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Harding, J., Graham, R., & Park, E. (2018). CTRL: A Flexible, Precision Interface for Analog Synthesis. *NIME 2018: Proceedings of the international conference on new interfaces for musical expression*, 1, 234-237. Article 0051. http://www.nime.org/proceedings/2018/nime2018_paper0051.pdf

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:

NIME 2018: Proceedings of the international conference on new interfaces for musical expression

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 03/06/2018

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CTRL: A Flexible, Precision Interface for Analog Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a new interface for the production and distribution of high resolution analog control signals, particularly aimed toward the control of analog modular synthesizers. Control Voltage/Gate interfaces generate Control Voltage (CV) and Gate Voltage (Gate) as a means of controlling note pitch and length respectively, and have been with us since 1986 [3]. The authors provide a unique custom CV/Gate interface and dedicated communication protocol which leverages standard USB Serial functionality and enables connectivity over a plethora of computing systems, including embedded devices such as the Raspberry Pi and ARM based devices including widely available Android TV Boxes.

We provide a general overview of the unique hardware and communication protocol developments followed by use case examples toward tuning and embedded platforms, leveraging softwares ranging from Pure Data (Pd), Max, and Max for Live (M4L).

Author Keywords

CTRL, CV, Control, Voltage, Analog, Synthesis, Communication, Protocol, Interface, Max, Pd, Embedded, Max for Live

CCS Concepts

- Applied computing → Sound and music computing;
- Hardware → Sound-based input / output;

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a resurgence in popularity of analog synthesis technologies, with NAMM 2017 figures describing the analog synthesis market as vibrant [1] showing the biggest increase in the music market currently at nine percent growth, while manufacturers such as ARP, Korg and Roland re-enter the boutique analog synthesis market following their departure in the late 1980s to early 1990s.

Digital to Control Voltage (CV) interfaces have existed since the mid-eighties and, in many cases, MIDI continues to be employed as the driving communication protocol for those interfaces. It is our contention that with a pitch range of 128 values the standard MIDI protocol fails to provide

sufficient resolution to explore the full potential of analog synthesis devices.

Recent years have seen some notable exceptions, in terms of higher resolution CV control interfaces, from manufacturers such as Expert sleepers¹ and Snyderphonics² amongst others. Many of these examples, however, require additional external hardware in order to function; for example an ADAT/Light-pipe³ or SPDIF⁴ enabled audio interface. This factor clearly increases complexity and cost for the user whilst practically eliminating the possibility of using an embedded system for control due to lack of available hardware drivers for the required supporting devices. The more recent 14 bit MIDI Standard has the potential to solve the combined resolution and connectivity issues to some degree. However, this particular variation of the MIDI protocol has yet to be widely adopted.

Recent community interest toward embedded designs is clearly evident [13, 6, 8, 5]. It is also our contention that a driver based approach to connectivity results in limitations in application across platforms (Win, PC, Linux, etc.) and makes combining analog synthesizers with embedded systems more difficult. Clearly, a driver based approach provides a certain level of reliability.

We present an alternate approach to communication and control voltage generation and mapping. As the range of available control values increases, the complexity of managing these values in a practical application becomes increasingly more challenging for the user. In response, we present various examples (appendices) of the increased capabilities afforded by CTRL within existing frameworks such as Max, Pd and Max for Live, in order to simplify execution.

The following section presents a general overview of CTRL, its hardware architecture and custom communication protocol and is followed by brief working usage example cases.

2. ARCHITECTURE

The design goals for CTRL are to provide a high resolution control voltage interface⁵ that fits within the popular eurorack standard [2] and which features approaches to user accessible calibration in order to both increase logarithmic conformity and to provide extensive possibilities for user configurable intonation/scaling. The driver-less approach outlined in section 2.3 is a key consideration for us in ap-

¹<http://www.expert-sleepers.co.uk>

²<https://snyderphonics.com>

³<http://www.expert-sleepers.co.uk/es3.html>

⁴<http://www.expert-sleepers.co.uk/es4.html>

⁵16 bit within a 0VDC to 5VDC range allows 1092 values per semitone @ 1V/Oct. Calculated by $(2^{16}/5)/12$.



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NIME'18, June 3-6, 2018, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA.

proaching to the long term goal of cross-platform (Linux, OSX, Win), cross-application (Pd, Max, M4L) cross-hardware (Pi, ARM) access to control voltage interfaces. We contend that this approach will enable developments towards embedded analog/digital instrument design, as demonstrated in section 3.3, while offering the potential to leverage a plethora of embedded devices in future.

2.1 Design and Specification

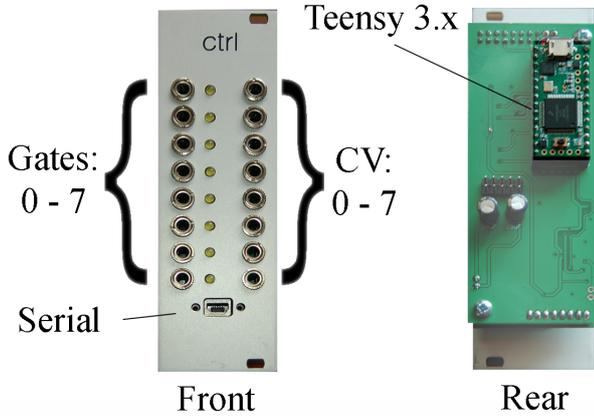


Figure 1: The CTRL unit in standard eurorack format

The CTRL hardware, depicted in Figure 1 and authored by John Harding in 2018, is specified as follows:

- 8 x Control Voltage (CV) outputs: 0VDC through to 5VDC
- 8 x Gate outputs: 0VDC or 5VDC with individual LEDs providing status indication
- Powered by Teensy 3.1/3.2 Arm Cortex M4 based Microcontroller.
- CV is produced by a Octal Precision DC stable 16 bit Digital to Analog Converter (DAC)

The DAC chosen, model DAC8568 from Texas Instruments, is DC stable and highly accurate, featuring a 5ppm/°C max drift. Individual step voltage of 0.0000763 VDC.

2.2 Communication Protocol

CTRL features a custom communication protocol which leverages standard USB Serial communication functionality and its structure is outlined as follows.

```
{Status}{DAC0}{DAC1}{DAC2}{DAC3}
{DAC4}{DAC5}{DAC6}{DAC7}{Gates}
```

Figure 2: A functional overview of the custom communication protocol which drives CTRL

The protocol authored by John Harding and Edwin Park in 2018, and as outlined diagrammatically in Figure 2, begins with a Status byte for the purpose of message ordering analysis which is immediately followed by a stream of seventeen bytes which collectively represent the states of all eight DAC and Gate outputs. Since output values of the

individual DAC channels are sixteen bits wide, and serial communication is limited to transmitting single byte size packets, we separate each sixteen bit value into High and Low byte pairs. These byte values can then be transmitted serially and reassembled computationally by the micro-controller upon receipt with an inverse process. The values which define the state of Gate outputs zero through seven are represented by a single zero or one, eight of which are manipulated to fit within a single byte by leveraging bit shift operations on the performance system, and further decoded by the micro-controller upon receipt with an inverse process.

2.3 Latency Performance

Recent studies have discussed the importance of low and consistent latency in musical systems and the accepted thresholds [11]. In a real world system we obviously aim to achieve the lowest latency figure possible, with Mc Pherson et. al. quoting Wessel and Wright's 10ms standard as the considered upper threshold [11]. Since CTRL produces and transmits no audio directly its latency figures can be kept exceptionally low.

In order to estimate the latency of CTRL, a modified version of the micro-controller firmware is employed and described as follows. The micro-controller decoding firmware is modified to toggle a previously unused digital pin; high at the beginning of the serial read, and low again at the end of the complete DAC/Gate write cycle. In this manner the instruction cycle latency can be estimated in real world conditions by means of time based oscilloscope measurements of the periodicity between successive toggle events. The instruction time period, measured using a digital storage oscilloscope⁶ has tested to be consistently within 50uS to 320uS range, extending toward 1mS max. in some cases.

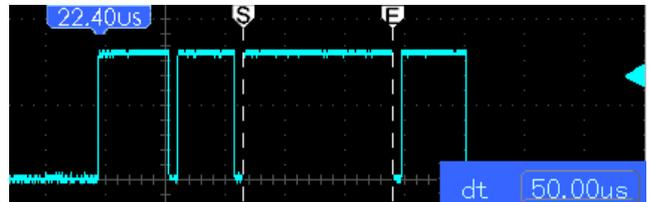


Figure 3: Modified oscilloscope capture of the firmware loop cycle latency

These figures align well with those predicted, with comparison to the benchmarking tests on Teensy, performed by the manufacturer PJRC [15].

3. EXAMPLES OF USAGE

3.1 Tuning and Intonation Calibration

Analog oscillators, of the type commonly used in modular synthesis, most frequently feature a hardware exponential converter which functions to process the frequency related control voltage input signal(s) in order to achieve exponential conformity over frequency.

This conversion stage often comprises of a pair of matched bipolar junction transistors (BJT) in a mirrored arrangement as shown diagrammatically in Figure 3 and can be seen in schematics from Oberheim and Moog [4, 12].

⁶Model Hantek DSO5102P 100MHz, dual channel DSO.

serial capable devices including embedded computing. To date, we have successfully employed CTRL with two distinct embedded technologies; Raspberry Pi and an ARM based Android TV Box. Details toward video references of both embedded examples can be found in the appendices.

It is our position that the application towards these ARM based TV Boxes is of particular interest, given their generally attractive cost-to-specification ratio, wide availability and robustly enclosed nature. In this example, we leverage a low-cost and widely available example, model X96mini, which is re-purposed to run a Linux based operating system named Armbian and a distribution of Pd to drive CTRL, which is further driving an analog Eurorack synthesizer via CV and Gate outlets.

Developments in embedded technologies are currently expanding rapidly, we propose that significant scope exists for a variety of embedded, digitally controlled, analog musical systems to be developed in future, with CTRL featuring as the intermediary.

4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this work, we have demonstrated a small sample of the possibilities afforded by CTRL and will strive to continually provide additional software and demonstration based content to the relevant repositories listed in the appendices, in the hope of easing boundaries to access. We also intend to make the hardware element available in the very near future.

The current revision of CTRL produces unipolar voltages within the fixed range of 0VDC to 5VDC. Future developments may include increased voltage output range in order to enable access to extended frequency range. Additional bipolar voltage modes are considered, which would allow the user to explore bipolar modulation capabilities such as digitally generated low frequency oscillators for example. The dedicated communication protocol is slimline and reliant on existing serial communication functionality however it has proven, through extensive testing, to be significantly robust for use in performance environments. Future work may include the generation of custom externals for both Max and Pd, which we hope may allow for direct transmission of audio-rate signal data to CTRL through employment of the libusb library for C. This approach may enable higher speed communication whilst retaining the important driverless design paradigm. Similarly, we are working toward development of custom VST/AU plug-ins within JUCE 5.3 (<https://juce.com>) in order to replicate software examples for use within VST/AU compatible Digital Audio Workstations. Finally, the development of a standalone version of the CTRL unit hardware is planned in order to simplify connectivity toward aforementioned embedded designs and beyond.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to extend a grateful acknowledgement to Katja Vetter for allowing the port of Helmholtz~ to the Max/MSP environment. We would also like to extend gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Institute at Ulster University Magee for their support.

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APPENDIX

The video repository houses reference toward embedded technologies and CTRL, and can be found at: <https://vimeo.com/user78996547>

The bitbucket code repository for CTRL firmware and coding examples for Max, Pd and Max for Live can be found at: <https://bitbucket.org/Nonzerojohn/ctrl-examples/src>