

Calculation of Inharmonicities in Musical Instruments

As we have discussed in the POM lectures, **real** 1-dimensional musical instruments do **not** have a **perfect/ideal** harmonic sequence of overtones – *i.e.* $f_n^{thy} = n \cdot f_1^{thy}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, in contrast to the predictions of the **perfect/ideal** “simple” first-order theory of how the instrument works – such first-order theories **neglect/ignore higher-order real-world effects** such as finite string stiffness, viscous damping/dissipative effects that do indeed change/shift/perturb the resonant frequencies from their “ideal” “simple” first-order theory predictions.

For any given 1-dimensional musical instrument, if we **measure** the frequencies of the **individual harmonics** of the instrument f_n^{expt} , we can compare them with the **perfect/ideal** “simple” first-order theory prediction $f_n^{thy} = n \cdot f_1^{thy}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ of the **harmonic sequence of overtones** to see how close to **perfect/ideal** the musical instrument actually is. In general, the experimental results will be **close** to, but not **precisely identical** with the simple **perfect/ideal** theory predictions. The **deviation** of each harmonic f_n^{expt} from the **perfect/ideal** prediction $f_n^{thy} = n \cdot f_1^{thy}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ is a measure of the **inharmonicity** of the musical instrument.

I.) Stringed Instrument Inharmonicities:

For **stringed** instruments, the **fundamental** frequency f_1^{expt} of an **open** vibrating string is **not significantly** perturbed from its **perfect/ideal** theory value of $f_1^{thy} = v/\lambda_1 = 2\sqrt{T/\mu}/L$, thus we can use it as a **reference** for the higher harmonics $f_n^{thy} = n \cdot f_1^{thy}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

We can calculate the **frequency ratios** $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt}) = n_{expt}$ ($\neq n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$) and compare these results to the “simple” **perfect/ideal** theory predictions $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy}) = n$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

The **measured** frequency ratios $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt}) = n_{expt}$ should be **close** to, but will **not** be **precisely equal** to n , $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ for stringed instruments, *e.g.* due to finite string **stiffness** and, to a lesser extent, due to the effect(s) of viscous damping/dissipation effects of the surrounding air in proximity of the vibrating string.

The **deviation** of a given **measured** frequency ratio $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt})$ from its **perfect/ideal** theory value $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy}) = n$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ is given by the **experiment** vs. **theory difference** between these two quantities:

$$\Delta R_n^{expt-thy} \equiv R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy} = \left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_1^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}} \right) = n_{expt} - n$$

If we then **normalize** the above expression to the theory ratio $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy}) = n$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ then we obtain the **fractional deviation** of a given **measured** frequency ratio $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt})$ from its **perfect/ideal** theory value $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy}) = n$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$:

$$\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \equiv \frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} = \frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_1^{expt}}\right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)} = \frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} = \frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n}$$

Next, if we **multiply** this expression by the **theory value** of the **frequency** of this **harmonic** f_n^{thy} , then this is equal to the **shift/departure** of this harmonic's frequency from its **perfect/ideal** theory value $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ (in Hz):

$$\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} \text{ (Hz)} = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = f_n^{thy} \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_1^{expt}}\right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)} \right] = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right)$$

Stated another way:

$$\left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{f_n^{thy}} \right) = \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = \left(\frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_1^{expt}}\right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)} \right] = \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right)$$

Then the **% deviations** $\Delta_n^{expt-thy}$ (%) of the **actual/measured** harmonics of a stringed instrument from their **perfect/ideal** theory values are obtained by **multiplying** the above expression by 100%:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta_n^{expt-thy} \text{ (%) } &\equiv 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{f_n^{thy}} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) \\ &= 100 \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_1^{expt}}\right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_1^{thy}}\right)} \right] = 100 \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right) \end{aligned}$$

Now **one semi-tone** in the **tempered scale** is equal to 100 **cents**, and since there are 12 notes in the **tempered scale**, then one **octave** = 1200 cents. The frequency ratio between two adjacent notes (i.e. a semitone) in the tempered scale is $a^{1/12} = 2^{1/12} = 1.0594631$.

Thus, one semitone **low** from the frequency f_n^{thy} is given by the formula:

$$f_{low}^{semitone} = f_n^{thy} / a^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} / 2^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} / 1.0594631 = 0.943874 f_n^{thy}$$

and one semitone **high** from the frequency f_n^{thy} is given by the formula:

$$f_{high}^{semitone} = a^{1/12} f_n^{thy} = 2^{1/12} f_n^{thy} = 1.0594631 f_n^{thy}$$

The frequency **difference** $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ for **one semitone low** from f_n^{thy} is given by:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta f_{low}^{semitone} &= f_n^{thy} - f_{low}^{semitone} = f_n^{thy} - f_n^{thy} / a^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/a^{1/12}) = f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/2^{1/12}) \\ &= f_n^{thy} (1 - 0.943874) \\ &= 0.0561257 f_n^{thy} \text{ (Hz)}\end{aligned}$$

The frequency **difference** $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ for **one semitone high** from f_n^{thy} is given by:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta f_{high}^{semitone} &= f_{high}^{semitone} - f_n^{thy} = a^{1/12} f_n^{thy} - f_n^{thy} = f_n^{thy} (a^{1/12} - 1) = f_n^{thy} (2^{1/12} - 1) \\ &= f_n^{thy} (1.0594630 - 1) \\ &= 0.0594630 f_n^{thy} \text{ (Hz)}\end{aligned}$$

Notice that $(\Delta f_{low}^{semitone} = 0.0561257 f_n^{thy}) \neq (\Delta f_{high}^{semitone} = 0.0594630 f_n^{thy})$.

They're close, but they are **not precisely** equal to each other.

Suppose the frequency of a note on the musical scale, e.g. A5 is $f_n^{thy} = 880.00 \text{ Hz}$.

The frequency of A_b5 (one semitone **low**) is 830.61 Hz, **differing** from A5 by 49.39 Hz.

The frequency of B5 (one semitone **high**) is 932.33 Hz, **differing** from A5 by 52.33 Hz.

In order to express our **measured experimental** vs. **theory** frequency **differences** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ in **cents**, we need to a.) first **normalize** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ to $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ (if $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0$) or **normalize** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ to $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ (if $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0$), then b.) **multiply each** of these **ratios** by **100 cents**:

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0: \# \text{ cents low} = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}} \right) \text{ cents}$$

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0: \# \text{ cents high} = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}} \right) \text{ cents}$$

Then, inserting the formulas for $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$, $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ and $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ in these expressions, we have:

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0: \# \text{ cents low} = 100 \left(\frac{f_n^{thy} / f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/2^{1/12})}{f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/2^{1/12})} \right) \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{(1 - 1/2^{1/12})} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) \text{ cents}$$

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0: \# \text{ cents high} = 100 \left(\frac{f_n^{thy} / f_n^{thy} (2^{1/12} - 1)}{f_n^{thy} (2^{1/12} - 1)} \right) \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{(2^{1/12} - 1)} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) \text{ cents}$$

where: $n_{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt})$ and: $n \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy})$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

Numerically, these formulas, for **stringed instrument inharmonicities** are:

If $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0$:

$$\# \text{ cents low} = \frac{100}{(1-1/2^{1/12})} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) = \frac{100}{0.0561257} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) = 1781.715 \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) \text{ cents}$$

If $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0$:

$$\# \text{ cents high} = \frac{100}{(2^{1/12} - 1)} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) = \frac{100}{0.0594630} \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) = 1681.718 \left(\frac{n_{expt}}{n} - 1 \right) \text{ cents}$$

where: $n_{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_1^{expt})$ and: $n \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_1^{thy})$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

II.) Wind/Brass Lip-Reed Instrument Inharmonicities:

For **wind/brass lip-reed** instruments, the **fundamental** frequency f_1^{expt} of an **open** vibrating string **is significantly** perturbed from its **perfect/ideal** theory value of $f_1^{thy} = v/\lambda_1$, because of a variety of higher-order effects not taken into account in the simple perfect/ideal theory – e.g. frequency-dependent wavelength effects at the bell end of the instrument; the (longitudinal) speed of sound propagation in the confined/internal space of the instrument is also formally frequency dependent, i.e. $v = v(f)$ and especially so a lower frequencies, due to frequency-dependent viscous damping/dissipation effects. In wind/brass lip-reed instruments, the fundamental frequency f_1^{expt} (aka the “pedal note” tends to be systematically pulled **low**, and significantly so. Thus, we **cannot** use the fundamental as a **reference** for the higher harmonics $f_n^{thy} = n \cdot f_1^{thy}$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$. The pedal note/fundamental is also extremely difficult to play on wind/brass lip-reed instruments, and also not with any great accuracy. The second harmonic of wind/brass lip-reed instruments is much less adversely affected than the fundamental (= the first harmonic), and also easy to play, accurately so. Hence we can/will use the **second harmonic** as a **reference** for the higher harmonics in wind/brass lip-reed instruments.

We can then calculate the **frequency ratios** $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt}) = n_{expt} / 2$ ($\neq n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$) and compare these results to the “simple” **perfect/ideal** theory predictions

$$R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy}) = n/2, \quad n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$$

The **measured** frequency ratios $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt}) = n_{expt} / 2$ should be **close** to, but will **not** be **precisely equal** to $n/2$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ for wind/brass lip-reed instruments, due to the effect(s) of viscous damping/dissipation effects of the air inside the bore of and in contact with the inside surface(s) of the instrument.

The **deviation** of a given **measured** frequency ratio $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt})$ from its **perfect/ideal** “simple” theory value $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy}) = n/2$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ is given by the **experiment vs. theory difference** between these two quantities:

$$\Delta R_n^{expt-thy} \equiv R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy} = \left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_2^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right) = \frac{n_{expt}}{2} - \frac{n}{2} = \frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{2}$$

If we then **normalize** the above expression to the theory ratio $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy}) = n/2$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ then we obtain the **fractional deviation** of a given **measured** frequency ratio $R_n^{expt} \equiv (f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt})$ from its **perfect/ideal** theory value $R_n^{thy} \equiv (f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy}) = n/2$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$:

$$\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \equiv \frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} = \frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_2^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)} = \frac{\frac{n_{expt}}{2} - \frac{n}{2}}{\frac{n}{2}} = \frac{\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{2}}{\frac{n}{2}} = \frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n}$$

Next, if we **multiply** this expression by the **theory value** of the **frequency** of this **harmonic** f_n^{thy} , then this is equal to the **shift/departure** of this harmonic’s frequency from its **perfect/ideal** theory value $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ (in Hz):

$$\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} \text{ (Hz)} = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = f_n^{thy} \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_2^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)} \right] = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = f_n^{thy} \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right)$$

Stated another way:

$$\left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{f_n^{thy}} \right) = \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = \left(\frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_2^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)} \right] = \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right)$$

Then the **% deviations** $\Delta_n^{expt-thy}$ (%) of the **actual/measured** harmonics of a stringed instrument from their **perfect/ideal** theory values are obtained by **multiplying** the above expression by 100%:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta_n^{expt-thy} \text{ (%) } &\equiv 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{f_n^{thy}} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta R_n^{expt-thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{R_n^{expt} - R_n^{thy}}{R_n^{thy}} \right) \\ &= 100 \left[\frac{\left(\frac{f_n^{expt}}{f_2^{expt}} \right) - \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)}{\left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_2^{thy}} \right)} \right] = 100 \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta n_{expt-thy}}{n} \right) \end{aligned}$$

Now **one semitone** in the **tempered scale** is equal to 100 **cents**, and since there are 12 notes in the **tempered scale**, then one **octave** = 1200 cents. The frequency ratio between two adjacent notes (i.e. a semitone) in the tempered scale is $a^{1/12} = 2^{1/12} = 1.0594631$.

Thus, one semitone **low** from the frequency f_n^{thy} is given by the formula:

$$f_{low}^{semitone} = f_n^{thy} / a^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} / 2^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} / 1.0594631 = 0.943874 f_n^{thy}$$

and one semitone **high** from the frequency f_n^{thy} is given by the formula:

$$f_{high}^{semitone} = a^{1/12} f_n^{thy} = 2^{1/12} f_n^{thy} = 1.0594631 f_n^{thy}$$

The frequency **difference** $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ for **one semitone low** from f_n^{thy} is given by:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta f_{low}^{semitone} &= f_n^{thy} - f_{low}^{semitone} = f_n^{thy} - f_n^{thy} / a^{1/12} = f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/a^{1/12}) = f_n^{thy} (1 - 1/2^{1/12}) \\ &= f_n^{thy} (1 - 0.943874) \\ &= 0.0561257 f_n^{thy} \text{ (Hz)} \end{aligned}$$

The frequency **difference** $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ for **one semitone high** from f_n^{thy} is given by:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta f_{high}^{semitone} &= f_{high}^{semitone} - f_n^{thy} = a^{1/12} f_n^{thy} - f_n^{thy} = f_n^{thy} (a^{1/12} - 1) = f_n^{thy} (2^{1/12} - 1) \\ &= f_n^{thy} (1.0594630 - 1) \\ &= 0.0594630 f_n^{thy} \text{ (Hz)} \end{aligned}$$

Notice that $(\Delta f_{low}^{semitone} = 0.0561257 f_n^{thy}) \neq (\Delta f_{high}^{semitone} = 0.0594630 f_n^{thy})$.

They're close, but they are **not precisely** equal to each other.

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The frequency of B5 (one semitone **high**) is 932.33 Hz, **differing** from A5 by 52.33 Hz.

In order to express our **measured experimental vs. theory** frequency **differences** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ in **cents**, we need to a.) first **normalize** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ to $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ (if $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0$) or **normalize** $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$ to $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ (if $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0$), then b.) **multiply each** of these **ratios** by **100 cents**:

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0: \# \text{ cents low} = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}} \right) \text{ cents}$$

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0: \# \text{ cents high} = 100 \left(\frac{\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}}{\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}} \right) \text{ cents}$$

Then, inserting the formulas for $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy}$, $\Delta f_{low}^{semitone}$ and $\Delta f_{high}^{semitone}$ in these expressions, we have:

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0: \# \text{ cents low} = 100 \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_n^{thy} (1-1/2^{1/12})} \right) \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{(1-1/2^{1/12})} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) \text{ cents}$$

$$\text{If } \Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0: \# \text{ cents high} = 100 \left(\frac{f_n^{thy}}{f_n^{thy} (2^{1/12} - 1)} \right) \left(\frac{n_{expt} - n}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{(2^{1/12} - 1)} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) \text{ cents}$$

where: $n_{expt} \equiv 2(f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt})$ and: $n \equiv 2(f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy})$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

Numerically, these formulas, for **wind/brass lip-reed instrument inharmonicities** are:

If $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} < 0$:

$$\# \text{ cents low} = \frac{100}{(1-1/2^{1/12})} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{0.0561257} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) = 1781.715 \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) \text{ cents}$$

If $\Delta f_n^{expt-thy} > 0$:

$$\# \text{ cents high} = \frac{100}{(2^{1/12} - 1)} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) = \frac{100}{0.0594630} \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) = 1681.718 \left(\frac{n_{expt} - 1}{n} \right) \text{ cents}$$

where: $n_{expt} \equiv 2(f_n^{expt} / f_2^{expt})$ and: $n \equiv 2(f_n^{thy} / f_2^{thy})$, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

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