

W.C. Honeyman: Vibrato Detective

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Establishing a useful context for the discussion and understanding of nineteenth-century sources on vibrato in violin playing is critically important for modern performers investigating historical performance practice. Because contemporary attitudes towards the technique were heavily conflicted, they often provide little assistance as a source of practical advice. This comment, from the 1890 *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, is typical:

When the vibrato is really an emotional thrill it can be highly effective, as also the tremolo in extreme cases, but when, as is too often the case, it degenerates into a mannerism, its effect is either painful, ridiculous, or nauseous, entirely opposed to good taste and common sense, and to be severely reprehended in all students whether of vocal or instrumental music.¹

From observations such as this, an entire orthodoxy has grown up within the historically informed performance movement which holds that the use of vibrato in the nineteenth century was limited in solo playing, and virtually absent from the orchestra. When it is remarked that the above example in fact says just the opposite, that in real life vibrato was regularly, indeed (too) frequently used, the focus then shifts to the contention that the better orchestras or more discerning artists, following strictures laid down in the most respected treatises, surely knew better, and therefore, implicitly, we should too.² But does this conclusion flow naturally from the evidence?

¹ H.C.D. [Harry Collins Deacon], 'Vibrato,' *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. George Grove (London: MacMillan and Company, 1890), iv, 260.

² See, for example, Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 556–57.

The problem is not that the period's iconic works on string technique, such as Spohr's *Violonschule*, are not technically or aesthetically sound; it is just that their authors felt little need (in print at least) to address the grubby practicality of how best to teach the vast majority of players who had no access to the kind of personal instruction considered a necessary adjunct to the written texts. In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of vibrato usage in nineteenth-century solo and orchestral playing, it is necessary to look beyond the limited number of musical treatises and tutors authored by the tiny handful of major artists who took time out of their busy lives, and attempted to codify their methods and suggestions for posterity. Fortunately, in adapting and explaining the rules and methods of the era's most famous violin tutors to local circumstances and specific classes of readers, a group of 'second tier' authors created a body of work that illuminates nineteenth-century musical life and attendant performance practice issues, such as vibrato usage, with a greater level of detail and clarity than that often found in the standard treatises.

William Crawford Honeyman (1845–1919) was one of these lesser authorities, a colourful character with a personality arguably more vivid and quirky than many of the fictional protagonists through whom he made his living. The most famous of these was Edinburgh detective James McGovan, under whose name Honeyman penned an extremely popular, indeed path-breaking series of crime stories,³ beginning roughly in the early 1870s and continuing through the 1890s. These were eventually collected into five books: *Brought to Bay*, *Hunted Down*, *Strange Clues*, *Traced and Tracked* and *Solved Mysteries*. Between 1864 and 1899 he wrote approximately sixty full-length series in an impressive range of genres: sentimental, criminal, historical, and most importantly, musical.⁴

However, writing serial fiction was merely Honeyman's vocation; his first love, and true avocation, lay in preaching the gospel of 'the grandest musical instrument which ever cheered the heart of man,' namely, the violin.⁵ This he did in a series of enthusiastic and entertaining didactic works which remain, as he would have been the first to suggest, unparalleled in their scope and comprehensiveness:

The Violin: How to Master it (1880)

The Young Violinist's Tutor and Duet Book (1883)

Hints to Violin Players (1885) also known as *The Secrets of Violin Playing*

The Violin: How to Choose One (1893)

The Strathspey, Reel, and Hornpipe Tutor (1898)

Scottish Violin Makers: Past and Present (1898–99)

Strathspey Players: Past and Present (1922)

Honeyman's writings on the violin, and in at least one instance his detective fiction as well, provide unique insight into the performance practice and aesthetics of his time. Both will serve as source material for this survey.

³ It has been suggested that Honeyman's work served as inspiration for Arthur Conan Doyle's violin-playing Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle grew up in Edinburgh and was a university student at the time that the first McGovan books began appearing in the late 1870s. See Mary Anne Alburger, 'The Mysterious Maister McGovan,' *The McGovan Casebook* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003), 195–8.

⁴ The complete list of Honeyman's literary works published before 1910 is listed in the second edition of his book *Scottish Violin Makers: Past and Present*.

⁵ W.C. Honeyman, *The Violin: How to Choose One*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: E. Köhler & Son [n.d.]), preface.

Born in Wellington, New Zealand, to Scottish parents, Honeyman was brought to Edinburgh at the age of four. His maternal grandfather, Adam Crawford, was a clothier in Princes Street, a musician, and also a writer of popular songs such as 'O, wha hasna' heard o' the Toon o' Dunkel?' and 'All Hallow Fair, O.' Essentially self-taught, as his biographical sketch in David Baptie's *Musical Scotland* relates, Honeyman eventually landed a job playing the violin in the orchestra in Macarte's Theatre at Leith. After a brief period as a travelling bandleader, he gave up music as a profession in 1872 to devote himself fully to his literary career, while supporting a growing family (he had six children, including five sons who all died in childhood). He nevertheless still found time during this period to sit in the first violin section of the Dundee Philharmonic Society.⁶

Honeyman was not above a healthy dose of self-promotion, establishing his own modest publishing empire (The Honeyman Music Publishing Coy.), which he operated from his home, Cremona Villa, in Newport, Dundee. His books of detective stories contain laudatory reviews of and advertisements for his various musical publications. After his sudden death in 1919, his only surviving child, daughter Liza Honeyman, a professional violinist educated at the Royal College of Music in London, carried on his legacy at least into the 1940s.⁷ Honeyman also composed—for the violin, naturally—salon and teaching pieces such as 'Three Brilliant Duets on Scottish and Irish Airs,' 'Two Easy Violin Solos on Scottish Airs,' 'Sweet Afton: Fantasia on Scottish Airs,' and 'Plantation Pot-Pourri: Fantasia on Negro Melodies.'

There are several reasons why Honeyman is of interest. His violin treatises are perhaps the most delightful in the English language; anyone who can turn stringing a bow or a recipe for making varnish into a literary adventure surely deserves a measure of acclaim, and his work has not been entirely neglected by modern scholars. His study *Scottish Violin Makers: Past and Present* remains a seminal piece of writing that receives due acknowledgment both in Henry George Farmer's *A History of Music in Scotland*,⁸ and Brian W. Harvey's *The Violin Family and its Makers in the British Isles*. Harvey describes Honeyman as the most important of 'several interesting authors whose personality comes through very strongly in their writings.'⁹

Beyond these achievements, however, Honeyman's papers (as he called them) on violins and violin playing offer that most priceless historical commodity: context. Honeyman goes well beyond most of his contemporaries, explaining not just what the player should do and how to do it, but why, elucidating each point in picturesque, anecdotal detail. His advice and observations say as much about the musical culture of his time as they do about technique, and this is nowhere more helpful than in considering one of the most controversial issues in today's period performance scholarship: the use of pitch vibrato in solo and, especially, orchestral string playing.

⁶ David Baptie, *Musical Scotland Past and Present* (Edinburgh: John Menzies and Co., 1894), 82–83.

⁷ Abraham Van Doren Honeyman, *Honeyman Family (Honeyman, Honyman, Hunneman) in Scotland and America, 1548–1908* (Plainfield, NJ: Honeyman's Publishing House, 1909), 141–42. Liza Honeyman was contributing letters to *The Strad* as late as 1941. According to Van Doren Honeyman, she played a 1742 Guarnerius violin, 'which was pronounced by Sivori (Paganini's only pupil) to be "the finest toned violin in the world."'

⁸ Henry George Farmer, *A History of Music in Scotland* (London: Hinrichsen Edition, 1947), 282–83.

⁹ Brian W. Harvey, *The Violin Family and its Makers in the British Isles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 177.

One of the more obvious questions that is too seldom asked in considering the nineteenth-century's conflicted attitude towards vibrato is this: if continuous vibrato was such a rare occurrence, then why is it so often described in period sources? The answer, of course, is that continuous vibrato was not rare at all; nor was its use limited to artists of the second rank. It was not despised by the music-loving public, or the musicians employing it would not have enjoyed successful careers. British-born American violinist Edmund Severn, writing in the May 1909 edition of *The Etude*, states emphatically:

Let us see who are the artists who use the vibrato constantly; by constantly I mean everywhere it is possible? Ysaye, Kreisler, Kubelik, Thebaud, Sarasate, Sauret—but what's the use? Let us say that *all* the soloists who get to the people and get their money. The public *will not pay* to hear the other kind play solos.¹⁰

Generic condemnations of continuous vibrato thus provide very little meaningful information about historical performance practice, and they do not validate the modern habit of adopting as historically correct the most extreme non-vibrato approach possible. Clearly there was a legitimate tradition of more or less continuous vibrato usage rooted in the nineteenth century. The qualifier 'more or less' is necessary because vibrato is virtually never continuous, even today, so the term is a misnomer. When used pejoratively, it conveniently stands for 'monotonously excessive vibrato abused to the detriment of all other attributes of expressive playing.' Honeyman makes this abundantly clear:

It is only those who aim at a cheap popularity who depend upon this grace as their chief attraction. The power to play smooth elastic notes in the faintest *piano* swelling to the loudest *forte*, together with the instantaneous, exact, and true stopping of the notes, is a field of true expression which is only too seldom explored, while every street player and burnt-corked Christy minstrel considers the close shake¹¹ the best trick in his trade. Either master the close shake, then, and keep it in subjection, or let it alone altogether. It is a great acquirement, but there are others infinitely greater.¹²

It is thus a particularly obtrusive vibrato, used relentlessly and to the exclusion of the finer elements of technique, that is objectionable. Equating this bad sort with modern performance practice is a mistake. Compare the above passage with, for example, violinist Isaac Stern's observations on the topic:

Normally, for me, a constant fast vibrato that comes totally from the arm with a fairly stiff wrist is neither varied enough nor strong enough to indicate vastly differing musical moods or musical emphasis. Indeed, there are, for me, two basic rules for vibrato: (1) When you hear a vibrato, it is too much, and (2) a vibrato should be constant, the performer choosing to use less or more depending on the musical direction, and absent only when needed for musical emphasis—in other words, a white sound ... Both the speed and the width of the vibrato should *always* be controlled so as to indicate quiet intensity, excitement, thoughtfulness, pensiveness, or passion—whatever the musical mood needs.¹³

¹⁰ Edmund Severn, 'The Vibrato,' *Etude* May 1909: 347.

¹¹ Honeyman invariably refers to vibrato as either the 'close shake,' or the '*tremola*.'

¹² W.C. Honeyman, *The Secrets of Violin Playing—Hints to Violin Players* (Edinburgh: E. Köhler & Son [n.d.]), 64.

¹³ Isaac Stern, *My First 79 Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 219.

What is immediately striking is not how different these passages are, but how broadly similar. The emphasis is on variety of timbre, discretion in the use of vibrato (whether continuous or not), appropriateness of expression, and the fact that vibrato 'always' should be controlled (Stern), or kept 'in subjection' (Honeyman). Any apparent disparity between the two can easily be explained by the fact that Honeyman is writing a do-it-yourself guide for amateurs, while Stern is speaking in an autobiographical context as a celebrated professional, largely for the benefit of other music professionals (and Isaac Stern groupies).

Honeyman's comments reveal a critical fact in determining if vibrato was an intrinsic aspect of tone production. In linking its use to the lowest elements in musical society, he confirms that it was not the exclusive province of the best players. David J. Golby seconds this idea in his study *Instrumental Teaching in Nineteenth-Century Britain*: 'The range of sources which contains discussion of the "close shake" demonstrate that it was widely used and, theoretically at least, not just an "advanced technique."' ¹⁴

Only in a context in which vibrato essentially runs rampant do the frequent cautions and warnings throughout this period make any sense. It is thus entirely possible that an acceptably tasteful vibrato timbre during this time might sound perfectly normal to us today, and appear to be consistent with the modern standard articulated by such artists as Isaac Stern. The theoretical conflict and incompatibility between a modern 'continuous' vibrato (which really is not) and an earlier limited vibrato (which could be quite frequent) is something of a red herring. Addressing the issue as a legitimate problem in applied musicology requires determining whether or not enough vibrato was used at any earlier period to make a perceptible difference in tone quality, and if so, whether the audible result differed in a substantive way from normative parameters of modern expressive playing.

Edith Lynwood Winn (1868–1933), a Boston, Massachusetts violin teacher, poet, biographer, composer, and pioneering suffragette trained in 1890s Berlin under Joachim quartet violinist Johann Kruse, offers a trenchant comment on this most important line of reasoning. Winn authored a vast quantity of articles on music generally, and some dozen or so books on violin technique and performance in particular. Her field of specialisation was music education, with an emphasis on the training of teachers, particularly for the very young. There are remarkable parallels between the writings of Winn and Honeyman, and in her 1905 tutor *Violin Talks*, Winn states:

One reason why I am very slow in the matter of teaching the portamento, and also the vibrato, is that young students are not discriminating in the use of either. They affect slides, which, in vocalists, as well as violinists, are disgusting to people of artistic tastes. This bad habit, affected and out of taste as it is, is very detrimental to the progress of amateurs. First, they invariably "scoop" for the tone, if they use the slide, and if they use the vibrato they play out of tune—usually sharp. I would rather a pupil would play entirely without warmth than use the vibrato indiscriminately.¹⁵

That there should be a rift between what may be taught or espoused in textbooks and what the best artists really do is not surprising, and it should give historical performance specialists

¹⁴ David J. Golby, *Instrumental Teaching in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 192.

¹⁵ Edith Lynwood Winn, *Violin Talks* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1905), 29.

pause. For if Honeyman's and Winn's attitude toward the teaching of vibrato is correct, then what some of today's early music performers and scholars accept as rules for acquiring superior taste and an authentic period style may in truth be nothing more than the minimum standard of foolproof guidance offered to the vast amateur market or to children—not a description of what serious artists really did. No treatise, old or new, addresses all elements of technique and performance practice equally, at the same level. Furthermore, 'elevated taste' is not an objective measure of the highest artistry, though it may be one of its components. Critics of Spohr all agreed that his taste was beyond reproach; it was just his playing that was sometimes considered dull.¹⁶

These observations in turn raise a serious question: Where did modern continuous vibrato (the good kind) come from? The usual answer, as David Milsom formulates it, is that continuous vibrato occurred as a direct result of 'the decisive changes wrought by the influence of Ysaÿe and Kreisler,'¹⁷ and from the influence of the Franco-Belgian tradition more generally. And yet, as Milsom also notes, it is very curious that these purported differences in vibrato usage are not reflected in the violin treatises produced by that school. Milsom offers no solution to this apparent paradox beyond a discussion of a few historical recordings.

The use of historical recordings as quantitative evidence for the presence or absence of vibrato is highly problematic, and best summarised by Dr Carl Seashore in his pioneering *Psychology of Music* (1938):

*Much of the most beautiful vibrato is below the threshold for vibrato hearing and is perceived merely as tone quality. Individual differences in the capacity for hearing the vibrato are very large. In a normal population, one individual may be 50 or 100 times as keen as another in this hearing ... In view of these large and often relatively fixed individual differences each individual has his own illusion, and his individual sense of vibrato determines what shall be good or bad for him. This introduces a most serious obstacle to the efforts toward establishing norms for a vibrato which shall be pleasant to all listeners.*¹⁸

The physiology of vibrato perception is merely one issue, above and beyond methodological considerations such as the size of the sample, its representativeness, engineering and sound quality, and the age and ability of the individual artists whose recordings have been selected. For all of these reasons, historical recordings have extremely limited value as source material in vibrato studies.

Honeyman, unlike Milsom, could not in any case assign responsibility for achieving continuous vibrato to Kreisler because the tutors considered here predate him. Honeyman had another culprit: Paganini. Speaking of Spohr's denunciation of Paganini, and the use of artificial harmonics in particular, Honeyman theorises:

Paganini, the most astounding and meteoric genius who ever conjured music from the violin, had just swept across the music world, and everywhere there was being

¹⁶ See the article on 'The Violin' in *The British Minstrel, and Musical and Literary Miscellany* (Glasgow: William Hamilton 1843), 32. Although he was rapturously received at his initial appearances in the British capital, the ardour for Spohr's playing, as for his compositions, in some quarters at least, quickly cooled.

¹⁷ David Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-century Violin Performance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 127.

¹⁸ Carl Seashore, *Psychology of Music* (New York, 1938), 45–46. Emphasis added.

heard nothing but the most diligent imitation of his impassioned style and eccentric tricks. Close shaking on every note; monochord playing; pizzicatos, and, above all, harmonics, were the rage or fashion of the day, and it seemed as if a pure and classic style was a thing of the past.¹⁹

Honeyman's description of Paganini's playing is supported by other accounts. Fétis, in his *Biographical Notice*, asserts that in cantabile passages, Paganini 'frequently produced a vibrating effect, which greatly resembled the human voice.'²⁰ That this was not to all tastes goes without saying. However, by acknowledging Paganini's genius and viewing Spohr as his opposite, Honeyman establishes a duality that gives less emphasis to the school-based theory of vibrato usage, and more to a 'class' system based on individual artistic temperament. As he explains:

Many seem to imagine that their power with the close shake depends on the mood of the moment, as it really does with those who choose to risk that. Others are content with a very faint attempt at the quivering, which they put in spasmodically, and often at notes and passages in which it is clearly out of place. Others, as I have noticed, go to the opposite extreme, and quiver on every note, however short, till all control of the hand is lost, and like those benighted beings trained to sing in the 'Italian style,' they cannot produce a plain pure note. The remedies for these defects of style are Practice and Good Taste. The first is within the reach of all. The second with many is inborn, but where it is not it may be acquired by frequently watching and listening to our greatest players. It will then be discovered that these great artists frequently play an entire slow movement through, without introducing a single close shake; while others of a more impassioned nature are richly and profusely ornamented with this delightful grace.²¹

Unfortunately, Honeyman does not mention who these alleged non-vibrato-using 'greatest players' are, nor can the possibility be disregarded that the term 'close shake' here refers only to a specific vibrato type. Nevertheless, there is a huge difference between active avoidance of vibrato as an aesthetic principle, which is the modern theory, and the notion that serious artists had broad latitude in the use of expressive timbre as a function of their individual inclinations in specific works. That this 'repertoire and temperament'-based theory of vibrato was certainly truer to nineteenth-century thought than the 'German vs. Franco-Belgian school' construct becomes even more evident if we give brief consideration to the writings of another Honeyman contemporary, James Winram.

Winram (b. 1868) was an Edinburgh violinist, conductor, and violin maker, who in 1908 published *Violin Playing and Violin Adjustment*, a book specifically aimed at 'those who are not in a position to obtain the best tuition.'²² Concerning vibrato, which he anachronistically for this date still calls the 'close shake,' he writes that:

it should be judiciously used at all times, as it is quite possible to have too much of a good thing. Beethoven's music will sound lovely with very little close shake, or if preferred with none at all; whereas Wagner's will gain rather than lose by its introduction. The

¹⁹ W. C. Honeyman, *The Violin: How to Master it* (Newport, Fife: The Honeyman Publishing Coy, [n.d.]), 84–85.

²⁰ François-Joseph Fétis, *Biographical Notice of Nicolo Paganini* (London: Schott & Co., 1876), 75.

²¹ Honeyman, *Secrets*, 63–64.

²² Baptie, *Musical Scotland*, 237.

character of the music must be taken into consideration, and good taste will surely be a sufficient guide. There are many who contend that the close shake should never be used, but when we consider that the world's greatest violinists all use it more or less, it surely must have some virtue.²³

As is evident, Winram's theory of vibrato usage is essentially the same as Honeyman's. However, whereas Honeyman's living models for beauty of tone and technique in 1880 were Joachim and Neruda (Lady Hallé), Winram's, writing a generation later, are Ysaÿe and Kreisler,²⁴ even though the advice on vibrato usage remains largely the same.

In short, individual artistic mastery, combined with the perceived demands of specific works, overrides the generic prescriptions of particular schools, even to the point where legitimate vibrato usage essentially could be continuous in the modern sense. If there is room for Kreisler in Winram's aesthetic system, then there is room for continuous vibrato in the Spohr/Joachim school. This observation applies equally and fascinatingly to Honeyman as well. In describing the development of a large tone suitable to the performance of a concerto, early editions of *The Violin: How to Master it* advise the student to watch 'Joachim or Madame Neruda, or any one of the great players' in performance. In later editions, because the value of the advice depends upon its currency, these names have been changed to 'Kreisler or Mischa Elman.'²⁵

In other words, contemporary observers of both artists either did not notice the alleged chasm in performance practice between the limited vibrato school of Joachim and the modern, continuous school of Kreisler, or else it was not considered important enough to mention. Indeed, published reviews of the period tend to stress the continuity of tradition between the two artists, and not a rupture with the past. Witness this pertinent piece on the London concert scene from *The Times* of 1903:

In view of the much-discussed advance in recent years of the science of violin-playing and of the wide general interest in it, it is interesting to note the appearance in London concert-rooms within the last few days of three of the greatest exponents—Lady Hallé, Dr. Joachim, and Herr Kreisler ... In a sense Herr Kreisler, who began a new series of recitals in St. James's-hall on Saturday afternoon, is an anachronism in that undoubtedly he, more than any other of his exact contemporaries, belongs to the race of giants of old, while himself still a young man. That he is in the royal line and will one day succeed to the possession of the giants, his still living predecessors, he makes quite evident at each appearance. He, more than the rest, seems imbued with the classic tradition, while fully alive to all that is called modern.²⁶

The point here is that even if Kreisler's handling of vibrato was considerably more extensive than his illustrious predecessors, it nevertheless represents a legitimate aspect of the true 'classic tradition.' To the extent that his tone differed from some hypothetical mean, it was a personal reflection of his character as an artist, just as was Joachim's. The tendency in modern scholarship to draw a firm line between the two musicians with regard to vibrato performance practice is nothing more than an intellectual exercise, a selective application of historical hindsight in order to validate a purely theoretical supposition.

²³ James Winram, *Violin Playing and Violin Adjustment* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1908), 34.

²⁴ Winram, *Violin Playing*, 37.

²⁵ Compare Honeyman, *The Violin*, 92, either edition.

²⁶ 'Concerts,' *The Times* 11 May 1903: 8.

Finally, Honeyman's tracing of the mid-nineteenth-century rage for continuous vibrato back to Paganini has yet another important historiographical implication. In the era before recordings, generalised claims about audible performance traits are effectively limited by the length of human memory and individual experience. For this reason alone, it is both ingenuous and methodologically insupportable to posit the existence of a twentieth-century 'continuous vibrato revolution,' and assign responsibility for it largely to single figures such as Kreisler. Go back a couple of generations, Honeyman demonstrates, and we find Paganini. Look back further into the eighteenth century, and consider Geminiani. All of them to a greater or lesser degree are mere labels, a means of putting a human face on significant, ongoing trends.

The debate about vibrato usage has been revived in its most recent form by the historical performance movement, but the premises are not new. Modern vibrato scholarship must be seen as occurring within this broader context. Just as the discussion about vibrato is as old as stringed instruments themselves, so too must be the existence of the full range of possibilities concerning its use. The louder the complaints, the more evident it becomes that continuous vibrato is neither an emergent nor an unusual occurrence, no matter what the period. Winram suggests that Wagner benefits from the use of vibrato, while Beethoven requires less. Had he been writing in 1808 rather than 1908, he might well have said exactly the same thing about Beethoven versus Bach.

There is voluminous evidence that players in nineteenth-century orchestras used vibrato freely, at will.²⁷ This does not mean that solo and orchestral playing were identical; they are not so today. Orchestral vibrato is not a 'grace' or ornament, and cannot be heard as such. It is the aggregate result of simultaneous individual behaviours. Mention of it in specific expressive contexts occurs in several noted period treatises on orchestration and instrumentation by authorities such as Gevaert (*Cours Méthodique d'Orchestration*, 1890), Jadassohn (*Lehrbuch der Instrumentation*, 1889), and Kling (*Professor H. Kling's Modern Orchestration and Instrumentation*, 1902).²⁸

Ebenezer Prout, the Ludwig Spohr of English orchestration treatise-writers, in his magnum opus *The Orchestra* (1897) describes a passage from the slow movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 75 in a way that leaves little doubt as to the actual performance practice of his time:

The waved line under the notes indicates the *vibrato*—a slight variation in the pitch of the note, produced by making the finger tremble upon the string. When used with moderation it is very effective in expressive melodies; but (as with the *tremolo* of vocalists,) its too frequent employment becomes a most objectionable mannerism, not to say nuisance. It is sometimes called the 'close shake,' and its employment is mostly left to the discretion of the player.²⁹

The only major issue in defining the use of vibrato in nineteenth-century orchestral practice, then, remains that of determining the specifics of frequency and intensity, a function not just of the player's personal preference, but also the calibre of personnel more generally, the

²⁷ See David Hurwitz, 'So klingt Wien: Conductors, Orchestras, and Vibrato in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century,' *Music & Letters* 93 (2012): 29–60.

²⁸ F.A. Gevaert, *Cours Méthodique d'Orchestration* (Paris: Lemoine 1890); Salomon Jadassohn, *Lehrbuch der Instrumentation* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1889); Henri Kling, trans. Gustav Saenger, *Professor H. Kling's Modern Orchestration and Instrumentation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Carl Fischer, 1902).

²⁹ Ebenezer Prout, *The Orchestra*, vol. 1 (London: Augener Ltd, 1897), 42.

demands of the conductor, and the requirements of the repertoire being performed. As should be clear from the above statement, Prout is no fan of continuous vibrato, but that is the point. He makes no distinction in his remarks between solo and orchestral playing, and speaks in the typical terms of his day. In other words, orchestral players from at least the second half of the nineteenth century used vibrato just as solo players did, all other factors being equal. Honeyman offers a good sense of just how this worked in an amusing anecdote:

It is no exaggeration to say that the strongest desire and ambition of every amateur violin-player is to play the close shake well. 'How *do* you do it? How on earth do you make that *tremola*?' said an amateur to me once in an orchestral society. "I have sweated over the attempt for two hours at a time, and yet I can't get at the secret." My prompt answer was, that there are studies in violin-playing much more worthy of having so much time devoted to them; but he quickly retorted that I had mastered the art, and could afford to say so—put him in the same position, and he might think so too. I placed his hand and fingers in the best position for a beginner (see: *The Violin: How to Master it*, page 79), and in two minutes he was able to make a few distinct waves on one note. He had laid the foundation for making a close shake slow or rapid on any note or any position, and went back to his seat among the second violins as proud as Punch.³⁰

Honeyman was, throughout his musical career, primarily an orchestral player. It is a subject that he discusses extensively in his various tutors. 'In orchestral or quartette playing,' he admonishes, 'great steadiness and purity of intonation, great exactness in stopping chords, and strict mental counting of time, are the essential qualifications for success.'³¹ At no point does he single out vibrato for special mention. The closest he comes, in *The Violin: How to Choose One*, is this somewhat generic prescription:

In playing in an orchestra, forget that you are a solo player; slide as little as possible, and when you must slide, make the movement with lightening swiftness, so that no whining may make your violin stand out from those of the players beside you. Self-restraint and an earnest desire to get most of the effects by careful management of the bow rather than the fingers of the left hand always mark the true orchestral player.³²

Less important than the usual admonition against attention-grabbing excess is the confirmation that orchestral players were indulging in such behavior in the first place. This is only to be expected when the vast number of violin students could not have enjoyed major careers and, if they became professionals at all, spent much if not most of their time as orchestral musicians (just as Honeyman did). The range of quality of vibrato in use by orchestral players, accordingly, must have varied very widely. As Edmund Severn confirms:

Orchestral and other ensemble players are frequently deficient in vibrato playing as are many teachers who have been long away from the public as soloists, and who are away perhaps for that very reason, and, who, at any rate discourage the use of vibrato by their pupils, thereby causing much harm.³³

³⁰ Honeyman, *Secrets*, 60.

³¹ Honeyman, *The Violin*, 90.

³² Honeyman, *The Violin: How to Choose One*, 77.

³³ Severn, 'The Vibrato,' 347.

The conclusion to be drawn from Honeyman's and Severn's experiences therefore cannot be that vibrato was not used in the orchestra (Severn takes its presence as given), but rather that doing it well was not a prerequisite to becoming a member of an orchestral string section. As the anecdote concerning Honeyman's colleague in the second violin section reveals, it was employed—or not—according to the individual player's inclinations and ability.

Support for the notion that vibrato does indeed have special uses in ensemble playing comes from the most reputable authority possible: the Joachim/Moser *Violinschule* of 1905, a work addressing the vibrato question, by its own admission, in the direct lineage of Spohr. When Joachim/Moser is cited in the scholarly literature on the vibrato question, it is often to emphasise this debt to Spohr, whose views are quoted almost verbatim.³⁴ However, the work's third volume, devoted to studies in performance, contains a substantial discussion that enlarges considerably on the advice given in Spohr's treatise, including some wholly positive remarks on vibrato in string ensembles and the orchestra: 'Notably mysterious and romantic is the vibrato effect when produced by several instruments at once, as in chords.'³⁵

Even more interestingly, while Spohr's *Violinschule* does not discuss ensemble vibrato at all, he notates it quite extensively (with a wavy line) in some of his chamber works such as his violin duos, and the String Quintet no. 7, op. 144.³⁶ The presence of simultaneous vibrato in multiple parts in some pieces but not others, taken in tandem with the more general performance practices recommended in the *Violinschule*, can only mean that vibrato was used at will in ensemble playing.

Edinburgh in the latter half of the nineteenth century was richly endowed with orchestras. In addition to various theatre ensembles and Honeyman's own Dundee Philharmonic Society, a typical report in the *Musical Herald* of 1 May 1904 lists concerts by The Amateur Orchestral Society (playing Dvořák's then still-novel 'New World' Symphony), Mr [James] Winram's Orchestra featuring Schubert's 'Unfinished,' the St Andrew Amateur Orchestral Society, the St Cecilia Orchestral Society, and the Edinburgh Professional Orchestra.³⁷ Accordingly, Honeyman strongly recommends to his readership that 'The player should get into an Orchestral Society as soon as he can be tolerated in one; and if there be none in his neighborhood, let him try to form one, however poor. It will prove a sure road to advancement and musical culture, besides being a means of conferring innocent pleasure, and therefore a blessing, on others.'³⁸

This is, admittedly, a very low standard. Without question, and as Honeyman's own testimony reveals, orchestras in his day—particularly amateur societies—admitted players whose vibrato (and much else besides) was either wretched or non-existent, but they also contained those who used it enthusiastically and well. The net result, in a situation without some definitely expressed preference from the conductor, or a clear exhortation to heightened

³⁴ See, for example, Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 531; Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell, *The Historical Performance of Music: An Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 144.

³⁵ Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser, *Violinschule* (Berlin: N. Simrock, 1905), iii, 8. 'Merkwürdig geheimnisvoll und romantisch wirkt das vibrato, wenn es von mehreren Instrumenten gleichzeitig ausgeübt wird, also akkordisch auftritt.'

³⁶ Originally printed by C.F. Peters, ca. 1855; parts are available from Merton Music (UK), and also for viewing or download online at IMSLP.org.

³⁷ 'News from All Parts: Edinburgh,' *Musical Herald* 1 May 1904: 142.

³⁸ Honeyman, *Secrets*, 69.

expressivity notated in the music, would be a basic level of ensemble vibrato wherever any number of players believed it properly belonged. This means, uncontroversially, on sustained notes, in lyrical melodies, passionate passages, in connection with certain accents (>, for example), or wherever a singer likely would employ it. Honeyman puts it this way:

Again, no two players[,] even though trained under the same master, adopt the same *style* of playing. One will become a player all fire and fury, fond of strong effects, “bitten” notes, *tremola* playing, and noise and astonishment generally; another will adopt smoothness and sweetness as his ideal, and will probably lose tone and strength without a sigh, that he may develop these qualities; another will be all tricks, and show, and tinsel-like effects. The playing, indeed, will to a certain extent partake of the nature of the player, just as in literature the inner nature of an author is bound sooner or later to appear in his works. Therefore it will not do for us to say this style or that style is right or wrong; we can only thank the Creator of all for the infinite variety with which He has crowned His work for our blessing and, looking on all as good, select that style to which we are most strongly drawn by our powers and conceptions, at best but limited.³⁹

In his autobiography *A Musician's Narrative*, Alexander Campbell Mackenzie notes:

Despite the many time-honoured jibes at our affection for the pipes, the Scot's favourite instrument is the violin. In almost every farmhouse a fiddle hung within easy reach, and the fame of the best local performers was jealously guarded. Nor was its manufacture confined to a number of skilled craftsmen—such as Duke, the Hardies, etcetera—but had a peculiar fascination for amateur makers of all classes. Indeed, the fiddle is to be held responsible not only for our earliest national music, but also for a considerable amount of genial conviviality.⁴⁰

In short, Honeyman was fortunate in living in a city not just rich in musical culture generally, but in a specifically violin-oriented culture. *The Violin: How to Master it* contains chapters on the proper playing of strathspeys, reels, hornpipes, and other genres of folk music on the violin, and his ‘do it yourself’ approach to all aspects of violin adjustment and maintenance generally reflects a society with a particularly strong and iconic attachment to the instrument. Honeyman *loved* the violin. His affection is perhaps best expressed in one of the most inventive and amusing of his James McGovan detective yarns, ‘The Romance of a Real Cremona.’⁴¹

The story follows the trail of a stolen Stradivarius through every level of Edinburgh society, beginning with a soirée organised by Lady —, and featuring an orchestra led by a prominent London violinist, Mr. Cleffton, who had been especially engaged to add an extra sparkle to the evening's festivities. The excessively high-strung artiste brings with him his beloved Strad, which is promptly stolen at the behest of one Mr Turner, ‘a curious, half-daft customer, who has a craze for buying fiddles’⁴² which he ‘never did, and never could, play upon.’⁴³ On being

³⁹ Honeyman, *The Violin*, 76–77.

⁴⁰ Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, *A Musician's Narrative* (London: Cassell and Company, 1927), 9.

⁴¹ ‘The Romance of a Real Cremona’ originally appeared in the collection *Traced and Tracked; or, Memoirs of a City Detective, Etc.* (Edinburgh: John Menzies and Company, 1884). It has been republished in *The McGovan Casebook*. The original book is also available as an ‘on demand’ reprint from the British Library's Historical Collection.

⁴² Honeyman, *Casebook*, 57.

⁴³ Honeyman, *Casebook*, 63.

told that Turner's mania had led to him being swindled on many occasions, McGovan tartly observes, 'Swindling seems to be a rather prominent feature in fiddle-buying.'⁴⁴

Initially the servants are suspected, since many of them play the violin. 'Perhaps some of the servants may have taken it out to have a scrape while we were at supper,'⁴⁵ a colleague suggests to the distraught Mr Cleffton. McGovan duly tracks down the missing instrument, but is prevented from returning it to Mr Cleffton because it turns out previously to have been lost off the back of a carriage by an Edinburgh theatre violinist (now deceased) on his way home from a job. It gets picked up in the dead of night by a farmer named Gow. That name is no accident. Niel Gow was a legendary Scottish composer and fiddler whose life Honeyman celebrated in *Strathspey Players: Past and Present*, as well as in other stories.

Farmer Gow is entranced with the tone of his new fiddle and decides not to return it. A slightly guilty conscience and fear of the law induces him to cover his tracks and bury it for more than a year, after which time the moisture causes the body of the violin to separate from the neck. The broken Strad then gets picked up on the cheap at a yard sale after the farmer's death by an Edinburgh broker named Finnegan, who sells it to a shady dealer named Mackintosh, who in turn makes a tidy profit offering it to Mr Cleffton. McGovan's detective work reunites the instrument with its original owner's widow as her rightful property, whereupon she promptly agrees to sell it back to an enraptured Mr Cleffton (for a good bit more than he originally paid).

What has McGovan's tale to do with vibrato? Just this: nineteenth-century string players found themselves in a quandary. The violin was both a folk instrument, a special province of the lower classes, and a vehicle for some of the most profound thoughts of the great composers. Discernment in the use of vibrato was one way by which serious musicians tried to separate themselves from Honeyman's 'street players' and 'burnt-corked Christy minstrels.' Melodic ornamentation, fixed in its basic details since the Baroque period, was not instrument-specific, but it was intimately linked to an aristocrat-commissioned repertoire demanding a respectable level of musical training and education. Although an essential component of expressive playing, and central to the violin's special charm and theoretical superiority to all other instruments, vibrato was *common*.

This explains some of the ambivalence of nineteenth-century writers on the subject, and also the disparity between what was said about vibrato, and what professional players likely did in actual performance. There was a very real, unresolved tension in the aesthetics of string playing, the result of class differences on the one hand, and the need to find distinct and idiomatic styles for an increasingly wide-ranging repertoire on the other. Reverence for the classics had to be reconciled with the firm belief in the ongoing march of musical progress more generally, and with it the need to master the advanced technical requirements and colouristic resources of the modern Romantic school.

Honeyman's treatises reflect this tension, and his detective story captures the social context perfectly. In 'The Romance of a Real Cremona,' just about everyone except Detective McGovan, who has a hard time understanding what all the fuss is about, either owns or (allegedly) plays

⁴⁴ Honeyman in fact devotes a goodly bit of space in *The Secrets of Violin Playing* to 'Frauds for the Experienced,' 'Frauds for the Inexperienced,' 'Frauds in Bows,' 'False Tickets and Real,' and so forth.

⁴⁵ Honeyman, *Casebook*, 49.

the stolen Strad: the servants, the farmers, and the shopkeepers as much as the true musicians. The artistic pretensions of the great virtuoso Mr Cleffton, who we only see at work leading a dance band, are not taken terribly seriously by anyone—least of all McGovan in his role as narrator. In a singularly entertaining way, it becomes clear why nineteenth-century musicians might have obsessed over the minutiae of taste and technique, but also why the public at large, for the most part, could not have cared less and supported what was undoubtedly a large population of musicians of dubious pedigree.

Honeyman identifies continuous vibrato playing at the very top and bottom of his musical world, but even this greatly oversimplifies the matter. There certainly were many other influences, both native and foreign, that he does not discuss. Edinburgh has hosted at various times a significant influx of talent. Peter Holman has written about the Italian composer Lorenzo Bocchi, who arrived in 1720, may have assisted in the creation of the first Scottish opera, and then a few years later decamped to Dublin.⁴⁶ Paganini visited in 1831. Barbara Eichner has made a study of German composer/conductor Johann Ruprecht Dürner, conductor of the Edinburgh Musical Association in the 1840s and '50s,⁴⁷ around the time Honeyman first came to Scotland from his native New Zealand. The orchestra's leader was Alexander Mackenzie, father of Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, who welcomed his friend the illustrious conductor Hans van Bülow to Edinburgh in 1875.⁴⁸

Given all of the real and potential musical currents, it is impossible to point to a single treatise, or school, or city, or country, or region, and say of vibrato technique, 'they only did it that way.' All we know for sure is that 'they did it.' Contemporary evidence suggests that they did it frequently, if perhaps not without a touch of guilt.

Honeyman's terminology may be archaic, but his aesthetics are wholly modern. Among 'The Graces of Solo Playing,' he lists, 'the glassy slide; the ringing, open shake; the weird *tremola*, or close shake; the pearly staccato bow; the vocal sweep of the fingers from one position to another; the brilliant and flute-like harmonic; the wailing double stopping; and all the intricacies of exceptional fingering.'⁴⁹ Compare this list of primarily timbral effects to the full range of Baroque/Classical embellishments still found in Spohr, and it becomes evident that we are witnessing the replacement of melodic ornaments with variegated tone-colours better suited both to the structure of Romantic melody, and an increasing respect for the printed page.

Accordingly, while even an ideally placed observer such as Edith Winn may have missed the mark somewhat when she claimed that the reason early writers resorted to excessive embellishment was because they 'lacked intensity and were not skilled in the use of the vibrato,'⁵⁰ her underlying point—that as ornamentation generally declined vibrato stepped into the breach—is surely correct. It is precisely because the need for vibrato and other colouristic devices became so great that Winn and contemporaries like Honeyman, in their various treatises, memoirs, and critical commentaries, make an issue of it in the first place.

⁴⁶ Peter Holman, 'A Little Light on Lorenzo Bocchi: An Italian in Edinburgh and Dublin,' *Music in the British Provinces, 1690–1914* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).

⁴⁷ Barbara Eichner, 'Singing the Songs of Scotland: The German Musician Johann Ruprecht Dürner and Musical Life in Nineteenth-century Edinburgh,' *Nineteenth-century British Music Studies*, vol. 3 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003).

⁴⁸ Mackenzie, *Narrative*, 88–96.

⁴⁹ Honeyman, *The Violin*, 76.

⁵⁰ Edith Lynwood Winn, *How to Study Fiorillo* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1910), 15.

This study concludes that vibrato in the nineteenth century was not solely an aspect of advanced training; it was used by all strata of musical society, from the lowest to the highest, often continuously; it was a very highly desired skill, acquired even at the expense of other, perhaps more important, elements of good technique; the range of vibrato habits was necessarily much greater than today owing both to regional variations in performance styles as well as to the large number of players (both amateur and professional) denied access to formal schooling; and finally, vibrato was used similarly in solo and orchestral playing. Most significantly, the evidence offers no support to the modern professional player or conductor who believes that authenticity in nineteenth-century music requires minimising vibrato to a degree that sounds strikingly different from today's practice.

Honeyman's discussions of vibrato, sampled here, constitute one of the most comprehensive and detailed considerations of the subject to appear in print before Siegfried Eberhardt's 1911 treatise *Violin Vibrato: Its Mastery and Artistic Uses*. The elite instructional manuals of the day deal with vibrato in cursory fashion, limiting their discussion to generic prescriptions regarding 'good taste,' and offering little if any basic technical advice. This is not surprising given the standards of nineteenth-century musical education and the complex aesthetic issues involved, but it must not be assumed, therefore, that the most famous or revered writers necessarily provide modern scholars with the best evidence of actual performance practice.

In *The Violin: How to Master it*, Honeyman's initial comments on vibrato are brief and to the point. He expands on them considerably five years later in *The Secrets of Violin Playing*, admittedly with some reluctance. That Honeyman felt the need to revisit the subject in greater detail speaks eloquently of the strong, unmet demand in the amateur market for pedagogical works that went beyond the 'classical' principles of Spohr, addressing practical matters more in line with contemporary taste and technique. A popular writer in the best sense of the term, Honeyman knew his audience. Whether he agreed or not with the general level of taste exemplified by the tendency to overvalue and overuse vibrato, he never let his personal biases interfere with a shrewd assessment of the reality before him.