**Basic Vibrato on the Upright Bass**

– A How To Guide

 by Donovan Stokes | Monday, November 7th, 2011

Many students have trouble mastering vibrato technically and understanding its usage musically. There are numerous debates regarding vibrato usage in musical contexts, so today we will focus on a simpler matter: how to achieve technical mastery of this skill.

From an instrumental point of view, our goal is to have complete control over the width and speed of our vibrato, no matter what area of the bass you are in, or what finger you are using.

**Basic Motion**

There are many types of body motion that can create a vibrato on the upright bass including full arm vibrato and finger vibrato motions, among others. In most cases, however, a forearm vibrato is the appropriate motion.

We produce this basic vibrato motion by turning our left forearm “in and out” at the elbow using our biceps muscle (i.e. you will pronate and supinate your left forearm). We already make this motion away from the bass every time we turn a doorknob. If you have trouble conceptualizing (or making) this motion at the bass, try taking your arm away from the bass and pretending you are turning a doorknob. Keep that motion going as you put your arm to the neck of the instrument and place your fingers on the string. On the neck, your thumb may act as a pivot, but it should be flexible and not “pinned down.”

Some people may find themselves attempting to move from the wrist once they press a string down, rather than from the elbow. This is an ineffective and awkward motion. Be mindful that you maintain the integrity of the “doorknob” motion. If you tense your arm or hand needlessly, you will inhibit and degrade your vibrato motion, as well as diminish your control. The most important thing to remember is that you must be loose and use minimum effort if your vibrato is to be under your complete control.

Once we can produce the motion, we must train to be in total command of the speed and width of the vibrato. The exercise below isn’t particularly glamorous, but it is extremely effective in training vibrato.

For the exercise below, we will measure our movements in “half oscillations.” We will also use “S” to represent a sharpening of the pitch (one half an oscillation) and “F” to represent a flattening of the pitch (also one half of an oscillation). This exercise is best done arco.

1. Set your metronome at 60 bpm.
2. Pick a finger on your left hand. Second finger is usually easiest for those just beginning to train

 their vibrato.

1. Using “free bows,” of at least half-note duration (longer is better), “turn your doorknob” in rhythm. Begin with quarter notes for each half-oscillation.

 

1. Without stopping the motion or your bow, proceed to eighth notes for each half-oscillation.

 

1. Proceed through triplets, sixteenth notes, sextuplets and thirty-second notes. As you increase speed the width of your vibrato may diminish. This is acceptable. Remain loose and rhythmic. When you reach a speed where you can no longer control the vibrato, or where you can no longer keep your arm loose, stop. Do not proceed any faster.
2. Do this for every finger, on every string and in both “neck position” and “thumb” position.
3. Do this every day for a few minutes and you will see significant results.
4. Once you have mastered this exercise, spend a few minutes each day solidifying your vibrato motion.

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