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Why is the perceptual octave stretched? An account based on mismatched time constants within the auditory brainstem.

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Abstract

This paper suggests an explanation for listeners' greater tolerance to positive than negative mistuning of the higher tone within an octave pair. It hypothesizes a neural circuit tuned to cancel the lower tone, that also cancels the higher tone if that tone is in tune. Imperfect cancellation is the cue to mistuning of the octave. The circuit involves two neural pathways, one delayed with respect to the other, that feed a coincidence-sensitive neuron via excitatory and inhibitory synapses. A mismatch between the time constants of these two synapses results in an asymmetry in sensitivity to mismatch. Specifically, if the time constant of the *delayed* pathway is greater than that of the direct pathway, there is a greater tolerance to *positive* mistuning than to negative mistuning. The model is directly applicable to the harmonic octave (concurrent tones), but extending it to the melodic octave (successive tones) requires additional assumptions that are discussed. The paper reviews evidence from auditory psychophysics and physiology in favor – or against – this explanation.

1 Introduction

It sometimes happens that competing theories differ on subtle effects that allow us to decide between them. A famous example is the precession of the perihelion of Mercury, a tiny effect (43 arc-seconds per century) that provided support for General Relativity over Newtonian physics. The asymmetry of mistuning for the octave interval (Demany et al., 1991, 2021) might play a similar role in hearing.

The octave (frequency ratio 1:2) is one of a series of small integer ratios that appear naturally between partials of a harmonic complex sound (or between the subharmonics of any periodic tone, complex or pure). Tones with frequencies in this ratio display a perceptual affinity when they are played together (harmonic octave) or in succession (melodic octave). The octave plays a special role in music of many cultures and genres, and there is some evidence that melodic octave similarity (if not "equivalence") is innate (Demany and Armand, 1984). Listeners, particularly musicians, are sensitive to small mistunings from the exact octave. "Asymmetry" refers to the fact that this sensitivity is greater for a compressed octave (ratio smaller than 2) than a stretched octave (ratio larger than 2).

Explanations of octave affinity have been imagined for both spectral and temporal models of auditory processing. For example Terhardt (1974) proposed that listeners acquire harmonic templates from exposure to harmonic sounds, whereas Ohgushi (1983) remarked that intervals between auditory nerve spikes (action potentials) evoked by the lower tone are also found between spikes evoked by the octave. Both ideas can be developed into models to account for harmonic and melodic octave affinity (Demany et al., 2021).

To the extent that those explanations involve integer ratios, it seems odd that the octave might be perceptually stretched. Matching the pitches of two consecutive pure tones so that one is at the octave of the other (melodic octave) requires enough musical skill to at least understand instructions. A common outcome is

for the frequency of the upper tone (f_H) to be matched higher than twice the lower ($2f_L$) by a few percent (Ward, 1954). This is known as melodic "octave stretching" or "enlargement". Mistuning from an octave relationship between two *concurrent* pure tones (harmonic octave) can likewise be detected. Here, it is observed that tolerance for mistuning is greater for positive mistuning (Demany et al., 1991). It is natural to search for a common explanation for melodic and harmonic octave stretch or mistuning asymmetry, but experimental support has been elusive, some studies favoring distinct mechanisms (Bonnard et al., 2013, 2016), others a common mechanism (Demany et al., 2021).

The aim of this paper is to explore an explanation of mistuning asymmetry according to which the asymmetry arises from a mismatch in time constants of neural signal processing networks within the auditory brainstem. This explanation is applicable to the harmonic octave, but extending it to the melodic octave requires additional assumptions that are considered. The psychophysics of octave tuning are further reviewed in the Discussion, together with relevant evidence from auditory physiology.

2 Methods and Results

This section introduces the required concepts and tools, and describes the main result.

Stimuli. In contrast to the harmonics-rich sounds of many musical instruments, most studies employ pure tones, so as to avoid the confound of beats between partials. A pure tone can, however, be treated as a "degenerate" harmonic complex with only harmonic, with a fundamental frequency equal to the frequency f of the tone, and period $T = 1/f$.

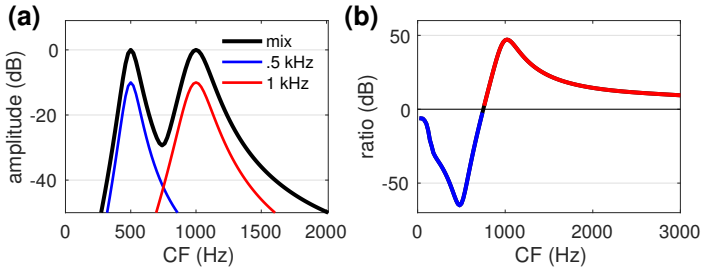

Figure 1: (a) Power as a function of filter center frequency (CF) for a pair of pure tones separated by an octave (black) and for each tone alone (blue and red, offset vertically for clarity). (b) Power of higher tone divided by power of lower tone (blue: lower dominates, red: upper dominates). These patterns were derived from a gammatone filterbank implementation (Slaney, 1993) with bandwidth parameters from Moore and Glasberg (1983).

Cochlear frequency analysis. As a first step of auditory processing, stimuli undergo filtering in the cochlea, modeled as a filter bank with bandwidths from Moore and Glasberg (1983). The bandwiths are roughly 1/3 octave (except in the low frequency region where filters are wider), so pure tones spaced one octave apart are well resolved, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Channels with characteristic frequencies (CFs) close to a tone's frequency are dominated by that tone by up to 50 dB or more, whereas some intermediate channels respond to both.

This gives us an idea of the information available for the auditory brain to detect the octave relationship between two pure tones. The profile of excitation across filter CF (panel a) shows a clear peak at the frequencies of both tones, which could thus be extracted from a tonotopic pattern. Multiple channels are dominated by one tone or the other (panel b), so information about those frequencies is available from the temporal fine structure of auditory nerve discharges. Finally, a smaller set of intermediate channels responds to both tones (circa 700 Hz) possibly offering a third cue in the form of their interaction. It is worth noting that these patterns, which depend largely on the *skirts* of cochlear filter transfer

functions, might be less well predicted by models optimized for the shape of their peak (Patterson, 1976).

Period estimation and pitch. A popular model of pitch perception suggests that pitch is derived from the temporal fine structure of auditory nerve discharges, for example according to an autocorrelation-like mechanism (Licklider, 1951; Meddis and Hewitt, 1991; Cariani and Delgutte, 1996). The autocorrelation function (ACF) can be defined as:

$$r_t(\tau) = \sum_{\theta=t+1}^{t+W} s(\theta)s(\theta+\tau) \tag{1}$$

where $s(t)$ is the acoustic signal (or some transform of it), W is an integration window, t is the time at which the function is calculated, and τ is the lag parameter (Fig. 2, left). Applied to a periodic stimulus, such as a pure tone, the function shows a peak at all multiples of T, where $T = 1/f_0$ is the period. An alternative to the ACF is the the "Squared Difference Function" (SDF):

$$d_t(\tau) = \sum_{\theta=t+1}^{t+W} \left[s(\theta) - s(\theta+\tau)\right]^2 . \tag{2}$$

calculated as the Euclidean distance between two windows, one fixed the other shifted by τ. The two functions are closely related: $d_t(\tau) = p_t(\tau) - 2r_t(\tau)$, where $p_t(\tau) = r_t(0) + r_{t+\tau}(0)$ reflects signal power circa time t. Applied to a periodic stimulus, such as pure tone, the SDF takes its smallest possible value (zero) at T and all its multiples (Fig. 2, right).

In the autocorrelation model of pitch, a neural approximation of the ACF is calculated within every channel of a peripheral filter bank (Licklider, 1951). In response to a stimulus of period T, all channels show a peak at T, and the position of this common peak is the cue to the period of a sound (and thus its pitch). The CF $\times$ lag pattern can also be summarized by averaging it over all channels to form

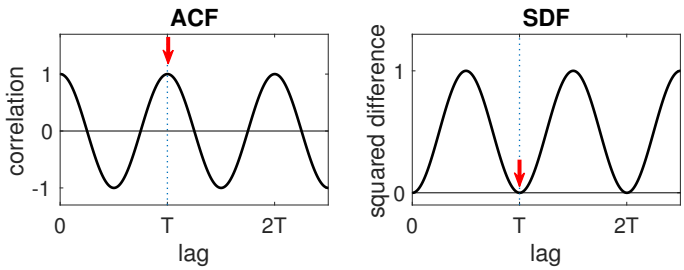

Figure 2: Period estimation based on autocorrelation (left) or cancellation (right). For a periodic stimulus of period T, the autocorrelation function (ACF) shows a peak for a lag equal to T (left), while the squared difference function (SDF) shows a zero at that same lag (right). Both can be used as a cue to the period (and thus the pitch) of the stimulus. The functions here are normalized to take values between -1 and 1 (ACF) or 0 and 1 (SDF).

a *summary autocorrelation function* (SACF), that typically also shows a peak at T (Meddis and Hewitt, 1991). Alternatively, in some tasks it might be beneficial to restrict the pattern to a subset of channels. For example, looking at Fig. 1, it would seem best to estimate the period of the lower tone from channels with CF below $\sim$700 Hz, and the period of the higher tone from channels with CF above that limit.

Replacing the ACF by the SDF yields a pitch model with properties very similar to the autocorrelation model, the cue to the period being the position of a dip (rather than a peak) in the CF $\times$ lag pattern (Fig. 2) (de Cheveigné, 1998). A reason for considering this variant is that it can easily be extended to detect mistuning.

Cancellation and mistuning. The SDF can be understood as quantifying variance of the output of a time-domain "harmonic cancellation" filter

$$h(\tau) = \delta_0(t) - \delta_\tau(t). \tag{3}$$

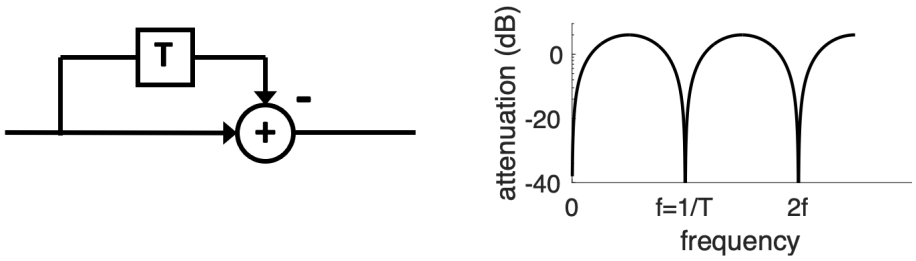

Figure 3: Harmonic cancellation filter. Left: comb filter with impulse response $\delta_0(t) - \delta_T(t)$. Right: transfer function. This filter suppresses the fundamental and all harmonics of a stimulus with period T.

calculated over a window W, as a function of the delay parameter τ, where δ_τ is the Kronecker delta function translated to τ. Figure 3 (left) shows such a filter with lag parameter T, together with its transfer function (Fig. 3 right). The transfer function shows deep dips at $1/T$ and its multiples: the output is zero for periodic input signal with period T/k. Mistuning of a signal of frequency f away from k/T can be detected as an increase in power at the output of the filter.

The cancellation filter (Eq. 3) can be used to implement *harmonic cancellation*, a hypothetical process according to which the auditory system exploits harmonicity of a background sound to suppress it (de Cheveigné, 2021). This model might explain why mistuning a component within a harmonic complex makes it more salient (Moore et al., 1985; Hartmann et al., 1990) and its pitch easier to match (Hartmann and Doty, 1996). Octave-spaced tones are a special case of this situation.

Octave mistuning. Harmonic octave mistuning can be detected with the following steps: (1) estimate the period of the lower tone, (2) use it as the parameter of a cancellation filter applied to the higher tone, (3) decide that the octave is in tune if the cancellation residual is below a threshold, and mistuned otherwise.

Referring to Fig. 2 (right), it appears that low CF channels represent well the

lower tone, high CF channels the higher tone, and a smaller set of intermediate channels represent both. There are at least three plausible scenarios. A first is that the period is estimated in low-CF channels and used to parametrize a harmonic cancellation filter applied to high-CF channels. A second is that both operations are applied to the set of intermediate channels (avoiding the need to carry the estimate across channels). A third is that both are applied after cross-channel convergence (see section on physiology in the Discussion).

Neural implementation. Processing within the auditory brain must rely on the spike-based neural representation created by transduction in the cochlea. Licklider (1951) imagined that the ACF might be approximated by an array of elementary neural circuits, each comprising a neuron fed from direct and delayed pathways via two excitatory synapses (Fig. 4, top left). The neuron fires only if spikes arrive together (within some short window) on both pathways. For example, short excitatory post synaptic potentials (EPSPs) evoked by spikes might interact additively (van der Heijden et al., 2013), reaching threshold only if they overlap in time (Fig. 4, top right). Instantaneous output spike probability then approximates the *product* of input spike probabilities, as required to approximate Eq. 1. Such a mechanism has been hypothesized within the medial superior olive (MSO) in a circuit that estimates interaural time differences (van der Heijden et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2018).

An analogous circuit can approximate the harmonic cancellation filter (de Cheveigné, 2021). A neuron is contacted by an excitatory and an inhibitory synapse, one fed from a direct pathway, the other via a delay (Fig. 4, bottom left). The EPSP and IPSP (inhibitory post synaptic potential) summate as in Fig. 4 (bottom right). The neuron's threshold is such that it fires at each excitatory spike, unless a spike arrives together at the inhibitory synapse within some short win-

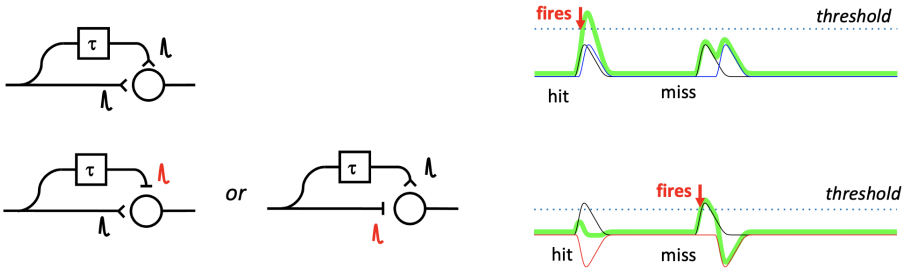

Figure 4: Neural approximations of autocorrelation (top) or cancellation (bottom). Top: a neuron receives direct and delayed input via two excitatory synapses and fires when spikes arrive simultaneously on both. This can be used to approximate the delay-and-multiply operation of the ACF. Bottom: a neuron receives direct and delayed input via excitatory and inhibitory synapses and fires whenever a spike arrives on the excitatory input, unless a spike arrives simultaneously on the inhibitory input. This can be used to approximate the delay-and-subtract operation of the harmonic cancellation filter, or the SDF. The delay can be applied indifferently to the inhibitory input (left) or to the excitatory input (center).

dow. Instantaneous output spike probability then reflects the *difference* of input spike probabilities, as required to approximate Eq. 2. Such a gating mechanism has been found within the lateral superior olive (LSO) in a circuit that estimates interaural differences in level or onset time (Franken et al., 2018).

A neural octave mistuning detector. The neural cancellation mechanism can be used to detect octave mistuning. To be concrete, let us suppose that the lower tone has a frequency of 500 Hz. A harmonic cancellation filter is implemented as in Fig. 4 (left or center) with EPSP and IPSP shaped as in Fig. 5 (top left), with the inhibitory pathway delayed by T = 2 ms (inverse of 500 Hz). The spike train is split in two pathways, one convolved with the EPSP, and the other delayed and convolved with the IPSP (Fig. 4 bottom left). The firing probability, modelled as one minus the normalized cross-product between direct and delayed PSPs, is plotted in Fig. 5 (top right) as a function of frequency circa 1 kHz. It is minimal at 1 kHz (in tune) and increases on either side (mistuned). The increase in firing probability with mistuning would offer a cue to mistuning from the octave relationship.

Asymmetry. We are now in position to suggest an explanation for the mistuning asymmetry. First, let us suppose that PSPs on direct and delayed pathways have a similar duration: the mistuning curve is roughly symmetrical around 1 kHz (Fig. 5 top right), with slopes that depend on PSP duration, being shallower for longer PSPs. If instead the PSPs differ in duration, the mistuning curve is *asymmetrical* relative to 1 kHz. In particular, if the PSP duration of the delayed pathway is longer than that of the direct pathway, there is a greater tolerance for a positive mistuning (stretched octave) than negative. For example, for a mistuning of 2% (green dots) the filter output for a negative mistuning is more than twice that for a positive mistuning. This is qualitatively consistent with results from most subjects

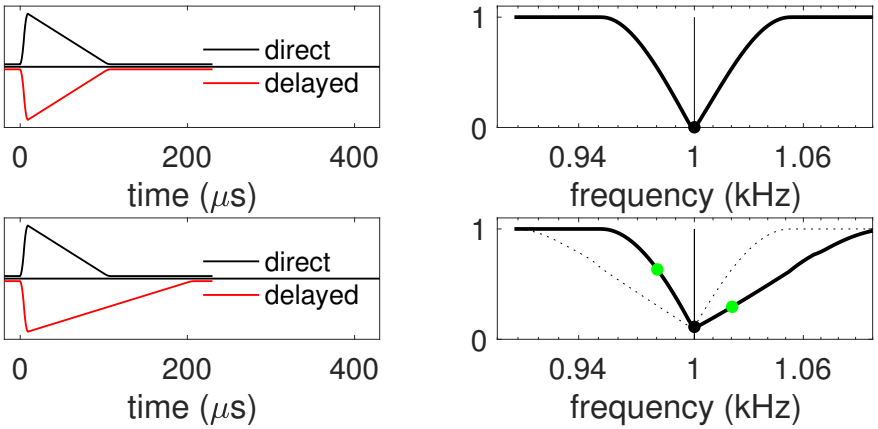

Figure 5: Detection of mistuning with a neural cancellation filter. Left: schematic PSPs on direct and delayed pathways (direct: EPSP, black, delayed: IPSP, red). Right: output of filter as a function of frequency of the higher tone in a mistuned-harmonic pair. Top: EPSP and IPSP follow similar dynamics, the mistuning curve is roughly symmetrical around 1 kHz. Bottom: the PSP on the delayed pathway is shorter than that on the direct pathway. The mistuning curve is shallower for positive than for negative mistunings (green dots represent ± 2 % mistuning). If the delayed PSP were the longer one, the asymmetry would be reversed (dotted line). In all cases, the dip is centered precisely at the in-tune octave (1 kHz).

in behavioral experiments. Interestingly, the position of the minimum does not shift, just the slopes.

The origin of the asymmetry can be understood intuitively by looking at Fig. 5 (left, bottom). Increasing the higher-tone period by 100 μs (compressed octave) would shift the onset of the delayed IPSP beyond the offset of the direct EPSP, abolishing the inhibitory effect. In constrast, decreasing it by the same amount (stretched octave) would only partially reduce the overlap. If, instead, the delayed path had the shorter PSP, the asymmetry would be reversed (dotted line in Fig. 5 bottom right). The asymmetry is also contingent on the asymmetric shape of the PSPs (steeper onset than offset), and other factors (e.g. jitter) could make additional contributions.

The demonstration that asymmetry may arise within a plausible mechanism of octave mistuning detection is the main result of this paper. However, the predicted *direction* depends on time constants for delayed and undelayed pathways. To match experimental results, the delayed pathway must have a longer time constant than the direct pathway, if not, the model fails. The model is applicable directly to the harmonic octave (concurrent sounds); the degree to which it accounts also for melodic octave affinity is examined in the Discussion.

3 Discussion

Two things need explaining. The first is *octave affinity*, for both harmonic and melodic octaves. The second is *asymmetric sensitivity to mistuning* from this octave. This paper attempts to explain both, but the explanation raises a number of issues that are discussed here. Anticipating, evidence from physiology leads us to expect an asymmetry, but only weakly predicts its sign. Furthermore, this explanation is directly applicable to the harmonic octave, but applying it to the

melodic octave requires additional assumptions.

Affinity or Equivalence? The octave has been recognized as remarkable since antiquity, and it plays an important role in the music of most cultures (Shepard, 1982; Burns and Ward, 1999). Tones separated by an octave are treated as equivalent for the definition of a chroma class (Bachem, 1950; Deutsch, 1969; Burns and Ward, 1999; Harrison and Pearce, 2020). For two complex tones separated by an octave, all the harmonics of the higher tone (including its fundamental) are also harmonics of the lower tone. Likewise, subharmonics of the lower tone are subharmonics of the higher tone. The "common harmonics" criterion is applicable only to harmonic complex tones, whereas "common subharmonics" apply also to pure tones. Most musical sounds are complex, but most studies use pure tones. The lower tone thus "contains" the octave tone, but the converse is not true: octave similarity thus lacks the symmetry property required for a "equivalence" in a mathematical sense.

Harmonic vs Melodic Octave. Affinity has been observed for both concurrent sounds (harmonic octave) and sequential sounds (melodic octave). With pure tones, the melodic octave is somewhat elusive, as discussed by Demany et al. (2021). While some studies have suggested perceptual similarity or even equivalence (Demany and Armand, 1984), other studies found little evidence that octave intervals are special (Kallman, 1982). A likely interpretation is that two perceptual qualities are involved, one salient for all listeners (difference in tone height) and the other more subtle and requiring musical literacy (chroma) (Bonnard et al., 2013). Affinity, which reflects the latter, requires that the former be ignored.

Parsimony lobbies for a common basis for the harmonic and melodic octave, but experimental support has been ambiguous. Of three careful studies by the same group, two concluded that there are distinct mechanisms (Bonnard et al.,

2013, 2016), and the third that there is a common mechanism (Demany et al., 2021), see also Demany and Semal (1988, 1990); Demany et al. (1991). For a harmonic octave, mistuning is not detectable if the higher tone exceeds ∼2 kHz, which is possibly related to the finding of Hartmann et al. (1990) that subjects cannot detect mistuning of a partial of a harmonic tone if its frequency is above ∼2 kHz. For a melodic octave, on the other hand, mistuning is detectable up to ∼4 kHz or higher (Ward, 1954). In the low frequency region, mistuning detection is easier for harmonic than melodic octaves (Demany et al., 2021).

Detecting mistuning from the octave. Detecting mistuning of a harmonic octave is straightforward. In tune, the mix is harmonic with same fundamental as the lower of the two tones. Mistuned, it becomes either inharmonic, or harmonic with a much lower fundamental. Likewise, in tune the mix is periodic with the period of the lower tone. Mistuned, it is aperiodic, or with a period much lower than either tone. Any mechanism that can detect inharmonicity (in the frequency domain) or aperiodicity (in the time domain) can detect mistuning. The model presented in this paper uses a cancellation filter for this purpose.

For the *melodic octave*, the situation is more subtle because memory is involved: a trace of the first tone must be retained for comparison with the second tone. The trace of the first tone (which might be the lower or the higher) can be used in either of two ways. It can be *compared* to a similar trace derived from the second tone. Alternatively, it can be used to parametrize some form of *filter* applicable to incoming correlates of the second tone.

Terhardt (1974) assumed that every harmonic of a complex tone evokes a "spectral pitch", that is then transformed into a series of "virtual pitch" cues via a harmonic template. The cues from all harmonics are tallied in a weighted histogram (see also Schroeder, 1968), resulting in a pattern with a series of peaks, the

largest of which signals the pitch in Terhardt's model. However, there are other peaks, and Terhardt notes that the largest among them tend to be separated by an octave interval. The trace, in this case, would be the subharmonic histogram of the first tone, which is compared to that from the second tone to detect an octave relation (or mistuning thereof).

This explanation relies on the regular pattern of *harmonics* (overtones) of most musical tones. Their perceptual reality was noted by Oresme in the XIVth century (Bod, 2014), and their physical reality worked out by a line of thinkers from Mersenne in the XVIIth up to Fourier in the XIXth century (de Cheveigné, 2005). The implication of harmonics in octave affinity is attributed to Sauveur and Rameau in the 18th century (Christensen, 1987). According to Terhardt, the harmonic template required for the spectral-to-virtual pitch transform needs to be *learned* from lifelong exposure to harmonic sounds, notably speech, an idea that dates back to Jean Jacques Dortous de Mairan, contemporary of Rameau (Christensen, 1987).

Instead of harmonics, one can invoke subharmonics (super-periods). Ohgushi (1983) proposed to use for this the interspike interval (ISI) histogram of auditory nerve fiber discharge patterns. The trace in this case is the ISI histogram calculated in response to the first tone, which is compared to a similar histogram calculated from the second tone. The ISI histogram shows peaks corresponding to period multiples, and at the octave the peaks of the lower tone coincide with peaks of the higher tone. A similar idea has been proposed for other auditory nerve fiber interval statistics such as autocorrelation (Cariani and Delgutte, 1996; Tramo, 2005). The principle has much earlier roots in the "coincidence theory of consonance" elaborated in the 16th and 17th centuries (Green, 1969; Christensen, 1993), and indeed in the association of consonant intervals with small integer ratios usually attributed to Pythagoras.

The model proposed in this paper is of the "subharmonic" flavor, as it relies on the fact that a cancellation filter tuned to the period of a tone also cancels a tone at the octave (one period of the fundamental matches two periods of the octave). The trace, in this case, is either the delay parameter T of the first filter, conserved and used to tune a new filter applied to the second tone, or the filter itself, "frozen" until the second tone. This sequential operation is straightforward in the case of an *ascending* octave, because the filter fit to the lower tone also cancels the higher, but for a descending octave the filter must be fit to *twice* the period of the first tone. This is less straightforward, but perhaps a skill that a musically-inclined subject might have learned to master. The issue of descending vs ascending octaves is further discussed in the context of stretching.

Incidentally, data specific to the descending melodic octave are somewhat sparse. Cuddy and Dobbins (1988); Bonnard et al. (2013) presented notes only in ascending order, while Ward (1954); Demany and Semal (1990); Demany et al. (2021) presented notes in alternation, so ascending and descending intervals contributed to each trial. However, Bonnard et al. (2016) presented half their subjects with ascending intervals and the other half with descending intervals, and found no reliable difference, consistent with reports of Hartmann (1993) and (Rosner, 1999). On the other hand, (Luo et al., 2014) observed that musical intervals are generally less accurately ranked when descending (they did not test octaves), and Vos and Troost (1989) found that descending octaves were half as common as ascending in two music databases.

Octave stretch and mistuning asymmetry. Octave stretch (preference for a frequency ratio larger than 2) and mistuning asymmetry (greater tolerance for positive than negative mistuning) are distinct phenomena, but that could conceivably be related. In the presence of jitter or noise, stretching the octave might be

a “safe” strategy to reduce the likelihood of a perceptually objectionable negative mistuning. If such is the case, a model of mistuning asymmetry could account for both phenomena, and data related to both would be relevant to constrain that model.

Mistunings are easier to detect for positive than negative excursions for both the harmonic octave (Demany and Semal, 1988; Demany et al., 1991; Bonnard et al., 2013; Demany et al., 2021) and the melodic octave (Dobbins and Cuddy, 1982; Demany and Semal, 1990; Demany et al., 2021). In the melodic case, stretching is observed for pure tones (Ohgushi, 1983; Hartmann, 1993) as well as complex tones and sounds of musical instruments (Sundberg and Lindqvist, 1973; Jaatinen et al., 2019). It is however unclear to what degree the stretch is specific to the octave, as a similar stretch has been reported for intervals of minor sixth or greater, whereas smaller intervals typically are compressed (Rakowski, 1990; Burns and Ward, 1999).

The magnitude of the stretch is typically a few percent, so a subject must be sensitive to pitch differences of that order. That might be the case for most musicians but not all non-musicians (Micheyl et al., 2006). For at least some subjects, the standard deviation of matches is considerably smaller than the magnitude of the shift (Demany and Semal, 1990). The magnitude of the stretch varies markedly across subjects (Ward, 1954; Demany and Semal, 1990; Hartmann, 1993; Demany et al., 2021), and for some subjects, in some conditions, it is close to zero or even negative (Hartmann, 1993; Rosner, 1999; Bonnard et al., 2013). This is an extra burden for a mechanistic explanation, as it must also explain why the phenomenon is observed in some subjects and not others. Large inter-subject differences are also observed for pitch discrimination (Micheyl et al., 2006), and sensitivity to consonance (McDermott et al., 2010).

The stretch is typically larger at higher frequencies than low, at least for the

melodic octave (Demany and Semal, 1990; Ohgushi, 1983; Jaatinen et al., 2019). For a harmonic octave, as mentioned earlier, the ability to notice mistuning breaks down in the upper range. For the harmonic octave, Bonnard et al. (2013) found that sensitivity to mistuning (of both directions) improved with level, which they attributed to the increased salience of beats. In line with this view, asymmetry vanished at higher levels. For the melodic octave, Sundberg and Lindqvist (1973) found a complex dependency of asymmetry on subject, frequency, tone nature (pure or complex), and intensity of both tones.

The model described in this paper can account for mistuning asymmetry of the harmonic octave *if* the time constants within the delayed pathway are longer than within the direct pathway (Fig. 4 bottom, see section *Physiological Basis* below). Interestingly, Fig. 5 (right) shows that the minimum of the cancellation filter output is precisely at the true octave (ratio 1:2). This is consistent with observations by Bonnard et al. (2013) who measured discrimination between various frequency ratios in the vicinity of 1:2 for concurrent pure tone pairs. Discrimination from a reference ratio of 1.96:1 was best for a test ratio of 2:1 and less good for a larger test ratio, which is unexpected because further from the reference ratio. From this, they concluded that the true octave ratio (1:2) is "special". Apparently, the subjective versus objective mistuning function is "V"-shaped with a minimum at 1:2, but with a steeper slope on the lower (<1 octave) than higher (>1 octave) side, consistent with Fig. 5 (bottom right).

Accounting for mistuning asymmetry of the *melodic* octave is less straightforward. A simple proposal would be that a cancellation filter is fit (accurately) to the first tone, and that filter is more tolerant to upward than downward mistuning of the second tone. Unfortunately, this would work only for an *ascending* octave, whereas it was mentioned earlier that asymmetry (or stretch) is also observed for the descending octave. To account for for the latter, we need to hypothesize that

(a) tolerance to upward mistuning affects also fit of the cancellation to the *first tone* (and thus the period estimate derived from it), as well as the fit to the second tone, and (b) this effect is greater for the high tone than the high tone. Testing this hypothesis requires modeling a complex process of trace acquisition, memory, and comparison or filtering, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

A Physiological Basis? Excitatory-inhibitory interaction is found throughout the nervous system. Within the auditory brainstem, there is abundant evidence for high-bandwidth representations supported by temporally-specialized neural circuitry, some excitatory and others inhibitory (Stange-Marten et al., 2017; Joris and van der Heijden, 2019). Fast excitatory-inhibitory interaction has been identified as early as the cochlear nucleus (Joris and Smith, 1998; Paolini et al., 2004; Xie and Manis, 2013; Campagnola and Manis, 2014; Kuenzel, 2019; Ngodup et al., 2020) and as late as the the dendritic fields of the inferior colliculus (Caspari et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019), in addition to intermediate stages within the superior olivary complex (Roberts et al., 2013; Myoga et al., 2014; Franken et al., 2018) and nuclei of lateral lemniscus (Caspari et al., 2015).

In some instances, the interaction has been attributed to binaural processing, for example estimation of interaural level differences (ILD) (Tollin and Yin, 2005), detection of onset timing differences (Franken et al., 2018), or sharpening of sensitivity to interaural time difference (ITD) (Myoga et al., 2014). In others, the processing seems to be monaural. For example, neurons in the ventral nucleus of the lateral lemniscus (VNLL) receive, via calyx-like synapses, excitatory input from contralateral cochlear nucleus (CN) and ipsilateral medial nucleus of the trapezoid body (MNTB) (Caspari et al., 2015), neurons in superior periolivary nucleus (SPON) and VNLL receive input from contralateral octopus cells and ipsilateral MNTB (Felix II et al., 2017), and a certain proportion of cells in MSO

are monaural (Grothe, 2000).

Inhibition, which requires an extra synapse, might be expected to lag excitation. This has indeed been observed (Xie and Manis, 2013), but the opposite has also been found (Paolini et al., 2004; Nayagam et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2013), presumably reflecting properties of the inhibitory pathways that favor transmission speed, such as thick myelinated axons or secure synapses (Stange-Marten et al., 2017).

The dynamics of interaction are usually thought to be governed by the time constants of excitatory and inhibitory post synaptic events, for example via a subtractive mechanism analogous to Fig. 4 (right) (Roberts et al., 2013; van der Heijden et al., 2013). Inhibitory events (IPSPs or IPSCs, inhibitory post-synaptic currents) are often reported to be more sluggish than excitatory (EPSPs or EPSCs, excitatory post-synaptic currents) (Campagnola and Manis, 2014; Caspari et al., 2015). Examples of decay time constants reported for inhibition and excitation, respectively, are $\sim$10 ms vs $\sim$ 0.5 ms in mouse AVCN bushy cells (Campagnola and Manis, 2014), $\sim$2.5 ms vs $\sim$0.3 ms in mouse ventrolateral VNLL (Caspari et al., 2015), or $\sim$1.5 ms vs 0.3 ms in mouse MSO (Myoga et al., 2014), etc. In contrast, Pilati et al. (2016) reported closely matched time constants of EPSCs and IPSCs in mouse LSO.

There is evidence, however, that the dynamics of EI interaction might not be directly governed by the duration of post-synaptic current or potential events. Franken et al. (2021) observed in LSO a window of binaural interaction much shorter ($\sim$0.5 ms or less) than the IPSP decay time constant ($\sim$5 ms), and with remarkably steep slopes (transition from maximum to suppressed firing on the order of 0.1 ms).

In summary, there is ample evidence that dynamics of excitation and inhibition might differ between different neural pathways, some delayed relative to others,

as required by the account proposed in this paper. However, the evidence is sufficiently complex and diverse to support either direction of octave shift. Faster dynamics for the delayed pathway should lead to a positive shift (consistent with behaviour), whereas slower dynamics would lead to the opposite shift. To make more precise predictions, we would need to identify the locus of interaction and better characterize its properties.

Other Explanations. An explanation worth considering is a response or classification bias due to the structure of the response or category set. If responses are limited to chroma within the octave, the listener must maintain a sharp boundary between the major seventh and the octave, but not necessarily between the octave and the minor ninth. A similar hypothesis could explain why the perceptual boundary between minor and major second is low (Rakowski, 1990; Vurma and Ross, 2006), and more generally the tendency for large intervals (not just the octave) to stretch and small intervals to shrink. This explanation seems less likely in a non-musical psychoacoustic setting, such as discriminating mistuned from in-tune intervals (Bonnard et al., 2013).

Another proposal, also rooted in music, relates octave enlargement to the "Pythagorean comma", which is the frequency ratio between twelve fifths (1.5^{12}) and seven octaves, (2^7), which amounts to roughly 3.4 cents per octave (Hubbard, 2021). This is in the ballpark of some perceptual shifts, but it is not clear why they would not then be equally distributed along the seven octaves. Instead, the octave stretch is small (even negative) at low frequencies and large (up to 50 cents) at high frequencies. Nor is it clear how shifts could be subject-dependent, or level-dependent.

A classic explanation is that the scale of notes on the piano is stretched to reduce the perceptual effects of beats that result from the inharmonic spectrum

of strings (Giordano, 2015). The piano is often used as a reference to tune other instruments, and it is conceivable that this has led listeners to expect octaves to be mistuned. The so-called "Railback" tuning is steep at the low- and high-frequency ends, consistent with a larger octave stretch in the high register, but not with the small or negative octave stretch observed in the low register.

As mentioned earlier, Terhardt (1974) proposed that listeners relate the "spectral pitch" evoked by each partial of a harmonic complex to a "virtual pitch" via a "harmonic template". The octave is stretched because spectral pitches are shifted (according to Terhardt) by the presence of neighboring partials, and for the same reason the learned template could be distorted. However, Peters et al. (1983) failed to replicate the pitch shift values upon which this model is predicated.

Also mentioned earlier, Ohgushi (1983) invoked the first-order interspike interval (ISI) histogram of auditory nerve fiber discharges (e.g. Rose et al., 1967) to explain octave affinity and shifts. The ISI histogram shows two quirks: (a) Spikes cannot occur at intervals shorter than the *refractory period* of the auditory nerve ($\sim$1 ms). In consequence the histogram is truncated near its origin (shortest intervals), and its first mode or modes may be distorted or missing at high frequencies. (b) At low frequencies (and/or high discharge rate), multiple spikes may occur within a period. When that occurs, a first-order interspike interval that spans one period to the next (or following) will tend to be shorter than the period (or multiple of the period), leading to a shift of the histogram modes. This shortening occurs more for low frequency tones than high, implying that the low tone's frequency must be lowered to align it's histogram with that of the higher tone, consistent with the observed stretch. Ohgushi (1983)'s explanation was further explored by (Hartmann, 1993; McKinney and Delgutte, 1999).

This explanation is not entirely satisfactory. The first-order ISI histogram, one among several possible statistics, is arguably not a good choice to represent

information available to the auditory system. It is highly sensitive to discharge rate: at high rates and/or low frequencies, most intervals end up in an uniformative "zero-order" mode, while the higher-order modes (required to estimate the period) are depleted and distorted (quirk b mentioned above). This would make it impossible, for example, to apply it to characterize the information carried by the $\sim$30 fibres that collectively code the vibratory information transduced by a haircell in the cochlea. Alternative statistics, such as the *all-order* ISI histogram (e.g. Cariani and Delgutte, 1996) and "shuffled" all-order ISI histogram (Joris et al., 2006) do not have this problem, but also do not predict the octave shift. The all-order ISI histogram is equivalent to the autocorrelation function, which could be approximated by a neural circuit such as in Fig. 4 (Licklider, 1951), whereas it is less clear how a first-order histogram would be implemented.

To summarize, multiple explanations of octave stretching can be envisaged, in addition to that proposed in this paper. Each is deficient in certain aspects, so we cannot say, at this point, that the problem is solved. Hopefully, the present model is a step in the right direction.

Limitations of the model. A first weakness is that, while the model accounts for the possibility of a systematic mistuning of the octave, it only weakly predicts its sign. To do so would require identifying the locus of its implementation within the auditory system, and verifying that the time constants agree with the assumptions of the model.

A second weakness is that applying the model to the melodic octave is less straightforward than for the harmonic octave, as the octave mistuning asymmetry of both ascending and descending octaves needs to be explained. This requires the asymmetry to operate equally at the first tone (when the trace is established) and at the second tone (where it is applied or compared with a trace derived from the

second tone), with a greater impact on high than low frequency tones. The details of how this would happen have not been worked out in this paper, and are left for a future study.

Significance. Keeping limitations of the model in mind, we can revisit the claim, made earlier, that the careful observation of a relatively small effect may yield wider insights into hearing. The logic is that, since the effet is reliably established and no other model comes closer to explaining it, each of the model's assumptions receives some degree of support. Reviewing:

- Pitch and and harmony is assumed to involve processing of time domain patterns in the auditory brain, in contrast to a purely spectral account (e.g. Terhardt, 1974)

- Time domain processing is assumed to involve a spike coincidence or anticoincidence counting process akin to autocorrelation or cancellation (e.g Terhardt, 1974; Cariani and Delgutte, 1996; de Cheveigné, 1998), in contrast for example to first-order interspike interval statistics (Ohgushi, 1983).

- Cancellation is favored on the basis of its appeal as a general mechanism to ensure *invariance* to competing periodic sounds (de Cheveigné, 2021), suggesting that the effect is an emergent property of a more widely useful mechanism. Cancellation also allows a simpler model than correlation, which is formally equivalent but entails an additional implementation complexity (de Cheveigné, 2021).

- Properties of cancellation (and correlation) are affected by details of their neural implementation such as the shape of PSPs involved in coincidence detection.

A form of neural cancellation was previously effective in a model of pitch shifts of mistuned partials (Hartmann et al., 1990; Hartmann and Doty, 1996; de Cheveigné, 1999). Intererstingly, mistuning functions reported by Hartmann and Doty showed an upwards bias in frequency, which that model did not try to account for. The asymmetric shape of PSPs was also invoked in a model to explain the pitch of a peak in frequency modulation is more salient than that of a trough (Demany and McAnally, 1994; de Cheveigné, 2000), although in that model it affected autocorrelation rather than cancellation, and did not differentiate between time constants of different pathways.

To the extent that octave mistuning asymmetry is indeed explanable with these assumptions, it may offer wider insights as to how hearing works.

Conclusion

The well-known asymmetry of mistuning of the harmonic octave can be explained by a model of excitatory-inhibitory interaction within the auditory brain. A difference in time constants of excitation and inhibition causes the neural circuit to be more sensitive to a negative than a positive mistuning of the higher tone. This paper reviews the phenomenon, describes the model, reviews relevant data from auditory physiology, and discusses evidence for, and against, the model.

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