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Vibrato in Wind Playing

Simeon Bellison

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In the last issue we stated that Mr. Bellison had promised to write a second article for us, but that unfortunately it had not yet been written at the time of his death.

While going through Mr. Bellison's papers, a member of his family discovered the article, finished and ready to be delivered. We are pleased and proud to publish it posthumously.

Mr. Bellison was a warm-hearted, mild, and quiet man. Rarely did one hear him raise his voice. No matter how excited his colleagues might become over an issue, he would discuss the problem in quiet and reasoned language. This article is a veritable call-to-arms against the use of vibrato. Those who knew him well will chuckle at its fire and excitement, prompted by his zeal only to perfect his art. It will warm your heart whether or not you may happen to agree with his views.

In music, vibrato means wavering the straight line of a sound produced by instrument or voice. Many wind players use vibrato to impress the audience with their sound. But musicians gifted with the good fortune of a fine sound do not need vibrato.

Some of the worried ones, attempting to cover up a deficiency of sound, vibrate slowly. Others do it slightly faster, and the rest go ahead full speed. But nobody is sure if he is right or wrong, because there are no rules or mechanical means of measurement to regulate the tempo of wavering. Everyone does it according to his own taste-which too often means without taste. Thus playing of this type often turns into a circus performance, which I have termed "shaky playing."

We see and hear such "artists" on the radio, television, in movies, and "in person." One vibrates with his lips. The other uses his throat or muscles. And some use everything that comes into their minds. The feet, too, are busy doing their part in accompanying a long and fast vibration. And so the land has become filled with young and old musicians, vibrating at home, at school, and in the orchestra. What was once a fad is now a style.

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Perhaps the word sickness would be more accurate than the term style in describing shaky playing. What makes it worse is that it is contagious and has spread to the better class of musicians, thus affecting symphonies and schools. When children turn on the radio and pick up their own instruments to follow the professional performer, they practise his vibrato and gradually become accustomed to it. They think this is the right and nice way to play. But when the youngsters start taking music lessons, the teacher doesn't know how to cure them of this sickness.

Dance Music and Jazz

This kind of playing, of course, is used to the greatest extent in dance music and jazz. The more such players shake, the more they are recognized as artists. They make more money and become famous. And little by

little, they promote themselves to the title of "king of jazz." In other words, they are now geniuses.

We hear such artists everywhere, day and night. Their most popular instruments are the saxophone and the trumpet. Both of these instruments compete with each other to prove virtuosity. The speed of the vibration and loudness play main roles in the performance. And to arouse the ardor of the audience, the players twist themselves and their instruments up and down and sideways, and at the climax of this Saint Vitus dance, look like victims of convulsions. Suddenly the performance is over and everyone feels as if he has been through an earthquake. That is "hot playing," in the language of these virtuosos.

The rest of the world dances to music, too. Musicians play different dances--slow ones and fast ones, classical and national. All are gay and free of vibration.

During the many years that I have been a teacher and performer, music schools and individual teachers have sent me many letters to ask about my experience with vibrato. I did not pay much attention to this problem before, but now that it has become a plague, I decided to tell openly what I think and know about shaky playing.

In Other Lands

The question of vibrato does not exist in Europe. All winds there as a rule must play without wavering. They use their natural color in orchestra chamber music, and solo playing. Vibration in winds sounds as unpleasant as strings without vibration. Winds must not vibrate, and most European conductors see to it that they do not. Teachers, too, are spared the difficulty.

When Toscanini took the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra on a concert tour of Europe in 1930, the conductor and orchestra were highly praised for their artistic performances. Yet the brass and winds were severely criticized for their vibrato.

Wind players and students begin to vibrate because they are disappointed with their sound. They do not know how to correct the sound and become impatient. Here is where the teacher must come to the rescue. He must change the reeds and mouthpieces, making sure they suit the lips of the student. Besides taking care of the embouchure, he might require a better instrument. But the vibration must stop immediately.

The only wind instrument free to vibrate--but carefully--is the saxophone, even if it sometimes plays in a symphony. It was born with a menagerie sound and is worse without vibration. The saxophone is vital to jazz. It is used but seldom in symphonies, and few compositions are written for it because only a few specialists can manage it artistically.

As a musician with a European background, I play without vibration. But at times I hear--or feel--a few seconds of vibration as I play. This happens in romantic music, where the expression of a delicate phrase in a love scene takes my mind off other matters. This vibration, however, is entirely different. It is natural and comes from my heart and soul. It disappears as mysteriously as it came.

Vibrato is as dangerous a sickness as diabetes. It is hard to get rid of, even with insulin. But if America stopped being stubborn and followed the example of Europe, it would get rid of shaky playing once and forever. Thus it would cast off the menace that kills the taste and development of legitimate music. If the plague persists, boards of education must call a conference of musicians to attack the problem and everything related to it. Get rid of the shaky plague!