Exploring the mechanism of active noice cancelation

Mathematical Exploration

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# Introduction

I have always found music inspiring, and I always carried around a Walkman with me where ever I go when I was young. I grew up in a crowded city, and loud noises in public, such as the subway station and the sidewalk, have always bothered me when I listen to music. This is why when my parents bought me my first active noise canceling (ANC) headphones when I was in middle school, I was convinced that it functioned on magic.

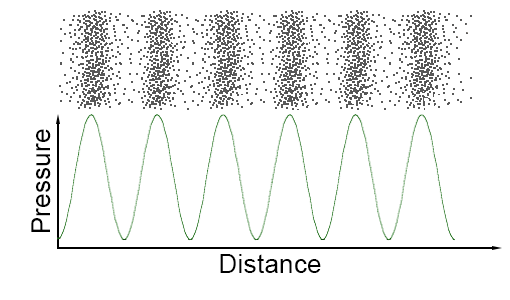
 I learned the principals which ANC function on last year in my SL physics course. Sound is a pressure wave of air with propagating numbers of air molecules as moving across the sound wave. There are points of compression created where there are more air molecules present with higher pressure, and points of rarefaction where there are fewer air molecules present with lower pressure.

Figure 1. Each dot on the top represent a air molecule, allowing the first graph to represent what a soundwave look like in real life. The second graph shows the air pressure at different points in the sound wave.

Figure one includes a graph that represents the shown sound wave in the form of a sine function. While most sound waves cannot be represented by a single sine function, this shows soundwave’s function like characteristic as each point in space only have one air pressure.

The graph in figure one denoted soundwaves by graphing distance against air pressure to better math with the visual representation of soundwave above, but this is not how soundwaves are usually recorded. Microphone record sound through the use of a diaphragm, which vibrates along the air molecule in the air as sound pass by. The microphone records the change in the physical location of the diaphragm, which is caused by the different air pressure on the soundwave passing by, allowing the computer to note down the change in air pressure over the change in time.

When two different soundwaves overlap, they interfere with each other. By viewing soundwave as a function of the change of air pressure over the change in time, it is intuitive that the result of two functions overlapping can be found by adding the two functions together. The graph shows the result of the interference, h(x), of the two functions f(x) and g(x). In the green boxes, because of that both soundwaves have the same sign, they interfere constructively, causing the amplitude of the resulting wave h(x) to be greater than either f(x) or g(x) in those regions. In boxes highlighted by red, the soundwaves interfere destructively, as their difference signs causes the two sound waves to cancel each other out. Consequentially, the resulting wave h(x) has a smaller amplitude than either f(x) or g(x) in these regions.

ANC headphones uses the interference of soundwaves to block out the noises from the outside environment. The headphone’s tight seal on the ears act as a physical barrier of sound, but there will still be some noise getting in to the headphone. The headphone then uses multiple different microphones to record the noise that was not blocked out by the headphone, and flips the signal to completely cancel it.

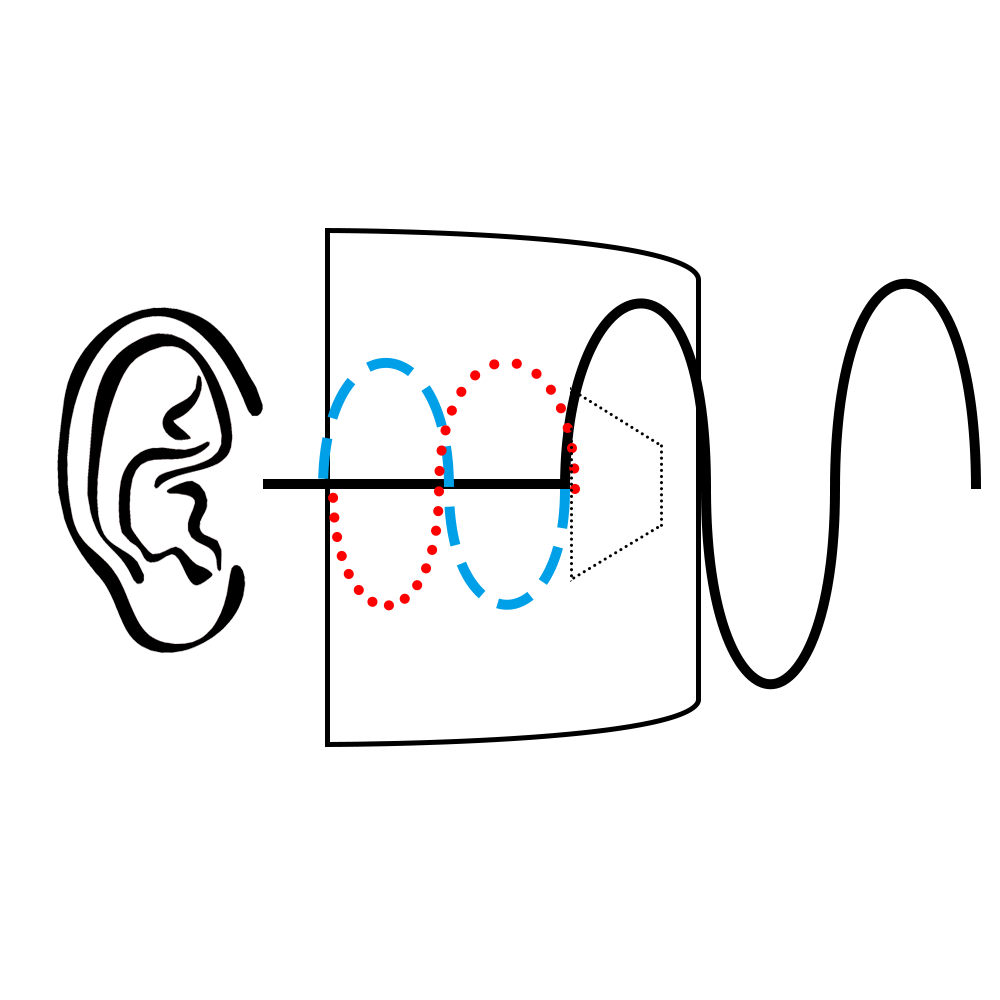


Figure 2 The black line represents the noise from outside. The blue line is the noise heard by the ears without ANC on, and the red line is the sound coming out from the speakers.

However, different frequencies of sound are blocked out by different amounts by the earphones themselves. Since there will always be a barrier between the microphone and the speakers, such as circuit boards even when the speaker is placed inside the earphones, the earphone needs to adjust the amplitude of different frequencies of sound.

# The Fourier Series

In order to be able to manipulate the amplitude of different frequencies of sound, the headphone must separate the different frequencies of sounds first. Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier, a French mathematician and physicist, have tackled this problem. His Fourier theorem states that any periodical function can be composed of a Fourier Series.

A Fourier Series is a summation function of an infinite amount of sine and cosine functions of different frequencies. Since the Fourier theorem is commonly regarded as an intuitive assumption in math, and its proof goes beyond the scope of this essay, I will be providing an example to show the theorem’s affect instead of going through a tedious proving process.