

## Vibrato as a Concept in Woodwind Performance

### Part I

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*(Before initiating the following article regarding woodwind vibrato and its place in woodwind performance, I should like to express my sincere gratitude to the distinguished American oboist, **Nancy Ambrose King**, for having inspired me through her splendid "live" performances and recordings which so clearly demonstrate the importance of vibrato in the art of woodwind performance.)*

**A**s a concept in woodwind performance vibrato may be defined as a technique which colors musical phrases. The mastery and usage of such a technique deserves no less attention and consideration than other techniques which may be used to color musical phrases such as the accent, the staccato, the diminuendo, the crescendo, and so forth. To delete this color source from the executant's palette would be the equivalent of removing a color from a painter's palette. In each case the artist's palette would become not richer but poorer as a consequence of the deletion. Clearly in this instance the expressive technique of vibrato is pure gold!

Sometimes a woodwind player's interpretive formation is such that the idea of "senza vibrato" (meaning without vibrato) is more or less constantly in play. Even though the music would seem to suffer in the minds of musicians associated with that particular attitude, such an idea of playing music free from discernible vibrato would seem to be completely appropriate and enjoyable for those particular musicians. It is quite clear, too, that any woodwind player who artistically endorses the "totally free from vibrato" concept of playing music is "deleting" a color source from the artist's palette as we had discussed earlier.

In examining recorded performances by such distinguished musicians as William Kincaid (flute), **Robert Bloom** (oboe), Richard Stoltzman (clarinet), **Sergio Penazzi** (bassoon), we find vibrato usage quite prevalent in their playing. Surprisingly enough, even prominent, classically trained clarinetists are playing with vibrato. These musicians would include Harold Wright (Boston Symphony), Stanley Drucker (New York Philharmonic), Richard Stoltzman, and Benny Goodman among others.

Some years ago, however, there was a great deal of resistance for playing classical music with vibrato on the clarinet. In those years we would observe the clarinet to be the prime candidate for the woodwind instrument most used in producing music "senza vibrato." The one major exception would be in the field of jazz where clarinetists would produce "vibrati" in their playing. As an example I defer to the remarkable Benny Goodman who played both jazz and classical with vibrato. Today the fascinating Richard Stoltzman does the same: the recording of the Beethoven *Quintet for Piano and Winds, Op. 16* (second movement) with Rudolf Serkin (piano) is a prime example.

On a personal level this writer had the special pleasure of recently enjoying a performance of the Villa-Lobos *Trio* by faculty members of Michigan State University. (**Dan Stolper**, oboe; Frank Ell, clarinet; **Barry Stees**, bassoon). These musicians demonstrated an affinity for the music and their coloring of the musical phrases with vibrato being adding a special warmth to their playing.

Even though vibrato usage in woodwind performance is the subject of frequent discussions today in terms of how much, where it should be used, how to produce it, etc., the concept of vibrato in woodwind playing has not always been popular. The baroque period, for example, represented a time when playing the woodwinds "senza vibrato" was in vogue. From an international point of view the oboe was played some years ago without vibrato. **Leon Goossens**, the internationally famous English oboist, had been rather unpopular for a while with many of his colleagues because of his vibrato. Goossens held firm to his convictions, however, that vibrato did have an important position in woodwind performance as an expressive tool and today his view now prevails! In Italy some oboists still cling to the idea of playing "senza" vibrato. This writer listened to the principal oboist of Il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Orchestra (Florence, Italy) play opera music without vibrato!

Even though there will always be arguments among woodwind players as to the use or non-use of vibrato, such arguments are often based on opinions derived more from well-intended

instructional experiences than from in-depth, non-biased study programs.

Indeed, when vibrato is studied as a function of musical concepts, what is perceived as a good vibrato may upon further study be discarded as inadequate and a more vigorous or less vigorous vibrato be instituted as the case may be. Furthermore, in some instances, the use of non-vibrato may be considered an ideal way to initiate a phrase followed by a warmly, expressive vibrato shading.

**Leon Goossens** and Edwin Roxburgh have collaborated on a very informative and particularly fascinating Oxford University Press publication comprising all aspects of oboe performance including a wonderful chapter on vibrato and its application. It is really excellent and highly recommended!

**Robert Bloom**, the dean of American oboists, had the right idea when he studied the performances of the great singers and encouraged his students to do the same. For the insights that he gleaned from these great singers became his insights which he then imbued with his own great personality, his own special

warmth and charm, and his own special concept of woodwind performance. He recognized that great singers had great breath control and great vibrato control. And in using these techniques he himself became a singer when playing the oboe. And one of the greatest ones we know!

Finally, this writer cannot emphasize too strongly how truly important it is to include vibrato in woodwind performance as a function of musical expression. If we as woodwind players would study the great performances and recordings of the most outstanding singers of the twentieth century, we would improve our phrasing technique immeasurably! We would improve our vibrato technique immeasurably! And we would improve our understanding of musical concepts immeasurably! ❖

***About the author ...***

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