Vibrato by Sheri Gould

Vibrato is often the subject of much speculation, misunderstanding and concern. Why is this? How could something so innocuous be such a source of contention? I am going to venture onto this somewhat controversial subject and try to shed some light as well as clear up some commonly misunderstood ideas about vocal vibrato.

Why We Like It vs. Why We Don't

We tend to like a natural vibrato because it's, well, natural! When all things are working properly, without tension, a singer should naturally produce a vibrato in their tone. A naturally occurring vibrato is not overbearing or too prominent. It actually sounds good. It seems to be a natural part of the rhythm of nature and so we like the feel of it.

Conversely, when there is NO vibrato it is the result of tension. Without tension, things would vibrate freely, but because there is a lack of control somewhere, tension often creeps in and kills any hope of a natural vibrato. When a singer has been properly trained, he or she can learn to relax in ways that will allow the various necessary parts of the body to vibrate. A properly trained singer has learned to use the correct muscles for support and tone and therefore doesn't inadvertently create unnecessary tension by using the wrong muscles. The end result is a naturally formed, comfortable to listen to -vibrato. Typically, we like it!

However, since so many people who venture into the world of singing are NOT properly trained, the tension that often ensues makes a natural vibrato elusive. In part because of this, many resort to finding other ways to manufacture a vibrato. Others, though, are often simply impatient. Since vibrato tends to exemplify the mark of a trained voice, the average singer is of course looking for that vibrato in their own voice. When it doesn't happen fast enough, many will begin to employ techniques to create a vibrato in a less natural way. THIS type of vibrato is typically more noticeable, at an unnatural pace and generally more annoying to listen to. It takes over the voice as the most prominent feature instead of the tone itself and therefore we tend to react more negatively to the sound of the singer's voice (even though we may not initially realize why).

Natural versus Unnatural

A natural vibrato should come about as the result of air pulsating from the diaphragm (a natural occurrence when there is no tension) and therefore causing a vibration as it strikes the vocal cords. This vibrato is "air generated". It is more subtle and does not change pitch (other than very slightly). It is more volume generated than pitch generated. It is such a natural sound because it comes simply from the air striking the cords, not from a change in position in the vocal cords (which is how various pitches are attained). A well-played flute will exhibit a natural diaphragmatic vibrato.

Although there are many ways to manipulate the voice to create a vibrato, probably the most common is the simple process of bending the pitch. Since pretty much any singer-experienced or not-can change pitch, this puts vibrato within reach, of even the most amateur of singers, almost instantly. It can make a young singer sound instantly more "mature". This is a pitch generated vibrato and can be seen on a scope as oscillating between two pitches. For this reason it is much more prominent. Whereas a natural vibrato generated from air will vary in volume slightly, it will NOT vary radically in pitch. Because the pitch stays the same,

the tone remains prominent. In the unnatural, pitch generated vibrato, the change in pitch become the most obvious feature on the voice, not the tone itself. Therefore we tend to find ourselves annoyed by the unending changes in pitch we find in this type of vibrato.

Additionally, there is the variable of rate with this type of vibrato, whereas with a naturally formed vibrato, the rate at which the air strikes the cords and causes a vibration doesn't vary much from singer to singer. Most healthy diaphragms will pulsate air at approximately the same rate. This makes blending with others possible and easy. However, when someone is contriving a vibrato through pitch change, the rate is up to the individual, and it often changes depending on circumstances. For example, when a person is young and has nice tight strong muscles, there might be a lot of control over the changing of pitch. This control may be such that the vibrato can easily imitate the rate of a natural vibrato. However, over time as the muscles weaken, that control wanes and thus we have the infamous "vibrato so big you can drive a truck through it".

Regardless of the rate of vibration, a pitch generated vibrato also has the dubious quality of…well…changing pitch! That in itself is a problem if you are attempting any kind of blending with another person. A pitch generated vibrato can be annoying to listen in a soloist, but it becomes menacing when in the context of a group. There is NO WAY to blend with a pitch generated vibrato because the singer is constantly changing pitch! Unless every singer in the group can learn to bend their own individual pitch at the same time, the one person with this strong, dominating type of vibrato will stick out. And can you imagine if everyone DID imitate the person with the pitch bending vibrato? What kind of group sound would that produce? The thought is a bit overwhelming.

Contemporary Styles of Singing with No Vibrato

One of the things I hear frequently is worship leaders, or producers asking their singers to "get rid" of their vibrato. Some of the newer contemporary sounds are often reflective of an untrained youthful sounding voice (which might not have developed a healthy vibrato yet). There are certain styles where an over-abundance of vibrato, and certainly a pitch generated vibrato, seem completely out of place. But it's important to bear in mind that where there is no vibrato—there is tension. Tension over the long haul wreaks havoc on the voice. A naturally occurring vibrato is not to be scorned, it is rarely offensive. Sure, a little straightening of the tone here and there for effect can be really nice. But a steady diet of a straight (tense) tone is a recipe for vocal disaster down the road. Whenever possible, allow the voice to do what it was intended to do-freely flow and vibrate!