

Development of SIS Receivers with Ultra-wide Instantaneous Bandwidth for wSMA

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Abstract—We report on the development of SIS receivers with ultra-wide instantaneous bandwidth, intended for the new wSMA (wideband Submillimeter Array) instrumentation. The different factors which would put a limit on the IF bandwidth of an SIS mixer are first examined. In order to deliver up to 20 GHz of IF bandwidth, we have based our SIS mixer design on a 3-junction series array connected to a wideband cryogenic isolator. Special considerations are given to the grounding of the mixer chip, which can introduce significant grounding inductance. We present the test results for the prototype wSMA 240 GHz receiver. Low noise operation has been confirmed over the IF range of 3.5 – 19 GHz, for Local Oscillator frequencies between 210 and 270 GHz.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the Superconductor-Insulator-Superconductor (SIS) mixer becomes established as the ultimate low noise heterodyne front-end at submillimeter wavelengths, it is recognized that its utility in astronomical instrumentation can see further enhancement by increasing its instantaneous operating bandwidth [1, 2]. At present, the majority of SIS mixer based receivers operate with an IF of 4 – 8 GHz, while an increasing number offer a wider IF band of 4 – 12 GHz [3, 4]. A number of SIS mixers have been tested with even higher IF bandwidths [5-7].

In this paper we will discuss the challenges of extending the IF bandwidth of SIS mixers. We will also present the design and performance of the wSMA 240 GHz receiver we are currently developing for the Submillimeter Array

The Submillimeter Array (SMA) is a radio interferometer located on Mauna Kea, Hawaii. It is jointly operated by the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory (SAO) and Academia Sinica Institute of Astronomy and Astrophysics (ASIAA), Taiwan. Since 2017, the SMA has been conducting routine nightly astronomical observations with dual SIS receivers operating between 200 and 420 GHz, delivering an on-sky bandwidth of 32 GHz using its 4 – 12 GHz double-side-band IF coverage. The total observation bandwidth will be further increased in the next phase of instrumentation upgrade. The new wideband SMA (wSMA) instrumentation [8] will operate with an IF of 4 – 20 GHz and will double the on-sky bandwidth of observation. This will lead to further increase in

wideband continuum sensitivity of the array as well as further increase in spectral line observation capability.

II. IF BANDWIDTH LIMITS OF SIS MIXERS

At very high IF, Tucker's Quantum Theory of Mixing [9] stipulates that the upper side band signal behaves differently to the lower sideband signal because of quantization of the IF. Pan and Kerr [10] have conducted an investigation of the effect of very high IF in SIS. They have concluded that the zero IF approximation holds well if the IF is less than one tenth of the Local Oscillator (LO) frequency. Thus, for an SIS mixer operating above 200 GHz, there should be no fundamental physical reason that prevents it from delivering IF up to 20 GHz. In practice, however, there are a number of factors which would limit the IF bandwidth of SIS mixers. Here we discuss a few of the dominating factors.

A. Junction Capacitance

It has generally been recognized that a large junction capacitance in an SIS mixer may short the IF signal. In addition, the tuning circuit also presents additional capacitance to the IF in parallel with the junction capacitance, further limiting the IF bandwidth of the mixer. According to [11], the 3-dB IF bandwidth of an SIS mixer is given by:

$$F_{3\text{dB}} = \frac{1}{2\pi(R_{\text{out}}//R_L) * (C_j + C_{\text{tune}})} \quad (1)$$

where C_j and C_{tune} are the capacitances of the junction and the tuning circuit respectively; and R_L is the load resistance of the mixer, which is typically 50 Ω for wideband IF system; and R_{out} is the output resistance of the mixer, which is in parallel with R_L .

In order to reduce the junction capacitance, one can either use very small junction or use a series junction array [12]. Junctions with small dimensions are generally more difficult to fabricate, requiring electron beam lithography, and they have higher leakage current when compared to devices with similar critical current density. In addition, they also require higher magnetic field to operate. For these reasons, we have chosen to use series junction arrays with relatively large dimensions, which can be reproduced reliably using optical lithography.

B. Impedance Level

Equation (1) shows that the equivalent resistance of R_{out} in parallel with R_L is inversely proportional to the IF bandwidth. R_{out} is simply the dynamic resistance of the photon step, which is typically many times R_N , and at times infinite or even negative. As a result, a lower value of R_N can generally help to increase the IF bandwidth. This is the case for SIS mixers with very high critical current density [7]. Likewise, Parallel-Connected-Twin-Junction (PCTJ) type SIS mixers generally have very low values of R_N , although they often only offer moderate IF bandwidth as the junction capacitances appear in parallel, and so are additive.

C. Output Saturation

The dynamic range of an SIS mixer is limited by the phenomenon of output saturation in which the IF voltage swing becomes a significant fraction of the width of the photon step [13]. Kerr also pointed out that this situation is accentuated for noise-like signal which is characterized by a Gaussian amplitude distribution [14]. As the IF bandwidth increases, this IF voltage swing also rises.

Consider an SIS mixer operating with an IF bandwidth of 20 GHz, and a double-side-band (DSB) conversion gain of 0-dB. When the mixer input is terminated by an ambient (300 K) load, the IF output power is around -70 dBm, or 100 pW. Assuming a constant IF load impedance of 50-ohm, the RMS IF voltage swing works out to be 0.07 mV. For noise-like signal, the peak-to-peak voltage swing, taken to be 4σ , is 0.28 mV, which is a significant fraction of the 1 mV wide photon step of a single SIS junction, pumped by a local oscillator (LO) of 242 GHz. Clearly, SIS mixers, which operate with a high IF bandwidth, are more prone to saturation.

The solution to the saturation problem is to employ a series junction array, so that the output voltage swing is divided between the junctions. By employing a 3-junction array, one increases the power handling capacity of the SIS mixer by a factor of 9. Conversely, one can also consider that the same junction array increases the IF bandwidth of the mixer by a factor of 9.

D. Impedance Matching

For all SIS mixers, it is important that the down-converted power from the mixer be efficiently passed onto the LNA. This requires good impedance matching between the IF output of the mixer and the input of the LNA. Early attempts to integrate an SIS mixer with wideband low noise amplifier generally employed the direct interface method [5, 15]. It is now recognized that a careful design of the impedance matching circuit is essential [16, 17]. Tan [6] designed a six-section transformer circuit to match an SIS mixer to the LNA and measured reasonable response from a 650 GHz SIS mixer to IF of 15 GHz. Another approach is to use SIS device with very high critical current density [7] such that $R_{out} \sim 50 \Omega$, to provide wideband matching to the LNA.

We have selected the more established method of using a wideband isolator between the SIS mixer and the LNA. This ensures that the LNA sees a constant 50Ω match across the

wide IF band, and on the other hand, the mixer IF port is terminated with 50Ω . More details on this wideband isolator will be given in the next section.

E. Grounding of Mixer Chip

For a waveguide mixer chip, it is common to have the actual IF grounding point of the SIS junction to be located at some distance away from the junction itself. While beam-lead mixer chips provide the best grounding configuration, many chip designs have the grounding point located behind an RF choke filter that prevents RF power from leaking along the chip channel. This arrangement introduces a grounding inductance to the IF embedding impedance [18].

Fig. 1 shows the how the wSMA-240 mixer chip is grounded with a cylindrical metal contact over a low impedance section of the IF choke filter. The center of the contact point is 0.82 mm from the waveguide feed point. Also shown in Fig. 1 is the IF embedding impedance seen at the waveguide feed point. At low IF, the reactive part of this embedding impedance increases linearly with frequencies, corresponding to an added grounding inductance of $L_{gnd} \sim 10$ nH. The real part of the impedance starts around 50Ω at low IF and first sees moderate increases followed by larger increases at IF > 10 GHz.

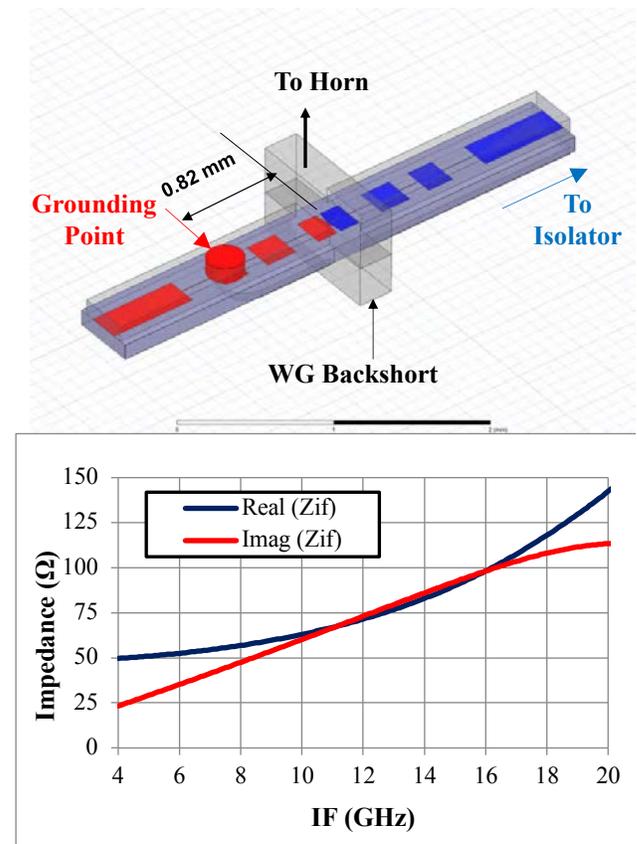


Fig. 1. (Upper) Grounding arrangement for the wSMA-240 mixer chip. (Lower) Simulated IF embedding impedance of the above mixer seen at the waveguide feed point.

This grounding inductance resonates with the junction and tuning capacitances, C_j and C_{tune} to form an impedance peak at an IF of f_R :

$$f_R = \frac{1}{2\pi \sqrt{L_{\text{gnd}}(C_j + C_{\text{tune}})}} \quad (2)$$

Beyond this resonant frequency, the conversion efficiency of the SIS mixer is expected to drop, marking the upper end of the usable IF bandwidth.

III. WIDEBAND CRYOGENIC ISOLATOR

In most SIS receivers, the cryogenic LNA is connected to the SIS mixer through a coaxial cable. A cryogenic isolator is usually inserted in front of the LNA to isolate reflections from the LNA from returning to the SIS mixer, which generally has high output impedance. Y-junction isolators can provide good isolation over an octave bandwidth. Edge-mode isolators are used when even wider bandwidths are required. At present, 4 – 12 GHz edge-mode isolators are commercially available.

We have developed a cryogenic edge-mode isolator which is usable between 4 and 22 GHz [19]. Its insertion loss is better than 1 dB from 4 to 17 GHz, rising to 1 – 1.5 dB from 17 to 22 GHz. The input return loss is about –15 dB from 4 to 22 GHz, and the isolation is better than 15 dB from 4 to 13 GHz, degrading to about 10 dB above 13 GHz.

The finite input return losses of the isolator, $|S_{11}|$, and the output reflection coefficient of the SIS mixer, Γ_{out} , drive a standing wave in the cable linking the isolator and the mixer. This standing wave ratio, SWR, is given by the following equation:

$$\text{SWR} = \frac{1 + |\Gamma_{\text{out}}||S_{11}|}{1 - |\Gamma_{\text{out}}||S_{11}|} \quad (2)$$

Since the output impedance of an SIS mixer is generally high and at times infinite or even negative, $|\Gamma_{\text{out}}|$ can be considered to be around unity. For $|S_{11}| \sim -15$ dB, equation (2) gives a SWR of 1.43 or 3.1 dB. Thus, the isolator shields the LNA from large source impedance variation, which can adversely affect the performance of the LNA. The isolator may help to prevent oscillation of the LNA when the SIS mixer exhibits negative output impedance.

IV. TUNING OF SIS JUNCTION

The discussion above highlights the importance of the output impedance of the SIS mixer for ultra-wideband operation. The other important parameter is its conversion gain. The insertion loss of the isolator means that the effective conversion gain of the mixer is reduced, especially towards the top end of the IF band. Furthermore, the noise temperature of an ultra-wideband LNA is unlikely to be as good as one with narrower band-width, and one also expects the noise of the LNA to rise with IF. Therefore, it is helpful if the SIS mixer can provide a net conversion gain so that the receiver noise temperature would remain flat across the wide IF band.

We present the result of a calculation based on Tucker's theory of quantum mixing [9] in Fig. 2. In this simulation, the source impedance presented to a tuned SIS junction is varied

over the Smith chart, which is normalized to R_n . The capacitance of the junction is assumed to be cancelled out by a shunt inductor at the simulation RF frequency of 240 GHz. Both the output impedance of the SIS junction and its conversion gain are calculated.

In Fig. 2, the solid black contour gives the locus of the source impedance associated with infinite output impedance. The region of the Smith chart above this solid contour yields negative output impedance, while the region below yields positive output impedance. The output impedance is independent of the IF load impedance. Unity conversion gain contours are plotted in dotted lines for the cases of an IF load impedances of R_n and $2R_n$.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this simulation. To begin with, inductive source impedance is generally linked to negative output impedance, and the same can be said for conversion gain. A higher IF load impedance also expands the domain of conversion gain.

By employing an isolator at the IF port of the mixer, one can tolerate an infinite output impedance or even have the mixer operating slightly into the negative impedance region, without sacrificing stability. This allows us to use a small amount of conversion gain to counter-balance the IF roll-off, as mentioned above. The same holds true, if the load impedance rises with frequency. Referring to Fig. 1, this is actually the case for our mixer, as a result of the grounding arrangement.

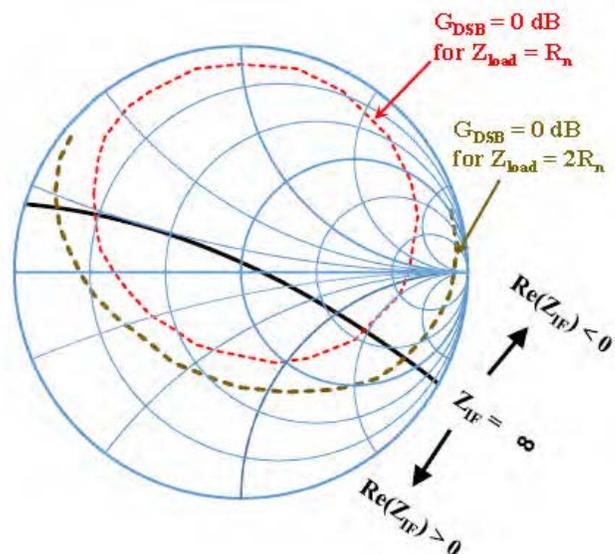


Fig. 2 Simulated conversion gain (G_{DSB}) and output impedance (Z_{IF}) of a Nb-based SIS mixer operating at an LO frequency of 240 GHz, and with $\alpha = 1$. The source impedance of the SIS junction with its capacitance tuned out is varied over the Smith Chart normalized to R_n .

V. DESIGN OF THE WSMA-240 MIXER

The wSMA-240 receiver will operate with an LO between 210 and 270 GHz, with a target IF coverage of 4 – 20 GHz. Based on the discussion above, we have chosen to use an SIS mixer based on a 3-junction array. The design parameters of the Nb/Al/AlO_x/Nb junction array are: nominal diameter of

1.6 μm , and R_nA product of 25 $\Omega\text{-}\mu\text{m}^2$. The normal state resistance R_n of the array is $\sim 40 \Omega$. Assuming a specific capacitance of 85 fF/ μm^2 , the total capacitance of the junction array is ~ 57 fF, corresponding to an ωCR product of 3 – 3.5. This latter value implies that a tuning circuit can readily be designed to achieve a percentage band-width of $\sim 30\%$. Considering that the IF coverage extends up to 20 GHz, the wSMA-240 receiver band is slated to provide sky coverage between 190 and 290 GHz, which corresponds to a percentage bandwidth in excess of 42%. Thus, our design goal is to provide good sensitivities to input frequencies between 205 and 275 GHz for a percentage bandwidth of 29%, with reduced performance beyond the band edges.

Equation (1) tells us that in order to maximize the IF bandwidth, not only does the junction capacitance have to be kept small, the capacitance of the tuning circuit, C_{tune} , has to be small as well. For this reason, we choose a simple transformer circuit to match the junction array to the waveguide feed point impedance. Fig. 3 shows the plot of the feed point impedance as a function of frequency as well as photos of the junction and the tuning transformer.

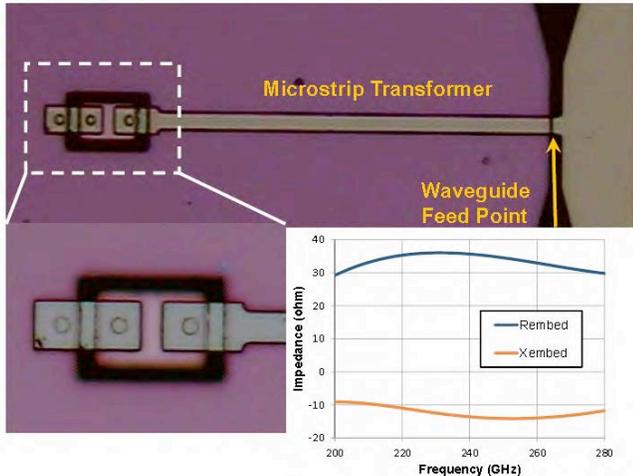


Fig. 3 (Upper) Photo of the SIS mixer chip showing the single section microstrip transformer linking the waveguide feed point and the SIS junction array. (Lower Left) Close up view of the junction array. Two of the junctions sit on top of a coplanar island. (Lower Right) Real (Rembed) and imaginary (Xembed) parts of the embedding impedance as a function of frequency seen at the waveguide feed point.

It should be noted that the embedding impedance at the waveguide feed point is capacitive. Consequently, the required length of the microstrip transformer is less than a quarter of a guided wavelength. This also helps to minimize C_{tune} , which amounts to ~ 58 fF, approximately equals to the junction capacitance. The sum of these 2 capacitances, C_{mixer} , is thus 115 fF. Using (1), one obtains a 3-dB IF bandwidth of 27 GHz if R_{out} is taken to be infinite.

However, when the grounding inductance, L_{gnd} , is taken into account, the resultant bandwidth is much reduced because L_{gnd} resonates with C_{mixer} . Equation (2) predicts a resonant frequency of 4.7 GHz. In practice, this frequency is affected by the real part of the impedance as well. By adding the susceptance due to C_{mixer} to the simulated complex IF load

impedance plotted in Fig 1, we arrive at the total load impedance seen by the SIS mixer. This is plotted in Fig. 4.

As seen from the plot, the real part of the IF load impedance peaks at around 12 GHz, whereas the imaginary part is capacitive above 10 GHz. We, therefore, expect that the conversion gain of the mixer will also peak at 12 GHz and decline beyond it. Using this complex IF impedance data, we have performed simulation of the conversion gain of the wSMA-240 mixer at a number LO frequencies between 210 and 270 GHz for IF spanning 4 – 20 GHz. The results are presented in Fig. 5.

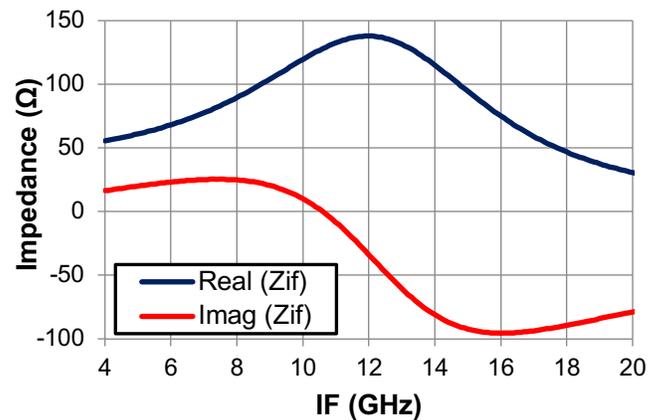


Fig. 4 Total IF load impedance, Z_{IF} , seen by the SIS mixer when both the grounding inductance, L_{gnd} , and mixer capacitance, C_{mixer} , are taken into account.

Fig. 5 confirms that the peak IF conversion gain is at approximately 12 GHz and drops above that frequency. Nevertheless, the single-side-band (SSB) conversion gain generally stays above -4 dB, except for the upper-side-band at the highest LO frequency. Adding in the 1 dB insertion loss from the isolator, the DSB conversion gain of the mixer is, therefore, generally above -2 dB. This means that the noise contribution of the isolator and the LNA is generally less than 1.6 times that of the inherent noise temperature of the LNA. We also note that the side-band ratio of the mixer is within 1 dB of unity ratio.

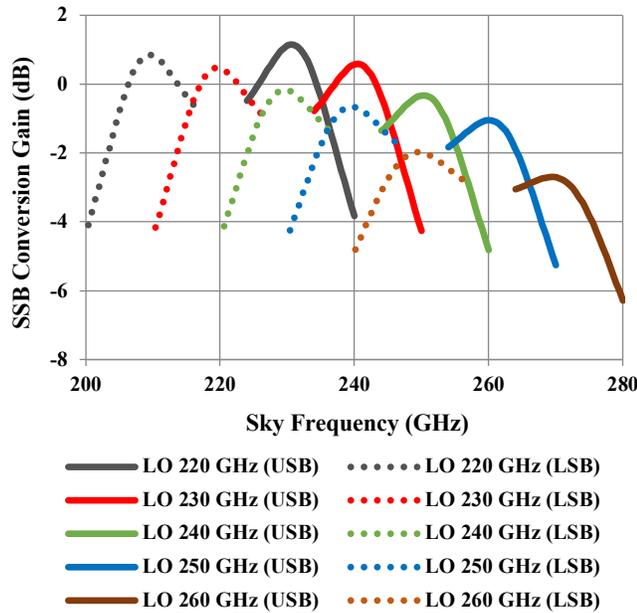


Fig. 5 Simulated SSB conversion gain of wSMA-240 mixer as a function of signal (sky) frequency for different LO frequencies when the IF is varied between 4 and 20 GHz. The upper-side-band (USB) responses are plotted in solid lines, while the lower-side-band (LSB) responses are in dotted lines.

VI. PERFORMANCE OF WSMA-240 RECEIVER

We have performed laboratory measurements of these wSMA-240 receivers. The SIS mixer was connected to the wideband isolator by a 15 cm long coaxial cable, with the junction array biased through a bias port on the side of the isolator. An LNF-LNC-6_20B amplifier was connected to the output of the isolator. From the data supplied by the manufacturer, the noise temperature of this amplifier is below 5 K between 6 and 14 GHz, and is below 10 K over 3.5 - 20 GHz.

Y-factor measurements using ambient load (295 K) and liquid nitrogen-cooled load (78.5 K) were conducted. Local oscillator was injected in front of the cryostat using a wire grid polarizer. DSB receiver noise temperature was calculated from the Y-factor directly without applying any corrections. The observed I-V and P-V curves of a test at an LO of 250 GHz were plotted in Fig. 6. The IF was 9 GHz and a maximum Y-factor of 2.93 was recorded, corresponding to a DSB noise temperature of 33.7 K, or around 2.8 times the photon noise at this LO frequency. We note from the pumped I-V curve that the photon step was bending downwards, indicating that the mixer had negative output impedance.

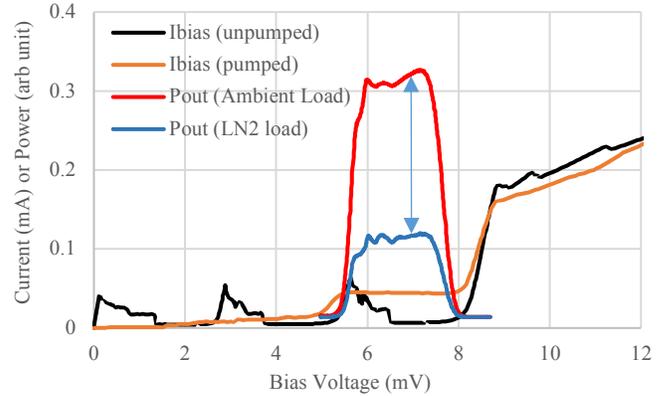


Fig. 6 Current Vs Voltage (I-V) and output Power Vs Voltage (P-V) curve of a wSMA-240 mixer when the mixer was pumped at an LO frequency of 250 GHz. The output power was measured at an IF of 9 GHz through a 30 MHz bandpass filter. A maximum Y-factor of 2.93 was obtained at 7.5 mV bias.

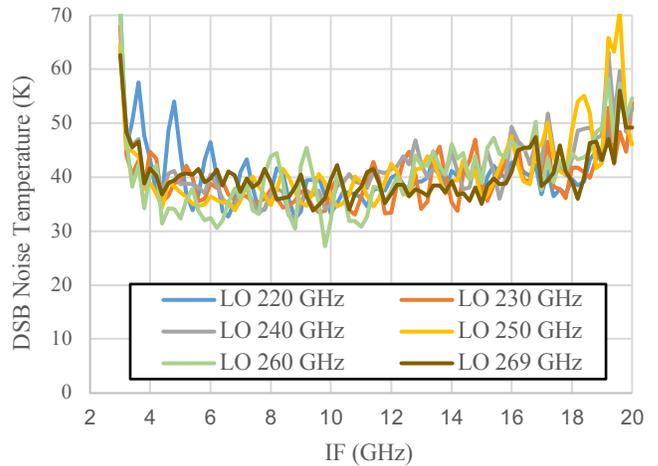


Fig. 7 Measured DSB receiver noise temperature of wSMA-240 mixer.

Using a YIG-tuned filter with a bandpass of 30 MHz, Y-factor was recorded between IF of 3 and 20 GHz, for various LO frequencies. The resulting DSB noise temperature is plotted in Fig. 7. On average, the noise temperature is around 40 K between IF of 3.5 and 19 GHz. A ripple with a period of 1 GHz is observed in the noise temperature plot Vs IF. This is caused by the standing wave given by (2) from the 15 cm long cable between the mixer and the isolator. One factor (2) does not account for is the finite isolation of the isolator, which couples with the finite input return loss of the LNA, to increase the magnitude of the standing wave.

VII. CONCLUSION

A 3-junction SIS mixer has been designed for the new wSMA-240 mixer, with very low mixer capacitance. By placing a wideband edge mode isolator between the mixer and the LNA, the receiver delivers low noise temperature for IF between 3.5 and 19 GHz, with LO spanning 210 and 270 GHz. The grounding inductance of the mixer is a limiting factor on

its instantaneous bandwidth. Changes to the IF circuitry will be introduced to reduce this inductance.

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