dbx Type IV™ Conversion System

White Paper

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dbx® PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTS

The dbx Type IV™ Conversion System is a proprietary analog-to-digital (A/D) conversion process that combines the best attributes of digital conversion and analog recording processes to preserve the essence of the analog signal when it is converted to a digital format. dbx Type IV™ not only exploits the wide linear dynamic range of today's A/D converters, but also enhances it and extends the useable dynamic range beyond the linear range. By providing a logarithmic "Type IV™ Over Region" above the linear A/D range, we benefit from the extended high-level headroom that is inherent in analog recording without compromising the noise performance of the A/D conversion process.

Digital conversion and recording processes proliferated in the 1980's primarily due to the "cleaner" sound of digital versus analog, an advantage resulting from the comparatively wider linear dynamic range of digital. Anyone who is familiar with the technical specifications of digital equipment knows that the typical maximum signal-to-noise specifications for 16-bit systems is in the neighborhood of 90-something dB. Compare this to the typical signal-to-noise specifications for professional analog tape of about 55 dB without the aid of noise reduction and around 75 to 85 dB with noise reduction such as dbx Type I™ or Type II™ applied.

This seemingly tremendous signal-to-noise advantage of digital over analog would suggest that digital would become the unanimous choice for recording. For the most part this has occurred, not totally due to its signal-to-noise advantage, but as much due to the benefits of digital storage such as random access and the inherent ability to withstand degradation, unlike that of analog tape or LP's. In spite of the benefits of digital, no one in the audio world can refute the rediscovery of analog recording and tube gear that has occurred in the 90's, attributable to the quest for that "analog character" that is missing from digital recordings. This continued use of analog gear with modern digital systems brings to light a favorable characteristic of analog recording which those who abandoned analog and jumped on the digital bandwagon were either never aware of or simply took for granted.

Anyone who has ever used analog tape knows that you can "hit it hard" without destroying the recording. The printed specifications of analog tape don't take into account the practical headroom available. The max signal-to-noise specification of analog tape is measured by defining the "max" signal as the point where a given signal level and frequency produces a given percent Total Harmonic Distortion (THD)—typically the level at which a 1 kHz signal produces 3% THD. In actual use, the signal can easily exceed this "max" signal level by 5, 10, or even 15 dB on peaks, depending on the type of signal being recorded, without unacceptable artifacts. High signal levels can be tolerated (i.e. more headroom) at the expense of increased THD which, incidentally, is often desirable as an effect, evidenced by the renewed popularity of tube equipment.

The obvious conclusion is that analog recording actually has more useable dynamic range than the specifications seem to indicate. For example, let's say we're recording a kick drum. If analog tape measures 55 dB from the 3% THD point down to the RMS noise floor and the peaks of the kick drum exceed the 3% THD level by, say, 15 dB and it still sounds good, then we have 15 dB of extra useable headroom. Therefore, we end up with 70 dB of useable dynamic range. Throw in noise reduction and we push into the 90-something dB dynamic range territory of 16-bit digital. This explains why well-recorded analog master tapes make good-sounding CD's with no objectionable noise.

One main drawback of digital is that it inherently lacks this forgiving and beneficial characteristic of analog recording. Although digital conversion exhibits wide linear

dynamic range, when you run out of headroom for high-level signals, hard clipping or even ugly signal wrap-around occurs, not to mention that A/D converters have their own nasty side effects such as going unstable when their modulator is overdriven with high-level signals.

This shortcoming of digital conversion has drastically affected the way users operate their equipment. Users are paranoid of overdriving the converter input and end up recording at lower levels to ensure that there is ample headroom to allow for the large peaks that would ruin an otherwise perfect recording. This, of course, compromises signal-to-noise performance since the signal is now closer to the noise floor. Because users of digital equipment have to be extremely careful not to exceed 0 dB FS (full-scale), they must use peak-reading headroom meters. On the other hand, the forgiving nature of analog tape allows users of analog recording equipment the luxury of only needing to monitor the average level using VU meters, often having no peak indicators whatsoever. If only digital were more forgiving like analog, we could really exploit its wide dynamic range and more completely capture the essence of the musical performance.

Enter the dbx Type IV™ Conversion System. Like its related predecessor technologies—Type I™, Type II™, and Type III™—dbx Type IV™ succeeds in preserving the wide dynamic range of the original analog signal within a limited dynamic range medium. Whereas Type I™ and Type II™ expand the dynamic range of analog tape and other limited dynamic range media, and the simultaneous encode/decode process of Type III™ similarly expands the limited dynamic range through minimum-delay devices, Type IV™ breaks new ground by greatly enhancing the useable dynamic range of the analog-to-digital conversion process.

The dbx Type IV™ Conversion System combines proprietary analog and digital processing techniques to capture a much wider dynamic range than the A/D converter could by itself, preserving the maximum amount of information from the analog signal. This information is then encoded within the available bits of whichever A/D converter is used. This means that Type IV™ improves the performance of *any* A/D converter, from low-cost 16-bit to high-performance 24-bit! And no decoding is necessary beyond the conversion process!

As we have previously mentioned, digital systems have a wide linear region compared to analog tape and the dynamic range of A/D converters has improved significantly in recent years. The dbx Type IV™ Conversion System takes advantage of this and utilizes the top 4 dB of the A/D converter's linear dynamic range to create a logarithmic "overload region". This allows high-level transient signals passing far above the point where the overload region begins to be adequately represented in just 4 dB of the converter's dynamic range, whereas a typical A/D converter would clip. With Type IV™, you can *never* clip the A/D converter!

Fig. 1 illustrates this concept showing the level of the converted signal below and above the start of the overload region. The converted signal level is plotted along the Y-axis (vertical axis) of the plot vs. the level of the input signal along the X-axis (horizontal axis). The logarithmic mapping of the overload region begins 4 dB below 0 dB FS (full-scale) of the A/D converter. What this shows is that below -4 dB FS, in the linear region, the output signal is the same as the input signal. Above this, in the logarithmic region, high-level input signals get "mapped" into the top 4 dB of the A/D converter. This mapping is analogous to the signal compression effect that occurs when recording high-level signals onto analog tape.

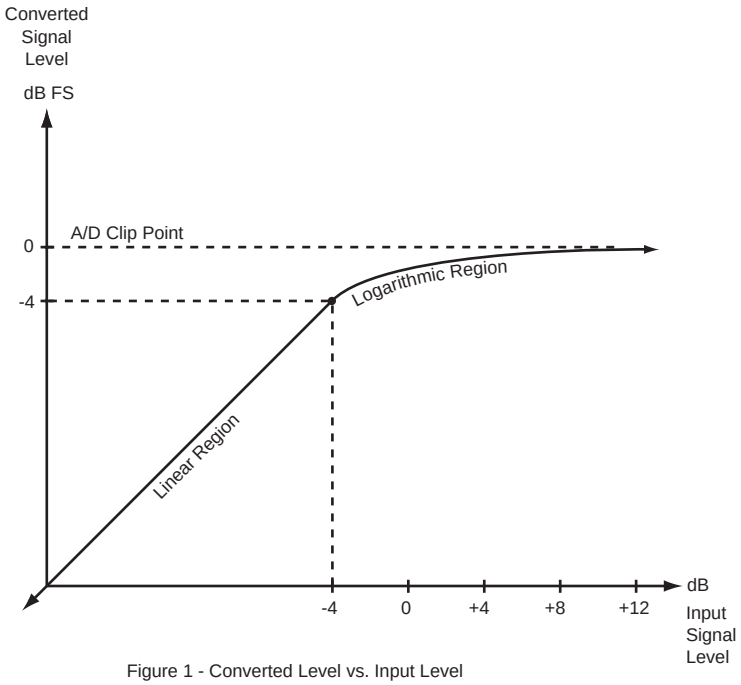


Figure 1 - Converted Level vs. Input Level

Fig. 2 illustrates the mapping function in a different way. Input levels are shown on the left of the graph, while converted levels are shown on the right. Notice the mapping of large signal excursions to the 4 dB "Type IV™ Over Region".

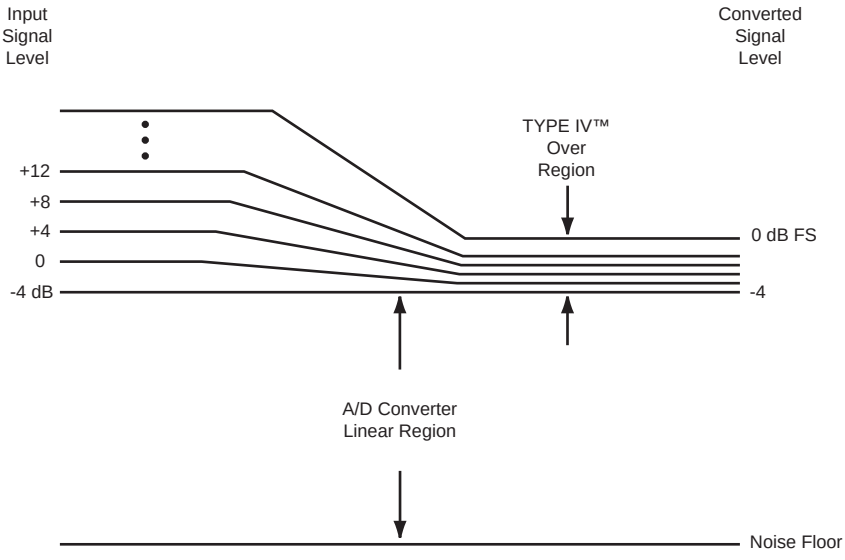


Figure 2 - Input Signal Levels Mapped to Type IV Over Region

One might question the validity of such an approach—trying to represent a lot of signal information within a smaller "space". The reason why this is not only valid but makes a whole lot of sense is that the digital codes in a converter are linear, or evenly-spaced, meaning that each consecutive code represents the same change in voltage of the input signal. This implies that half of the digital codes are used to represent input signals whose voltage level is below 1/2 of the full-scale A/D input voltage, while the other half of the codes are used to represent signals above 1/2 of the full-scale A/D input voltage. This seems reasonable until you realize that 1/2 of the full-scale input is only 6 dB below full-scale! So half of the codes are used to represent only the *top 6 dB* of signal information, while the other half are used to represent the *remaining 80 to 110 dB* of signal information, depending on the quality of the converter. It seems not only reasonable, but also desirable, to utilize the increased signal resolution afforded by this density of digital codes to represent more input dynamic range in this region.

Another advantage of the logarithmic mapping of our dbx Type IV™ Conversion System is that it preserves the high-frequency detail of the signal in the overload region. Figs. 3a through 3d illustrate what happens when you overload an A/D converter without Type IV™. Fig. 3a shows an input signal having both low-frequency and high-frequency components. When the signal overloads, or clips, (Fig. 3b) at the A/D converter, a disproportionate amount of high-frequency signal information is lost compared with the low-frequency information. The low and high-frequency components of the signal are separated in Fig. 3c to illustrate this more clearly. As you can see, the low frequency signal simply gets distorted but maintains most of its signal characteristics, while sections of the high-frequency signal are completely lost! With dbx Type IV™, its mapping preserves high-frequency signal information, as illustrated in Fig. 3d, since the signal is confined within the Type IV™ Over Region and never clips. The dashed line indicates the original input signal level. Below the Over Region no mapping occurs, while above this, mapping keeps all peaks of the signal below the A/D clip level, thus preserving the high-frequency content of the signal.

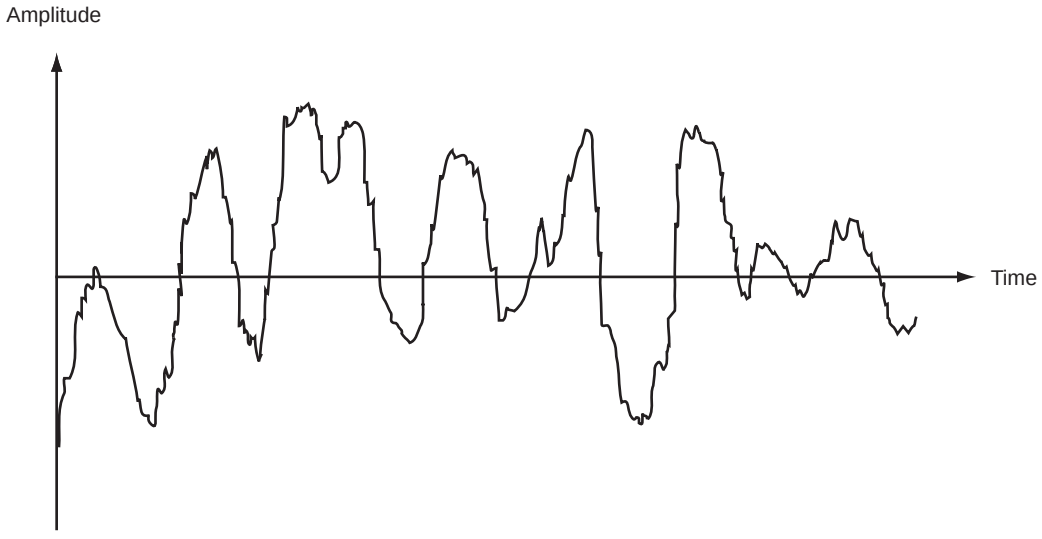


Figure 3a - Signal Having Low and High Frequency Content

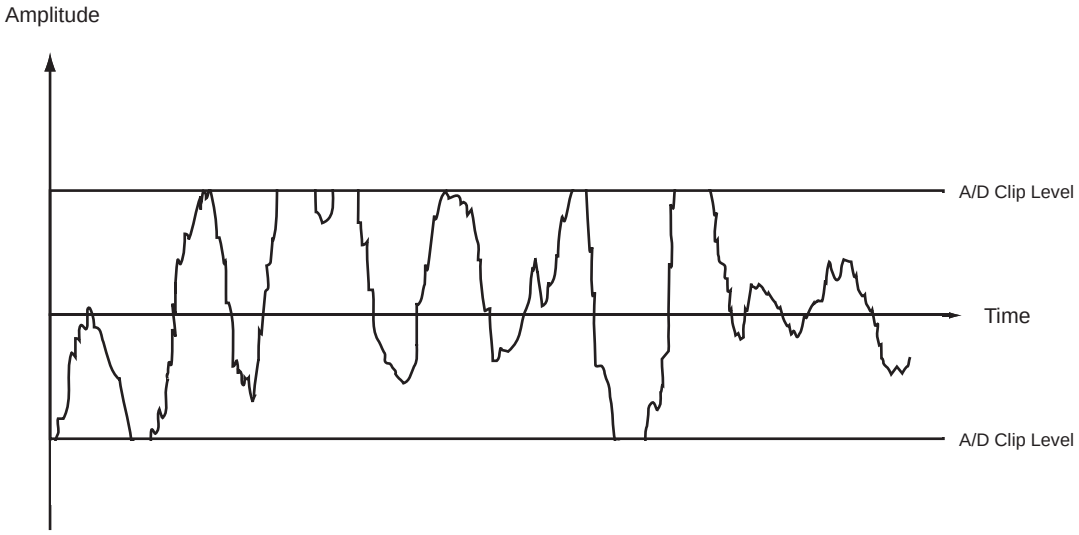


Figure 3b - Signal of Fig. 3a Going Beyond the A/D Clip Level

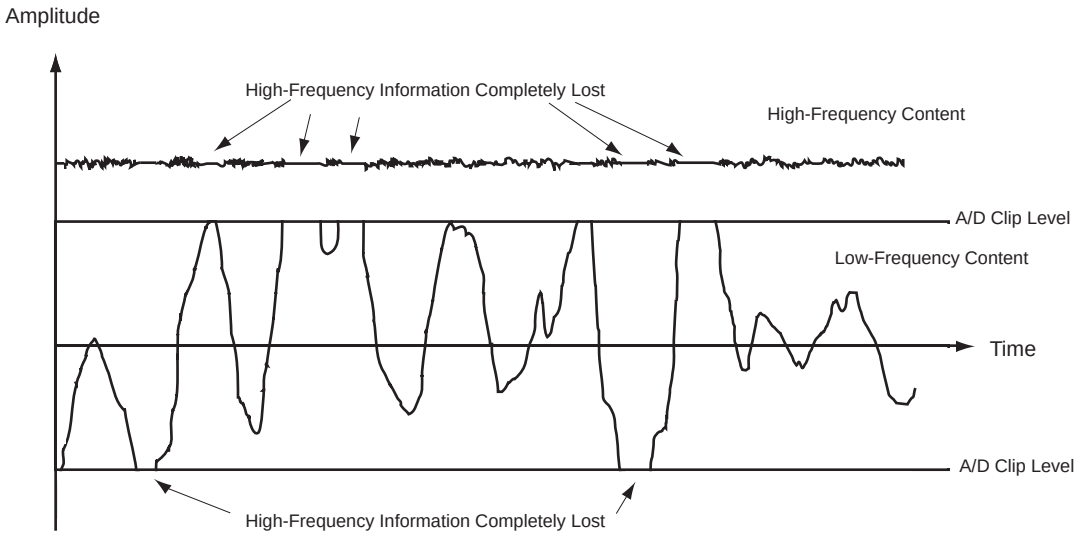


Figure 3c - Disproportionate Loss of High-Frequency Information Due to Clipping

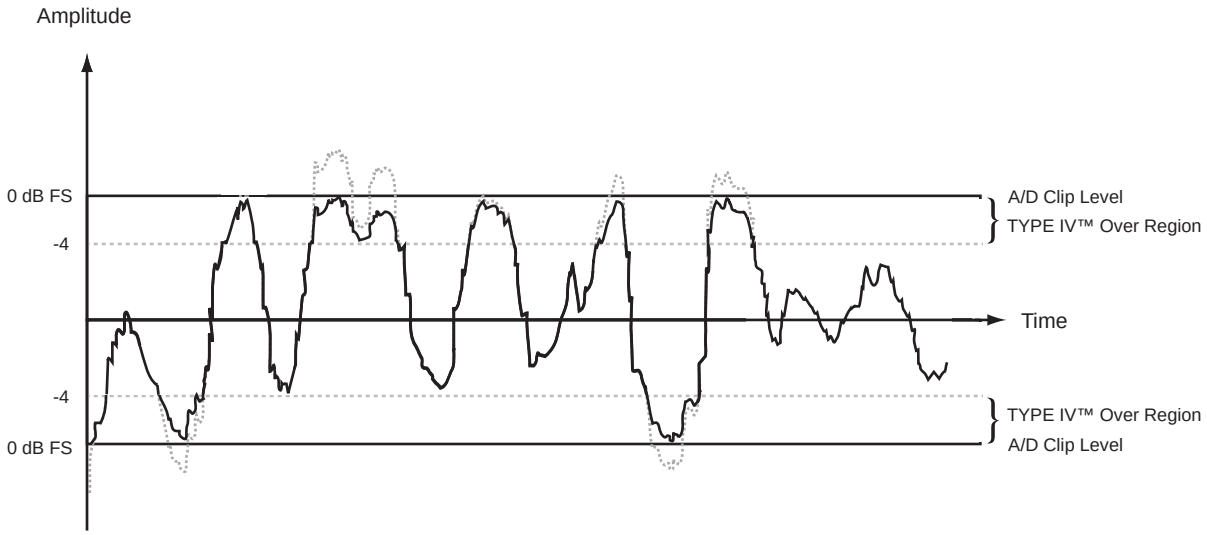


Figure 3d - Type IV Mapping Preserves High-Frequency Information

Now you're probably wondering, "What's the catch? I can't get something for nothing so what did I give up?" You may be worried that your A/D noise floor got 4 dB worse because we borrowed the top 4 dB of your converter. This is certainly a valid concern. Fortunately, we have the answer! Without going into the confidential technical details, by using our proprietary analog and digital Type IV™ processing, we reclaim the original A/D noise level! So what you get is free headroom!

The benefits of the dbx Type IV™ Conversion System can easily be heard by switching it in and out while listening to signals with high-level peaks captured in the Type IV™ Over Region. You will notice an obvious audible difference. With Type IV™ bypassed, you can't help notice the harsh, edgy sound of the A/D converter clipping. With Type IV™ enabled, those nasty artifacts disappear revealing a more open and natural sound. With Type IV™ enabled, you will get a more accurate and pure representation of the original wide-dynamic-range signal. You will absolutely agree that we really do give you "something for nothing". We give you peace of mind knowing that you never have to worry about clipping your A/D again! And when you listen to the noise floor of your A/D, you'll realize that we *never* compromise your noise performance with Type IV™!

The dbx Type IV™ Conversion System succeeds in combining the best of the analog and digital worlds to capture the truest essence and fullest dynamic range of audio signals. Who else but dbx would bring you this technology!

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