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Neal Zaslaw

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Vibrato in Eighteenth-Century Orchestras

Neal Zaslaw

The following excerpts are taken from *Mozart's Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception*.¹

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These remarks will deal not with soloistic techniques of the individual instruments, concerning which there is a growing literature, but with matters of interpretation affecting orchestral players, which has been less studied. The stark terms in which Francesco Galeazzi described the duties of the ripienist in 1791 suggest that one ought not automatically to equate the advice given in treatises for soloistic performance with the behavior required of ripienists:

It is worth observing that expression is one thing when you play in a full orchestra but something different when you play solo. Expression in the whole orchestra is reduced almost entirely to the

1. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 473-81, with permission of the publisher.

lowly, practical mechanics of performing at the right moment the pianos and fortes that are notated in the music.²

* * *

Vibrato is a controversial subject in the performance of eighteenth-century music. An extreme position was taken by Francesco Geminiani, for whom vibrato, which he called "the close shake,"

cannot possibly be described by Notes. . . . To perform it you must press the Finger 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 Degree, 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 and for this Reason it should be made use of as often as possible.³

In this passage Geminiani was most probably writing about solo playing. His final clause has been interpreted to mean that he advocated continuous vibrato, but do we really know what he meant by "short Notes" and why he wrote "as often as possible" rather than "all the time," "continuously," or another similar expression? And how should one deal with the fact that most modern musicians would probably attribute to vibrato on a long note such affects as "tenderness," "vibrancy," "warmth," and "passion," but hardly Geminiani's "affliction" and "fear"?

In any case, other eighteenth-century writers cautioned against overuse of vibrato, with the extreme opposite position to Geminiani's stated by his pupil, Robert Bremner. Bremner's reply to his teacher was that vibrato, which he called "tremolo," may be used here and there as an ornament by a soloist but has no place in orchestral playing:

2. Francesco Galeazzi, *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica con un saggio sopra l'arte di suonare il violino analizzata, ed a dimostrabili principi ridotta*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1791-96), vol. 1, p. 197. Concerning the differences between orchestral and non-orchestral musicians, see John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, "Improvised Ornamentation in Eighteenth-Century Orchestras," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 39 (1986): 524-77.

3. Francesco Geminiani, *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (London, 1751?; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 8. Other writers who seem to advocate a similar approach to vibrato: Jean Rousseau, *Traité de la viole* (Paris, 1687; repr. Geneva: Minkoff, 1975), 100-101 (" . . . on le [i.e. bat(t)ement: a microtonal, two-finger vibrato] pratique en toutes rencontres quand la valeur de la Note le permet, & il doit durer autant que la Note."); John Wilson (ed.), *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello, 1959), 164-5.

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. Though the application of it may, for the sake of variety, be admitted, at times, on a long note in simple melody; yet, if it be introduced into harmony, where the beauty and energy of the performance depend upon the united effect of all the parts being exactly in tune with each other, it becomes hurtful. The proper stop 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: and, if an unsteady voice is reckoned a defect in a singer, he may also be called a defective performer whose fingers are destroying the plain sound, which includes both truth and beauty.⁴

There were reactions to Geminiani's and Bremner's contradictory statements on vibrato. When Geminiani's treatise was posthumously republished in the second half of the eighteenth century, the remark that vibrato "should be used as often as possible" was removed, suggesting that his position was considered controversial or that his statement was thought possibly misleading.⁵ Whereas Geminiani's book did not discuss orchestral playing, Bremner's essay was explicitly written to emphasize the differences between the performance responsibilities of soloists and of orchestral players.

A response to Bremner's passage on vibrato, by his German translator Carl Friedrich Cramer, makes interesting reading, even though Cramer neglected to observe Bremner's careful distinction between soloist and ripienist and appears to be writing only about the former:

The author of these remarks seems to me to be entirely too much prejudiced against vibrato. . . . The application of this [vocal technique] to instrumental execution is easy to make. Because

4. Robert Bremner, "Some Thoughts on the Performance of Concert Music," published as a preface to J. G. C. Schetky, *Six Quartetts for two Violins, a Tenor, & Violoncello*, op. 6 (London, 1777; repr. 1972; mod. edn. by N. Zaslaw as "The Compleat Orchestral Musician," *Early Music* 7 (1979): 46-57.

5. Roger Hickman, "The Censored Publications of *The Art of Playing on the Violin*, or Geminiani Unshaken," *Early Music* 11 (1983): 73-76.

however much *vocal* performance (also the model and ideal for the instrumental) and passionate expression allow of it, so much more does the indefiniteness of the naked, wordless tone [of instrumental music]. Thus it follows irrefutably that, in such passages where the singer would apply vibrato, the instrumentalist not only *may* make use of it, but *must*. That this, however, like all niceties and ornaments, must occur not too frequently but with discretion and upon reflection, I have no desire to argue about with our author.⁶

Hence, Cramer, although he wished to modify Bremner's purist position, would never have endorsed Geminiani's broad mandate for vibrato.

Leopold Mozart's position was similar to Cramer's (and again no distinction between solo and orchestral playing is mentioned):

Now because the tremolo is not purely on one note but sounds undulating, so would it be an error if every note were played with tremolo. Performers there are who tremble consistently on each note as if they had the palsy. The tremolo must only be used at places where nature herself would produce it, [. . . on] a closing note or any other sustained note.⁷

Leopold's previously cited remarks about the oboist Carlo Besozzi confirm his fundamentally conservative attitude to vibrato. Wolfgang's only recorded remarks on the matter, although they do not specifically address the question of orchestral vibrato, would seem to arise from a similarly conservative position:

[The singer] Meissner, as you know, has the bad habit of making his voice tremble at times, turning a note that should be sustained into distinct crotchets, or even quavers — and this I never could endure in him. And really it is a detestable habit and one which is quite contrary to nature. The human voice trembles naturally — but in its own way — and only to such a degree that the effect is beautiful. Such is the nature of the voice; and people imitate it not only on wind instruments, but on stringed instruments too and even on the clavichord. But the moment the proper limit is overstepped, it is no

6. Carl Friedrich Cramer, ed., *Magazin der Musik* (Hamburg, 1783-86), vol. 1, p. 1216; Neal Zaslaw, "The Orchestral Musician Completed," *Early Music* 8 (1980): 71-72.

7. Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, 238-39; English translation by Editha Knocker as *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1948), 203-04.

longer beautiful — because it is contrary to nature. It reminds me of when, on the organ, the bellows are jolted.⁸

And concerning the oboist Johann Christian Fischer, whom Mozart heard in Holland in 1766 and again in Vienna in 1787: "He certainly does not deserve the reputation he enjoys. [. . .] The long and short of it is that he plays like a bad beginner. [. . .] His tone is entirely nasal, and his held notes are like the tremulant on the organ."⁹

Francesco Galeazzi's statement about vibrato is in much the same vein as Leopold Mozart's of thirty-five years earlier:

[Vibrato] consists in pressing the finger well on the string to perform a long note, and then, marking with the hand a certain paralytic and trembling motion, performing so that the finger bends now to this side and now to that, and resulting in a vacillating pitch and a certain continual trembling not unpleasing to those people [who do it]; but these are most genuine discords which can please only those who are accustomed to them and which should be entirely banned from music by anybody equipped with good taste.¹⁰

Running through all these comments, except Geminiani's, are the same ideas: some (perhaps many) performers use vibrato; they sometimes use it too much; it makes perfect intonation impossible; there is something unpleasant or impure about it. (The words "defect," "trembling," "palsy," and "paralytic" are used, and Mozart writes three times, "contrary to nature.") Hence vibrato was considered primarily an ornament, and there is good historical evidence to suggest that it was used sparingly by soloists and generally eschewed by well-disciplined orchestral players.

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Since the above was written (around 1985-86), a major new study has appeared: Greta Moens-Haenen, *Das Vibrato in der Musik der Barock: ein Handbuch zur Aufführungspraxis für Vokalisten und Instrumental-*

8. Letter of 12 June 1778. W. A. Bauer, O. E. Deutsch, and J. H. Eibl, eds., *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 7 vols. (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1962-75), vol. 2, p. 378; English translation by Emily Anderson in *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, 3 vols. (London, 1938), vol. 2, pp. 816-17 (or in 2nd ed. [2 vols., New York: St. Martin's, 1966], vol. 2, p. 552).

9. Letter of 4 April 1787. *Briefe*, vol. 4, pp. 40-41; *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 1350 (2nd ed., vol. 2, p. 907).

10. Galeazzi, *Elementi*, vol. 1, p. 171.

*isten*¹¹. This important monograph contains a great deal of valuable information about vibrato. As I read Moens-Haenen, her conclusions are entirely consonant with the interpretation I offer above.

11. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1988.