

Reflections on Vibrato

Today, it being one of those beautifully sunny and mild late summer days, I took my flute outside to practice by the pool. As I settled into the rigors of working on Marcel Moyse's "De la Sonorite", my daily companion for longer than I care to remember, I gradually moved into a calm, meditative state. This sometimes happens when I can focus completely on the sound of the flute as something my whole body produces, not just something that comes out of the instrument somehow and isn't part of me.

I've recently learned something about the mechanism of vibrato, and it has turned my world, as it were, upside down. There have been times in the last few weeks that I've felt unable to play even the simplest pieces, the old habits have been so strong. There has been something fundamental missing, and now that I am aware of it, there is a lot of work to be done. Thank heaven for Louis Moyse's "40 Little Pieces for Beginner Flutists", otherwise I wouldn't have known where to begin! I've sometimes despaired of ever gaining control of the sound.

So, as I looked into the water while working – at this point, *meditating* -- through one of the exercises in "Souplesse des Sones Graves", trying with all my concentration to produce a beautiful, vibrating tone, I realized how much like water the sound of the flute is, and how the vibrato is like ripples. This insight proved not to be as simple as it seemed at first.

The expression "living water" is well known to both Jewish and Christian religious traditions, though with different connotations. "Mayim Chayyim", as it's denoted in Hebrew, refers in the Jewish tradition to water that comes from a natural source, such as rainwater or water directly coming from an underground spring, *that is constantly moving*. In the Jewish mystical tradition, all spring water originates from the springs of the Garden of Eden. Thus, all water that comes from the earth and is in motion, is living in some sense, physically and spiritually. This kind of water is required for certain ritual observances in the Jewish tradition.

How does this relate to flute vibrato?

The motion of the vibrato is the life in the sound of the flute. Water that does not move is called "stagnant"; water that moves – and therefore ripples in various complex ways – is called "living". The melody is as it were what is seen through the "water" of the sound of the flute. "Clarity" of water and of tone are similar concepts. Though all vibrato to an extent is a distortion of the sound, without it the sound is lifeless. There are "vibratos" which impart a deep sense of motion, color, and mood, to the melody, and there are others which appear only to be turbulence, obscuring the shape of the melody "underneath". My old vibrato was more turbulence than smooth, life-imparting ripples. Of course there is a place for playing *senza vibrato* as a color in and of itself, but only in the context of a vibrating whole.

So, I stared at the pool while I played, identifying the sound I was making with the

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motion of the water. I would select a part of the pool with deep, wide ripples, and say to myself, “sound like that!”, and the vibrato would deepen, as would the color of the tone. I would then move to a quiet, darkly shaded part of the pool, and say, “sound like that!”, and the tone would darken, the vibrato becoming quieter. Finally, I would turn to a part of the pool in bright sunlight, full of sparkling reflections and moving prism effects, and say, “sound like that!”. You can imagine the results. There is a rich area of imagery here which bears further exploration.

However, even more than imparting life to the sound, the vibrato, like flowing water, *impels the motion of the musical line*. Vibrato is not an aspect of a “note”, but a moving current that creates music as it flows. My eye followed the ripples as they crossed the pool, interacted with each other, plunged into dark shade, and then emerged into sparkling sunlight. Musical line has that same sense of variety of motion.

I continued my routine of working through Moyses's tone exercises. Today was a day to finish with J.S. Bach's “Air in G”, certainly one of the most beautiful things ever written to be played on *any* instrument, let alone the flute. It seemed to me that the patterns of light and shade on the water, constantly changing, constantly moving, guided my playing to more nearly approach something imbued with *life*.

It's an experience I hope to repeat.

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