

Perform Coarse and Fine Correction with Less Costly Dual DCPs

Digitally Controlled Potentiometers (DCPs) find uses in a wide variety of systems for setting bias currents, variable reference voltages, and calibration settings. In industrial control and automation applications, high accuracy is a must. DCPs with 1024 taps are available, but for a few dollars instead of tens of cents. A dual, 32-tap, 50kΩ DCP is available for 64 cents (1k unit price). Can we use both of the DCPs in the package and reach similar performance to the 1024 tap?

Using the dual 32-tap DCP, the first inclination might be to simply stack one atop the other. This only doubles the effective resolution, and many DCPs aren't configured to allow that type of connection. By the way, it's common practice to span a DCP over a smaller voltage range to increase its resolution, but that's not the optimum solution here.

However, both DCPs can be used simultaneously. In fact, instead of a linear gain of 2 in resolution, it's possible to increase the resolution by 322, or 1024. Both DCPs will stretch between ground and the power supply. One will give coarse adjustment and the second will give fine adjustment. In other words, one provides the most significant 5 bits and the other provides the least significant 5 bits. The critical components are the weighted resistors within the summing circuit.

Referencing Figure 1, resistor R_{FINE} needs to be 32 times the value of R_{COARSE} (in our 32-tap potentiometer example). For various DCP tap values, the resistance needs to scale so that:
 $R_{FINE} = R_{COARSE} \times (\text{number of taps})$

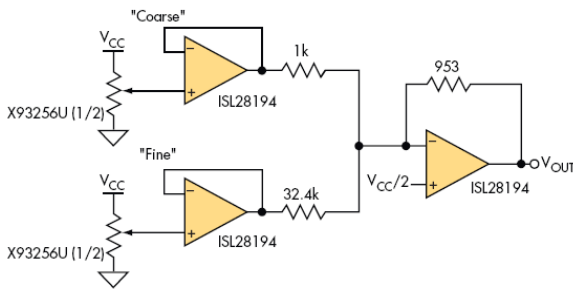


FIGURE 1. A DUAL 32-TAP DCP CAN PERFORM COARSE AND FINE TUNING. ALSO OFFERS A LESS EXPENSIVE SOLUTION TO THE 1024-TAP DCP

The feedback resistor of the summing op amp has a value of 953Ω (1% resistor value). This is the closest approximation below the parallel combination of 1kΩ and 32kΩ.

Realize that the resolution will not always increase by the square of the number of taps, as in this example. Aforementioned DCPs have 1024 taps. This coarse/fine setup should theoretically give a resolution equal to 20-bits, or 1,048,576 taps. On a 5V supply, the LSB would be equal to 4.7μV. Are op amps this accurate?

If we need absolute accuracy to DC, then the parameter of interest is offset voltage. For the ISL28194, the typical offset is 0.1mV (or 100μV), since it's a precision op amp. This will limit our achievable accuracy. If a more typical amp is chosen, the offset voltage might range from 5mV to 25mV. Because op amps are readily available with 5mV offsets, it follows that the maximum number of taps commercially available is 1024.

Note that the output will be the inversion of the sum of the two inputs. Figure 2 presents the output voltage data. An ideal circuit would show a linear response across all 1024 taps. While the circuit does exhibit some nonlinearities at the ends of the voltage spectrum, the linear range extends from about 100 to 900 taps in the coarse/ fine spectrum. Those 800 taps translate to 9.6 bits—a respectable output for a dual 32-tap DCP—and it definitely rivals the more expensive 1024-tap, 10-bit DCP solution.

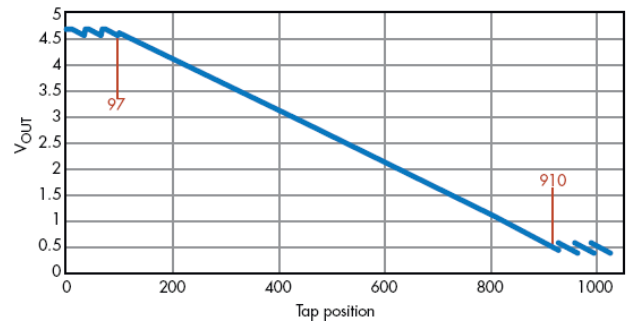


FIGURE 2. OUTPUT VOLTAGE VERSUS TAP VOLTAGE SHOWS 9.6 BITS OF ACCURACY

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Renesas Electronics America Inc.
1001 Murphy Ranch Road, Milpitas, CA 95035, U.S.A.
Tel: +1-408-432-8888, Fax: +1-408-434-5351

Renesas Electronics Canada Limited
9251 Yonge Street, Suite 8309 Richmond Hill, Ontario Canada L4C 9T3
Tel: +1-905-237-2004

Renesas Electronics Europe Limited
Dukes Meadow, Millboard Road, Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, SL8 5FH, U.K
Tel: +44-1628-651-700, Fax: +44-1628-651-804

Renesas Electronics Europe GmbH
Arcadiastrasse 10, 40472 Düsseldorf, Germany
Tel: +49-211-6503-0, Fax: +49-211-6503-1327

Renesas Electronics (China) Co., Ltd.
Room 1709 Quantum Plaza, No.27 ZhichunLu, Haidian District, Beijing, 100191 P. R. China
Tel: +86-10-8235-1155, Fax: +86-10-8235-7679

Renesas Electronics (Shanghai) Co., Ltd.
Unit 301, Tower A, Central Towers, 555 Langao Road, Putuo District, Shanghai, 200333 P. R. China
Tel: +86-21-2226-0888, Fax: +86-21-2226-0999

Renesas Electronics Hong Kong Limited
Unit 1601-1611, 16/F., Tower 2, Grand Century Place, 193 Prince Edward Road West, Mongkok, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: +852-2265-6688, Fax: +852-2886-9022

Renesas Electronics Taiwan Co., Ltd.
13F, No. 363, Fu Shing North Road, Taipei 10543, Taiwan
Tel: +886-2-8175-9600, Fax: +886-2-8175-9670

Renesas Electronics Singapore Pte. Ltd.
80 Bendemeer Road, Unit #06-02 Hyflux Innovation Centre, Singapore 339949
Tel: +65-6213-0200, Fax: +65-6213-0300

Renesas Electronics Malaysia Sdn.Bhd.
Unit 1207, Block B, Menara Amcorp, Amcorp Trade Centre, No. 18, Jln Persiaran Barat, 46050 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Tel: +60-3-7955-9390, Fax: +60-3-7955-9510

Renesas Electronics India Pvt. Ltd.
No.777C, 100 Feet Road, HAL 2nd Stage, Indiranagar, Bangalore 560 038, India
Tel: +91-80-67208700, Fax: +91-80-67208777

Renesas Electronics Korea Co., Ltd.
17F, KAMCO Yangjae Tower, 262, Gangnam-daero, Gangnam-gu, Seoul, 06265 Korea
Tel: +82-2-558-3737, Fax: +82-2-558-5338