

INconclusion

Vibrato and the Anxiety of Modernism

By Shulamit Kleinerman

BECAUSE IT IS SO EASY to associate a throbbing vibrato with the expressive outpourings of Romanticism, there has been a tendency in the early music community to identify continuous vibrato as a holdover from the 19th century. But as historically-informed performers have explored later and later repertoires, we have begun to recognize that continuous vibrato did not come into use until the 20th century. In a *New York Times* article last year, Roger Norrington challenged modern orchestras to rediscover a vibrato-free sound. This spring, in the pages of the academic journal *Early Music*, he called on musicologists to address the historical specifics. It might be worthwhile, in the meantime, to wonder how this revision of the timeline affects performers who devote themselves to earlier repertoires.

A hundred years ago, pedagogues and commentators were still treating vibrato as a means to highlight particularly expressive notes or passages. This approach remained largely consistent with that of the Baroque treatises, in which vibrato was counted among ornaments for individual notes. As late as 1921, Leopold Auer was cautioning his violin students that vibrato was an embellishment to be applied only occasionally, with discretion and sensitivity.

But Auer himself admitted that the students often ignored his warnings. Vibrato was becoming fashionable even in faster, more technical passages of

music. A number of different factors encouraged this development. The most obvious of these had to do with instrumental hardware, such as silver flutes, narrower oboe reeds, and steel E strings on violins, all of which produced louder but more shrill sounds than earlier materials. Vibrato could soften the edges of the sound while giving it added muscle. Another factor – one that deserves research – was the influence of vibrato-heavy popular styles such as cabaret and jazz. (“That’s circus music,” violinist Joseph Joachim chided his students when they used too much vibrato.) Over a few decades, vibrato began to be used and thought of not as an ornament but as an integral element of modern musical sound. Recordings captured this period of transition, in which players with new and old styles of vibrato sat together in wind sections and string quartets.

In 1927, flutist Louis Fleury described the vibrato of his teacher Paul Taffanel as part of a “search for tone color.” Carl Flesch wrote that the vibrato “determines the spiritual content of the tone” and published a treatise in 1931 called *Problems of Tone Production in Violin Playing*. This preoccupation with tone was entirely new. Earlier writers had focused on elucidating the character of rhythmic or melodic gestures in the music, with no need to objectify musical sound out of context, any more than a speaking voice can be scrutinized in the absence of words.

With the language they used about sound, the pedagogues suggested what they really felt to be at stake in their

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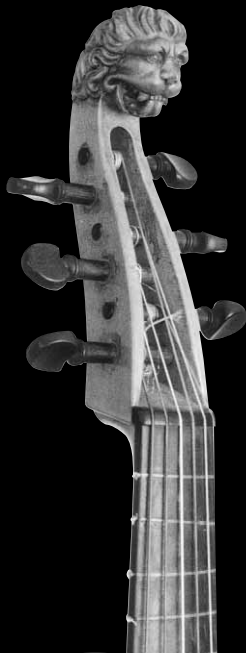
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music-making. Joachim called vibrato “that factor of tone production which is capable of thawing the original stiffness of the ‘objectively beautiful’ sound to the extent that the sound, now become alive, has the power to arouse in the listener the feeling of pleasant warmth.” London violin professor Hans Wessely said the same thing more baldly. Without vibrato, he wrote in 1913, “violin playing is lifeless and void.”

Such a notion would never have occurred to musicians of earlier eras. The development of continuous vibrato seems to have dramatized a particularly modernist anxiety about bringing old music to life. This was the period of time in which “classical music” began to ossify as a collection of great works of the past, in contrast to the living popular-music traditions. Perhaps the earnestly gushing emotiveness of continuous vibrato masked a fear that the music would wither on the vine if it wasn’t saturated with sentiment. Meanwhile, recording technology offered the opportunity to hear sound divorced from the human act of its production. No wonder contemporary musicians were preoccupied with insisting that their sound was alive.

Classical musicians today – even those of us who revel in vibrato-free resonance – have inherited the modernists’ obsession with tone as part of our musical training. Surrounded by CD collections, we experience disembodied sound every day. Classical music-making, whether mainstream or historically informed, strives for beautiful, clean tone. Among modern performers, some already deplore the increasing uniformity of sound that has resulted. The variation and individuality that have characterized early music so far depend on robustness of gesture and rhetoric – which sometimes comes at the expense of polished sound. If we were freed from the anachronistic ideal of beautiful musical surface, perhaps we would get even closer to the vitality of past traditions. ☘



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