:

Modern (late 19th, early 20th-century) instructions for violinists to use vibrato "sparingly" were anomalies, then, converted and taken over from tremolo, which indeed had been confined to certain long tones: opening cadential notes with *messa di voce*, or the final notes of soft movements).

Likewise, modern instructions to speed-regulate one's vibrato according to register also were anomalies, taken over from the different speeds of note repetition or cancellations in single-pitch tremolo. The only real question for players today is "how continuously was the pitch-changing vibrato applied?" Here we can reject the popular theory to the effect that (in Will Crutchfield's words) "the gradual transition to continuous vibrato took place during the 19th century and was a subject of much debate," because we know that it had existed all along [10].

Equally, we can reject the speculation of Sir Roger Norrington, who tells us that the continuous vibrato was first established in modern times, not even the result of a slow evolution, but a mere fad. Norrington writes,

"What was new in the 20th century was the idea of a continuous vibrato, used on every note, however short" [11].

Upon reading further, we are most astonished (and heartily amused) to learn that "the great Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler seems to have started the fashion, drawing on the style of café musicians and Hungarian and Gypsy fiddlers."(!)

As it turns out, Norrington's statement about Kreisler is lifted (without acknowledgement) straight from Carl Flesch's *The Art of Violin Playing* [12], but the part about the Gypsies is just pure baloney. None of it makes any sense. To begin with, it is not possible to achieve vibrato on "every note, no matter how short" (one is truly surprised to learn that a major conductor would be unaware of this simple technical fact.) But that Fritz Kreisler transmitted his "continuous" vibrato to us from Hungarian and Gypsy fiddlers is the very height of unwashed speculation.

Kreisler studied with Hellmesberger at the Vienna Conservatory and with Massart at the Paris Conservatory. His technique was clearly formed when he made his *début* at the age of nine, possibly before he ever entered a Hungarian café and decidedly before his mama would have allowed him to spend much time with the Gypsies. And apart from an inappropriate ethnic fantasy, how could

Norrington "know" that Gypsies and Hungarians of the late 19th century used "continuous vibrato" in violin playing? After a hard day polishing their earrings and telling each other's fortunes, did they then also drink too much wine and dance the night away behind their wagons?

Let's get serious here. Singers, as we know, probably always had used continuous vibrato in their natural sound, and not a single historical source presents evidence to the contrary. It makes no sense that the violinists who imitated them simply did not notice this fact, recreating only their gruesome goat trills and ornamental shakes! According to Geminiani's own treatises, he (and others) used vibrato on every note possible. Writing from Austria, even that dour and cautious pedagogue Leopold Mozart was forced to admit, reluctantly, that many players to his knowledge did likewise. The adoption of an expressive, "continuous" vibrato was apparently a progressive trend.

If differences of opinion and taste in this matter still existed in Beethoven and Schubert's day, we can be sure that they, as progressive composers, must have come down on the side of maximum expressivity. Schubert's tendency in all serious works, for example, was to strive towards the effect of a "higher" medium: piano works in string-ensemble idealizations, as well as string works in the idealizations of song. In light of this principle, one can find no justification for a basic, vibrato-less sound, accompanied by the anachronistic use of pre-Tourte bows and other outdated approaches. Try such abstinence in the slow movement of Schubert's C-major Quintet and make up your own mind.

Spohr, it is true, still stuck to the pedagogical gossip even in 1832, recommending vibrato only on certain notes. The next time one of those knowledgeable academics mentions this to you, just ask him to whistle one of Spohr's more memorable tunes. ###

NOTES

1. This delightful imagery was borrowed, with a tip of the hat, from Michael Michalski's private audio advertisement entitled "Webern's Greatest Hits".

2. Bauer, W.A. and Deutsch, O.E., eds, W.A. Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen 4 (Kassel / Basel, 1963): 377/8, cited in Greta Moens-Haenen, Das Vibrato in der Musik des Barock / Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1988: 17. "Meissner hat wie sie wissen, die ueble gewohnheit, dass er oft mit fleiss mir der stimme zittert - ganze viertl - ja oft gar achtl in aushaltender Note marquirt - und das habe ich an ihm nie leiden koennen, das ist auch wircklich abscheulich. das ist voellig ganz wieder die Natur zu singen. die Menschenstimme zittert schon selbst - aber so - in einem solchen grade, dass es schoen ist - dass ist die Natur der stimme."

3. In the widely-known Norton volume, Performance Practice: Music after 1600 (1989), Will Crutchfield mistranslates "zittert" (shakes) as "vibrates". Furthermore, he simply omits the definitive part of

Mozart's statement, where the composer explains that Meissner purposefully marked off his long notes in both quarter and eighth-intervals. It is no wonder, then, that Crutchfield allows his readers to come to the wrong conclusion about this quotation, confusing "vibrato" with "tremolo".

4. "...Sein Ton ist ganz aus der Nase - und seine tenuta ein tremulant auf der Orgel".

5. I am indebted to Dr. Ulrich Konrad, of the Musikwissenschaftliches Institut in Wurzburg for back-tracking the original term through successive editions of the Mozart letters. The original is lost.

6. J.Alexandre P  rault de Villaneuve, M  thode tres facile pour apprendre la musique et les agr  ments du chant.

7. Giuseppe Tartini, "Regole per arrivare a saper ben suonare il violino" (ms, no date).

8. Leopold Mozart, Versuch einer gruendlichen Violinschule (Lotter).

9. Ludwig Spohr, Violinschule mit erlaeuternden Kupfertafeln (Haslinger).

10. Performance Practice, p.296.

11. "Time to Rid Orchestras of the Shakes" in The New York Times, February 16, 2003 (Arts and Leisure Desk, Section 2, available online with free registration <http://www.nytimes.com/>)

12 [Ch.I, p.40]. The original was in German, entitled "Die Kunst des Violin-Spiels" (Berlin).

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Books by this author:

1) Historical Information for Musicians

(Huntingdon: Kings Music, 1996)

2) Franz Schubert's Music in Performance

(Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2002)