

Vibrato Workshop Handout – Debra Devi

Solos –

“Slowly Losing My Mind” – BB King

“Mary Had a Little Lamb” – Stevie Ray Vaughan

“While My Guitar Gently Weeps” – Eric Clapton/The Beatles

“Get Free” – Debra Devi

Albino bluesmeister Johnny Winter once said, “I can tell if I like a person’s style after listening to his vibrato for ten seconds.” Vibrato, the raising and lowering of a note’s pitch by moving the string back and forth, tells you everything you need to know about a guitarist: strength, taste, and musicality are all expressed in that subtle motion.

It’s not surprising that some of the strongest vibratos you’ll hear belong to blues guitarists like Winter or B.B. King. Blues guitar, like blues singing, developed from the West African musical tradition. West Africans spoke languages in which the meaning of a word could be altered by the pitch at which it was spoken. West African singers used combinations of pitch and timbre to convey many shades of meaning, resulting in vibrato, tremolo, overtones, and hoarse-voiced and shouting techniques.

To the ears of colonialist chroniclers, accustomed to polite waltzes and stately symphonies, West African music sounded harsh--and just plain weird. They labeled it “primitive,” when it was anything but. African musicians were actually more advanced in the use of polyphonic, contrapuntal rhythms, for example, than their European peers. In his brilliant 1963 book *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones notes that to African ears European music must have seemed “vapid rhythmically.”

West African musicians were also seriously into improvisation, which had been explored very little in Western music by the time the first slaves were shipped to the United States. Jones also points out that “For a Westerner to say that the Wagnerian tenor’s voice is ‘better’ than the blues singer’s is analogous to a non-Westerner disparaging Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony because it was not improvised.”

The first blues, which were work songs and field songs composed by slaves, were largely improvised, because slaves were forbidden to speak their African languages, play their drums or sing their songs. But they still managed to transfer features of their native music, such as vibrato, antiphonal singing (call and response between a lead singer and a chorus), shouted singing, and their scales and funky polyrhythms to the United States. These musical techniques eventually formed the foundation of the blues, and, subsequently, of jazz and rock. It’s mind blowing that an enslaved people managed to have such a potent effect on the culture of the enslaving country.

Western classical violinists did use vibrato. They were working with such short strings on such small instruments that they needed vibrato to keep their notes from dying out rapidly—but they didn’t use it to improvise. The expressive, improvisational use of

vibrato was developed by early blues guitarists not only to keep notes sustaining, but also to mimic the qualities of African singing.

Listen to the wide, slow back-and-forth moan of B.B. King's vibrato. It might sound easy, but try to duplicate it. King steadily bends the note back and forth an entire half step to create the vibrato. If you watch King play, you'll see that he shakes his entire hand to create this vibrato. His hand flutters like a butterfly. This technique is called "butterfly vibrato".

True vibrato requires hand strength and to develop it, you do need to work at it. Today's rock guitarists, blessed with loads of sustain from distortion, longer strings, and dense, resonant guitar bodies, don't need vibrato to keep their notes alive, so this technique often goes under-developed. Many guitarists today have never thought about putting the effort into acquiring a decent vibrato. Instead, they play notes that don't really move an entire half step back and forth but just kinda wobble around the original pitch.

In contrast, check out the opening lick from Stevie Ray Vaughan's solo for "Mary Had A Little Lamb." Not only is he bending the note a whole step, but he then moves it back and forth an entire half step to create vibrato at the top of the bend. This takes a *lot* of hand strength.

To develop a really solid vibrato, start slowly. You are going to be working muscles you never knew you had in your left wrist and you don't want to strain. Practicing these exercises just a few minutes a day will greatly improve your playing.

Start by slowing down the vibrato to half speed. It's very important to dampen the other notes by bending your right thumb and holding it lightly against them, so nothing rings but the note you have picked. Now double the speed of the vibrato and, again, play the exercise for 30 seconds. Feeling anything in the wrist yet? Finally, double up again and try it. Sounding more like Stevie, aren't you?

You might be tempted to achieve the vibrato by pulling the string down (toward the high E), but resist that urge and practice pushing it up. This will make you stronger. Again, experiment with working slowly first and then increasing your speed. When you increase your speed, however, don't lose that half step distance between the top and bottom of your vibrato.

You might think this isn't really going to make a difference in your playing, but in my experience it makes more difference than just about anything else you could practice. When you have the strength to lay into a note at the top of a bend and move it back and forth like nobody's business, all your soloing will sound much more powerful.