

Vibrato on Fiddle by Sean Kenan

Vibrato is the wavering, wobbly pulsating note is a feature of Classical violin playing that is considered by some fiddlers as inappropriate in Folk music. Classical music has used vibrato in different ways through the ages. Some historical violin masters warned students of vibrating every note and others encouraged its use. Wolfgang Mozart's father, Leopold Mozart urged that violinists only use vibrato on sustained notes and at the end of phrases. He wrote "there are performers who tremble consistently on each note as if they had the permanent fever." In contrast to Leopold, the famous German violinist Fritz Kreisler used a continuous vibrato. Francesco Geminiani (1687-1762) recommended using vibrato "as frequently as possible." Most styles of Western Folk music use little or no vibrato but musical traditions like Middle Eastern, Indian and Balkan use vibrato. Irish fiddlers like Martin Hayes and Kevin Burke use vibrato in a subtle manner in much the same way as recommended by Leopold Mozart, on sustained notes and at the end of phrases. Irish music scholar Brendan Breathnach maintained that vibrato was not part of the Irish traditional but Irish uilleann pipers use a technique similar to vibrato on long notes. Donegal fiddler Johnny Doherty used vibrato in his playing of airs. Vibrato was and is used by many players of traditional Irish music. Scottish fiddle has been heavily influenced by Classical music and vibrato is common in the playing of Scottish airs. Old recordings of Scott Skinner playing airs show his use of a continuous unrelenting vibrato.

Developing Vibrato

A fast, frantic vibrato is rarely used in fiddle playing but a slower, controlled vibrato can add colour and expression to the music. The left hand also gains flexibility and sensitivity with development of vibrato. The trick is to control the vibrato speed and width. This can be achieved by slowly bending the finger backwards and slowly bringing it up to the correct pitch then bending the finger backwards again. The right hand should draw the bow in a smooth, continuous, long bow stroke and the left hand finger maintains a steady oscillation that is uninterrupted by changes in bow direction. This independence of right and left hand takes practice. Try also beginning the note with no vibrato then gradually bring in the vibrato softly for a few oscillations then exit the

vibrato softly as the oscillations slow down in intensity to a held, still note.



The diagram above illustrates entering and exiting the vibrated note. The photos below show wide expanded movements used to develop the finger strength and control but the actual application of vibrato in tunes is more like the above diagram. Yes, you can use vibrato in reels, jigs and hornpipes as well as slow airs. Vibrato in fast paced reels is used on held notes and just a few oscillations are sufficient. The hard part is keeping time and inserting the vibrato without interrupting the flow of the tune. Give it a go. Vibrato can give a new insight into your musical expression and is excellent for finger development both in strength and control as well as sensitivity. I have found tunes can take on a new life once vibrato is under control.



Above: Stage one: 3rd finger leaning backwards.



Above: Stage Two: 3rd finger upright.



Above: Stage One: 3rd finger leaning backwards with base of thumb against fiddle neck. This is common position with fiddlers but regarded as bad technique by Classical players.



Above: Stage Two: 3rd finger upright with common fiddler's hold.

Finger, wrist or arm vibrato?

Most Classical players are quick to condemn what they regard is "incorrect" vibrato and "incorrect" left hand position. If the left hand wrist is contacting the

fiddle neck or body, this will be immediately frowned upon as faulty technique and is regarded as an extreme sin in Classical music circles. However fiddle players like Martin Hayes hold the fiddle this way and it does not hinder their ability to produce wonderful music. They also can produce a lovely vibrato with this so-called "incorrect" left hand position. Classical players maintain that finger or wrist vibrato is incorrect and the correct way is to activate the whole arm to produce vibrato. Finger vibrato is quite acceptable in fiddle music, the main aim being to add colour and expression to a note and finger vibrato can certainly do this.

Martin Hayes plays a slow version of reel The Sailor's Bonnet and this is a good one to practice your vibrato. The held notes with the roll symbol ~ are ones that can be vibrated.

The Sailor's Bonnet Traditional Ireland

Reel

Low Octave B part

The Sailor's Bonnet was recorded in 1938 by Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman (1891-1945) Leitrim flute player John McKenna (1880-1947) had earlier recorded the tune with Sligo fiddler James Morrison (d.1947) Fiddler Kevin Burke helped popularise this tune and others on a recording he made in the 1970's with Arlo Guthrie.