

Developing a Nuanced Vibrato

- The saxophone vibrato is used to warm and color the tone, should not be obvious, and is normally used with delicacy and restraint. The vibrato should seem to be “inside the tone.” The normal embouchure creates a clearly audible “tone line” and the vibrato is smooth enough and rapid enough to become one with it.
- One must have a good, pure, warm, projecting straight tone before starting to use the vibrato. Most students will start to use a vibrato when they are ready for it, without realizing they are doing it at first. Then the teacher steps in and helps develop and refine it.
- The jaw moves up and down almost imperceptibly, some estimates are $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ of an inch. It must move regularly and be indiscernible to an observer. By repeating the sound “vah-vah-vah” the proper jaw movement can be obtained. The jaw should move up and down only, not backward and forward. When the pulsation is sufficiently refined, it should melt into the sound producing an enriched liquid tone.

To practice and perfect:

- Place your mouthpiece and reed in your mouth to form your embouchure. Remove them and maintain the embouchure. Blow as if playing, repeating in a whisper “vah-vah-vah” without moving the front portion of the tongue.
- It is impossible to pronounce “vah” without any tongue movement, but it is the front of the tongue that must not move. With just the very back of the tongue moving slightly, a regular slight interruption of the air stream is achieved, while at the same time there is a very slight jaw movement. This combination of jaw movement and air cycling gives us a controlled musical vibrato.
- Set your metronome to 80 and try to say 1 “vaw” for every beat. Then increase to 2 “vaws” per beat, and then 4 “vaws” per beat.* This is a good average vibrato speed.
- Now try the same exercise, blowing on your mouthpiece. Try to make the pitch change almost imperceptible.
- Repeat same exercise on a long tone open C#, then G on the staff, then D below the staff, finally G above the staff. Remember you are trying to create warmth and color, not a perceptible vibration or pitch change. Use restraint!
- Now play scales in quarter note at mm 80, vibrating 4 times per note.
- Repeat all of the above at varying metronome markings from 60 to 90. This is about as slow and fast a vibrato as you will ever need.
- Now do *pp* to *ff* on long tones at various vibrato speeds.
- Now go from 60 to 90 and back with 4 pulses per beat on a single note.
- Now combine a crescendo and diminuendo with speeding up and slowing down the vibrato. This will help your control of the “terminal vibrato” mentioned below.
- Try adding vibrato to slow lyrical pieces you already know.

Appropriate use of the vibrato:

- Generally speaking it is less used on any note in which you can not fit 4 “undulations” at 90 beats per minute.
- It can be used with solo piano; solo with instrumental accompaniment; and solo passages with orchestra. It should not be used on all tones at all times and certain unisons may sound best without vibrato. It should not be used in duets with other instruments unless that player also uses vibrato (clarinets and French horn are the most common exception.) Try to make the vibratos blend.
- Used in tutti sections with stage band, wind ensemble or orchestra at directors discretion.
- Use in soli sections with other saxophonists when not playing in unison.
- Very common use of a “terminal” vibrato on a held note at the end of the phrase: slightly widening vibrato as you diminuendo.

*This is the Ryan Cheng method. A fine student, he came up with this approach in his first lesson on vibrato.