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Vibrato in Early Music Performance Practice

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The Debate

Musicians and scholars disagree on whether vibrato should be used in early music performance practice. There are three primary factors that influence their opinions:

- **Historical Authenticity:** belief that early music was either performed with or without vibrato, and therefore should be performed that way now.
- **Vocal Health:** belief or denial that singing without vibrato is unhealthy.
- **Expression:** belief that vibrato and/or straight tone should be used for expressive purposes.

Though scholars and musicians share the influences listed above, there is no correlation between these factors and their subsequent opinions about vibrato in early music performance practice.

What is Vibrato?

Vibrato is a fluctuation in frequency (pitch) and intensity (volume) that is perceived as a single frequency.

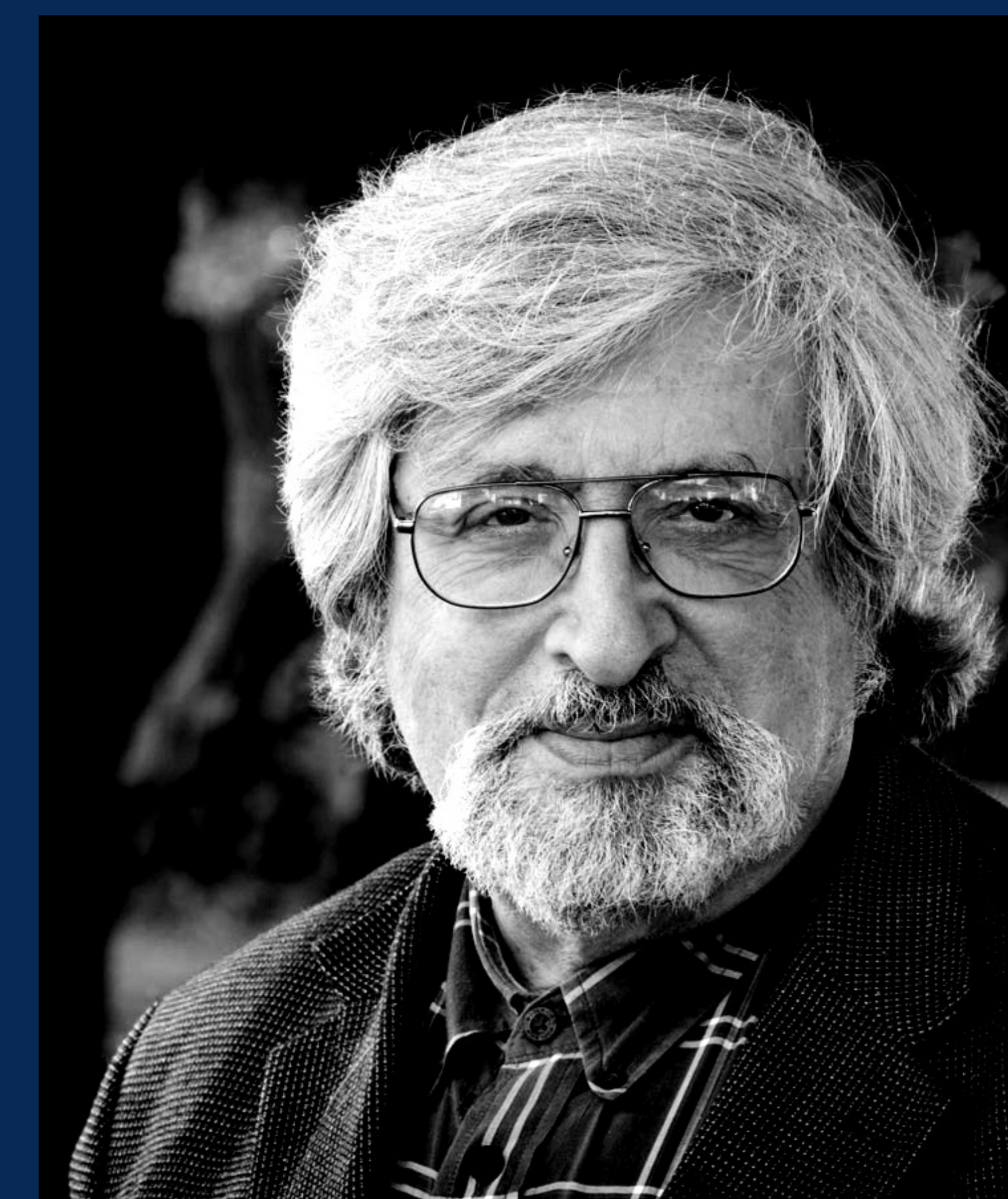
- Actual frequency typically fluctuates about one half step above and below the perceived frequency 6 – 7 times per second. (Figure A)
- Vibrato is partially caused by air pressure. As air pressure increases, so does intensity. (Figure B)
- When singers reduce the extent of frequency fluctuation, it is called straight tone.

What is Performance Practice

Performance practice refers to the expectations and parameters by which specific music is to be sung or played.

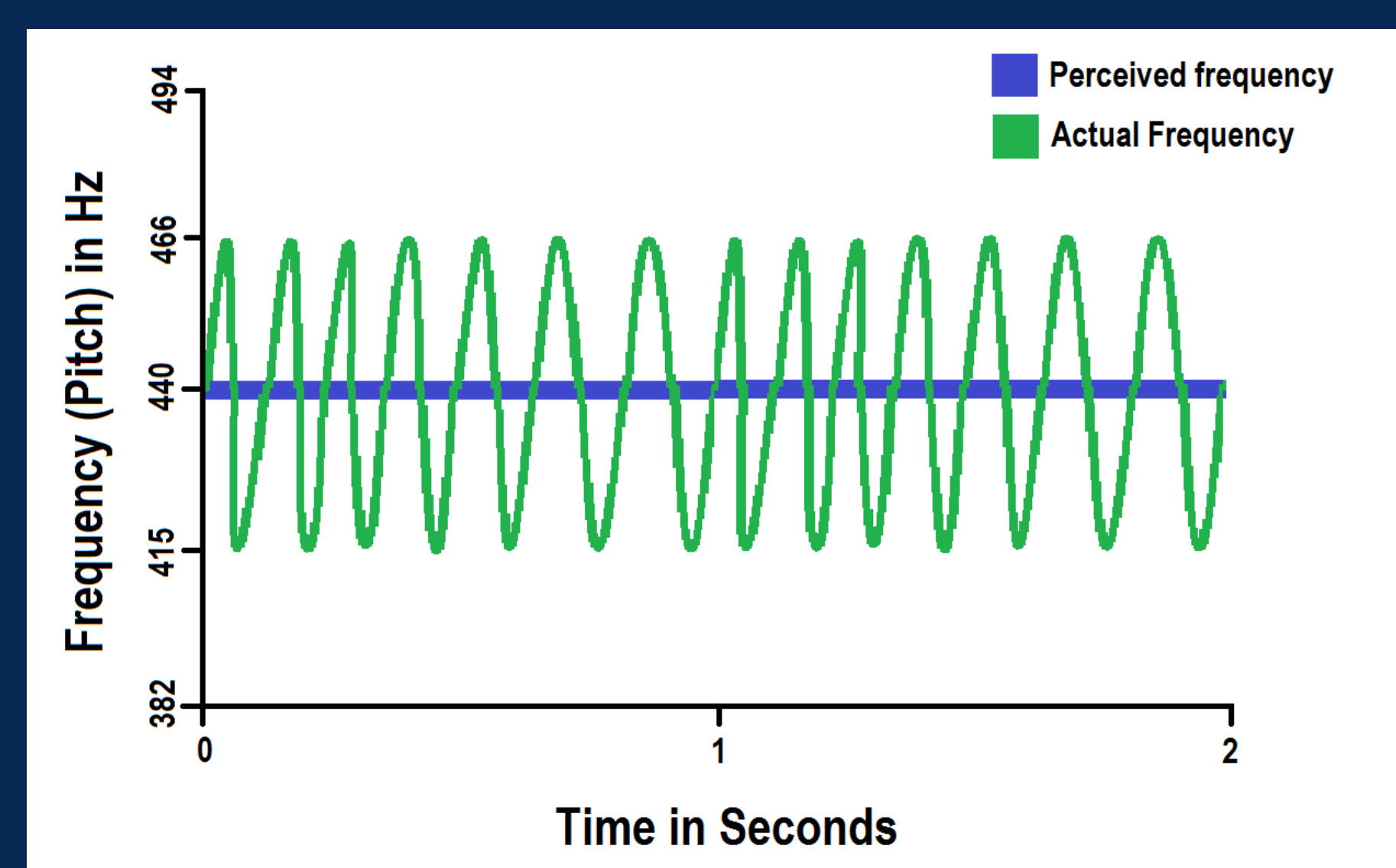
- Straight tone (vibratoless) singing became a trend in performance practice of early music (music composed before 1750) in the mid 1900s.
- Some musicians perform early music with straight tone because they believe this is how it was performed pre-1750, an idea known as "historical authenticity."
- Many musicologists claim there is not enough evidence to prove whether or not early music was performed with vibrato. (Figure c)

Figure C – Richard Taruskin

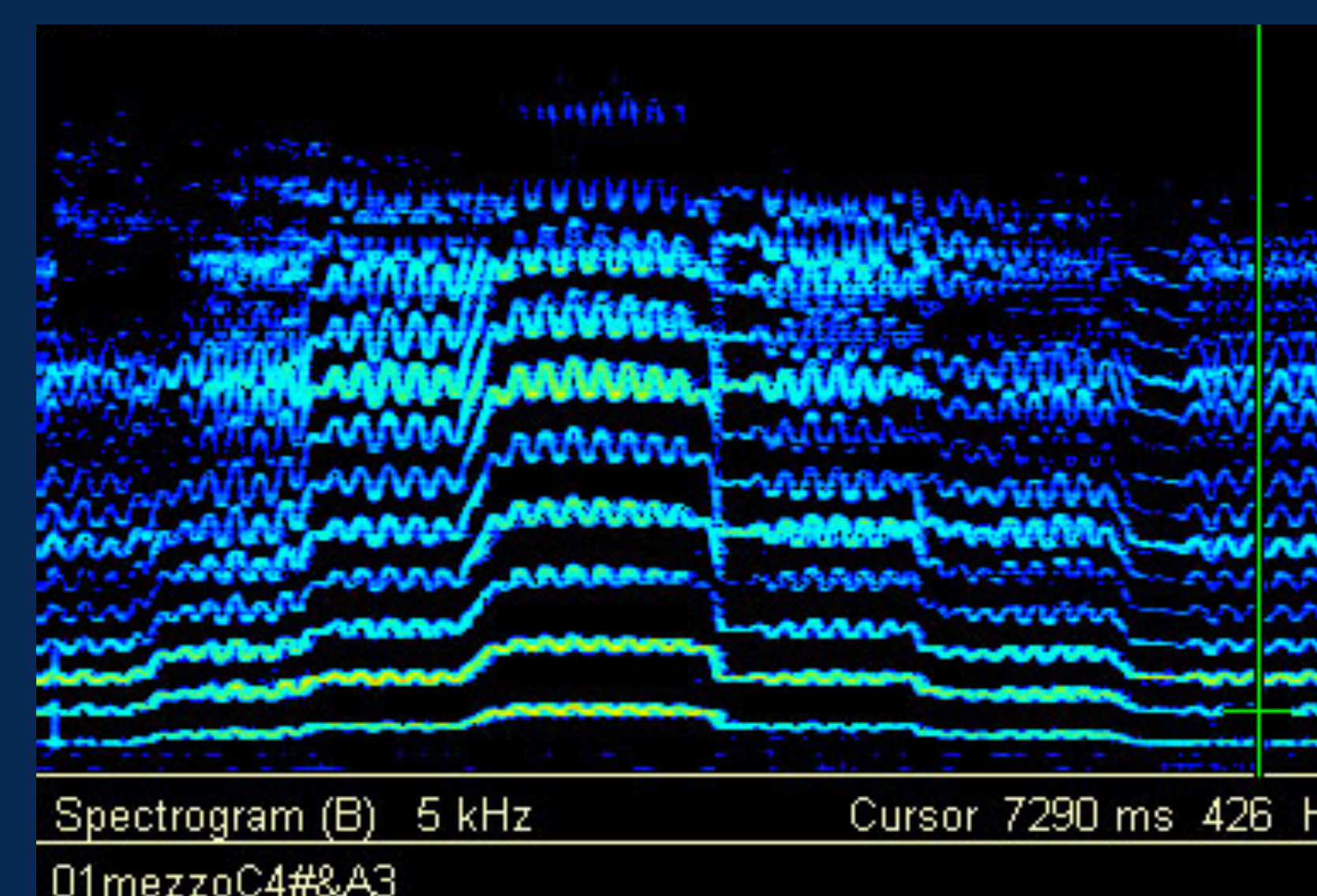


c) Taruskin is a leading musicologist and critic of the historical authenticity movement.

Figures A & B – Vibrato Visualized



a) Actual frequency compared to perceived frequency



b) High intensity is indicated by bright yellow/green hues, while low intensity is shown by cool blue tones.

Conclusions

The use or lack of vibrato is not inherent to early music, but rather, depends on the values of the musician.

By studying the values and practices of others, musicians may develop their own values and use them to support their decisions in early music performance practice.

