Vibrato can be one of the most difficult skills to teach a young string player. Some students are able to produce a beautiful vibrato seemingly without effort while others struggle, working to produce a relaxed motion, but perhaps becoming more tense and frustrated at the effort. Possibly because of the difficulty some students encounter, vibrato can be seen as an advanced technique that should only be approached after a student reaches a certain level of technical proficiency.  

Unfortunately, a delay in exposing students to vibrato may lead to students attempting to teach themselves with tense, difficult, and nervous results. It is much easier to teach a relaxed vibrato early than to correct a tense vibrato later. But when should vibrato instruction start?  

LEFT-HAND POSITION  
Instruction in vibrato actually starts the very first day left-hand position is taught. The enemy of good vibrato is tension and a proper, relaxed left-hand playing position is a must or relaxed vibrato will not follow. Phyllis Young’s books, Playing the String Game and The String Play include many position, as well as vibrato, exercises and visualization games to develop a proper, relaxed playing position. Though developed for cellists, most of her exercises transfer to all stringed instruments.  

Exercises used to develop vibrato should always reflect a proper, relaxed left-hand position. Some vibrato exercises, however, may result in students altering their left-hand position to accommodate the physical demands of the task. Examples include vibrato exercises that ask violinists and violists to wave at themselves; simulate door knocking, erasing a chalkboard, or shaking dice; or that ask students to tap the top of the instrument. While these exercises may be useful in practicing the relaxed wrist or arm movement required of vibrato, a student may twist the wrist and fingers into an incorrect playing position. For instance, in the wave or tapping exercises, students turn the hand so the palm faces the performer (or the floor in the case of cellists and bassists tapping the top of their instruments). Vibrato exercises should not create extra tension. Patting the instrument, especially if rhythms are added, may create tension in the muscles in the back of the hand.  

Some vibrato exercises, including the one described below, though intended to develop vibrato, can also be use to reinforce a relaxed vibrato.
left-hand position. Thus, simple vibrato exercises can start well before the concept of vibrato is introduced and can start as soon as the student learns to hold the instrument. Even before the students are told what vibrato is and what it is for, short vibrato exercises can be incorporated into lessons as warm-up exercises.

**The Vibrato Motion**

Many vibrato exercises focus on one element of vibrato, such as wrist movement. Carefully consider each exercise to determine if it encourages muscles to move as they would in vibrato or in an artificial way. Also remember that vibrato is about combining the motions of various joints and muscles, not just one muscle or joint. During practice may lead to tension elsewhere.

Though violinists will eventually move to a wrist vibrato, one approach, which has worked well with my students, is to start all students, regardless of instrument, with an arm vibrato. As Phyllis Young (among others) pointed out, larger muscles are easier to learn than smaller ones. Later, when the relaxed arm vibrato motion is established, the violinists can refine the smaller wrist muscles. Violinists will then have two types of vibrato at their disposal and can choose to use the vibrato most appropriate for each piece of music.

Teaching arm vibrato initially also simplifies the introduction to vibrato in a heterogeneous string class. A relaxed arm vibrato does not mean the wrist is immobile, but the wrist moves as a natural extension of the arm. All parts of the hand, forearm, and joints remain flexible during vibrato. Carl Flesch described a perfect vibrato as being “produced by the combination of the finger, hand, and arm movements. The extent to which each of these factors participate is an individual matter; yet all the joints must be loosened and prepared to take an active part at any moment.” The goal is always a relaxed motion.

One vibrato exercise that has worked well in my classes consists of asking students to perform long slides from first to about fifth position on the violin and viola—or until the wrist naturally comes into contact with the instrument. No effort is made to bend the wrist and continue up the string, which alters the natural left-hand position used in the lower positions. The finger skims the string creating a ghostly or siren sound. (This exercise is perfect to introduce at Halloween!)

Similar vibrato exercises are advocated under the names of “Wiping the String,” “Polishing the String,” “Finger Slides,” “The Siren,” or erasing the string. Regardless of the name given to the exercise, the goal is to slide up and down the string with no tension. Using a slide also emphasizes the backward and forward motion required of vibrato, rather than inappropriate side-to-side, wrist-twisting or elbow-swinging motions.

When the students become comfortable, ask them to gradually narrow the slide, sliding only to fourth position, then to first to third position, then to second position. While specifying exact slide distances may be appropriate if this same exercise were to be used to introduce shifting, for the purposes of introducing vibrato, slide distances need only be approximate. In fact, identifying an exact end pitch or target position on the fingerboard may result in the students stopping and restarting, creating a jerky motion. As the slide narrows, students should be encouraged to increase the speed of the slide. The increase in speed should be natural and comfortable for the student; exact speeds are unimportant. Specifying rhythms or subdivisions may distract the students from the relaxed feel of the motion: moving attention from the physical motion to cognitive counting. When the slide becomes very narrow, the finger will naturally “stick” onto the string. The goal of this exercise is...
to introduce students to a large vibrato motion that is gradually narrowed until the finger stops naturally; transferring the larger motion into a smaller motion.

During the long slides, the thumb just goes along for the ride, staying completely relaxed and in light contact with the instrument neck. In the beginning stages, it is acceptable for the thumb to move slightly when the slide narrows sufficiently for the finger to stick to the string. Attempting to slide without moving the thumb will cause great tension, generally freezing the wrist and arm, and distorting the shape of the hand.

This sliding exercise can be done without using instruments, in effect teaching air vibrato, but I do not teach this exercise in banjo (also called guitar) or shotgun position. While vibrating in these positions may appear easier, the muscles used to control the slide in banjo position are different from those used in normal playing position. The same is true when practicing the vibrato motion on the right forearm. The vibrato learned in these positions will not necessarily transfer to the muscles used when vibrating in playing position and time is wasted training a different combination of muscle movements than is actually used in the vibrato motion.

Initially, the slide motion may be concentrated on the inner two fingers of the left-hand. This will aid in keeping the hand balanced and in a correct shape. Do not neglect the other fingers, though. Sliding on each finger, including fourth finger is essential. The angle in which each finger contacts the string and the muscles used to control the vibrato motion are slightly different for each finger. It is acceptable to use a stronger finger to help when sliding on a weaker finger. When concentrating the slide on the fourth finger, for example, the third finger may actually control the slide. The more the weaker finger is used—even if a stronger finger helps out—the stronger the muscles will become. While concentrating the slide on one finger, the other fingers should remain in close contact with the string. Fly-away fingers create tension and disrupt the natural playing position. Every finger remains relaxed.

If tension occurs at any point during the slide exercise, the student should immediately return to the large, relaxed, sliding motion. Some students will need to return to the large sliding motion many, many times. The idea is for the student to become familiar with the feeling of a relaxed slide and encourage the transfer of this tension-less, larger motion into a tension-less smaller motion. Some students will fall easily into a relaxed vibrato as the sliding motion transfers into the finger joints, but others will tense up as the finger sticks to the string in an effort to stop the pitch, thus locking up the finger joints.

THE KNUCKLE JOINTS
The sliding exercise encourages proper elbow movement and relaxation needed for good vibrato, but some students will need help in transferring the relaxed sliding motion into the finger joints. Relaxed vibrato needs relaxed knuckle joint movements as
[The player’s] entire concentration must be focused on the desired end results in sound and in motion rather than on the mechanical means of attaining them.” —Phyllis Young

well. Students may be able to perform the relaxed slide, but continue to freeze-up when a pitch is stopped. If a student is unable to feel the relaxation in the finger joints, the teacher can simulate the motion with students in order to feel the vibrato motion before being able to control the motion themselves.

With the left-hand in playing position, ask the student to relax as you play for them. Students can be encouraged to relax by imagining their hand or fingers as consisting of Jell-O or wet noodles. The teacher can lightly place his or her hand (I generally use my right hand) on the outside of the student’s wrist, forming a shadow-hand. If the student is having problems with joint tension on a stopped pitch, focus the student’s attention on the weight of the finger, rather than the grip of the string, by pressing lightly on the student’s fingernail. Gently move the hand back and forth. Show the student how easily the finger joints move and how the joints move in relation to the elbow. As the teacher is in contact with the student’s hand, any tension present in the left hand will be felt, immediately. Though the student may not be able to control the motion at this point, the student may be better able to recognize the correct motion when practicing.

COORDINATING THE BOW AND VIBRATO

Start vibrato exercises without the bow. The vibrato motion and bowing motion are opposites, and coordination becomes an issue if the vibrato exercises are practiced while bowing—a bit like putting your head and rubbing your stomach. Some children will be able to separate their hands, but most will try to synchronize the motion, possibly leading to that elbow-swinging, side-to-side motion that is exactly opposite from the vibrato motion. If not using the bow, violinists and violists can use the right hand to help support the instrument as an insurance against dropping the instrument. The chin and shoulder should be the primary support for the instruments as the left hand will need to be free to move and the bow will eventually be added; however, the extra right-hand support can provide a little bit of extra confidence to the beginner. Placing the scroll of the instrument against a wall or even on a chair seat also provides support but requires effort to keep the instrument in place leading to tension and possible damage to the instrument.

START WITH THE END IN MIND

Some students a may require a long time to develop vibrato because the motor motion needed is not a motion naturally encountered. No other activity in everyday life asks the arm, wrist, and finger muscles to move as they do when producing a vibrato. Practicing the motion needed to turn door handles, wave, and shake salt-shakers may aid the students in imagining the vibrato motion, but the actual muscles used in these activities are very different from those used in vibrato.

Vibrato exercises should always serve to reinforce proper, relaxed left-hand position. As Phyllis Young states when discussing vibrato: “[The player’s] entire concentration must be focused on the desired end results in sound and in motion rather than on the mechanical means of attaining them.” Vibrato exercises should always be authentic and never performed without the end goal of the vibrato sound.

As the relaxed vibrato motion becomes natural, students should be encouraged to start incorporating it into their playing. Some students will find coordinating bow and vibrato motions very difficult. Don’t rush it! The goal is not fast vibrato or to learn to vibrato, quickly. The goal is a relaxed, tension-free and overall beautiful vibrato! Ø

References

1. Most method books introduce vibrato late in book 2 or in book 3 if the skill is addressed at all.
2. Both Paul Rolland and Phyllis Young advocated introducing vibrato from early in instruction.
4. For example, “The Wave” and “Palmpats” in Gerald Fischbach and Robert S. Frost, Viva Vibrato! (San Diego: Kjos, 1997); “Erasing the Blackboard” and “Shaking Dice” in Young’s Playing the String Game; 5. Young, 1989.

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