



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**THE ROLE OF VIBRATO IN THE PERCEPTION
OF VIOLIN TIMBRAL QUALITY**

MICHELE LAW SOO LING

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By

MICHELE LAW SOO LING

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Science**

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This research seeks to verify the assumption that the presence of vibrato assists listeners in “hearing” the resonance structure of a violin, hence facilitating judgments concerning violin timbral quality. Three violins of different costs and presumably different qualities were used. Listening tests were conducted to identify the perceived timbral quality of each violin. To further validate the results, body resonance curves of the violins were analyzed based upon the location and separation of two major resonance peaks. The results obtained were compared with those of previous research findings to confirm the quality of each violin. Spectrum analysis on glissando tones provided data for the plotting of the resonance curves. A pitch and vibrato detection algorithm using interpolated zero crossings was tested for its ability to accurately extract the quantifiable parameters of a vibrato, namely its rate and frequency excursion. This algorithm may be employed in resynthesis of vibrato tones.

Results of the listening test indicated that tones with vibrato were more easily discriminated in terms of quality than tones without vibrato, and the resonance curve analysis showed that there were indeed three violins of different qualities. Although the ranking of the violins in the listening test and resonance curve analysis in terms of quality were not quite in agreement, both were unanimous in identifying one of the violins as being perceived as the superior violin. The discrepancy in ranking could be attributed to the limitations and inadequacy of equipment during the recording of tones, as well as errors and imprecision in the analysis. Extraction of the vibrato parameters was successful but requires further fine tuning for more accurate results. Resynthesis had been successful for fundamental frequencies, but a high-quality synthetic violin tone can only be attained if higher harmonics are taken into account.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PERANAN VIBRATO DALAM PERSEPSI
KUALITI BUNYI BIOLA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membuktikan anggapan bahawa vibrato membantu pendengar "mendengar" struktur resonans biola dan oleh itu, membantu dalam penilaian kualiti biola. Tiga biola berlainan kos yang dianggap berlainan kualiti digunakan dalam kajian ini. Ujian pendengaran dilaksanakan untuk mengkaji persepsi kualiti bunyi setiap biola. Untuk mengesahkan dapatan kajian tersebut, keluk resonans setiap biola dianalisis berdasarkan kedudukan dan pengasingan dua puncak resonans utama. Hasil analisis dibandingkan dengan dapatan kajian dari pengkaji yang lain untuk mengesahkan kualiti setiap biola. Algoritma pengesanan pic dan vibrato yang menggunakan interpolasi perlintasan sifar diuji untuk keberkesanannya dalam ketepatannya untuk mengekstrak parameter-parameter dalam vibrato, iaitu kadar vibrato dan sisihan frekuensi. Algoritma ini boleh digunakan dalam sintesis semula ton bervibrato.

Dapatan kajian daripada ujian pendengaran menunjukkan bahawa ton dengan vibrato membantu mengasingkan kualiti biola berbanding dengan ton tanpa vibrato. Analisis keluk resonans pula menunjukkan bahawa sememangnya tiga biola tersebut berlainan kualiti. Walaupun tahap kedudukan biola berdasarkan kualiti tidak setara dalam ujian pendengaran dan analisis keluk resonans, tetapi kedua-dua analisis mendapati salah satu dari tiga biola mempunyai kualiti yang tertinggi. Ketidakteraturan dalam tahap kedudukan kualiti kedua-dua analisis mungkin disebabkan oleh limitasi peralatan kajian serta ralat dalam analisis. Parameter-parameter vibrato berjaya diekstrak. Sintesis semula dapat dilaksanakan untuk frekuensi asas, tetapi ton sintetik biola yang berkualiti tinggi hanya boleh diperolehi sekiranya harmonik-harmonik yang lebih tinggi digunakan.

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“God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of need.”

(Psalm 46:1)

I certify that an Examination Committee met on 23rd August 2002 to conduct the final examination of Michele Law Soo Ling on her Master of Science thesis entitled “The Role of Vibrato in the Perception of Violin Timbral Quality” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
DEDICATION		ii
ABSTRACT		iii
ABSTRAK		v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		vii
APPROVAL SHEETS		viii
DECLARATION FORM		x
LIST OF TABLES		xiii
LIST OF FIGURES		xv
 CHAPTER		
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	Violin: Structure and Acoustics	2
	Vibrato	4
	Sound Perception and Auditory Physiology	8
	Statement of the Problem	11
	Objective of the Study	12
	Significance of the Study	12
	Definitions	13
	Design of Study	14
	Outline of Thesis	16
II	LITERATURE REVIEW	17
	Musical Timbre Identification	17
	Vibrato	18
	Resonances	19
	Methods for Measurement of Sound Characteristics	28
	Subjective Perception of Quality	31
	Summary	32
III	METHODOLOGY	33
	Recording and Editing	33
	Listening Test	41
	Body Resonance Analysis	45
	Spectral Analysis	45
	Pitch and Vibrato Detector	47
	Digital Signal Processing	54
	Vibrato Resynthesis	58
	Summary	59

IV	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	60
	Listening Test	60
	Overall Counts	61
	Tone Ratings	65
	Listener Ratings	74
	Discussion	78
	Spectral Analysis	81
	Vibrato Rate and Frequency Excursion	90
	Vibrato Resynthesis	96
	Conclusion	97
V	CONCLUSION	98
	Summary of Research	98
	Conclusions	98
	Suggestions for further research	101
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	102
	APPENDICES	108
A	Listening Test Score Sheet	109
B	Pitch and Vibrato Detector Algorithm	111
C1	Listening Test: Original Data, Violin 1	114
C2	Listening Test: Original Data, Violin 2	115
C3	Listening Test: Original Data, Violin 3	116
D	Listening Test: Listener Ratings	117
E1	Spectral Analysis: Violin 1, G string, 0.2-second window ...	123
E2	Spectral Analysis: Violin 1, G string, 0.04-second window ...	125
E3	Spectral Analysis: Violin 1, D string	133
E4	Spectral Analysis: Violin 1, A string	135
E5	Spectral Analysis: Violin 2, G string	136
E6	Spectral Analysis: Violin 2, D string	146
E7	Spectral Analysis: Violin 2, A string	154
E8	Spectral Analysis: Violin 3, G string	162
E9	Spectral Analysis: Violin 3, D string	169
E10	Spectral Analysis: Violin 3, A string	177
	VITA.....	184

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Details of Violins	34
2	Glissando Frequency Ranges	39
3	Frequencies of Isolated Tones	39
4	Pitches in Subsequences of Section 1	43
5	Tone Matrix for Section 2	44
6	Spectral Analysis Parameters	46
7	Filter Parameters	48
8	Overall Counts for Vibrato	62
9	Overall Counts for Non Vibrato	63
10	Average Overall Counts for Vibrato and Non Vibrato	64
11	Tone Ratings in Section 1	66
12	Summary of Perceived Quality of Each Tone from Tone Ratings in Section 1	69
13	Violin Quality Determination from Tone Ratings in Section 1	69
14	Tone Ratings for Vibrato Tones in Section 2	70
15	Tone Ratings for Vibrato Tones in Section 2 with Summings-up	70
16	Tone Ratings for Non-vibrato Tones in Section 2	71
17	Tone Ratings for Non-vibrato Tones in Section 2 with Summings-up	71
18	Summary of Perceived Quality of Each Tone from Tone Ratings in Section 2	71

19	Violin Quality Determination from Tone Ratings in Section 2	72
20	Contribution of Each Analysis Method	79
21	Major Peaks in Resonance Curves	83
22	Vibrato Rate and Frequency Excursion of Violin 1	91
23	Vibrato Rate and Frequency Excursion of Violin 2	91
24	Vibrato Rate and Frequency Excursion of Violin 3	92
25	Comparison of Violin Prices, Perceived Quality of Sound and Peak Separation Intervals	99
26	Violin 1, Vibrato	114
27	Violin 1, Non Vibrato	114
28	Violin 2, Vibrato	115
29	Violin 2, Non Vibrato	115
30	Violin 3, Vibrato	116
31	Violin 3, Non Vibrato	116
32	Listener Ratings for Vibrato Tones in Section 1	117
33	Listener Ratings for Non-vibrato Tones in Section 1	118
34	Listener Ratings for Vibrato Tones in Section 2	119
35	Listener Ratings for Vibrato Tones in Section 2 with Summings-up...	120
36	Listener Ratings for Non-vibrato Tones in Section 2	121
37	Listener Ratings for Non-vibrato Tones in Section 2 with Summings-up	122

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Parts of the Violin, Top and Side Views	2
2	a) Sawtooth Wave, b) Spectrum and Harmonic Amplitudes of the Ideal Sawtooth Wave	3
3	Frequency Modulation and Amplitude Modulation in a Vibrato	7
4	Frequency Sweep and Amplitude Modulation in a Glissando	8
5	Cross Section of the Human Ear	9
6	Cross Section of the Cochlear	11
7	Summary of Methodology.....	15
8	Amplitude Modulation due to Violin Body Resonance	22
9	Loudness of the Various Harmonics as a Function of Frequency ...	25
10	Resonance Curve of a 1713 Stradivarius violin	26
11	Loudness Curves of a Good 1713 Stradivarius, a Poor 250-year old Violin and a Poor Instrument	27
12	Control Room Dimensions	35
13	Schematic Diagram of Microphone Setup	36
14	AKG C 3000 Frequency Response Curves	36
15	AKG C 3000 Polar Response Curves	37
16	Flowchart for Pitch and Vibrato Detection Algorithm	49
17	Hanning Window	52
18	Original Waveform and Fundamental Frequency	53

19	Interpolated and Rough Crossings	53
20	Vibrato Rate Detection Corrupted by Jitter	54
21	Conversion of a Continuous-time Signal to a Discrete-time Signal ...	55
22	Overall Counts for Vibrato	63
23	Overall Counts for Non Vibrato	63
24	Average Overall Counts for Vibrato and Non Vibrato	64
25	Tone Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 1, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	67
26	Tone Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 2, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	68
27	Tone Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 3, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	68
28	Tone Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 1, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	72
29	Tone Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 2, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	73
30	Tone Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 3, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	73
31	Listener Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 1, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	75
32	Listener Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 2, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	76
33	Listener Ratings in Section 1 for Violin 3, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	76
34	Listener Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 1, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	77

35	Listener Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 2, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	77
36	Listener Ratings in Section 2 for Violin 3, a) with vibrato, b) without vibrato	78
37	Vibrato Tone Analysis	82
38	Resonance Curve: Violin 1, 0.2-second window	84
39	Resonance Curve: Violin 1, 0.04-second window	85
40	Resonance Curve: Violin 2	86
41	Resonance Curve: Violin 3	87
42	Superposition of Resonance Curves	88
43	Vibrato Sinusoids of Violin 1	93
44	Vibrato Sinusoids of Violin 2	94
45	Vibrato Sinusoids of Violin 3	95

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The complex resonance structures of the violin body characterize the timbre of the instrument and are peculiar to the make and model of the instrument. As the violin player rocks his finger back and forth on the fingerboard, he is essentially altering the effective length of the string, which corresponds to a frequency modulation of the pitch being played. This is vibrato. The result of the interaction between the frequency-modulated string motion and the densely spaced resonances of the violin body is the rapidly fluctuating amplitudes of the harmonics of the tone. The assumption of this research is that vibrato helps the ear "hear" the resonance structure of a violin as the harmonic amplitudes are asynchronously modulated by the walls of the spectral envelope. By this, listeners are able to discriminate between different quality violins.

In general, there are two complementing methods used in the judgment of timbral quality, namely, subjective assessment via listening tests and objective evaluation of resonance curves of frequency response curves made through physical measurements. A correspondence will then be made between the differences in the subjective and objective methods.

Violin: Structure and Acoustics

The violin is the highest pitched instrument in the string family. Four strings, tuned a fifth apart at G₃ (196 Hz), D₄ (293.66 Hz), A₄ (440 Hz), E₅ (659.3 Hz), are strung over a bridge. The strings and bridge are mounted on a hollow, wooden body containing an almost closed air space. Hutchins (1962) provides thorough physical and acoustical descriptions of the violin in her seminal work, 'The Physics of Violins'. Figure 1 shows the top and side views of the violin together with the names of various parts of the structure.

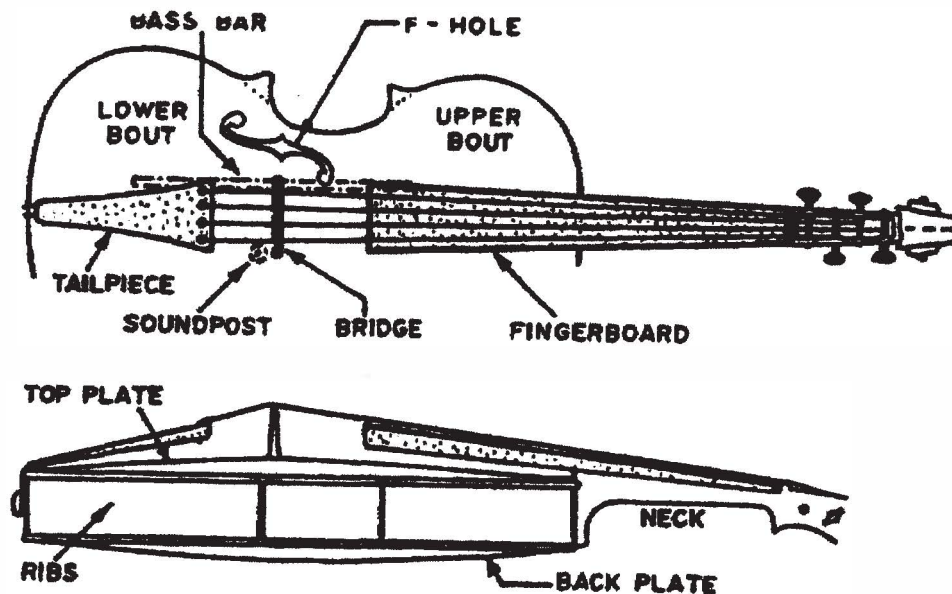


Figure 1: Parts of the Violin, Top and Side Views (from Benade, 1976)

The violin consists of three distinct sections: the sound generator, comprising the bow and string action; the resonator, or body of the violin; and the bridge, which couples the oscillating strings to the body. The primary oscillator is a stretched, flexible piece of string. As the bow is drawn across the string, sound waves are

generated. However there is very little sound coming from the string alone since its surface area is too small to set a sufficient number of molecules of air in motion to initiate human audition. It is the bridge and body of the violin having larger surface areas than the strings — that transmit the string vibrations to the air.

Helmholtz observed the stick-slip motion of a violin string during bowing, from which he deduced the sawtooth wave (Figure 2a) of the string displacement, now commonly referred to as Helmholtz motion. This was accomplished using a vibration microscope. The action of a bow on the string, as with the violin, produces sawtooth-like waves. Sawtooth waves are composed of all harmonics where the amplitudes are $1/n$, and $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots, \infty$ (Figure 2b). The timbre of a periodic complex tone is dependent on its spectral composition. However, the spectral envelope, which gives the general shape of the spectrum, is more important than the details contained within the spectrum (Hartmann, 1998).

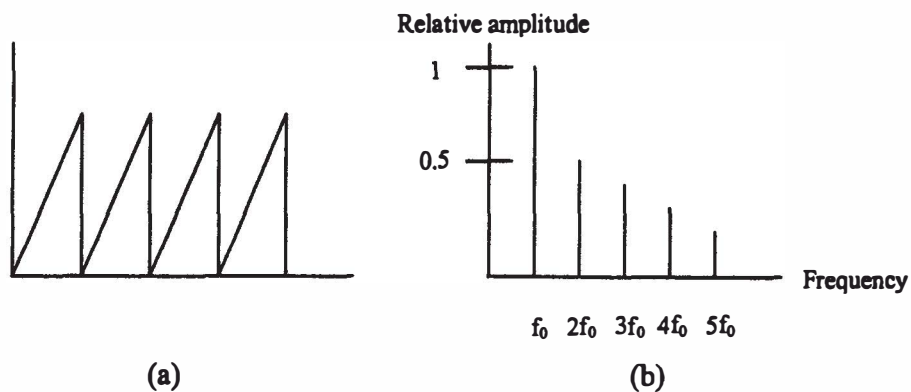


Figure 2: a) Sawtooth Wave, b) Spectrum and Harmonic Amplitudes of the Ideal Sawtooth Wave

Resonances involve the existence of natural frequencies that are easy to excite. These natural frequencies are associated with standing waves and usually include fundamental and harmonics, but sometimes also include non-harmonic overtones (Nave, 2000). The resonance properties of the violin provide information on its acoustic structure, the so-called “structural invariance” of a sound source (Michaels & Carello, 1981). Structural invariants are those properties that specify the nature of the acoustic structure of the object or group of objects participating in an event. Resonances have a noticeable effect on the timbre of musical sounds. The amplification and attenuation of certain harmonics contribute to the musical quality of the violin tone.

Vibrato

Vibrato is technically comprised of different components; it is a composite of modulations of frequency, dynamics and timbre (Desain & Honing, 1996). The present research scope focuses primarily on frequency modulations. In the case of a violin, vibrato is created by the rhythmic motion of the performer’s left forearm and wrist which enables the stopped finger to rock back and forth on the fingerboard. This action by the finger changes the effective string length, which in other words, is essentially a small modulation of string length. String players usually regulate the speed of the vibrato to the range of between 5 Hz to 8 Hz, and the frequency excursion is generally about 25 cents [equivalent to one-quarter of a musical semitone].

Vibrato causes complex asynchronous amplitude modulation (AM) in the spectra of string tones as harmonics oscillate under the walls of the fixed resonances or resonant envelopes of the violin body. The amplitude of the waveform is not changing because the violin player is changing the bow pressure or velocity in synchrony with the vibrato. It must be that a prominent harmonic is moving back and forth in frequency — because of the vibrato — under the resonance having fairly steep side walls. The amplitude modulation may produce sound level changes of between 3 dB to 15 dB, resulting in a perceived loudness due to vibrato. This pulsation of intensity affects the timbre or tone colour of the instrument (Fletcher & Rossing, 1998). If vibrato affects the amplitude of the harmonics as they move up and down under the resonances, the rate at which they change should be correlated, but the amount and direction of the change in amplitude of each harmonic will not be correlated. That is, each harmonic is being affected by a different part of the resonance curve and for one, the slope may be positive while for another, it may be negative. Assuming the vibrato period is much longer than the decay time of all resonant modes, it can be assumed that the modes reach steady state at each instantaneous frequency. Hence a vibrato could effectively trace out the spectral envelope of the resonance modes of a violin.

Figure 3 illustrates the fluctuations of harmonic amplitudes during vibrato. The harmonics of a violin, indicated by solid lines, are under resonance curves as depicted diagrammatically. During a vibrato, the finger alternates between a forward rotation and a backward rotation, resulting in a shortening and

lengthening of the string respectively. When the string is slightly shortened because the finger rotates a little sharp, the third harmonic ($3f_0$) is now at a position under the resonance indicated by the dotted line. Since the resonance is decreasing sharply at that frequency, the amplitude of the third harmonic will be attenuated. When the finger rotates back, lengthening the string, the amplitude of the third harmonic will increase again. So while the frequency is synchronous with all the other harmonics, the amplitudes are not because they are determined by different parts of the resonance curve of the violin. Listeners cannot “hear out” the individual harmonics, but they will be able to hear the effects as a change in tone colour. The enlarged extract of the fundamental frequency is about a quarter tone [25 cents] higher during a vibrato, and this represents the maximum range of frequency excursion of vibrato.

A vibrato sweeps up and down a small part of an octave whereas a glissando sweeps over all frequencies within its sweep. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music defines glissando as “passing all or part of the way from one note to another by the drawing of a finger down or up a series of adjacent notes, but the pitches passed through, instead of representing the fixed tones and semitones of a scale, are infinite in number” (Kennedy, 1980). Glissandi are similar to vibrato in that they also cause asynchronous AM.

Figure 4 shows octave sweeps of the fundamental frequency (f_0) and the second harmonic ($2f_0$). Since octaves have a frequency ratio of two to one, f_0 sweeps to $2f_0$, while $2f_0$ sweeps to $4f_0$. So the section of the resonance curve that it sweeps

will shape the amplitudes of the harmonics. As the fundamental frequency sweeps the octave, so will its other harmonics, and they will pass through all the resonances. A powerful confirmation of a resonance is when the intensities of several harmonics react to the resonance in the same way and within the same frequency region.

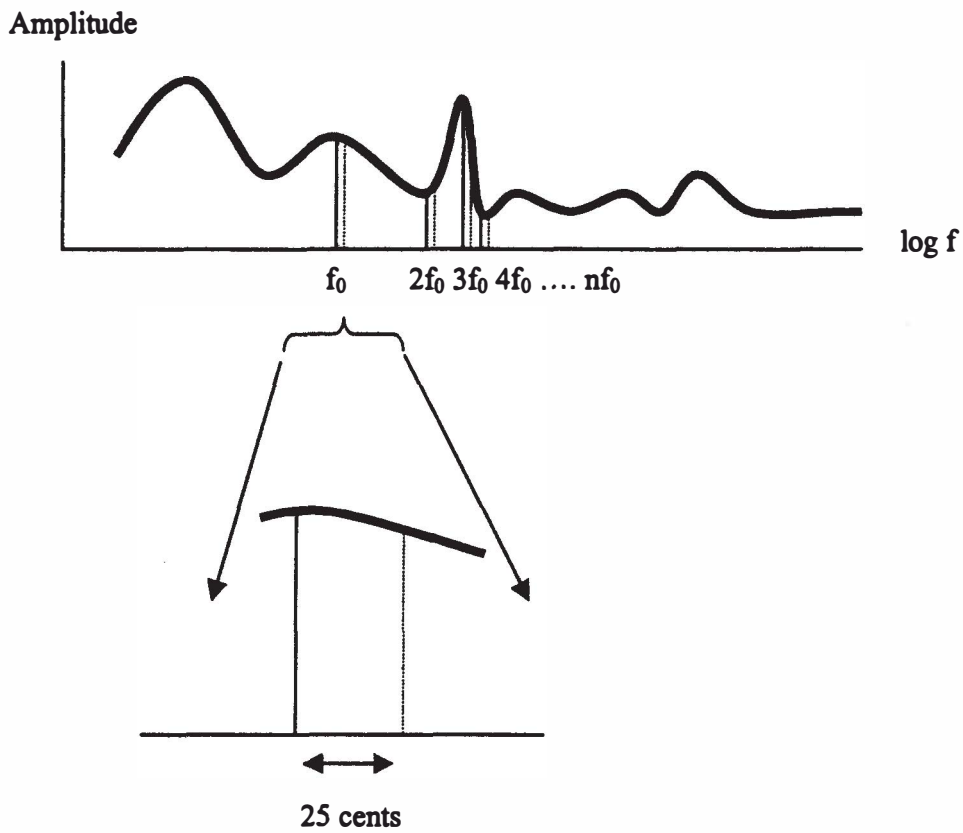


Figure 3: Frequency Modulation and Amplitude Modulation in a Vibrato