An ultra low-distortion oscillator with THD below -140 dB

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Abstract*: ADC circuits that resolve signal into 20 or more bits need a low-noise signal source for measuring parameters such as harmonic distortion or effective number of bits. A notch filter removes the fundamental frequency from the oscillator's signal for testing harmonic distortion. (Actualization 9/2020 - switching from LME49710 to OPA1656)*

A low-distortion oscillator is necessary for testing today's ADCs (analog-to-digital converters) that have resolution higher than 20 bits. Low-distortion amplifiers with THD (total-harmonic distortion) of -120 dB or less also need such an oscillator for testing. Commercially available distortion meters offer many measurement functions, but even the best have a THD measurement limit somewhere
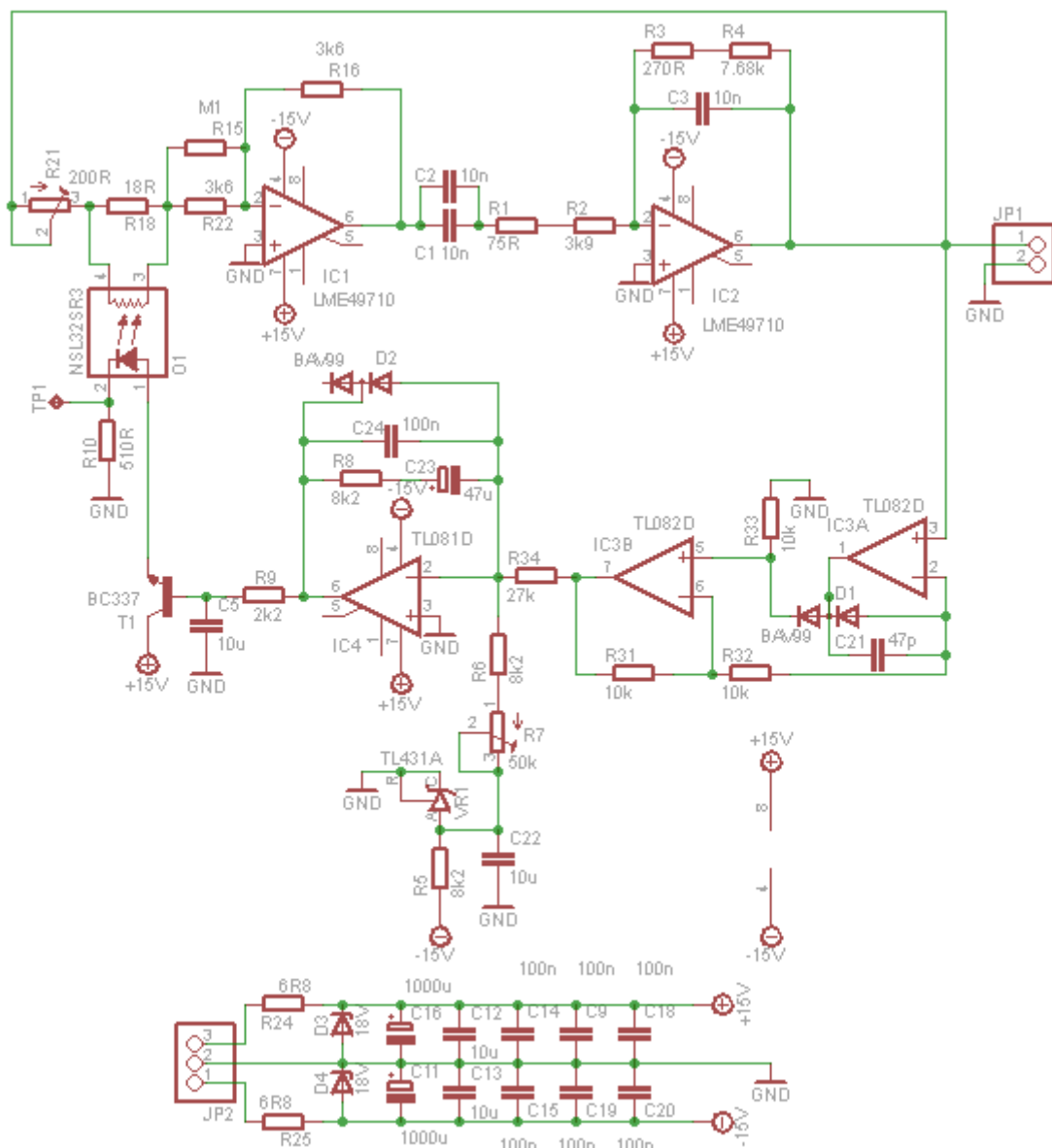

Fig. 1 Ultra-low distortion oscillator

around –115 dB (Ref 1).

Several low-distortion oscillator designs have been published, but they also have THD of –120 dB or slightly better (Refs. 2, 3, 4). At JanasCard, we've developed an oscillator with THD below –140 dB that we use for in-house testing.

The oscillator in **Figure 1** uses an inverted Wien-bridge topology with amplitude stabilization through a LED-driven CdS (cadmium-sulfide) photocell isolator. IC_1 and IC_2 are low noise, high linearity LME49710 audio amplifiers from Texas Instruments, key components of the oscillator. These amplifiers have nonlinearity below 0.1 ppm in inverting mode (Ref. 5). IC_1 acts as an inverter with gain –1. IC_2, in conjunction with R_1, R_2, R_3, R_4, C_1, C_2, and C_3, forms a band-pass filter that sets the oscillator's resonant frequency to 2 kHz. The design uses a Wien bridge with values R, C, R/2, and 2C because it the oscillator needs an inverting gain of –1.

You can use a simpler configuration with equal values for R and C, (Ref. 4) but it requires an inverter with a gain of –2 and you must take the output from the inverting amplifier stage. The resulting noise is significantly higher because of the higher overall gain and the circuit isn't bandwidth limiting.

Noise is also an important parameter for ADC testing. Thus, we used SPICE simulation on the oscillator's noise performance. **Figure 2** shows that the circuit's voltage noise-spectral density is highest at the resonant frequency and then falls at higher frequencies because of band-pass filtering. Total noise in the 20 Hz-30 kHz band is 1.7µV. That gives a theoretical SNR (signal-to-noise ratio) of 126 dB for output level 10 V_{PP}, or 3.5 V_{RMS}. The LM49710 has voltage-noise density of 2.5 nV/$\sqrt{Hz}$. Resistors and input noise currents of the amplifiers also add to the overall noise. If the lowest possible noise is important, you can use lower resistor values, but that's at the expense of higher power consumption and increased distortion. The LM49710 distortion performance is specified with minimum load resistance of 600 Ω.

For amplitude stabilization, the oscillator's AGC (automatic gain control) circuit consists of a full-wave rectifier with high input impedance (IC_{3A}, IC_{3B}), integrator IC_4, and optocoupler O_1. The voltage across the optocoupler's photo-resistor is only 18 mV as set by the 18-Ω parallel resistor R_{18}. That voltage keeps the voltage across O_1 to a negligible level. Multi-turn trim potentiometer R_{21} sets the AGC's working point to roughly 10 mA through O1's LED (5 V at TP_1). Turn R_{21} slowly until the AGC locks, loop's time constant is several seconds. The setting is quite sensitive because of the AGC loop's narrow range. After setting the proper operating point with R_{21}, set the output amplitude with multi-turn trim potentiometer R_7 in range of 5 Vpp to10 Vpp.Right selection of passive components in signal chain is another important requirement for minimum distortion. Resistors are preferably 0.1%, 15 ppm/K through-hole types, capacitors are preferably polystyrene

foil types, another choice are NPO (Negative Positive Zero) with their smaller size and lower temperature coefficients, but sometimes slightly higher but more consistent champdistortion (Ref. 6,8).
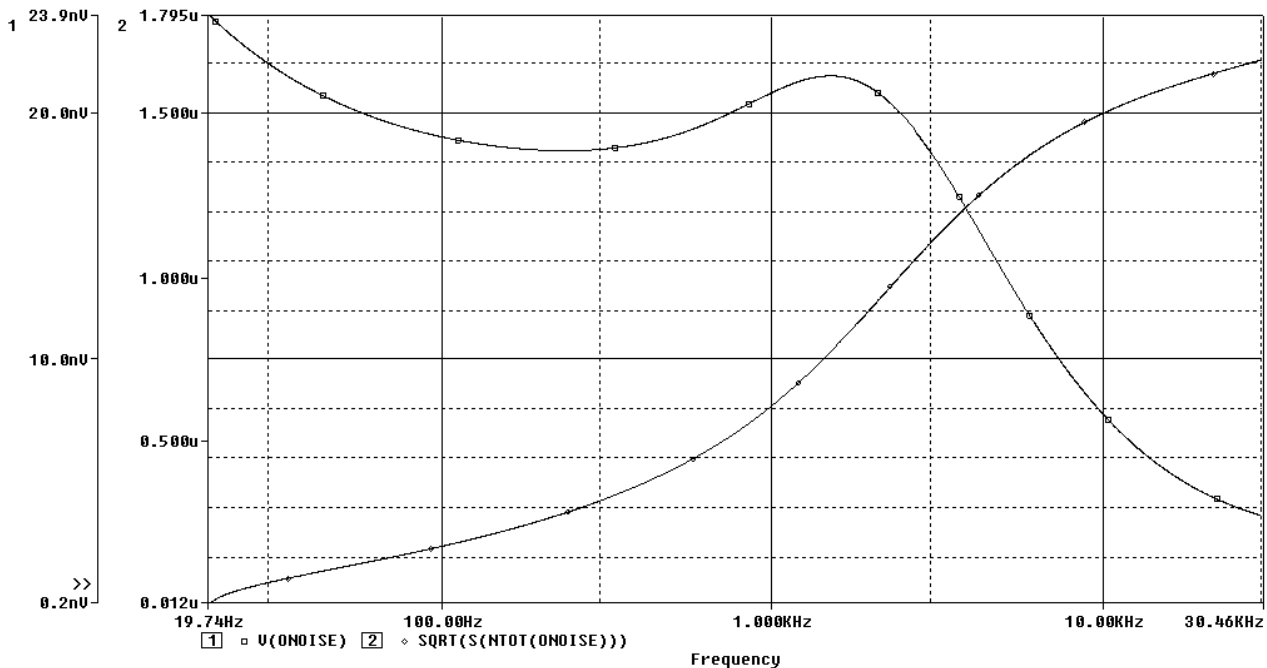

Fig. 2. Noise simulation

Performance verification

We know of no commercially available equipment with enough resolution to directly measure distortion of the ADC circuit. Fortunately, you can use a simple two-stage approach. First, attenuate the fundamental frequency as much as possible; at least 80 dB. A low-distortion notch filter lets you measure residual distortion much more simply than a spectrum analyzer. **Figure 3** shows a tunable notch filter with an amplifier. The notch filter is a passive twin-T circuit, which rejects the oscillator's fundamental frequency, but it also attenuates the second and third harmonics by about 9 dB and 5 dB, respectively.

Distortion performance of the notch filter is important, so use the same high quality passive components as in the oscillator. Feed the notch-filter's output into low-noise amplifier IC_1 with a gain of 100. Monitor the output of this amplifier with any common spectrum analyser or with a PC sound card and frequency-analysis software. For quick self-testing of distortion and gain accuracy of the whole measurement chain, the circuit has a jumper-selectable resistive divider (R_9, R_{10}) with 70 dB attenuation.
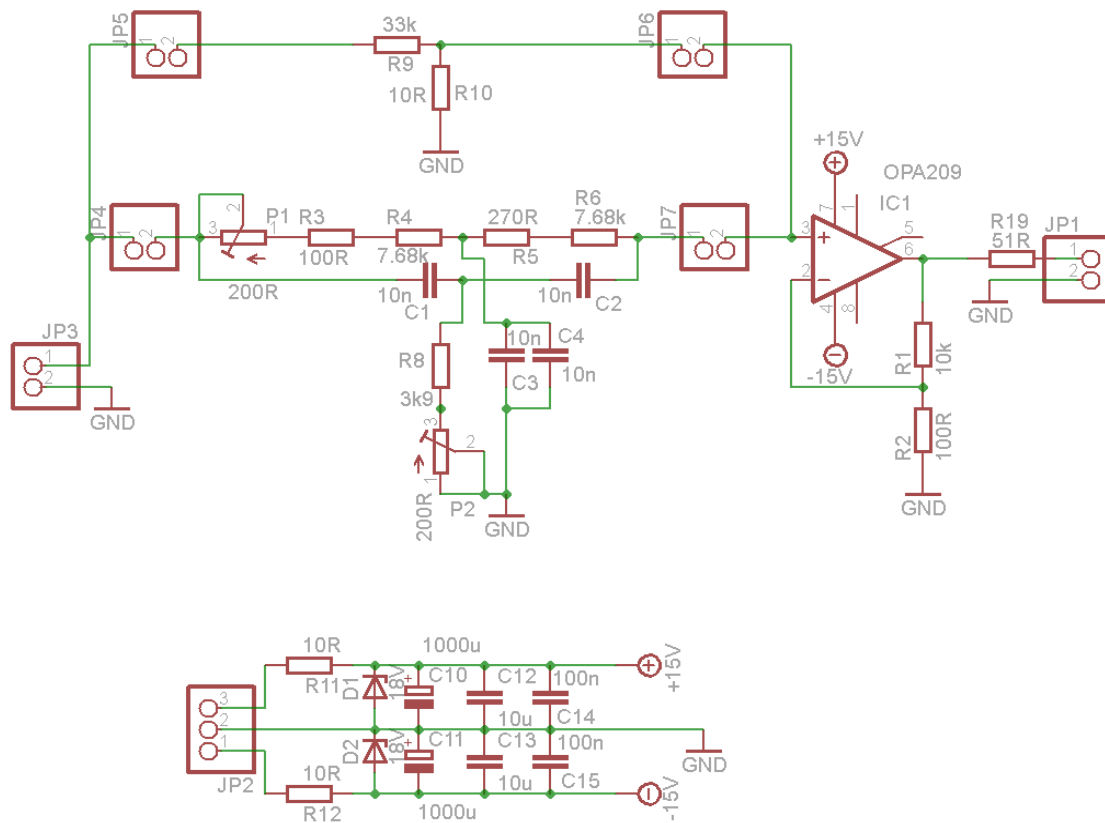
Fig. 3. Twin T notch and amplifier

Figure 4 shows the noise and distortion performance of the amplifier and analyser together when the attenuator is connected to the output of the oscillator. We used our DAQ module AD14ETH www.janascard.cz as a spectrum analyser. The DAQ module has a 14-bit ADC with 400 ksamples/s sample rate. The module averages 8 samples to reduce sampling speed to 50 kS/s and takes 128 ksamples to perform FFT analysis. The high number of samples is necessary for highest possible dynamic range, second harmonic is as low as –150 dBV so frequency resolution below 1 Hz is necessary. Fig. 4 shows that noise floor of the amplifier is –155 dBV. The third harmonic is –141 dBV, so the amplifier's THD together with that of DAQ module is less than 80 dB.

After verifying that JP_5, JP_6 are open and JP_4 and JP_7 are closed, connect an AC voltmeter or oscilloscope to the output and tune P_1 and P_2 for maximum attenuation of the oscillator's fundamental frequency. Now the filter is ready to measure the oscillator's THD. **Figure 5** shows distortion of the oscillator with NPO capacitors, the second harmonic is –147 dBV, the third harmonic is –143 dBV, oscillator output level is +10 dBV. Thus, the second harmonic is 10 dB+147 dB –9 dB = 148 dB below the fundamental. The third harmonic is 10 dB +143 dB –5 dB = 148 dB below the fundamental. THD is –145 dB. **Figure 6** shows distortion with C_3 replaced with a polystyrene foil capacitor. Distortion is several dB lower. The second harmonic is –151 dB, which is nearly invisible in the noise. The third harmonic is also –151 dB below the fundamental. THD is –148 dB.
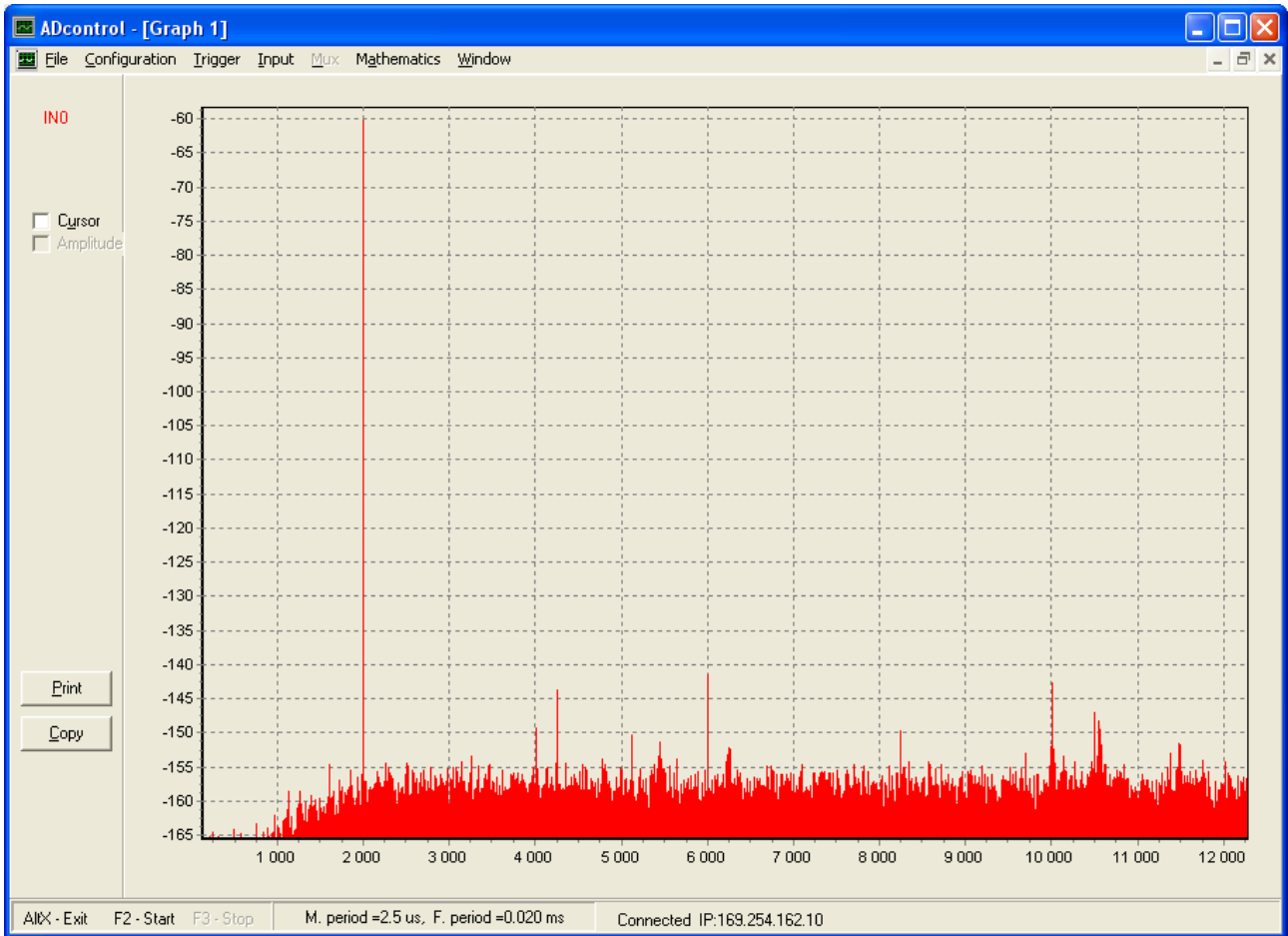
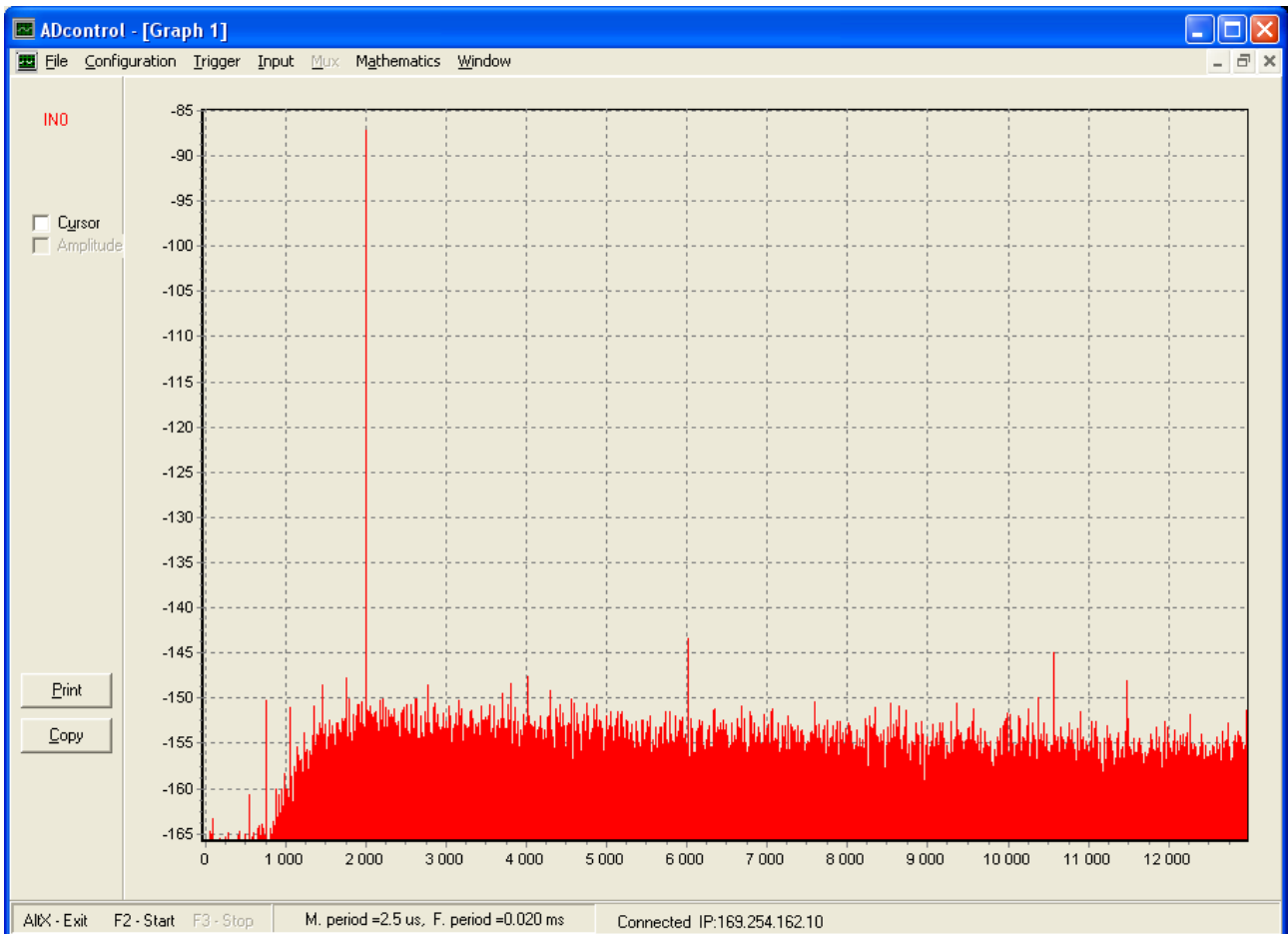Fig. 4. Noise and distortion of the amplifier

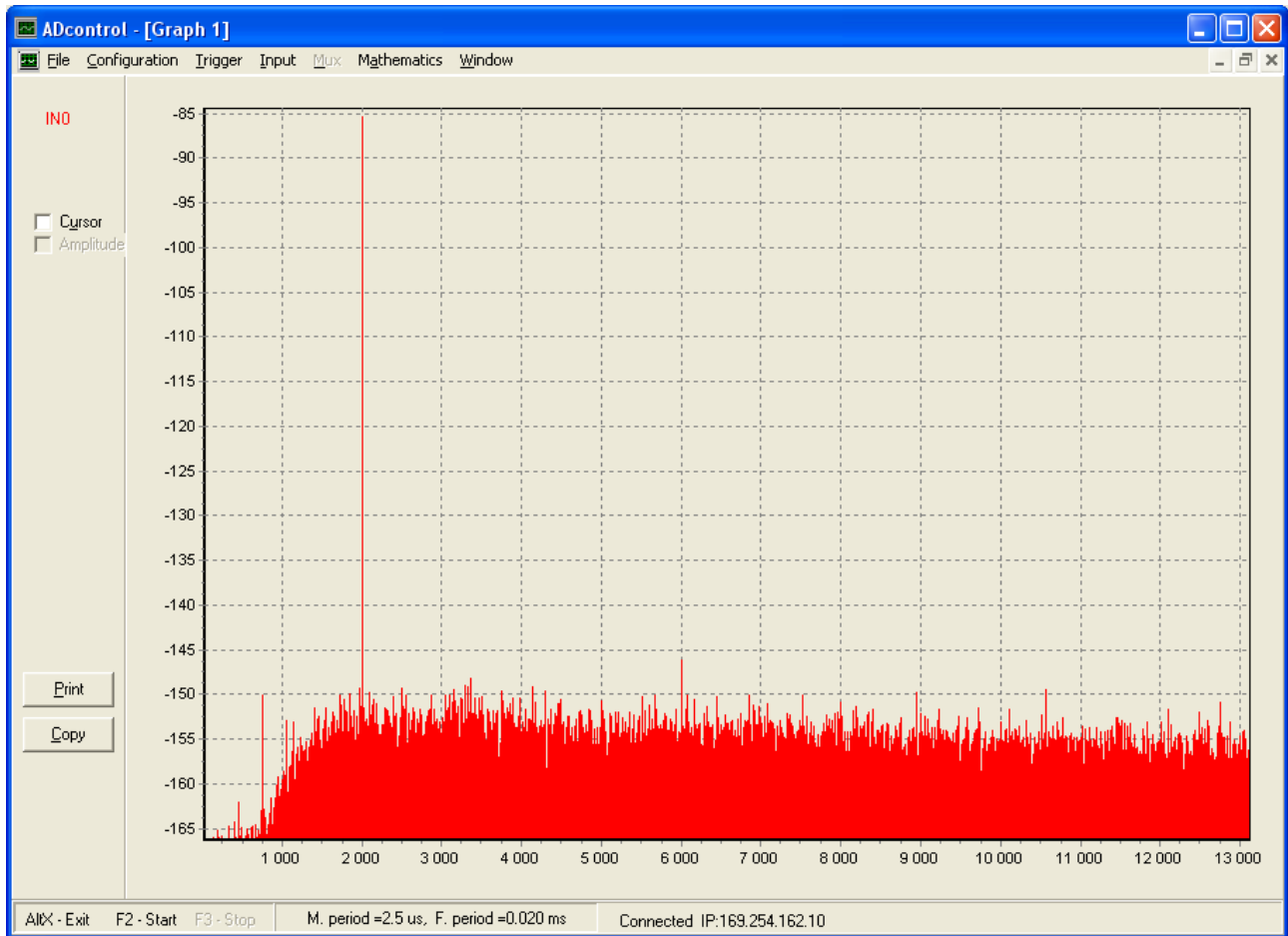Fig. 5. Distortion with NPO capacitors

Fig. 6. Distortion with polystyrene foil capacitor

When lower performance is acceptable, significantly simplified version of an oscillator can be used. The oscillator in **Figure 7** is a standard noniverting Wien bridge with gain +2 around IC_1 and integrator IC_2, active rectifier is replaced by dual diode D_5, the second half act as a temperature compensation. This simplified version has THD -120 dB and higher noise than the first circuit due to higher noise gain of the circuit and no bandpass filtering but it still outperforms many at least 100x more expensive types of equipment.
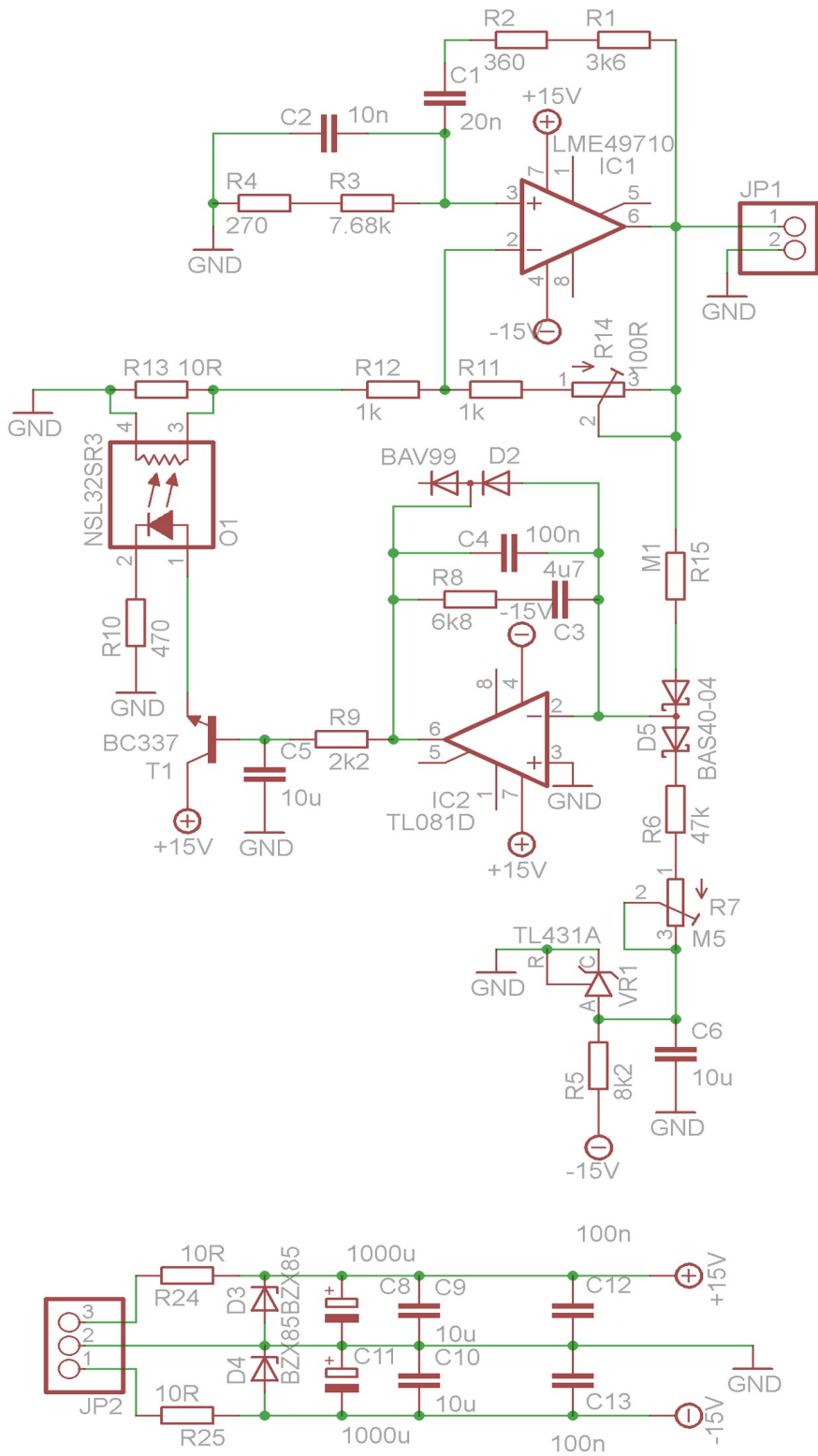
R2
360
R1
3k6
C1
20n
C2 10n
+15V
LME49710
IC1
R4
270
R3
7.68k
GND
7
1
3
5
2
6
4
8
-15V
R14
100R
JP1
1
2
GND
R13 10R
R12
1k
R11
1k
1
3
2
GND
NSL32SR3
4
3
O1
BAV99
D2
C4 100n
R8
6k8
4u7
-15V
C3
M1
R15
R10
470
2
1
GND
R9
2k2
8
4
2
6
5
3
D5
BAS40-04
BC337
T1
C5
10u
IC2
TL081D
1
7
GND
+15V
GND
+15V
R6
47k
TL431A
R
A
C
VR1
2
1
3
R7
M5
GND
R5
8k2
C6
10u
GND
-15V

10R
R24
D3
BZX85
BZX85
1000u
C8
C9
100n
C12
+15V
JP2
3
2
1
10R
R25
D4
BZX85
C11
10u
C10
10u
C13
1000u
100n
GND
-15V

Fig. 7. A simple Wien oscillator

Actualization 9/2020, 2/2021

A few tens of the described oscillator with various frequencies were built during the last years, here are some experiences.

1. Although a carefully designed double-sided PCB was used, a performance of the prototype was rarely achieved, nevertheless higher harmonics was below 140 dB in most cases.

2. LME49710 became obsolete now and a new champion between ultra-low distortion amplifiers OPA1656 came, so the PCB was redesigned to fit OPA1656. The data-sheet of OPA1656 [7] specifies that higher harmonics are lower than 160 dB for frequencies below 2 kHz. Unfortunately, there is no description of how that distortion was measured. Direct measurement (Fig.12 of the data-sheet) requires a generator with distortion well below 160 dB and also an ADC with such THD, it is several orders bellow any available equipment as far as I know. I have also doubts about the credibility of another common approach – using higher noise gain of the tested amplifier and THD measurement with a common THD meter. I think this approach works well at higher frequencies, but it is questionable at lower frequencies where a low open-loop gain of the tested OA isn't an issue and other sources of distortion especially in the input stage can play their role.

A new version of the oscillator with OPA1656 was built and tested at frequency 1 kHz. The output amplitude was 10 Vpp = 3.53 VRMS = 11 dBV. The measured results are in fig. 8. The second harmonic is nearly invisible in noise – about -152 dBV = 154 dB bellow fundamental, the 3. harmonic is -154 dBV = 160 dB bellow fundamental. Several pieces were build and measurements show similar results with higher harmonics usually bellow 150 dB.

Several versions with different frequencies were built and tested, measured results are shown in Tab.1.

Oscillator freq [kHz]	2.harm [dB]	3.harm[dB]
3	-148	-151
5	-148	-154
10	-134	-146

Tab.1.

The table shows that up 5 kHz higher harmonics are close to -150 dB, the 10 kHz version is significantly worse. The reason is probably increased distortion of the OPA1656 at higher frequencies.

For frequencies up 5 kHz capacitors are probably the main limiting component, but their distortion is unspecified, so some measurement of it is a good idea. A very good description of distortion measurement is shown in [8], the conclusion of this measurement shows, that NPO caps with the

highest possible voltage range gives the best results. It is in agreement with my experience.

Conclusion

Measured results with OPA1656 shows that a low distortion amplifier itself is only a part of the problem, used capacitors are another key component. Distortion of the whole oscillator bellow 140 dB can be reached with high probability, distortion bellow 150 dB is challenging even with the best OAs and capacitors and verification of achieved results is always necessary.

The described oscillator together with a notch for easy performance verification is available at www.janascard.cz at various forms – from unpopulated PCB boards for DIY, populated and tested PCB boards to the complete equipment – fig. 9.
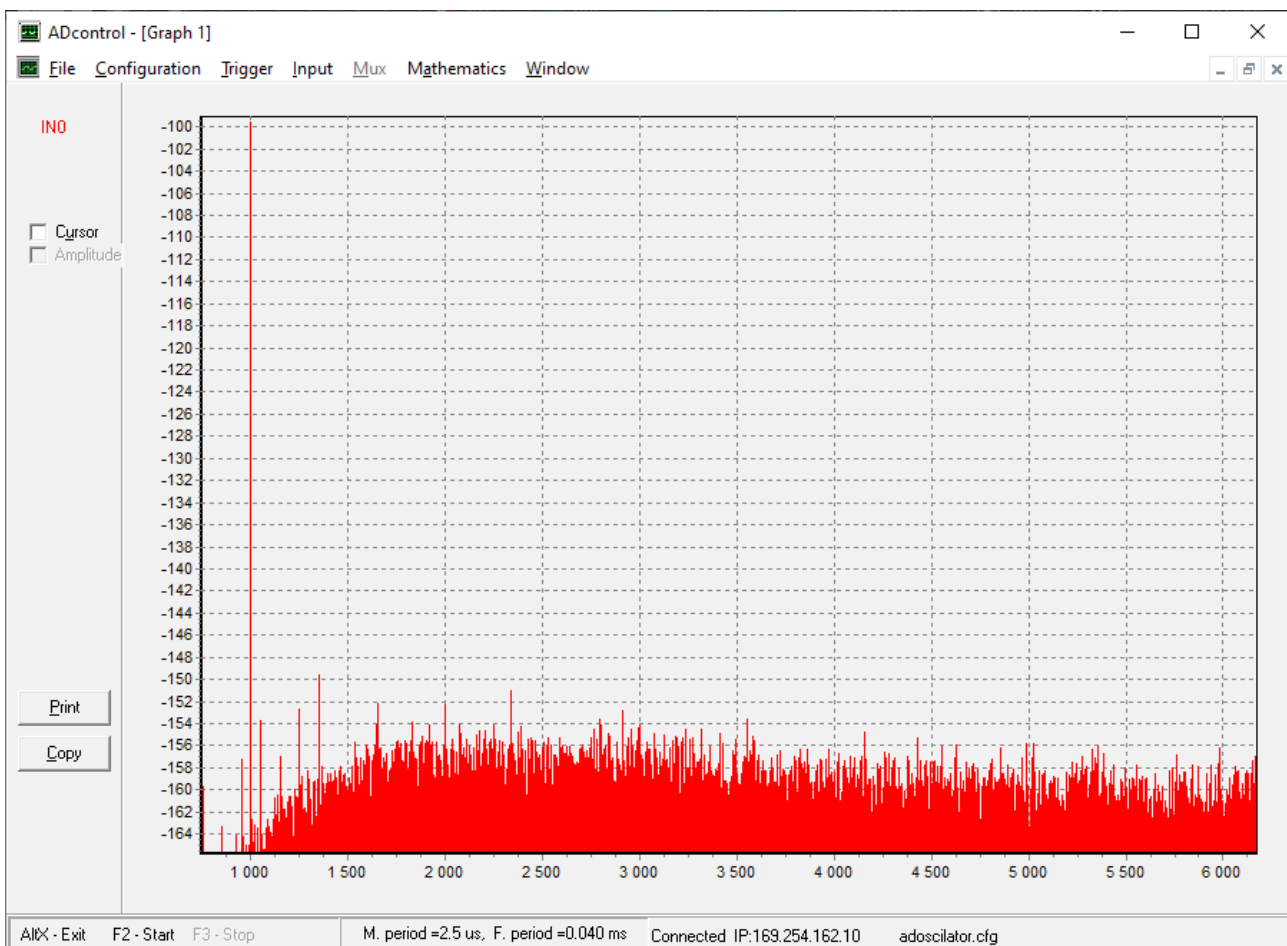

Fig. 8. An oscillator with NPO and OPA1656 at 1 kHz

Fig. 9. A complete oscillator

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