



# A Research for Vibrato on Violin in Baroque and Romantic Period

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the evolution of vibrato on the violin from the Baroque to Romantic period, focusing on its frequency and stylistic changes. In the Baroque era, vibrato was used sparingly, mainly in solo or expressive passages, while in the Romantic period, it became a key expressive tool. Through a comparative analysis of J.S. Bach and Felix Mendelssohn's works and performances by various violinists, the study shows how vibrato evolved from an ornamental technique to a central means of conveying emotion in music.

**Keywords:** violin; vibrato; baroque and romantic period; mendelssohn; bach

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## 1. Introduction

Vibrato, an essential violin technique, has evolved significantly over time. In the Baroque period, it was used sparingly as an ornament in solo passages. By the Romantic era, vibrato became a key expressive tool for conveying emotion. This paper compares its use in the works of J.S. Bach and Felix Mendelssohn, analyzing performances and writings from figures like Leopold Mozart to explore its frequency, stylistic variations, and emotional impact across the two musical periods.

The vibrato is a traditional technique on the violin. The origin of the trill can be traced back to the 16th century by theorists such as Agricola and Ganassi[1]. They divided the original vibrato into two types: the vibrato of one finger and the vibrato of two fingers (the 'gypsy trill'). In the book (*Art of Playing on the Violin*, London, 1751), Geminiani details a technique for playing one-finger vibrato: 'You must press the finger strongly upon the string of the instrument, and move the wrist in and out slowly and equally.' In the article (*Vibrato* (It., from Lat. *Vibrare*: 'to shake'), 2001), G. Moens-Haenen explained how to play the vibrato with two fingers: 'On fretted string instruments such as viols 'two-finger' vibrato (also known as the close shake or *languueur*) was used, the first finger being placed firmly on the string and the second making a trilling movement near it, thus creating an undulation of about an eighth to a quarter tone.'

## 2. The Basics of Vibrato and Research Focus

Currently, two-finger vibrato is being replaced by the single-finger technique. However, there is a lot of disagreement in the history of violin playing about how to use it and whether to use it. In this article, I will explore vibrato in the Baroque and Romantic periods, focusing on its frequency and comparing its application by different performers in each era.

## 3. Instrument and Period - related Influences on Vibrato

I chose these two periods as a comparison because people have different understandings of vibrato. Most people think that during the Baroque period, vibrato was a technique used to imitate the human voice and was rarely used. It's also very homogeneous. In contrast, during the Romantic period, vibrato became a means of personal expression, more diverse, categorized, and frequently applied throughout entire pieces.

On the instrument itself, having played both baroque and modern violins myself, I found the latter to be more prone to the trill technique. Baroque violins are made entirely of gut strings. These strings are harder to produce than the steel or nylon strings of modern violins. Plus, the baroque violin's sound box resonates far less than the modern violin's. So, when we play a vibrato, the timbre becomes very difficult to control.

But even when we use the same modern violins to play baroque pieces, vibrato is executed very differently by each person.

## 4. Practices and Perceptions of Vibrato in the Baroque Period

In Leopold Mozart's book '*Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*', he explains in detail how to perform vibrato[2]. In the first section, as well as in the following, the finger of the left hand should make a small, slow movement that should not be sideways but rather forward and backward.

In the eyes of most people, vibrato was rarely used in the baroque period. However, when I looked at some of the data,

I found that vibrato was not frowned upon during the baroque period. On the contrary, sometimes it's used a lot.

When we perform solo music or play the solo parts of ensemble pieces, we often add vibrato to longer notes and the more sung phrases to convey our emotions. However, when playing in an orchestra or in unison, the use of vibrato is generally discouraged. Since vibrato involves altering intonation, its application in an orchestral or ensemble setting can negatively affect the overall intonation of the group. Interestingly, composers from the Baroque period had varying opinions about this, some were in favor of it, but others were opposed to its expression.

To summarize, vibrato was not entirely banned at that time. So what causes us to play most of the Baroque music, particularly that of Bach, without vibrato? Is vibrato considered 'unrecommended' in this context?

As we listen to Rachel Podger perform the Adagio in the first movement of J.S.Bach's Sonata for Solo Violin No. 1 in G Minor, BWV 1001 in her album (Bach: Complete Sonatas And Partitas For Violin Solo, 2007), we can hear her using almost no vibrato. She opts for a more primitive sound a voice devoid of embellishment. In her interpretation of Bach, we perceive minimal bow technique, resulting in a very pure sound[3].

By the Romantic period, an increasing number of musicians were employing the vibrato technique. The music of this era often necessitated vibrato in almost every capital to convey the emotional depth and heightened tension characteristic of the period.

## 5. The Rise and Application of Vibrato in the Romantic Period

Take Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor OP.64, a classic of romanticism. There is little variation in vibrato among the violinists. In the first movement, Mendelssohn wrote a very singing theme at the outset[4]. Of all the violinists I've heard thus far, each employs have a vibrato on the first note B.

Similarly, in another classic violin work -- Sibelius Violin Concerto in D Minor, Op.47,--all the violinists employed a robust vibrato. In the first movement of this concerto, Sibelius used the same formula as Mendelssohn: go straight to the theme without any foreshadowing[5].

The music of the Romantic period is free and unrestrained compared with the Baroque period. It is no longer as rigorous and elegant as Baroque music, nor is it confined by strict forms and genre. Instead, it reflects the personal thoughts and interpretations of the composer. Music in the Romantic period is rich in emotion and color, incorporating many subjective and utopian factors[6].

In the second half of the 19th century, more and more instrumentalists used vibrato more frequently and prominently. As a result, many composers of the Romantic period made specific demands on them.

In Robin Stowell's article in the book 'A Performer's Guide to Music of the Romantic Period', he states: confines its introduction to occasional long notes or when the same note is repeated, while Spohr provides a useful example of its restrained ornamental application. Joachim and Moser recognized 'the steady tone as the ruling one' and used vibrato only when expressively appropriate[7].

## 6. Comparing Vibrato Use between the Two Periods

For most people, vibrato was used much more in the Romantic period than in the Baroque period. In fact, literature from that time indicates that the range and frequency of vibrato in the two periods were indeed different. But the difference is not as great as we think. The distinction lies in is this: in the Baroque period, vibrato was usually a technique, akin to ornamentation. Additionally, the development of the violin's shape and functionality greatly influenced the use of vibrato[8]. In some cases, vibrato was written into music. During the Romantic period, it evolved from a vocal imitation technique to an emotional expression tool. The era's musical style allowed vibrato to become a single ornament that could bring music to life and add a "singing" quality. This shift reflects the distinct musical styles of both eras.

Even though a significant amount of vibrato is essential in Romantic period writing, its use is not unlimited under any circumstances. Vibrato typically appears only in long notes or very expressive phrases. In Andrew Manze's article, he states, "It should be used with care. Think of it as a cooking spice, and decide for yourself how spicy you like your music." [9] This will also be reflected in the various audio comparisons in my essay. In summary, the use of vibrato has evolved due to the influence of the times. However, one constant remains: it must always be controlled. Unrestrained tremolo is not correct approach to play[10].

## 7. Conclusion

The study highlights key differences in vibrato use between the Baroque and Romantic periods. In the Baroque era, vibrato was a decorative technique used sparingly, while in the Romantic period, it became essential for expressing personal

emotion and was employed more frequently. By comparing performances and analyzing the music, the study shows how vibrato evolved alongside musical styles. Future research could explore the influence of different violin schools and regional styles on vibrato, as well as performers' interpretative choices.

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