Amplifiers*

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Appreciable care is required in the design of a system which must amplify with great fidelity practically the whole range of audible frequencies and be capable of delivering a high level while at the same time providing a wide volume range. Some of the problems involved are discussed, particularly as applying to the equipment used in the reproduction in Washington, D. C., of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra playing in Philadelphia.

VACUUM tube amplifiers have been closely identified with the extension of the channels of communication since, with completion of the initial transcontinental telephone line 20 years ago, they first enabled New York to converse with San Francisco. There are now thousands of audio frequency amplifiers in telephone circuits and in sound picture theaters, public address systems, and other similar services as well as in the millions of radio receiving sets.

Along with the extension of the field of usefulness of audio amplifiers there has been continuing progress toward more faithful reproduction, better transmitters, better receivers, and better amplifiers. Those first telephone repeaters, although quite adequate for their immediate purpose, transmitted a frequency band only a few octaves wide. Very few radio sets even now cover a range above 3,000 c.p.s. without distortion, and the most up-to-date sound picture installation rarely can be depended upon for accurate reproduction of frequencies above 7000 or 8000 c.p.s. The requirements as to frequency range and freedom from distortion for any particular service are, in the last analysis, determined by public demand.

However, when one undertakes to reproduce an orchestra like the Philadelphia Symphony and to reproduce it in such a manner as to satisfy the critical ear of the director, or that of the devotee of symphonic concerts, one has to provide something out of the ordinary in audio amplifiers.

In his paper, which forms a part of this symposium, Dr. Fletcher has pointed out that only the elimination of those frequencies below 40 c.p.s. and those above 15,000 c.p.s. produces no detectable difference in the reproduction of symphonic music. This, then, is the

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frequency spectrum that the amplifier must be designed to handle. Also, it is important that there shall be uniform amplification of all parts of the frequency range and that no extraneous frequencies shall be introduced.

Of importance commensurate with the distortionless amplification of the complete frequency range of the orchestra is the provision of an equivalent volume of sound. The amplifier must be capable of supplying to the loud speakers without distortion an amount of energy that will produce a sound volume at least equivalent to that produced by the orchestra (the Philadelphia-Washington installation was designed to produce about 10 times this amount). And equally important, the amplifier must be so free from internal disturbances and from self-induced electrical fluctuations that the softest music, the weakest input to the microphone, can be reproduced without appreciable background noise. According to Fletcher the ratio of the heaviest playing of a large orchestra such as the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra to the softest music such as that of a violin is about 10,000,000 to 1, or 70 db. Thus it is required that any noise be at least 75 db below the loudest tones; that is, there must be at least a 75-db volume range.

The sources of noise may be divided into 2 groups. In the first group are included the 60-cycle alternating current power supply, vibration or jar of mechanically unstable vacuum tubes, contact and thermoelectric potentials, and similar disturbances, which may be reduced to practically any degree depending upon the lengths to which one is willing to go to reduce them. In the second group are those electronic irregularities intimately associated with the operation of the vacuum tube and which depend somewhat upon the design, manufacture, and method of operation of the vacuum tube; and which, when sufficiently amplified and fed into a loud speaker, may be heard as noise. In general, the maximum volume range of an amplifier is reached when all other disturbances are reduced to the level of this tube noise.

It is evident, then, that under ordinary circumstances the limiting volume range of an amplifier is a function of the amount of amplification following the first tube. In other words, the magnitude of the signal voltage with respect to the noise voltage in the plate circuit of the first tube in a multistage amplifier determines the limiting volume range obtainable with that amplifier.

It will appear that in a sound reproduction system a highly efficient microphone simplifies the amplifier volume range requirements, and that loud speakers of high efficiency reduce the volume required from the amplifier.

Perhaps it is in order to inquire as to what makes an amplifier free from frequency distortion over a wide range. The answer might well be: attention to impedance relations. A compact, efficient amplifier requires several pieces of reactive apparatus such as transformers, retardation coils, and capacitors. One must remember that an inductance of one henry is equivalent to an impedance of 250 ohms at 40 c.p.s. but that it is nearly 100,000 ohms at 15,000 c.p.s.; that the grid circuit of the vacuum tube is not actually an open circuit even though the grid is maintained negative with respect to the cathode, but has a reactance which becomes important at high frequencies or with large ratio input transformers. Many years of development in this field have advanced the art to the point where transformers transmitting extremely wide bands now can be designed. The commercial production of such designs requires rigid inspection including shop transmission measurements under the actual conditions of use. The transformer must be designed for the particular type of vacuum tube with which it is to be used. First, however, the tube must be designed to permit its use under the proposed conditions and then it must be manufactured to close limits, every tube of a type like every other tube of that type.

This is, then, the general requirement for a wide frequency range amplifier: (1) attention to impedance relations; (2) meticulous design of each component for the particular job it has to do, and rigid inspection to insure that it does that job.

One might suppose that when the tube designer and the coil designer each had done his part the job was done. Such is not the case. The various pieces of apparatus have to be gathered together into a unit (often a current supply set for supplying anode, cathode, and grid potential is assembled with the amplifier) and out of this electrical and physical association is apt to arise "feed-back" and "noise."

When there is coupling between two parts of the amplification circuit which are at different potential or different phase there is feed-back. Feed-back sometimes is employed designedly to modify an amplifier characteristic, but, feed-back which may arise as a result of a particular arrangement of apparatus or wiring ordinarily will cause more or less severe frequency distortion. It may be induced due to stray electromagnetic or electrostatic fields, which must be eliminated by rearrangement of apparatus or by shielding; or it may be caused by common circuit impedance, requiring circuit modifications. In general, a low gain amplifier or one with limited frequency range presents no feed-back problems, but a study of a high-gain wide-range equipment usually is necessary in order to determine the best arrangement. Often modifications of tentative circuit or apparatus must be made to obtain satisfactory operation.

The provision of a volume range of some 75 db on an energy basis became largely a matter of the suppression of a.-c. hum. The low inherent electronic noise effect of the Western Electric No. 262A vacuum tube and the relatively high level from the microphones kept electronic tube noise well in the background. Careful and in some cases rather elaborate shielding of audio transformers and leads and the segregation of the 60-cycle power equipment coupled with the use of vacuum tubes having indirectly heated cathodes and specially designed to have small stray fields prevented a.-c. hum trouble in the early stages. However, the Western Electric No. 242A vacuum tubes used in the push-pull final stage have filamentary cathodes, and when such tubes have raw a.-c. filament supply, a very appreciable 120-cycle component appears in the space current. Although theoretically in a perfectly balanced push-pull amplifier this component would be eliminated, in practice an exact balance cannot be obtained. As a final step in noise elimination, advantage was taken of the fact that each channel employed two amplifiers in parallel. Under such conditions and with proper phasing of the power supply to the two amplifiers the net a.-c. noise output of the two amplifiers in parallel will be less than that of either one alone.

Having reduced feed-back and noise to tolerable values, it remains to determine the operating conditions for maximuum output. The vacuum tube is not strictly a linear device, but, when properly used, the total harmonic content can be held to a low figure. For a high quality system the total harmonics produced in the system should not exceed one per cent of the fundamental. This requires that impedance and potential relations in the vacuum tubes should be adjusted to give approximately linear operation; and also that the design of audio transformers, particularly those carrying considerable levels, must be scrutinized carefully to insure that they operate over an essentially linear portion of the magnetization curve of the core material.

An instrument really essential to the design of high quality amplifiers is a high sensitivity harmonic analyzer that is capable of quickly and accurately resolving a complex wave into its simple components. By this means the effect of variations in circuit relations can be evaluated and the optimum condition for maximum distortionless power output determined.

It may be desirable at this point to examine the make-up of the audio amplification system used in the Philadelphia-Washington experiments. It should be noted that the arrangement of equipment

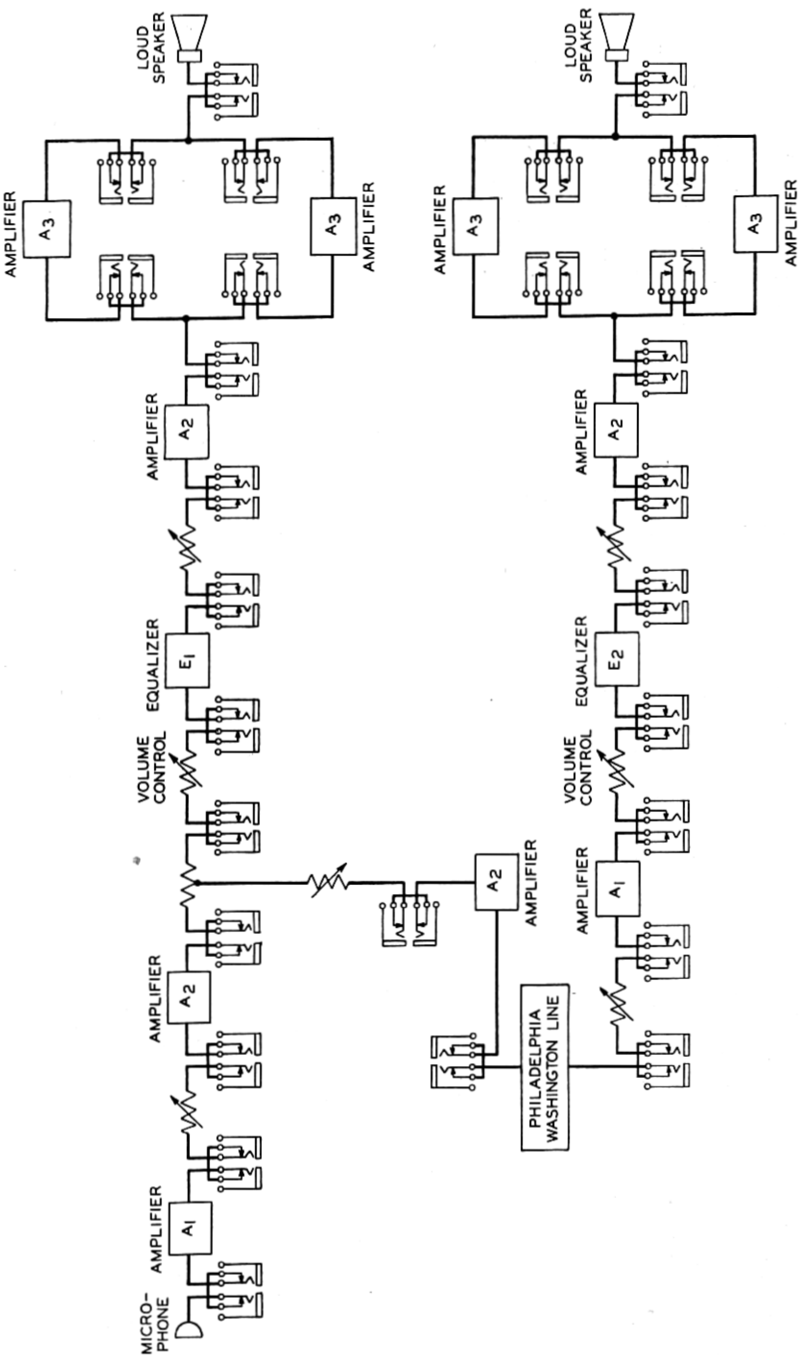

Fig. 1—Schematic diagram of the amplification system used in conveying Philadelphia symphonic music to Constitution Hall in Washington, D. C., and there reproducing it in auditory perspective.

provided for simultaneous reproduction at both Philadelphia and Washington. There were three complete and essentially equivalent channels of equipment actually in use and a fourth complete channel held in reserve as a spare.

Several stages of so-called voltage amplification were required preliminary to the final or power stage. There is, of course, no essential difference between a voltage amplifier and a power amplifier, the term "voltage amplifier" being applied to those preliminary stages of an amplification system the function of which is so to amplify the output of the pick-up device as to supply adequate driving voltage to the grids of the power stage. Theoretically, inasmuch as no energy is absorbed in the ideal grid circuit, this voltage increase might be supplied entirely by a high ratio input transformer. However, there are practical difficulties to the design of such a single stage amplifier and therefore multistage vacuum tube amplification is employed.

As a matter of convenience the voltage amplification for this system was obtained through the use of several separate amplifier units in tandem. This arrangement not only enabled the ready replacement of any unit of the system in case of failure, but it also facilitated the insertion of a pad, control potentiometer, or other network at any desired point. Several of these devices were required, and of course each introduced a loss. Thus the gross amplification of the system used for reproduction at Philadelphia was approximately 160 db and for Washington 240 db, although the actual difference in level between microphone output and loud speaker input was but from 80 to 90 db.

The general scheme of the amplification system is shown in Fig. 1. A_1 is a single-stage, single-tube Western Electric No. 80A amplifier slightly modified to meet the particular conditions of use; it has a gain of 30 db, and employs a Western Electric No. 262A vacuum tube. This tube has an equipotential cathode, the heater being operated on 10-volt 60-cycle alternating current and the anode being supplied from rectified alternating current. A_2 is a 2-stage amplifier having a single Western Electric No. 262A vacuum tube in the first stage and push-pull Western Electric No. 272A tubes in the second stage. It has a gain of 50 db. The cathodes of the tubes are energized with low-voltage 60-cycle alternating current and the anodes with rectified alternating current. A_3, the final or power amplifier, is a single stage amplifier employing two Western Electric No. 242A vacuum tubes in parallel on each side of a push-pull circuit, thus having four tubes per amplifier. Two of the A_3 amplifiers were used in parallel on each channel, and were capable of supplying 60 watts each, or a total of 120 watts, to the loud speakers. These are r.m.s. values. The instantaneous peaks of power of course could equal twice this value, or 720 watts, for the three channels. E_1 and E_2 are equalizers to compensate for any amplitude distortion that would cause a listener to obtain a different tone effect from the loud speakers than he would from the

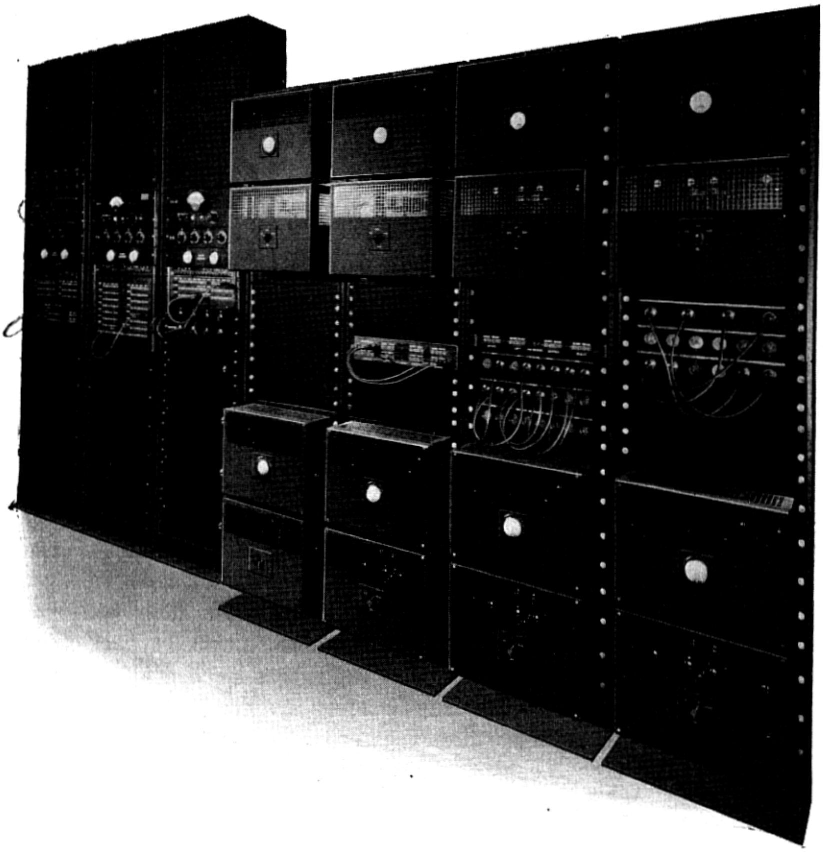

Fig. 2—Amplifying equipment used at Philadelphia. The taller racks are 8 ft. high and contain A_1 and A_2 amplifiers, volume indicators, and various controls.

actual orchestra. These equalizers are loss networks and principally equalize for the acoustic characteristic of the loud speakers in the particular hall, but they are placed in a low energy part of the amplification circuit so as not to waste the energy of the final power stage.

In view of the inclusion of the equalizers in the amplification system, and particularly because of the fact that the amplification of the A_3 amplifier deliberately was made to increase with frequency in order to compensate in part for acoustic losses in the overall system, the actual amplification-frequency curves of the amplifiers are of little importance. The equalizers of the system are discussed in the paper by Bedell and Kerney.