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Portamento, Rubato and Vibrato: Using Essential Expressive Tools Effectively in String Playing

Daniel Mason

Professor of Violin
University of Kentucky

Introduction

Portamento, the expressive “carrying” of sound between two notes, is among the most characteristic defining idioms of string instrument performance. Borrowed from vocalists, the string portamento smooths the linking of pitches and draws attention to landmark melodic or harmonic gestures; it is closely tied to two other essential expressive tools, rubato and vibrato. As exemplified by the “golden-age” masters, in particular, Jascha Heifetz and Fritz Kreisler, the “slide” is very frequently paired with subtle expressive timing and the action involved can be felt as a continuation of the vibrato. motion. Although often associated with performance practice beginning in the 19th century, historical evidence is plentiful that Haydn, Mozart and other 18th century composers embraced the sound of stringed instrument portamento in their works. The modern string player is so often cautioned to avoid portamento and rubato that their natural employment is in danger of becoming a lost art. Their use can bring a sense of release to phrasing and even flexibility to muscular action; as is true for vocalists, expression and physical well-being for string players starts with the breath and depends upon the phrase. An elastic portamento helps to ensure an elastic left hand.

Clive Brown's Presentation (ASTA, 2020)

Recommend:

Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900

Clive Brown (Oxford Press, 1999)

Brown, Clive. “Bowing Styles, Vibrato and Portamento in Nineteenth-Century Violin Playing.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 113, no. 1, [Royal Musical Association, Taylor & Francis, Ltd.], 1988, pp. 97–128, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/766271>.

Many widely-held assumptions about early 19th century performers may not be supported by exhaustive research of documentation, still ongoing. Recent research suggests that misconceptions about performance practice in the late 18th- and 19th-century Europe may be common.

Performers decisions based on misunderstanding of the past might be re-evaluated with fuller consideration of the societal and aesthetic landscape of the past.

“Correct” vs. “Beautiful”

“*Richtiger Vortrag*”, or “correct performance” - Students should learn to play this way, with minimal deviation from the notation.

“*Schöner Vortrag*”, “beautiful performance” - As one progressed to artist level, the interpretation of music would involve much more than was on the page.

Terms quoted by Clive Brown from August Eberhardt Muller, written in 1804.

Composers responded to socio-economic shift away from sponsorship toward appealing to a mass audience by notating scores so that their music could more readily be played by performers they had never met.

Shift from composer-performer to more specialization

First celebrated musicians to build career on playing the works of others.

David and Lipinsky were known as soloists, but held concertmaster posts as primary activity.

Examples:

- Ferdinand David (1810-1873)
- Karol Lipinski (1790-1861)
- Joseph Joachim ((1831-1907)

Why was the metronome's early 19th century arrival on the scene about the same time published music was being performed far from the composer? This was 600 years after the mechanical clock was invented.

Some archival recordings may shed light, by letting us hear performers born in the first half in the 19th century. The earliest birth date of a musician who was recorded in the 20th century was Karl Reinecke (1824-1910). His piano roll recording of Mozart is extremely free and arpeggiated, both forbidden today.

Why do older editions of violin music seem to suggest avoiding the 2nd position?

Socio-economic Factors?

As musical life transitioned from patronage system to public concerts, careers depended more on a wider (and perhaps, less informed audience). Excessive expression may have been viewed as an asset for a soloist. Were portamento, rubato and vibrato employed more through the 19th century for economic reasons (in part)? The opposite became true for orchestras, as the recording era began. Because a flexible, expressive timing requires more rehearsal time for a group to truly play together, it was simpler to assemble a stage full of players who had the training to play metronomically.

It might be more interesting and informative, if, in every orchestra audition, each excerpt was heard twice, once “richtig” and once “schöne”

Isolation of Schools

Major effort (sometimes over decades) required to become acquainted with the work of celebrated artists from elsewhere in Europe.

As the concert “A” varied from place to place, so, too, did technical preferences. String playing in Paris likely very different from Berlin or Vienna through most of 19th century. Even the Tourte bow was accepted at different paces around Europe.

Joseph Joachim (1831-1907)

His performance of the Beethoven Concerto at age 12, in London, with Mendelssohn conducting, and for which he wrote his own cadenzas, “rehabilitated the concerto and secured its place in the violin concerto pantheon.

Brahms was his friend of long standing and wrote his concerto and double concerto for him. Concerti by Bruch Schumann, and Dvorak were also written with Joachim in mind.

Joseph Joachim

Brahms, Hungarian Dance No. 2,
recorded in 1903.

Joachim's opposition to continuous vibrato and his free rubato remained influential until his death in 1907, just ten years before Heifetz' New York debut.



Joachim's mentors

Joachim benefitted from a long list of supporters and mentors. One teacher, Joseph Boehm, was known to be admired by Beethoven. Boehm also encountered Paganini in the 1820s and introduced some of those innovations to his students.

Mendelssohn gave Joachim advice from a composer's perspective and encouraged Joachim to employ a variety of techniques, as seemed appropriate, helping settle the "on the string-off the string" wars.

Lineage from Boehm (known to Beethoven) to after 1900

Joachim dominated the 19th-century string playing world, especially after Paganini, and bridged the late-classical to late-romantic periods.

Students included Marie Soldat, Leopold Auer, Tivadar Nachez, Maud Powell, Andreas Moser, Jeno Hubay, Bronislaw Huberman

Marie Soldat (1863-1955)

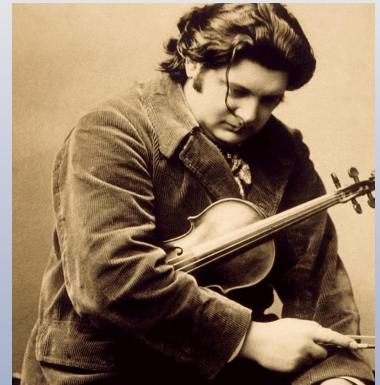
She would later go by her married name - Marie Soldat-Roege. Her all-women quartet played for Brahms funeral. Brahms helped her acquire her 1742 Guarneri del Gesu violin and enjoyed playing with her more than anyone except Joachim.



Eugene Ysaye (1858-1931)

The great Belgian violinist and composer was among the first solo string players to use vibrato continuously. Kreisler said: “Wieniawsky [1835-80] intensified the vibrato and brought it to height never before achieved, so that it became known as the 'French vibrato'. Vieuxtemps [1820-81] also took it up, and after him Eugene Ysaye [1858-1931], who became its greatest exponent, and I. Joseph Joachim, for instance, disdained it.”

In this recording, we hear Ysaye playing Dvorak *Humoresque*.



Arnold Rosé (1863-1946)

Concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic for 50 years from early 1880s until the 1930s, occupying that position for the last ten years of Brahms' life. The Rosé Quartet, which he founded, championed both Brahms and Schönberg. Excerpt from Beethoven *Romance* in F Major.



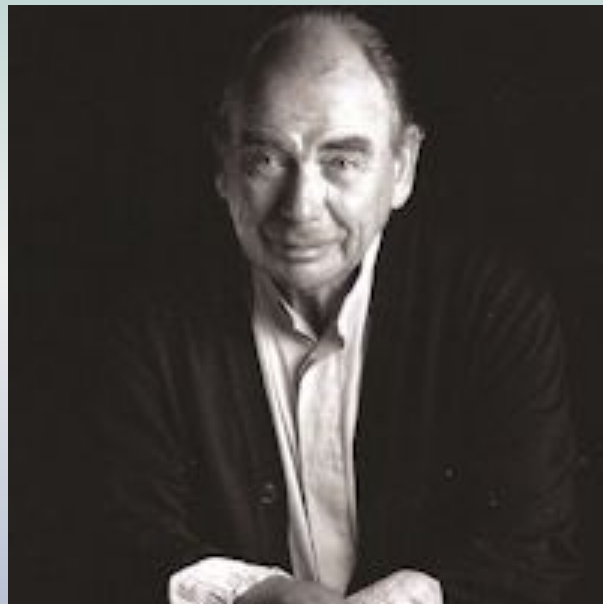
Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962)

Kreisler's recordings are celebrated for the beauty of the sound captured and for his unmistakable turn of phrase. This recording of "Liebesleid" is from 1942, and includes a lead-in cadenza not in his score.



Leon Spierer (1928-)

Concertmaster of Berlin from 1963-1993. Plays with varying degree of portamento and said that small, subtle, personal, portamenti were part of the shared sense of sound that characterizes the BPO. Everyone knows how much and where to use the technique, but un-planned, and adds warmth and roundness to the string sound. Here is the White Swan Pas de Deux from Swan Lake (Eberhard Finke is the cellist).



“Acceptable” portamento: Singer vs. string player

Kiri Tekanawa is widely acknowledged for her Mozart. An example quickly tells us why.

Could string players today employ these subtle connections between notes and not face stiff resistance?

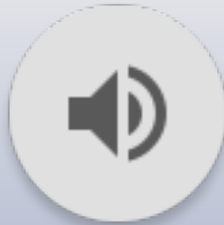


In 1776 in his treatise “Über die Pflichten des Ripien-violinisten”, J. F. Reichardt prohibited the orchestral player from sliding with the same finger from one position to another, but allowed it to be used by the solo player 'from time to time’.

Quoted in CLive Brown’s 1988 article

When NOT to Slide

Avoiding some of the most obvious opportunities for portamento was, at times, part of the Heifetz aesthetic, much as a skillful performance practice player would eschew ornaments in the most obvious places.



“I would be happy to rest my case on three violinists. Fritz Kreisler had a sublime feeling for portamento, through which he contrived to transport us straight to the heart of Vienna. David Oistrakh played with such expansive generosity that it was inevitable portamento would form part of his armoury, yet his playing always had a kind of nobility. Perhaps the finest master of portamento, however, was Jascha Heifetz, and the better he knew the music he was playing, the more portamento he employed (try his solo Bach – the D minor Partita, which he performed most often, features the most slides). You do not have to go along with everything that Heifetz did, and I do not. But when it comes to portamento, he led the way.”

Tully Potter *The Strad*, October 16, 2014

Old/New Finger/bow

Like the singer's breath, the bow can participate in effective portamento.

Common wisdom that Heifetz preferred audible portamento on the “new finger”, even when it travels a short distance, and that Kreisler applied the “old” finger portamento. However, there are abundant examples of each doing the other.

Sometimes, Heifetz used a “new finger” slide without changing positions

If there is a bow change, it is generally “old bow-old finger”, or “new bow-new finger”. JH was always mindful to allow no identifiable pitch along the way, though sometimes an in-between pitch can be heard in Kreisler's portamento.

Suggestions for Effective Portamento and Rubato

- Prepare the portamento with timing and vibrato
- Use vibrato to “launch” the shift for portamento, so it feels like an oscillation that broke free.
- Sing (and conduct) rubato. Your breathing will help you know what sounds most natural. Natural timing is key to physical well-being.
- Play smallest subdivision to insure that rubato flexibility is organic.
- Play a phrase with metronome, then remove beats until only starting and ending beats are audible. If you are natural in your give and take, you should end up approx. on the last beat.
- Use Metronome, or an app that lets you vary the beat by a percentage to hear truly progressive tempo fluctuation.
- Keep arrival finger angle low on ascending “new-finger” portamento

- Practice everything without vibrato and portamento. Neither should sound like technical cover up.
- When practicing the phrase without vibrato, be as expressive as you can using other means.
- When you add vibrato, choose one note as highest priority, add a second, etc. until phrase sounds the way you want.
- Same exercise with portamento.

Strings

The only important respect in which the nineteenth-century violin differed from the modern one was its stringing. Apart from the silver- or copper-wound gut G, all the strings were pure gut and there was considerable diversity in the thickness of strings employed, ranging from the maximum possible thickness (and consequently maximum tension) recommended by Campagnoli and Spohr for a strong tone, to the thin strings of such virtuosi as Paganini and Ole Bull which facilitated the performance of artificial harmonics. The particular style of performance of Paganini and Bull also led them to use an exceptionally flat bridge; this made multiple stopping easier but hindered the production of a full tone on the middle two strings.

The metal E did not gain widespread acceptance until after 1920, and gut A and D were still common for some time after that. On the whole, though, these methods of stringing have a far less striking effect on the way violin playing sounds than does performance style. The involvement of the performer in creating the sound on a bowed and unfretted string instrument is more direct, and the range of possibilities wider, perhaps, than on any other musical instrument. It is well known to violinists that the same instrument can sound utterly different in the hands of different players, while the same player using different good-quality instruments, regardless of stringing, can still produce his own distinctively individual sound.

There can be no doubt that nineteenth-century violinists' technical and aesthetic approach to performance resulted in a sound and style that differed substantially from that of modern violinists. Where or when particular approaches predominated is more difficult to determine, but it is precisely these questions which are crucial to our understanding of what composers envisaged when writing for the instrument.

- Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900*

Jascha Heifetz' Strings

Throughout his career, Heifetz used a plain gut “A” and “D”.

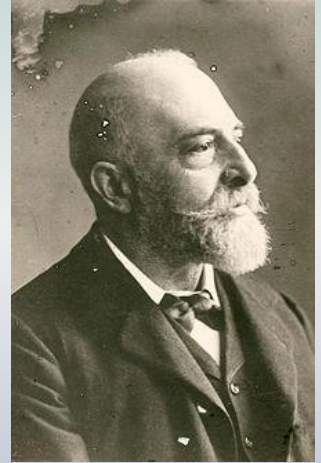
The middle strings thus had a more intimate quality than the outer strings, and his fingering choices took advantage of the contrast.\

The Tricolore G (wound silver) A and D (plain gut), as well as the Goldbrokat “E” string are recently being sold as the “Heifetz set”.

The plain gut creates more friction for the finger sliding than wound strings do, so the speed of the shift, and of the portamento is subtly affected.

Leopold Auer, Student of Joseph Joachim

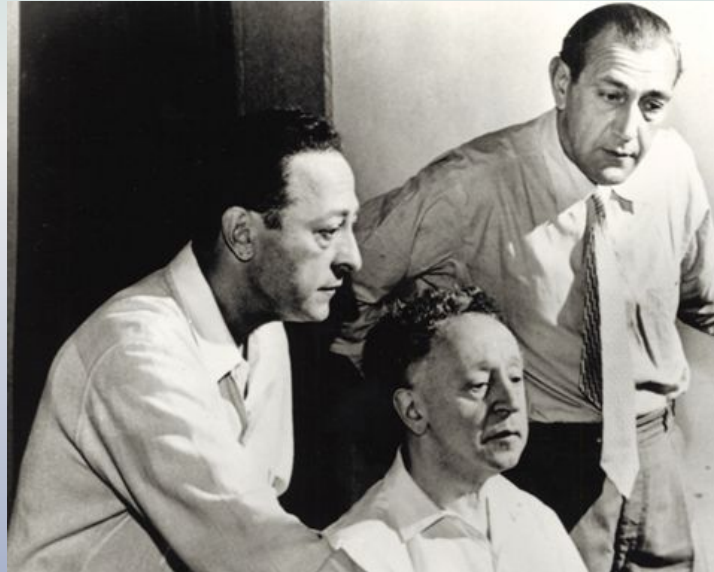
“In any case remember that only the most sparing use of the vibrato is desirable; the too generous employment of the device defeats the purpose for which you use it. The excessive vibrato is a habit for which I have no tolerance, and I always fight against it when I observe it in my pupils though often, I must admit, without success. As a rule I forbid my students using the vibrato at all on notes which are not sustained, and I advise them not to abuse it even in the case of sustained notes which succeed each other in a phrase.”



Leopold Auer, from *Violin Playing as I Teach It*. London, 1921

Heifetz, Piatigorsky, Rubinstein

In this variation #4, 2nd movement of Tchaikovsky *Trio*, the string players give a master class in use of portamento, rubato and vibrato! They were known as the “Million Dollar Trio”.



Jascha Heifetz



Debussy: *La Fille aux
Cheveux de Lin*, (arr.
Hartmann)

1953

Jascha Heifetz



Debussy: *La Fille aux
Cheveux de Lin*, (arr.
Hartmann)

1971

Manuel de Falla, *Nana* from *7 Canciones populares Españolas*

A favorite of students in the Heifetz Master class, his approach to this lullaby is more vocal and folk-like than almost any other recorded work. Varied vibrato, free, though structured, timing, bending of pitches, and same-finger portamento used like a singer. One of the last solo works he performed in public.



Questions?

Daniel Mason

daniel.mason@uky.edu

www.danielmasonviolin.com