

Acoustics

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Acoustics is the interdisciplinary science that deals with the study of all mechanical waves in gases, liquids, and solids including vibration, sound, ultrasound and infrasound. A scientist who works in the field of acoustics is an acoustician while someone working in the field of acoustics technology may be called an acoustical engineer. The application of acoustics is present in almost all aspects of modern society with the most obvious being the audio and noise control industries. Hearing is one of the most crucial means of survival in the animal world, and speech is one of the most distinctive characteristics of human development and culture. Accordingly, the science of acoustics spreads across many facets of human society—music, medicine, architecture, industrial production, warfare and more. Art, craft, science and technology have provoked one another to advance the whole, as in many other fields of knowledge. Robert Bruce Lindsay's 'Wheel of Acoustics' is a well accepted overview of the various fields in acoustics.

Fundamental concepts of acoustics

The study of acoustics revolves around the generation, propagation and reception of mechanical waves and vibrations. **Cause -> Generating mechanism (transduction) -> Acoustic wave propagation -> Reception (transduction) -> Effect** The steps shown in the above diagram can be found in any acoustical event or process. There are many kinds of cause, both natural and volitional. There are many kinds of transduction process that convert energy from some other form into sonic energy, producing a sound wave. There is one fundamental equation that describes sound wave propagation, the acoustic wave equation, but the phenomena that emerge from it are varied and often complex. The wave carries energy throughout the propagating medium. Eventually this energy is transduced again into other forms, in ways that again may be natural and/or volitionally contrived. The final effect may be purely physical or it may reach far into the biological or volitional domains. The five basic steps are found equally well whether we are talking about an earthquake, a submarine using sonar to locate its foe, or a band playing in a rock concert. The central stage in the acoustical process is wave propagation. This falls within the domain of physical acoustics. In fluids, sound propagates primarily as a pressure wave. In solids, mechanical waves can take many forms including longitudinal waves, transverse waves and surface waves. Acoustics looks first at the pressure levels and frequencies in the sound wave. Transduction processes are also of special importance.

Wave propagation: pressure levels

In fluids such as air and water, sound waves propagate as disturbances in the ambient pressure level. While this disturbance is usually small, it is still noticeable to the human ear. The smallest sound that a person can hear, known as the threshold of hearing, is nine orders of magnitude smaller than the ambient pressure. The loudness of these disturbances is called the sound pressure level (SPL), and is measured on a logarithmic scale in decibels.

Wave propagation: frequency

Physicists and acoustic engineers tend to discuss sound pressure levels in terms of frequencies, partly because this is how our ears interpret sound. What we experience as "higher pitched" or "lower pitched" sounds are pressure vibrations having a higher or lower number of cycles per second. In a common technique of acoustic measurement, acoustic signals are sampled in time, and then presented in more meaningful forms such as octave bands or time frequency plots. Both these popular methods are used to analyze sound and better understand the acoustic phenomenon. The entire spectrum can be divided into three sections: audio, ultrasonic, and infrasonic. The audio range falls between 20 Hz and 20,000 Hz. This range is important because its frequencies can be detected by the human ear. This range has a number of applications, including speech communication and music. The ultrasonic range refers to the very high frequencies: 20,000 Hz and higher. This range has shorter wavelengths which allow better resolution in imaging technologies. Medical applications such as ultrasonography and elastography rely on the ultrasonic frequency range. On the other end of the spectrum, the lowest frequencies are known as the infrasonic range. These frequencies can be used to study geological phenomena such as earthquakes. Analytic instruments such as the Spectrum analyzer facilitate visualization and measurement of acoustic signals and their properties. The Spectrogram produced by such an instrument is a graphical display of the time varying pressure level and frequency profiles which give a specific acoustic signal its defining character.

Transduction in acoustics

A transducer is a device for converting one form of energy into another. In an electroacoustic context, this means converting sound energy into electrical energy (or vice versa). Electroacoustic transducers include loudspeakers, microphones, hydrophones and sonar projectors. These devices convert a sound pressure wave to or from an electric signal. The most widely used transduction principles are electromagnetism, electrostatics and piezoelectricity. The transducers in most common loudspeakers (e.g. woofers and tweeters), are electromagnetic devices that generate waves using a suspended diaphragm driven by an electromagnetic voice coil, sending off pressure waves. Microphones employ electrostatic capacitors—as the sound wave strikes the microphone's diaphragm, it moves and induces a voltage change. The ultrasonic systems used in medical ultrasonography employ piezoelectric transducers. These are made from special ceramics in which mechanical vibrations and electrical fields are interlinked through a property of the material itself.