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# Fundamentals of Teaching Flute Vibrato

Jonathan Bayley

The Spring 2005 issue of *Canadian Winds / Vents canadiens* included an article I wrote, entitled “Fundamentals of Successful Flute Playing.” While many aspects of flute playing were addressed (e.g., embouchure, articulation, care and maintenance, etc.), the topic of vibrato was not discussed. Shortly after it was published, I received an e-mail from a teacher asking me if I had any suggestions for guiding students in developing a “beautiful vibrato sound when playing lyrical and smooth passages on the flute.”<sup>1</sup>

This request encouraged me to think about my teaching practices and the feasibility of providing clear instructions for music educators whose primary instrument was not the flute. I thought about the procedure I use with my private flute students, to see if my pedagogy could be helpful to instrumental music teachers. As a result of this self-reflection and analysis, I came to the conclusion that vibrato pedagogy is not and should not be elusive, and can be an important aspect of music teachers’ responsibilities and skill sets.

## What is Vibrato?<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, “vibrato is a modulation in the pitch of the flute tone, making it rise and fall.”<sup>3</sup> Flutists aim to control both the amplitude (the high and low of the pitch) and the frequency (or speed) of the pulsations. If the vibrato is too wide or slow, it can resemble a wobble; if it is too fast, it will take on the characteristic of a “nanny goat” or “billy goat” vibrato, which the French call *chevrottement* (from the word for goat, *chèvre*).

Vibrato is not simply added to flute tone or a pitch. It should be an integral component of the tone. The speed and amplitude of the vibrato should be determined by the nature of the music being played, rather than being thought of as something that is imposed on the music. Therefore, vibrato flexibility is essential if one is to perform with musicality.

When properly used, vibrato allows the flutist to perform with a wider range of expression, thus adding both variety and nuance to the tone. The use of vibrato also encourages the flutist to be more engaged in the process of music-making.<sup>4</sup>

## Should Vibrato be Taught?

There appear to be two schools of thought relating to the teaching of vibrato. The first school believes that vibrato is a trait that is best left alone to develop naturally. With this approach, vibrato is seldom addressed during instruction time. Rather, reference is often made to a desired singing quality or the shape or direction of the phrase. The second school of thought believes that while some students may need only minimal guidance, others will require directed, structured, and possibly ongoing instruction in order to eventually develop a flexible vibrato, thus allowing them to express the intent of the

music being performed.

In an interview with the flutist, Frances Blaisdell, I asked her, “Can vibrato be taught?” She asserted, “Yes, certainly it can be taught and, although the method is very structured, in the end you should not be aware of the pulsations but just of a singing tone.”<sup>5</sup>

It has been my experience that students’ understanding of vibrato and their ability to produce it varies greatly. It is for this reason that most students benefit from directed instruction. Such guidance will bring greater awareness of the process involved in vibrato production and encourage students to play with greater musical expression.

## When Should Vibrato be Taught?

According to the world-renowned flutist, James Galway, not only can flute vibrato be taught but it “should be taught as soon as possible, partly because it sounds nice and so encourages beginners, partly because it helps them get the sound more in focus.”<sup>6</sup>

Prior to receiving any formal instruction, some students may already play with some pulsation to the sound. Usually these early indications of vibrato will be sporadic, and often too fast due to a lack of physical control. Generally, if a student has a focused tone and is capable of playing a two-and-a-half octave range (D1-G3), they would benefit from guided instruction. These should be thought of as general guidelines, for there is not an exact set of circumstances that dictate when the study of flute vibrato should begin.

## Who Can Teach Vibrato?

As a woodwind instructor at a community college, I had the opportunity to teach saxophone vibrato. Because of this experience, my thoughts as to who can teach flute vibrato have changed.

I often wondered what was unique or difficult about flute vibrato that it could not be taught by a non-flutist. When asked by music teachers what they could do to help their students, I suggested that they seek out the expertise of a flutist. In essence, I believed that the responsibility for teaching students about the subtleties of vibrato production lay exclusively in the hands of the professional flutist and not the music educator. I no longer believe this to be the case; hence, this article.

## My Experiences Learning Vibrato

Prior to my attending university, I received little or no instruction from my ensemble directors (band and orchestra) or private flute teachers on how to produce vibrato. I remember that my vibrato seemed to be a little faster than I thought it should be and it was not always under my control. In the years that followed my secondary education, I experienced two very different pedagogical approaches relating to vibrato production.

During my undergraduate studies at McGill University, I was very fortunate to study flute with Jeanne Baxtresser.<sup>7</sup> She insisted that we practice vibrato, and to help us with this new challenge she gave us very specific instructions to gain control over this physical endeavour.

These exercises consisted of regular abdominal pushes in groups of

# FUNDAMENTALS OF TEACHING FLUTE VIBRATO

two or three, similar to saying “ha-ha” or “ha-ha-ha.” The general expectation was that the pulsations would “move up” and eventually resemble a “natural” vibrato. This seemed to be the case with most of the flute studio. There was the occasional student who seemed to have a “lower” (abdominal) vibrato which resulted in a slower and more pronounced mechanical or artificial vibrato. This type of vibrato production is often referred to as diaphragm vibrato.

For many years I taught using this approach with adequate success. However, my understanding of vibrato and approach to teaching it changed (or should I say evolved) when I had the privilege of studying with Frances Blaisdell.

As a young flutist, Blaisdell played with a fast vibrato, often referred to as a “nanny goat” vibrato. With the help of the great American flutist, William Kincaid,<sup>8</sup> she was able to gain greater control over her vibrato, bringing it in line with what would be referred to in time as the American sound. Kincaid, who is often affectionately referred to as the “father of American flute playing,” encouraged his students to play with a darker tone and slower vibrato in contrast to the faster vibrato of the French school. This vibrato was more than a shimmer on top of the tone, it was a fundamental component of flute tone.

During a recent conversation,<sup>9</sup> Frances Blaisdell recalled the pedagogical approach that William Kincaid used with his students:

Kincaid said that the vibrato is controlled by a muscle in your throat, the same muscle with which you cough. You must learn to play a throat staccato with this muscle. He said it is not difficult, and not to make it so.

As a result of studying with Frances Blaisdell, I was introduced to a more natural and direct pedagogical approach to vibrato production. The following steps outline the procedure she uses to introduce students to flute vibrato:

Say “ha-ha-ha.” That gives you the pulsations which make the throat staccato. At first you will not hear a good flute tone but rather a whisper, perhaps with a slight whistle, indicating that your throat is open and relaxed. Start on C2 and play 4 pulsations to a beat, 4 beats to a bar, 16 pulsations on the same note, with the metronome (mm=72)

Play a chromatic scale down from C2 to G1. It must be even and it must be staccato.



Figure 1. “HA” Whisper Pulsations (MM = 72)

The physical sensation should be similar to a series of very gentle coughs, where the pulsations are felt in the throat and not the abdomen. The pulses should be even without any extraneous throat sound.

When students can do the above exercise well, they should put it up an octave and play from C3 chromatically down to G1 (or even D1). Students may also practice the above exercise with 3 pulsations per note.

Once students can control the speed and evenness of the

throat staccato they should connect the pulses using the syllable “who” instead of “ha,” so that there is a more legato feel.

Once students are able to produce a series of even pulsations with a whisper tone (i.e., *sotto voce*), they are ready to play these same exercises with a true vibrato using a full and centered tone.

When students are able to perform the above beginning exercises successfully, they are ready to practice the following more challenging flexibility exercises:

Play a note with vibrato. Once it is secured, gradually vary the speed of the vibrato.

Play a note with a straight tone (no vibrato). Gradually move to producing an expressive vibrato and then return to a straight tone, all on one breath.

Set the metronome to mm=72 and vibrate in groups of three, four, and five pulses per beat. Once consistency has been acquired at this comfortable tempo, repeat the exercise at slower and then faster *tempi*.

The purpose of these sequential exercises is to help students develop a controlled and flexible vibrato that will eventually become an integral part of their music-making. At first, perform all of these exercises in the middle register of the flute. As vibrato flexibility increases, expand the playing range. Ideally, flutists should be able to play with vibrato using a variety of speeds throughout the range of the flute and at different dynamic levels.

I have found that both novice and experienced flutists can benefit a great deal from practicing these exercises. It can also be helpful if an inexperienced student practices these exercises with a more experienced flutist.

## From Exercise to Musical Performance

It is important that finger action does not interfere with vibrato production. On more than one occasion, my teachers would depress the F, E, and D keys while I was vibrating and fingering G, in order to see if my vibrato would be affected by this unexpected finger action and change of pitch. Ideally, finger action and vibrato should function independently of each other.

If one intends to play with vibrato, then it stands to reason that one should practice, and even tune, with vibrato. When students are able to perform the above exercises with accuracy and flexibility, they are ready to apply what they have learned in an authentic way by playing their band/orchestral music, studies (e.g., Bona Rhythmic Study # 75, mm=76), or solo repertoire (e.g., slow movements from Handel sonatas) using appropriate vibrato.

Usually, playing the flute is not a solitary activity. Playing with others is essential to developing ensemble skills. Therefore, it is hoped that students will have an opportunity to perform in both large and small (chamber) ensembles. When flutists perform together, they must listen to each other and make every effort to match vibrato styles within the section. With respect to vibrato awareness, students should continually monitor their playing, be flexible during performance, and adjust when necessary.

# FUNDAMENTALS OF TEACHING FLUTE VIBRATO

Regular practice is necessary in order to make adequate progress. Therefore, teachers should periodically monitor their students' development and remind them to play with vibrato, thus encouraging them not to give up but to "sing" through the musical phrase.

## The Importance of Listening to Performance Exemplars

It is important that students have opportunities to hear performance exemplars early on in their music education. This could take the form of live or recorded performances (e.g., CD, DVD, sound file). Far too often, young players have the student next to them as their only model.

Today, there is an abundance of wonderful flute recordings. All students, whether they are taking private lessons or not, should have the opportunity to hear the world's finest flutists. Ensemble teachers should include regular guided listening during their rehearsal time. This could be accomplished by featuring a different instrument each week for a short period of time (e.g., 3-5 minutes) or as a guided listening home assignment.

In addition to in-school guided listening, students should also be encouraged to build their own listening library. For instance, I often encouraged the parents of my students to give their children educationally appropriate gifts at special occasions (Christmas, birthdays, or graduation). For the saxophone and clarinet players, this could mean an upgrade in a mouthpiece or a superior-grade box of reeds. Percussion students could benefit from receiving new sticks or a practice pad. All students would benefit from being given CDs/DVDs featuring renowned artists performing on the instrument they have chosen.

As a means of further expanding and enriching musical experiences, I encourage my flute students to search the World Wide Web to locate sites relating to their instrument. Teachers can guide their students by suggesting specific Web sites or asking them to use a search engine (e.g., Google) and key in specific words relating to an artist (e.g., "Emmanuel Pahud," "Marina Piccinini") or the instrument (e.g., "flute" and "history"). Some Web sites have sound files (e.g., Jeanne Baxtresser's Home Page, <http://www.jeannebaxtresser.com/>), allowing students to hear wonderful examples of fine flute playing.

These activities need not be restricted only to the flute. Students should also be encouraged to listen to vocalists and other instrumentalists (i.e., strings and winds) in order to discover how vibrato is used in different contexts and historical periods.

## Flute World

For those who love to collect anything relating to the flute, Flute World (<http://www.fluteworld.com/>) is the place for you. This store, located in Michigan, has the largest collection of flute CDs, sheet music, posters, accessories, and memorabilia in North America. I would recommend that music educators get a copy of their comprehensive catalogue and if they have any questions, phone and speak to their staff, most of whom are flutists. This is a candy store for flute lovers!

## Concluding Thoughts

If I were to state in the simplest terms what I do physically when I play with vibrato, it would be this: with a relaxed and open throat, I pulsate the air as it exits my mouth while I support the sound with my abdominal muscles. Because I have physical control of my vibrato, my primary focus is on expressing the intent of the musical phrase.

There has been an ongoing debate about flute vibrato instruction and usage since its inception in the early sixteenth-century.<sup>10</sup> However, based on contemporary thought and practice, both teachers and students should keep in mind three key points about flute vibrato; it can be taught, it should be practiced, and it is an integral component of flute tone.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The author would like to thank Oscar Jose Garcia for encouraging me to write about this very important topic.
- 2 For a more detailed explanation of the physiological or historical aspects of vibrato, refer to the following sources: Jochen Gärtner, *The Vibrato, with Particular Consideration as Given to the Situation of the Flutist: Historical Development, New Physiological Discoveries, and Presentation of an Integrated Method of Instruction* (Regensburg: Gustav Verlag, 1981); Nancy Toff, *The Flute Book: A Complete Guide for Students and Performers* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1985); and Sheridon W. Stokes and Richard A. Condon, *Illustrated Method for Flute* (Culver City: Trio Associates, 1981).
- 3 Michel Debost, *The Simple Flute: From A to Z* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 260.
- 4 James Galway, *Flute* (London: Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides, 1982).
- 5 Interview with Frances Blaisdell, 1986. Frances Blaisdell was the first female wind player to graduate from The Juilliard School of Music, where she studied with Georges Barrère (<http://www.k-c-p.com/nyfluteclub/index.html>) and later with William Kincaid. She was the Principal Flutist with the New York City Ballet Orchestra for ten years and, since 1973, she has taught in the Department of Music at Stanford University.
- 6 Galway, 106.
- 7 Jeanne Baxtresser is the former Principal Flute of the Montreal and Toronto Symphony Orchestras, and the New York Philharmonic.
- 8 William Kincaid was for many years Principal Flute of the Philadelphia Orchestra and flute instructor at the Curtis Institute of Music.
- 9 Telephone conversation, August 1, 2006.
- 10 Toff, 109.



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