

Vibrato Dean Stallard

If asked what the most difficult extended technique for a flautist is, I often laugh and reply “senza vibrato”. I’m only half joking though, can you play without vibrato? If not, you might want to consider who is controlling who and read on.

When Liz asked me about doing an article on vibrato I laughed and replied, “whoa, that’s a can of worms” and wondered what I’d done to upset her! But then I got to wondering, why should vibrato be such a touchy and controversial subject? It is simply one of several tools we can choose to use (or not to use) in our playing. Different types of articulation or changes in tone colour are in no way plagued by the same kind of controversy as vibrato, so perhaps the problem is more the thoughtless and tasteless application of the technique, than vibrato itself.

Like all other techniques vibrato needs to be split into 2 very different areas of focus to gain mastery of it; the technique itself and the practical/artistic usage of it.

To use vibrato as a tool of expression you really need to have some musical ideas and absorb impulses by listening to many other performers. These performers should not be limited to the flute. You can learn a lot by listening to string players and singers. Likewise, the use of vibrato is not confined to the classical field. A large number of today’s pop stars use vibrato in an imaginative and artistic way, as they always have. Your use of vibrato, while on some occasions might be planned for specific effect, should on the whole be a natural part of your reaction to the music you are playing. For this to happen you need to be listening actively to as many performers and styles as possible, over weeks, months and years. Good taste is usually assimilated by exposure, rather than learnt sitting at a desk!

Many of my pupils start to use vibrato naturally, long before I have thought about any discussion on the subject. In my opinion, if someone doesn’t have the musical maturity to pick up and react to what is going on in the music they hear, then there is no real need to learn vibrato at that time. There is also no point in adding vibrato to a weak and un-centred sound; it should be an addition to an already good basic tone. However, once vibrato starts showing itself (rearing it’s ugly head some would say) the time has come for some specific study on the technique of vibrato production.

To be sure that you have a good command of vibrato as a technique, some specific and considerable study on the mechanics involved is usually necessary. This mechanical study and usage of vibrato should in way be confused with playing expressively!

Focused and in-depth study on vibrato can be found in Trevor Wye’s practice book for the flute volume 4 “Intonation and Vibrato” published by Novello. Trevor tells that of all the practice books, this is the one that sells the least. A strange state of affairs for something so central to flute-playing, but perhaps an explanation in part as to why vibrato is seen as a nasty disease amongst flautists☺

I highly recommend purchasing this book for serious work on flute technique, but here are some exercises to get you started.

The most usual start with vibrato practice is sustained notes with a strong and slow pulsing;

Ex.1

HooooHooooHooooHoooo

Make sure you keep your throat relaxed (don't close it when you think "hoo". Think about using warm-air, as if you are breathing on a mirror. Make the differences in volume and tone height as large as possible at this stage. Take a good couple of weeks over these first exercises to get things into place.

Anyone getting impatient to cut to the chase, as they see no practical use for this should look at the last few notes of Syrinx;

Debussy wrote that accent (*marqué*), within a sustained note because he wanted it. A final sob, that is sure to be wrecked if you are already playing with stacks of vibrato before you reach it. A nice big "ooHooo" will give you the sob. However, I'm always amazed by the real difficulty that many have in executing this. If you do regular, proper practice on the basics of vibrato it should really pose no problem.

Once you are having a fair degree of success (and I mean that literally) with the first exercise it is time to speed the vibrato up.....GRADUALLY!

Ex.2

Play each note value as you did on ex.1 (i.e G,F#,F etc.) Again, take your time, using a week or two on each level before you move on to the next note value.. Go often back to the slower vibrato exercises to make sure all is still in place (This should be a part of your daily warm-up and practice). As things gather more pace, smooth the vibrato off, making it less wide.

Once you are using quaver (8th s) pulses you can start applying the vibrato in a slow etude. My favourite for this work is No.1 from Gariboldi's "Etudes faciles et progressives"

4

Largo non troppo

Apply the quaver pulses religiously throughout the whole etude, paying close attention to the nuances (no point in learning to play vibrato at only one volume). Keep it open and relaxed. When you can do the exercise with quavers, move on to triplets and then onto semi-quavers (16th s), paying strict attention to tempo and the chosen note value. This will also improve your reading as such sub-division will show up poor attention to note lengths!

While you are applying the above concept to an etude you can continue your vibrato exercises by working on accelerating it (play ex.2 as one exercise before moving on to the next note) and slowing it down (the same but in reverse)

This will give you a full control of vibrato, rather than the opposite. Now play the Gariboldi (or your chosen etude) again with a varied and musical expression, using vibrato to help you maintain musical lines, add intensity, relax the music, give notes direction through a slightly undesirable but necessary breath, senza vibrato to add starkness or simplicity

Any more suggestions? Just remember, using vibrato can help you play expressively, but **the use of vibrato is not expressive in itself.**