Missing Link in Speaker Operation

Parts 1 & 2

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PART 1

THE AMPLIFIER DAMPING FACTOR AND ITS APPLICATION TO SPEAKER PERFORMANCE

IN AUDIO REPRODUCTION, a subject of considerable importance to the high-fidelity enthusiast is amplifier damping factor and its effects on speaker operation. Misconceptions have arisen concerning this subject, and vague and incomplete answers have too often been given to the many questions involved.

Are the high damping factors found in present high-fidelity amplifiers by-products of high-feedback circuits and, as such, unimportant in the operation of the system? Or is the ultimate, as some loudly proclaim, to have the highest possible damping factor built into the amplifier? Why does a particular speaker sound better with amplifier A than with amplifier B, although both show identical frequency response and power capabilities under bench checks? Why does that $2.00 speaker with the 6-ounce magnet (inefficiency and distortion included) seem in some cases to have more bass than the high-fidelity unit with the 5-pound magnet? Why is it that one enthusiast found reproduction more pleasing when he used a little current feedback from the output circuit yet another didn't when using the same circuitry?

Some simple laboratory experiments and straightforward analysis can answer these questions and clear the air.

SPEAKER MECHANICS

The speaker can be considered, for the moment, a purely mechanical device. As such, the cone with its inherent mass and the cone suspension with its compliance or stiffness make up a resonant system. Some mechanical damping is present but such a slight amount that the system can be considered highly underdamped —if the cone is displaced and then released, it oscillates about its normal resting position for several cycles at its natural resonant frequency. This oscillation decreases in amplitude and finally reaches a state of rest due to the small amount of damping.

If this underdamped speaker is driven by a voltage source having a very high internal impedance so as to maintain the underdamped condition, the cone will vibrate at a greater amplitude at frequencies close to its natural resonance. (This action is similar to pushing a swing or pendulum "in time" with its natural period so as to obtain large amplitudes.) The frequency-response curve of the speaker under these conditions will show a peaked output near cone resonance, usually between 30 and 80Hz. Operation in this manner produces high transient distortion and is undesirable in high-fidelity systems. This can be shown by pressing and then releasing the cone. The oscillation which results is all distortion, since the cone does not follow the applied square waveform of depressing and releasing it.

THE SPEAKER AS A TRANSDUCER

To reduce the transient distortion as well as the peaked bass response, it is necessary only to damp the cone. If the speaker were purely a mechanical device this would be difficult. But since it is an electromechanical transducer, damping is obtained easily. In analyzing the electrical portion of the speaker we find a coil of wire wound around a form and attached to the cone. The coil is placed in a magnetic field and in this way constitutes a simple motor or generator.

If a voltage is applied to the coil, it moves in the magnetic field which in turn moves the cone. If the cone is mechanically moved, the motion of the coil in the magnetic field generates a voltage in the coil. From this it can be seen that cone damping can be obtained by using the magnetic braking action present when the coil terminals are externally closed through a resistance. The motion of the cone in trying to oscillate generates a voltage in the coil. This voltage produces a current flow through the coil and external resistance. The current flow tries to move the cone by motor action, but opposite in direction to the motion producing the current. Therefore the cone is damped in its free motion.

For a given speaker, the amount of damping can be varied by changing the value of the external resistance and consequently the value of the braking current. There is one value of damping at which the cone returns to rest in the quickest possible time without going past the rest position. This condition is called the critically damped state. Transient distortion is greatly reduced and the low-frequency response is more nearly uniform.

Excessive damping returns the cone slowly to its rest position. If the speaker is driven by a voltage source with very low internal resistance, the low-fre-