

Classical Guitar Intonation and Compensation

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Abstract

TBD.

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1 Introduction and Background

Discuss initial [1] and ongoing work by G. Byers [2], and recent studies of steel-string guitars [3].

2 Simple Model of Guitar Intonation

Fundamental frequency of a string [4, 5]:

$$f_0 = \frac{1}{2L_0} \sqrt{\frac{T_0}{\mu_0}}, \quad (1)$$

where L_0 is the length of the free (unfretted) string from the saddle to the nut, T_0 is the tension in the free string, and $\mu_0 \equiv M/L_0$ is the linear mass density of a free string of mass M .

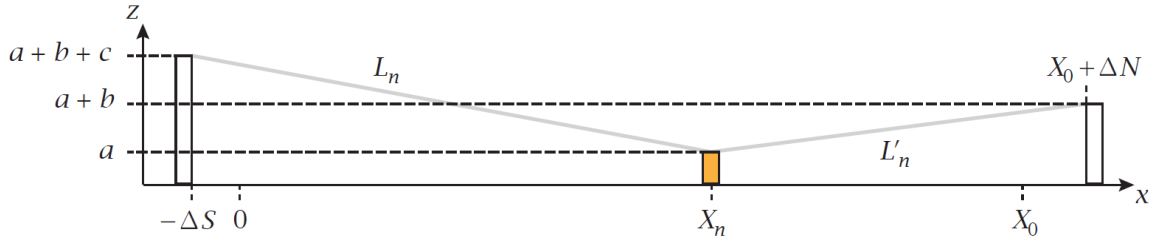


Figure 1: A simple (side-view) schematic of the classical guitar used in this model. The scale length of the guitar is X_0 , but we allow the edges of both the saddle and the nut to be set back an additional distance ΔS and ΔN , respectively. The location on the x -axis of the center of the n^{th} fret is X_n . In the y direction, $y = 0$ is taken as the surface of the fingerboard; therefore the height of each fret above the fingerboard is a , the height of the nut is $a + b$, and the height of the saddle is $a + b + c$. L_n is the *resonant length* of the string from the saddle to the center of fret n , and L'_n is the length of the string from the fret to the nut.

$$f_0 = \frac{1}{2L_0} \sqrt{\frac{T_0}{\mu_0}} \left[1 + B_0 + \left(1 + \frac{\pi^2}{8} \right) B_0^2 \right], \quad (2)$$

where B_0 is a “string stiffness parameter.” For a uniform string with a cylindrical cross section, B_0 given by [6]

$$B_0 \equiv \sqrt{\frac{\pi R^4 E}{T_0 L_0^2}}, \quad (3)$$

where R is the radius of the string and E is Young’s modulus (or the modulus of elasticity). For a typical nylon guitar string with $E \approx 2 - 4$ GPa, $T_0 \approx 50 - 70$ N, $R \approx 0.35 - 0.51$ mm, and $L_0 \approx 650$ mm, we have $B_0 \approx 0.007 - 0.026$, indicating that the corrections in Eq. (2) are not significant.

Throughout this work, we will use *cents* to describe small differences in pitch [7]. One cent is one one-hundredth of a 12-TET half step, so that there are 1200 cents per octave. The difference in pitch between frequencies f_1 and f_2 is therefore defined as

$$\Delta v \equiv 1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{f_2}{f_1} \right). \quad (4)$$

We define $f \equiv (f_1 + f_2)/2$ and $\Delta f \equiv f_2 - f_1$. Then

$$\Delta v = 1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{f + \Delta f/2}{f - \Delta f/2} \right) \approx \frac{1200}{\ln 2} \frac{\Delta f}{f}, \quad (5)$$

where the last approximation applies when $\Delta f \ll f$. An experienced guitar player can distinguish beat notes with a difference frequency of $\Delta f \approx 1$ Hz, which corresponds to 8 cents at A_2 ($f = 220$ Hz) or 5 cents at E_4 ($f = 329.63$ Hz).

Our model begins with the schematic of the guitar shown in Fig. 1. The scale length of the guitar is X_0 , but we allow the edges of both the saddle and the nut to be set back an additional distance ΔS and ΔN , respectively. The location on the x -axis of the center of the n^{th} fret is X_n . In the y direction, $y = 0$ is taken as the surface of the fingerboard; the height of each fret is a , the height of the nut is $a + b$, and the height of the saddle is $a + b + c$. L_n is the *resonant length* of the string from the saddle to the center of fret n , and L'_n is the length of the string

from the fret to the nut. The total length of the string is defined as $\mathcal{L}_n \equiv L_n + L'_n$. For reasons discussed below, we have not adopted a more complicated fretting model [2, 3]. We start with the simple form of the fundamental frequency of a string given by Eq. (1), and apply it to the frequency of a string pressed just behind the n^{th} fret:

$$f_n = \frac{1}{2L_n} \sqrt{\frac{T_n}{\mu_n}}, \quad (6)$$

where T_n and μ_n are respectively the tension and linear mass density of the fretted string. We note that T_n and μ_n depend on \mathcal{L}_n , the *total* length of the fretted string from the saddle to the nut. Ideally, in the 12-TET equal-temperament system [7],

$$f_n = \gamma_n f_0, \quad (12\text{-TET ideal}) \quad (7)$$

where

$$\gamma_n \equiv 2^{n/12}. \quad (8)$$

Therefore, the error interval expressed in cents is given by

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta v_n &= 1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{f_n}{\gamma_n f_0} \right) \\ &= 1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{L_0}{\gamma_n L_n} \sqrt{\frac{\mu_0}{\mu_n} \frac{T_n}{T_0}} \right) \\ &= 1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{L_0}{\gamma_n L_n} \right) + 600 \log_2 \left(\frac{\mu_0}{\mu_n} \right) + 600 \log_2 \left(\frac{T_n}{T_0} \right). \end{aligned} \quad (9)$$

The final form of Eq. (9) makes it clear that — for nylon guitar strings — there are three contributions to intonation:

1. *Resonant Length*: The first term represents the error caused by the increase in the length of the fretted string L_n compared to the ideal length X_n , which would be obtained if $b = c = 0$ and $\Delta S = \Delta N = 0$.
2. *Linear Mass Density*: The second term is the error caused by the reduction of the linear mass density of the fretted string. This effect will depend on the *total* length of the string, given by $\mathcal{L}_n = L_n + L'_n$.
3. *Tension*: The third (and most complex) term is the error caused by the *increase* of the tension in the string caused by the stress and strain applied to the string by fretting. This effect will also depend on the total length of the string \mathcal{L}_n .

We will discuss each of these three sources of error in turn below.

2.1 Resonant Length Error

We can estimate the first term in the last line of Eq. (9) by referring to Fig. 1 and computing the resonant length L_n . We find:

$$L_n = \begin{cases} \sqrt{(X_0 + \Delta S + \Delta N)^2 + c^2}, & n = 0 \\ \sqrt{(X_n + \Delta S)^2 + (b + c)^2}. & n \geq 1 \end{cases} \quad (10)$$

When $b + c \ll X_0$ and the guitar has been manufactured such that $X_n = X_0/\gamma_n$, we can approximate L_n by

$$L_n \approx \begin{cases} X_0 + \Delta S + \Delta N + c^2/2 X_0, & n = 0 \\ \gamma_n^{-1} \{X_0 + \gamma_n \Delta S + [\gamma_n(b + c)]^2 / 2 X_0\} . & n \geq 1 \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

Suppose that $X_0 = 650$ mm, $b + c = 5$ mm, and $n = 12$ (i.e., $\gamma_{12} = 2$). Then $[\gamma_n(b + c)]^2 / 2 X_0 < 0.1$ mm, and it's clear that we can neglect the terms here that depend on b and/or c . Then the resonant length error is approximately

$$1200 \log_2 \left(\frac{L_0}{\gamma_n L_n} \right) \approx -\frac{1200}{\ln(2) X_0} [(\gamma_n - 1) \Delta S - \Delta N] \quad (12)$$

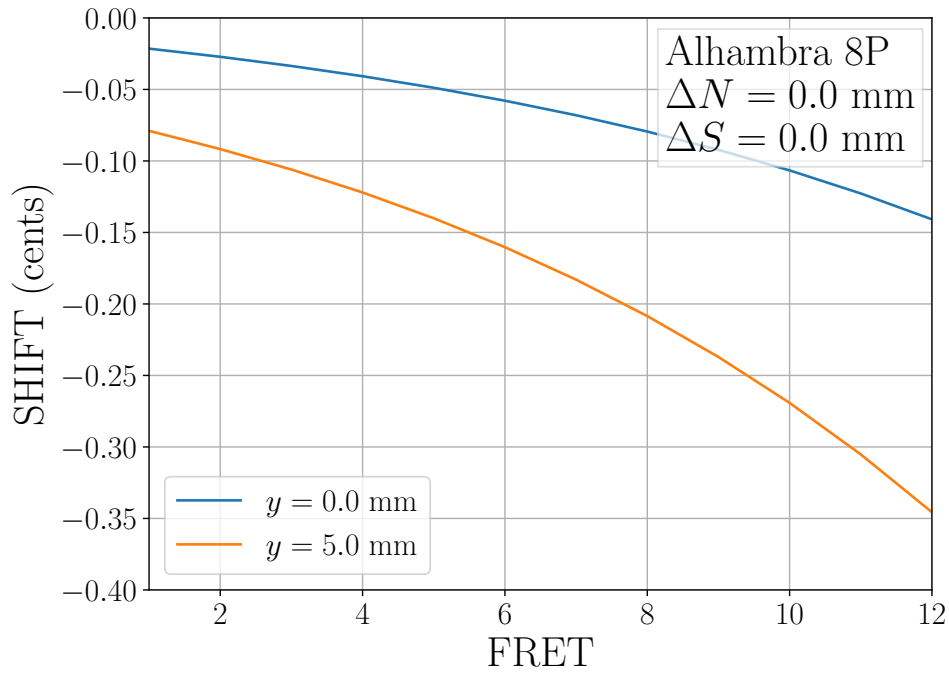
If the guitar is uncompensated, so that $\Delta S = \Delta N = 0$, this error is negligible. In fact, for most classical guitars and strings, it is much less than 1 cent because the impact of b and c on L_n is quadratic and therefore very small. But, with $\Delta S > 0$ and $\Delta N < 0$, we can *increase* the magnitude of this “error” and cause the frequency to shift lower. We’ll see that this is our primary method of compensation.

Previous studies of guitar intonation and compensation have chosen to include the apparent increase in length of the string caused by both the depth of the fretting action (**Matt: Is this the right term?**) and the shape of the fretted string under the finger [2, 3]. As the string is initially pressed to the fret, the total length \mathcal{L}_n increases and causes the tension in the string — which is clamped at the saddle and the nut — to increase. As the string is pressed further, does the additional deformation of the string increase its tension (throughout the resonant length L_n)? There are at least two purely empirical reasons to doubt this hypothesis. First, we can mark a string (with a fine-point felt pen) above a particular fret and then observe the mark with a magnifying glass. As the string is pressed all the way to the finger board, the mark does not move perceptibly — it has become effectively *clamped* on the fret. Second, we can use either our ears or a simple tool to measure frequencies [8] to listen for a shift as we use different fingers and vary the fretted depth of a string. The apparent modulation is far less than would be obtained by classical vibrato, so we assume that once the string is minimally fretted the length(s) can be regarded as fixed. (If this were not the case, then fretting by different people or with different fingers, at a single fret or using a barre, would cause additional, varying frequency shifts that would be audible and difficult to compensate.)

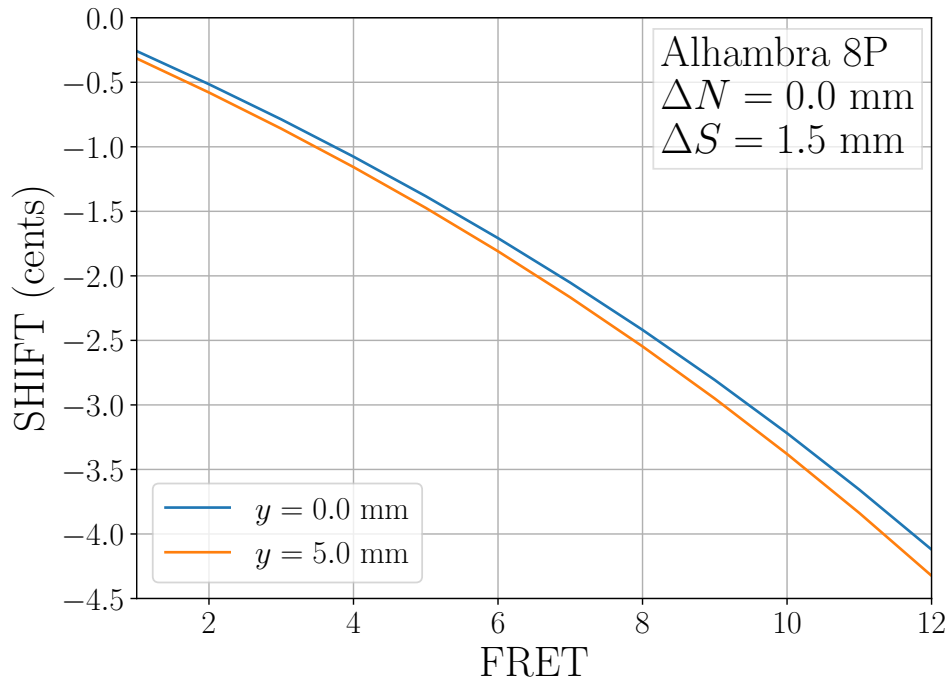
3 Experimental Estimate of the String Constant

4 Classical Guitar Compensation

5 Conclusion

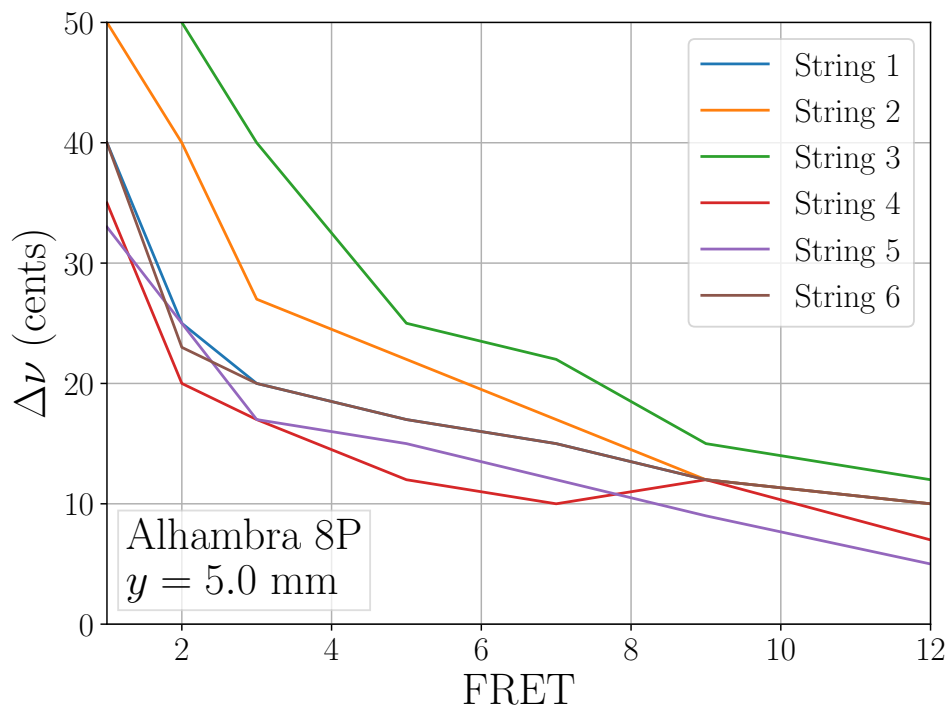


(a) Frequency shift for an uncompensated guitar



(b) Frequency shift for a factory guitar

Figure 2: Frequency shift (in cents) due to the fretted length L_n for an uncompensated (a) and factory (b) Alhambra 8P guitar, for both zero and nonzero lateral displacement y .



(a) Experimental data

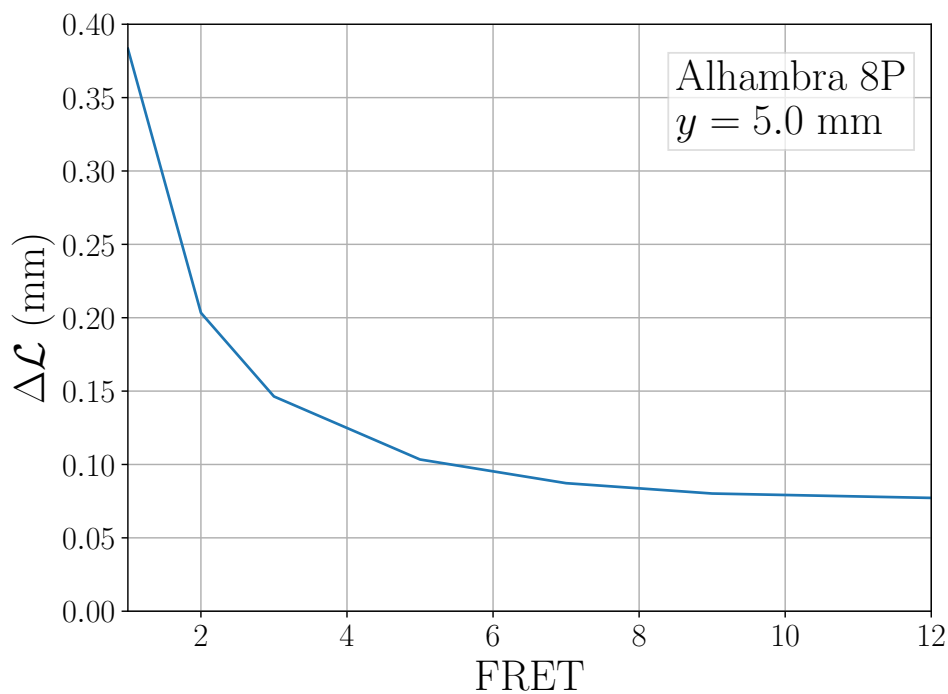
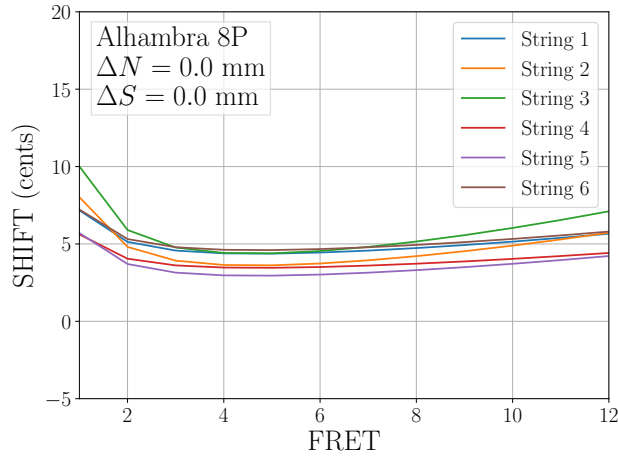
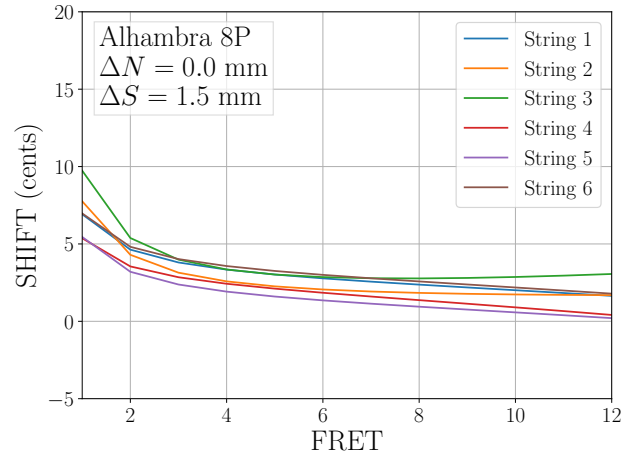
(b) Calculated change in total string length \mathcal{L}

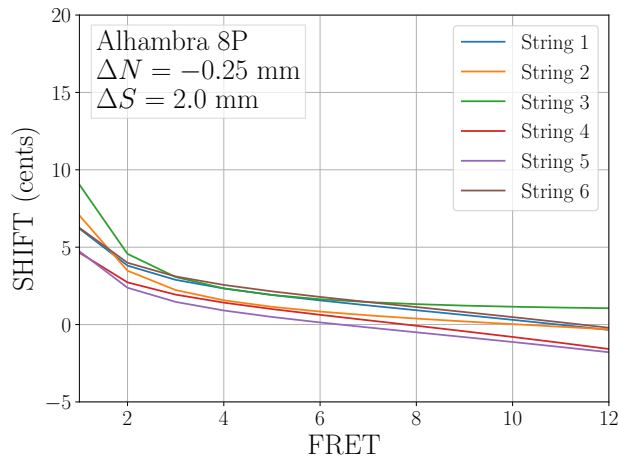
Figure 3: Frequency shift (in cents) (a) and change in total string length \mathcal{L} (b) due to lateral displacement y .



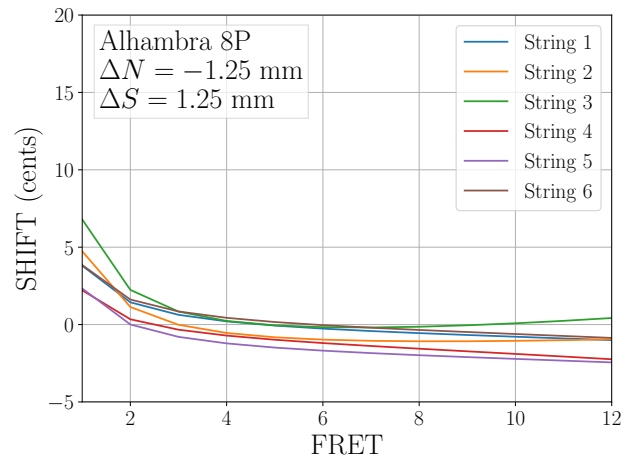
(a) Uncompensated



(b) Factory guitar



(c) Saddle and nut



(d) Preserved scale length

Figure 4: Frequency shift (in cents) for four different strategies of saddle and nut compensation.

References

- [1] G. Byers, Guitars of Gregory Byers: Intonation (2020). See <http://byersguitars.com/intonation> and <http://www.byersguitars.com/Research/Research.html>.
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- [7] D. S. Durfee and J. S. Colton, “The physics of musical scales: Theory and experiment,” *Amer. J. Phys.* **835–842**, 368 (2015).
- [8] J. Larsson, ProGuitar Tuner (2020). See <https://www.proguitar.com/guitar-tuner>.