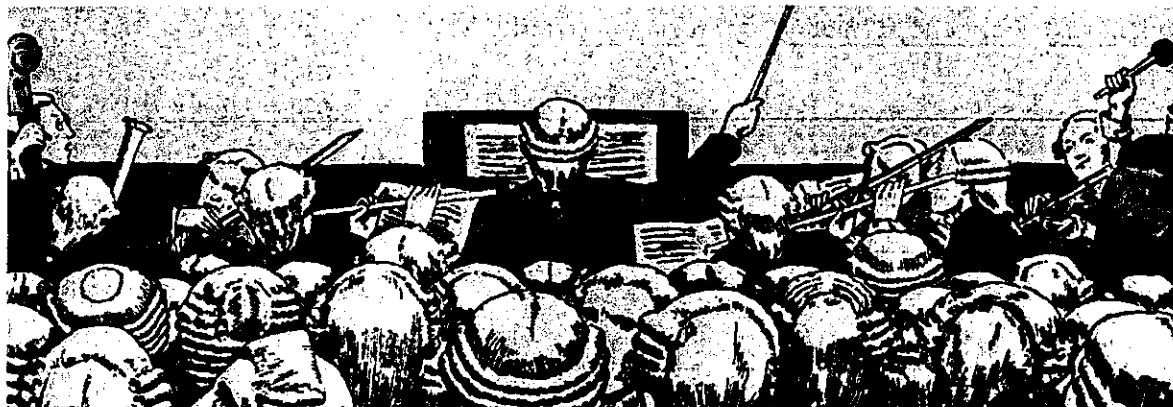


# Good Vibrations

Contrary to current thinking, a light vibrato was the order of the day for 18th-century musicians, asserts **Beverly Jerold**



**ABOVE RIGHT** audiences in the 18th-century sat very close to players: often an ear-splitting experience as contemporary accounts reveal that musicians played extremely loudly

Today's specialists in early music play with a minimum of vibrato and consequently with a light, delicate bow stroke, which yields a tone that might be described as thin and lacking in colour. But early writers, such as Johann Friedrich Reichardt, Kapellmeister at the Berlin court, tell a different story. As reported in Berlin's 1791 *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, he had attended a 1785 programme given by the Concert of Ancient Music, comprising London's best musicians, and found that a buffer zone had been left between the orchestra and the high-society audience:

'I very much like having the instruments at a distance, for when they are close, particularly the string instruments whose every separate, strong stroke is always a powerful shock, it makes an extremely adverse, and often painful and long-lasting impression on my nerves.'

A strong violinist himself who had travelled far and wide to hear every reputable orchestra, Reichardt implies that these nerve-rattling bow strokes were the rule in symphonic playing. His article also stresses that Handel's orchestral music needs to be played with 'powerful tone from all the instruments'.

What then is the basis for our delicate playing? It seems to be an inference drawn from our belief that vibrato was an ornament restricted to soloists and used sparingly. Because a stringed instrument played loudly without vibrato is displeasing, we play with subdued volume. But this is at odds with reports about 18th-century orchestral playing, so perhaps the early sources have been misinterpreted. The present position may be summarised by *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001, *Vibrato*):

'[Vibrato] seems always to have been accepted as an ornament until

the first quarter of the 20th century, when its continuous use gradually became the norm... During the Baroque era, vibrato was used sparingly, for emphasis on long, accented notes in pieces with an affect or character to which it was suited. Being regarded as an ornament, in principle it was used on single notes like any other... Less common ornaments such as vibrato or glissando were in theory used only by soloists... Continuous vibrato is a 20th-century phenomenon.'

In early texts, vibrato can range from barely perceptible to one employing such distant microtones as to sound out of tune. Because our ears have been fine tuned by exposure to world-class artists, no musician today would use the latter. Before recording technology, however, musicians with good ears were much more exceptional. The type of vibrato called an 'ornament', which often veered into poor

intonation, was rightly restricted by 18th-century writers. Very different, however, was the matter of how to obtain good tone quality on an instrument. Here, the singing voice was the role model and a light vibrato the means for achieving it. In reading early texts, we need to determine whether the subject under discussion is a vibrato intended to imitate the singer's natural vibrato or a more intense, artificial undulation, of the type called an 'ornament'. All singing voices vibrate and early sources never suggest repressing this sound unless it is an out-of-tune wobble.

Leopold Mozart's two different forms of vibrato. Attention today has focused on the artificial tremolo that Leopold Mozart's 1756 *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* warns against using too frequently. But he presents a very different form of vibrato earlier in his book:

## 'THE STRING INSTRUMENTS MAKE AN ADVERSE, OFTEN PAINFUL, IMPRESSION ON MY NERVES'

'The left-hand finger should make a small, slow movement, which, however, must not go toward the side, but forward and backward. That is, the finger should bend forwards towards the bridge and backwards towards the violin's scroll, quite slowly for soft tones, but somewhat faster for loud ones.'

This vibrato is unnamed, has no limitations and is simply part of good string technique. In contrast, tremolo must be rationed. That these are different entities is confirmed by his index, in which tremolo is treated in chapter eleven. Light vibrato, however, is indexed as 'Movement of the hand when holding out a long note' (*Bewegung der Hand beyem Aushalten einer langen Note*) and included in chapter five's bowing techniques for achieving good tone.

Borrowed from Giuseppe Tartini, the tremolo is an artificial device, and is illustrated by Mozart in his *Versuch*. Example 1 (right) gives Mozart's explanation of tremolo,

showing its slow, accelerating and rapid forms: a ♪ is represented by a larger character and a ♪ by a smaller one. The hand is moved once for each character, creating a relatively slow, measured vibrato.

Example 2 (see p.46) shows two different types of tremolo as performed. Here, says Mozart, the rhythmic stress in no.1 always falls on the notes marked '2', while in no.2, the stress falls on the notes marked '1'. This tremolo has rhythmically accented pulsations, unlike standard finger vibrato, where no pulsations are evident. Observing that some players tremble on every note as if they had the palsy, he limits it to final notes and passages like example 2.

In practice this tremolo seems to have tended toward exaggeration. Francesco Galeazzi's 1791 *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica* deplores its out-of-tune 'vacillating intonation', a characterisation

that cannot be applied to standard string vibrato, whose intonation remains intact when performed correctly. In contrast, Galeazzi later implies a light vibrato, when stressing that the violin must 'always sing' and 'imitate the human voice' in playing an Adagio.

For the frontispiece of his book, Mozart chose the illustration

shown in figure 1 (see p.49). Not until later in the book do we learn that it depicts a violinist holding the instrument in a way that limits technique – that is, unsupported, so that 'the bowing is more up and down than horizontal'. This position, of course, makes frequent vibrato difficult. Figure 2, however, shows Mozart's favoured position, in which the violin is placed under the chin; it remains firmly in place, he says, during the strongest movements of the hand when moving up and down. His text implies that many violinists were still holding the instrument as in figure 1: the general standard of training was far lower than ours is today.

Vibrato as an ornament differs from light vibrato in being stronger, using more distant microtones to produce the pitch instability and also being measured and slower. Because of its potential intonation problems, ripienists – not leaders or soloists – were advised against it. On the other hand, standard light vibrato, which only imitates the warmth of the singing voice, had no such restriction.

Vibrato as an ornament

The story of how we came to believe that vibrato in 18th-century music should be rationed begins with a 1751 instruction for violin vibrato ('close shake') in the *Art of Playing on the Violin* by the famed Italian violinist Francesco Geminiani:

Of the Close SHAKE... To perform it, you must press the Finger ▶

**EXAMPLE 1** Mozart's three types of tremolo, showing its slow, accelerated and rapid forms. The larger character represents a ♪ and the smaller one a ♪

The image shows three musical staves, each with a different type of tremolo notation above a note. The first staff is labeled 'Der langsame.' and has a large, wide 'w' character above the note. The second staff is labeled 'Der anwachsende.' and has a medium-sized 'w' character above the note. The third staff is labeled 'Der geschwinde.' and has a small, narrow 'w' character above the note. Each staff consists of five lines.

Image: courtesy of Mozartous-Violinschule

N. 1.

So muß man den Tremulo ausdrücken.

N. 2.

So macht man die Bewegung.

**EXAMPLE 2** Mozart's two different types of tremolo as performed: he says that the rhythmic stress in no.1 falls on the notes marked '2'; in no.2, the stress falls on the notes marked '1'

strongly upon the String of the Instrument, and move the Wrist in and out slowly and equally, when it is long continued, swelling the Sound by Degrees, drawing the Bow nearer to the Bridge, and ending it very strong it may express Majesty, Dignity, &c. But making it shorter, lower and softer, it may denote Affliction, Fear, &c. and when it is made on short Notes, it only contributes to make their Sound more agreeable [sic] and for this Reason it should be made use of as often as possible.

Geminiani's vibrato is applied frequently, but we cannot judge its degree. Perhaps imitators exaggerated it to the point of becoming offensive to those with more refined ears. Thus in 1777 his former pupil Robert Bremner, explaining that the 'tremolo' equals the 'close shake', adds a word of caution (reprinted *Musical Quarterly* 69, 1983, 245f.), which today has been interpreted as advising soloists to use ordinary vibrato sparingly and ripienists, not at all:

Many gentlemen players on bow instruments are so exceeding fond of the tremolo, that they apply it wherever they possibly can. This grace has a resemblance to that wavering found given by two of the unisons of an organ, a little out of tune; or to the voice of one who is paralytic; a song from whom

would be one continued tremolo from beginning to end... The proper stop [to place the finger] is a fixed point, from which the least deviation is erroneous: consequently the tremolo, which is a departure from that point, will not only confuse the harmony to the hearers who are near the band, but also enfeeble it to those at a distance... Its utility in melody may likewise be doubted, because no deficiency is perceived when it is omitted by good performers.

Bremner argues against a tremolo that is out of tune, one that resembles the unsteady voice of a wayward singer. Nothing suggests that he objects to the light vibrato meant to imitate the human voice. Moreover, he finds the melody 'not deficient' when this tremolo is omitted by good performers: the same cannot be said of one played without light vibrato.

In his 1783 *Magazin der Musik*, Carl Friedrich Cramer translated Bremner's passage into German, adding his own reaction which confirms that this tremolo (*Bebung*) must be created artificially, even by singers:

'To me, the author of these remarks appears to be much too opposed to the *Bebung*... To be sure, a generally tremulous, unsteady voice is counted as the first among errors... For the accomplished

singer, however, arias and recitatives often have sections of powerful emotion where, if declamation and imitation of the specific expression of each emotion are essential, the *Bebung* is even obligatory.'

Cramer then quotes from Johann Adam Hiller's 1780 vocal method:

'[With the *Bebung*] one does not hold a long sustained tone completely steady, but lets it waver and float, without making it higher or lower [in pitch]. On string instruments, it is easily made by rocking the fingers back and forth on the string. For the singer who wants to produce it simply with the larynx, it is more difficult; some facilitate it by moving the lower jaw.'

Because the voice must create this *Bebung* artificially, it is called an ornament. It is thus unrelated to the natural vibrato that is part of every singing voice. According to Cramer: 'In such places where the voice would apply the *Bebung*, the instrumentalist not only should use it, but also must.'

#### Light vibrato

The following writers compare light vibrato to what the voice does naturally and advise instrumentalists to apply it whenever a note is long enough. For example, Johann Georg Sulzer's influential 1771 *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* ('*Bebung*' referring not to the ornamental form, but to light vibrato) observes that the micro-tones of light vibrato 'alternate so rapidly that the alternation itself is not clear; this makes the tone gentle and undulating'. Just as a painted contour differs from an austere ruler line, he adds, the vibrating tone differs from one of uniform pitch and strength. Every longer note becomes rigid and hard if not given a gentler quality by vibrato:

'Because of the gentle vibrato it gives all sustained notes, the human voice has an obvious advantage over all other ▶



instruments. A fundamental part of good singing and playing requires holding out every note with such vibrato. It is easiest in singing, because Nature herself ensures that the vocal instrument does not remain on any sustained tone with the same rigid tension. But on instruments, vibrato

specified for the instrument, because otherwise they would not be practised.'

By 'specified', Rousseau means that they should be practised intentionally, not that they are specified in a score. His finger vibrato, which imitates a 'certain sweet wavering

*Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* advises ripienists to use a not-too-fast vibrato to avoid sharpening notes when making a crescendo – indicating that light vibrato was both known and required in the orchestra.

According to these writers, a continuous light vibrato on long notes served only to imitate what the voice does naturally and therefore was highly desirable. The abuse of 'ornamental' vibrato was the bone of contention in the 18th century, not light vibrato. Unable to imagine trained musicians considering an exaggerated vibrato as beautiful, we concluded that all vibrato was suspect and to be used sparingly (and not at all by ripienists). But they had a far lower level of training, and their values were not our values. While we would not wish to imitate their overwhelming volume, our performances would benefit from a fuller tone, which becomes possible once strings are permitted a vibrato that imitates the beauty of the singing voice. ▣

**FIGURE 1 (left)** the violin is held incorrectly in the frontispiece of Mozart's book

**FIGURE 2 (right)** Mozart's favoured position: the instrument remains firmly in place, he says, during the strongest movements of the hand when moving up and down. This position makes frequent vibrato much easier

## THE ABUSE OF 'ORNAMENTAL' VIBRATO WAS THE BONE OF CONTENTION IN THE 18TH CENTURY

requires more effort. On the violin, it is most easily obtained by rolling the finger rapidly back and forth on the string.'

The same principle is advanced in Jean Rousseau's 1687 *Traité de la viole*, which recommends the two forms of finger vibrato as normal viol technique for imitating the singing voice:

'These are never specified for the voice because it does them naturally, but they must be

of the voice', is prescribed for every note whose length permits; it continues as long as the note itself.

Early in the 18th century Roger North (Roger North on Music, London, 1959, p.165) refers to violin vibrato in England as continuous: 'The violin wrist-shake... serves all alike, upon every note that gives time for it.'

While the ornamental form of vibrato potentially causes intonation problems, light vibrato ameliorates them. For example, Johann Joachim Quantz's 1752 *Versuch einer*