

Bassoon Vibrato – The Application and Recordings Comparison of Weber ‘s

Bassoon Concert in F, 2nd movement.

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Although vibrato was widely adopted and mentioned in vocal and strings playing, it was seldom introduced into the official curriculum and definitely a sticky and controversial subject in woodwinds¹. Among the woodwind instrument, flute is the one on which vibrato is mostly adopted and clarinet is the only instrument that does not adopt vibrato because it is generally considered as jazz or folk music, and is like putting sugar on ice-cream². There are various ideas regarding the use of vibrato on bassoon. Some bassoonists, mostly before 1950s, did not encourage the use of vibrato or only encourage small amount of it in solo playing because it distorts the characteristic colour of bassoon tone, destroy its core and contour, bringing it too close to saxophone³.

¹ Anthony. Baines, *Woodwind Instruments and their History* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1962), 44.

² Robert. Philip, *Early recordings and musical style: changing tastes in instrumental performance, 1900-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), P.138.

³ Archie. Camden, *Bassoon Technique* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 30.

However, Werner Seltmann mentioned in his book *Bassoon Tutor* (1976) that vibrato will never make alien the tone but will always beautify it and make the music alive.⁴

William Waterhouse, a British bassoonist also stated in his book *Bassoon* (1962):

*(Vibrato)... a varying and subtle means of highlighting the points of a phrase in order to heighten the expressiveness and eloquence of what we are playing.*⁵

And Michael Burns, a bassoon professor in United States stated in his article

Thoughts and Strategies for Bassoon Vibrato (2006):

*It (Vibrato) is a coloristic tool that can be added and used to enhance the music.*⁶

⁴ Werner Seltmann, *Bassoon Tutor*, 1 vols. (Mainz: Schott, 1977), 56.

⁵ Archie. Camden, *Bassoon Technique* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 163.

⁶ Micheal.Burns, “Thoughts and Strategies for Bassoon Vibrato,” *The Double Reed* 28:2 (2005): 122.

For me, vibrato gives the singing quality to bassoon. And different players have different vibrato so it is surely an importantly individual tool for bassoonist to express music in their own ways.

Vibrato is a technique started to use in woodwinds in 20th century and became a wider trend in the world until 1940s⁷. Although it is mentioned in the English translation of two famous treatises in 18th century by Johann Joachim Quantz and Jacques Martin Hotteterre but what they mentioned is *Beburg* in German, referring to an ornament or flattement on long note created by fingering. For modern sense, vibrato is created by breath. However, the concept of breath vibrato was also stated early in Martin Agricola's treatise *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* published in 1529⁸. Agricola (1486-1556), a German author of several treaties on musical performance, states that the flute should be played with "quaking breath"⁹ so it proves that breath

⁷ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 137.

⁸ Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music, 1984), 523.

⁹ David McGill, *Sound in Motion: A Performer's Guide to Greater Musical Expression* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 211.

vibrato is actually existed in the past. However, it is critical to think why it is not become a wider trend until 20th century. There was a general tendency for detailed phrasing and wider dynamics to create more expressive playing styles in 20th century and the development of woodwinds instruments in 20th century such as the predominance of metal flute over the traditional wooden flute and the wide adoption of German bassoon also fertilized the employment of vibrato on woodwinds¹⁰.

Hearing vibrato in your playing is important to classify the modern playing with the old one and only performers on period instruments take a more selective view of it¹¹. Since the vibrato on woodwinds is a subject started to develop in last century and is important for modern playing, it is worthwhile to discuss the use of vibrato as a wind player. The application of vibrato in bassoon playing will be discussed in this essay with reference to different books and articles by different bassoonists, and different recordings of Weber 's Bassoon Concerto in F, 2nd movement will be

¹⁰ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 109.

¹¹ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 139.

compared to prove vibrato is an individual tool for different performers to express music.

Firstly, what is bassoon vibrato? It is created by the fluctuations in the supply of breath¹². The fluctuation means alternation of more and less forceful pressure in your air support to the instrument¹³. And what finally come out to the sound of bassoon vibrato is produced by the pitch oscillation and volume change¹⁴. Pitch oscillation is the change of pitch, when a note is made sharper and flatter alternating with the in-tune pitch¹⁵. It can be demonstrated as the below sound wave:



¹² Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) P.109.

¹³ James Galway, *Flute* (London: Macdonald, 1982), 106.

¹⁴ Micheal Burns, "Thoughts and Strategies for Bassoon Vibrato," *The Double Reed* 28:2 (2005): 121.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

And the volume change is to stay the same pitch and play loud-soft-loud-soft-loud-soft. Vibrato can be created by either pitch oscillation or volume change but both can be used to maximize the effect and for easier production.

There is no doubt that the use of vibrato gives life and warmth to the tone if you vary your vibrato. James Galway stated in his book Flute that:

*A second belief of mine is that if the vibrato never varies, neither does the life of the music, and the result is rather tiresome and tedious. Some people think vibrato should have regular speed. Others clearly demonstrate that it should not. The human body has a range of intensity of life, from sleeping peacefully to running the hundred yards' spirit. Music needs this too. But the intensity should be intended and under control. The ultimate target is to master a whole variety of speeds of vibrato, on every note and at every volume level.*¹⁶

¹⁶ James. Galway, Flute (London: Macdonald, 1982), 106.

The flexibility of vibrato should also be applied on bassoon playing. And how to vary your vibrato? There are three aspects:

1. Frequency

It is the number of oscillations per second. I divided it as three level as fast, normal and slow. The number of vibrations per beat can be changed relatively.

Speed	Per beat
Fast	 A waveform showing a high frequency of oscillations, with approximately 8 full cycles across the width of the cell.
Normal	 A waveform showing a moderate frequency of oscillations, with approximately 4 full cycles across the width of the cell.
Slow	 A waveform showing a low frequency of oscillations, with approximately 2 full cycles across the width of the cell.

2. Intensity

It is how deep is your vibrato. Three levels stated as below with diagrams:

Intensity	
High	
Normal	
Low	

- Continuity

It is about when does the vibrato starts in a note of playing. It can start right

when the note begins or after the note begins. And it can stop before the note

ends or continues to the end.

The recordings chosen to compare are from Klaus Thunemann, Mathias Racz, Michelle Rosen, Karen Geoghegan and Rodion Tolmache. They are all different in nations and background. Appendix one is the table for comparison. Background and descriptions with recording links are included. According to the comparison, there seems to be regional or national tendencies in favored vibrato speed and depth¹⁷ but the recordings are too limited to conclude different national preference of vibrato.

Vibrato used by Michelle Rosen is the most regular and other bassoonists tend to be more flexible. The vibrato of the two German bassoonists - Klaus Thuneman and Mathias Racz are very different too. Thunemann's vibrato is faster, more intense and regular but Mathias used less intense and slower vibrato with lesser amount.

Therefore, the bassoonist in same nations may also be different or this difference may suggest that the use of vibrato is changing from 20th century to 21st century.

Thuneneman represents the old school of German styles and Mathias is relatively green. Listening to other younger bassoonists recording in 21st century, not including Michelle Rosen, their vibrato is more flexible with changes in speed and intensity. For example, using more intense vibrato to emphasize particular notes and increase the

¹⁷ Micheal.Burns, "Thoughts and Strategies for Bassoon Vibrato," *The Double Reed* 28:2 (2005): 122.

tension of a phrase. Almost every bassoonist use vibrato or more intense vibrato on the highest and loudest note in the phrase at bar 15. Appendix two is the score of the 2nd movement of Weber's Bassoon Concerto in F major. Since the use of vibrato is relative, particular note can be highlighted by little vibrato if you prefer less vibrato in your general playing like Mathias Racz. If you prefer using more vibrato generally, note can be specified by using more intense vibrato like Klaus Thunemann and Rodion Tolmache or using no vibrato like Karen Geoghegan. Examples are specified in table for comparison.

*If one thing rather than another expresses the individual, it is vibrato. By the way of demonstration, get a couple of records of Jascha Heifetz on violin and Maria Calla singing. Heifetz has very intense vibrato, Callas a wide and slow one, and clearly, though they have nothing in common, both are using vibrato properly. There is no last word on what vibrato should be used, or how it should be varied to suit the music. These decisions are made by a player's own musicality and individuality.*¹⁸

¹⁸ James. Galway, Flute (London: Macdonald, 1982), 106.

Vibrato is not something that written on score by composers. It is absolutely an individual tool for performers to express themselves. There is no right or wrong about the vibrato. By experimenting the different intensity and speed of vibrato through practice, performers can develop their personal style of vibrato and vary their vibrato to add life to music in their own way. The sound of vibrato can be the unique character of you.

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Sharrow. New York: International Music Company, 1958.

Appendix one:

Table for comparison

Year	Bassoonist	Orchestra	Tempo	Vibrato (Frequency, Intensity and Continuity)
2016	Rodion Tolmachev	Mariinsky	48-50	Usually Slow and low intensity
Age: 39	- Russian bassoonist mainly received education in St Petersburg, Russia. (2 years study in Germany)	Theatre Symphony Orchestra in St Petersburg, Russia		Vibrato (3 per beats / 4 per beat with low intensity vibrato) Have change of intensity (with dynamics) in vibrato within a note (Bar 9)

				<p><u>Continuity</u></p> <p>Usually starts vibrato right the note begins</p> <p>End phrase with slow and low intensity vibrato</p> <p>comfortable tone</p> <p>Rodion Tolmachev - Bassoon</p> <p>Concerto in F-Major, Op. 75: II.</p> <p>Adagio</p>
2013	Mathias Racz	N/A	48-50	Normal speed with normal intensity
Age: 34	- German born bassoonist and received			Relatively less use of vibrato

	<p>education in Hanover, Germany. Now is the principal bassoonist of the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne in Zurich.</p>		<p>(just used in notes more than one beat)</p> <p>Have change of intensity (with dynamics) in vibrato within a note (Bar 9)</p> <p>sometimes the vibrato is less intense and barely hear</p> <p><u>Continuity</u></p> <p>Like holding the notes before vibrato, will not start vibrato right when the note begins</p>
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				Matthias Racz - Bassoon Concerto in F Major, Op. 75, J. 127: II. Adagio
2013	Michelle Rosen	The Chamber	50-53	Even and regular vibrato
Age:	- Principal	Orchestra of		adopted on all long notes
N/A	bassoonist of The	Philadelphia		
	Chamber			Relatively Fast and high intense
	Orchestra of			vibrato
	Philadelphia			no change in intensity and
	since 1997 ,			frequency
	graduate of The			
	Curtis Institute of			Continuity
	Music			Start vibrato when the note start
				Quite mechanical feeling

				<p>Same style of vibrato throughout the piece.</p> <p>Carl Maria von Weber - Bassoon Concerto in F Major, Op. 75, J. 127: II. Adagio</p>
2012	Karen Geoghegan	BBC	43-47	Mainly normal and low intensity vibrato (2nd)
Age:	- Scottish	Philharmonic		
N/A	bassoonist			
	studied in the			Use vibrato to transcend the notes
	Royal Academy			
	of music, United			
	Kingdom.			Does not use vibrato in the notes she wants to specify (e.g. Bb bar 5 , F in bar 15)

				<u>Carl Maria von Weber - Bassoon Concerto in F Major, Op. 75, J. 127: II. Adagio</u>
1991	Klaus Thunemann		51-53	Usually Fast speed (8 per 1 beat)
Age:	- German born		4:36	and normal intensity (quite
55	bassoonist ,			regular)
	principal			
	bassoonist in			have change of speed (normal to
	North German			slow)
	Radio Symphony			
	Orchestra of			Hear a bit about the change of
	Hamburg from			intensity of vibrato but it is
	1962 to 1978.			naturally done according to the
				register and dynamics

				<p>Continuity</p> <p>Start vibrato when the note starts</p> <p><u>Klaus Thunemann - Bassoon</u></p> <p><u>Concerto in F, Op.75: 2. Adagio</u></p>
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Appendix two:

Weber, Carl Maria Von. *Concerto in F Major, Op. 75 for bassoon*. Edited by Leonard

Sharrow. New York: International Music Company, 1958.

The image shows a page of musical notation for a bassoon solo. The tempo is marked "Adagio" and the section is labeled "Solo". The music is written in F major and 3/4 time. The score consists of eight staves of music. The first staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and a *mf* marking. The second staff includes markings for *ten.* (tension), *mf*, *cresc.* (crescendo), and *f*. The third staff starts with *f* and ends with a trill marked *tr^b*. The fourth staff is marked *dolce*. The fifth staff has a *f* marking. The sixth staff includes *p*, *cresc.*, *f*, and *dolce*. The seventh staff has *f* and *dolce* markings. The eighth staff begins with *ad lib.* (ad libitum), followed by *f* and *a tempo* markings. The page number "3006" is printed at the bottom left.