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Observation of Parametric Instability in Advanced LIGO

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Parametric instabilities have long been studied as a potentially limiting effect in high-power interferometric gravitational wave detectors. Until now, however, these instabilities have never been observed in a kilometer-scale interferometer. In this Letter, we describe the first observation of parametric instability in a gravitational wave detector, and the means by which it has been removed as a barrier to progress.

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Introduction.—Optomechanical interactions, the moving of masses by radiation pressure, are typically of such a tenuous nature that even carefully designed experiments may fail to observe them. In the extreme environment of a high-power interferometric gravitational wave detector, however, these effects arise spontaneously. This is true despite the fact that these instruments feature multikilogram optics [1], unlike the microgram or nanogram optics generally used in experiments which target such effects [2–5].

Hence, gravitational wave detectors provide an extraordinary platform from which to explore the optomechanical couplings which give rise to optical springs, optical cooling, ponderomotive squeezing, and quantum-mechanical entanglement, all with undeniably macroscopic objects [1,6–9]. These opportunities are not without cost; the
radiation pressure associated with high circulating power can destabilize interferometer alignment [10] and lead to parametric instabilities.

Since the seminal work of Braginsky et al. in 2001 [11], optical parametric instabilities have been extensively studied as a potential limit to high-power operation of interferometric gravitational wave detectors [12–41].

We report on the first observation of a self-sustaining parametric instability in a gravitational wave detector and the subsequent quenching of this instability. This observation, at the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (LIGO) Livingston Observatory (LLO) [42], is the culmination of more than a decade of theoretical calculation, numerical modeling, and laboratory-scale experimentation. Although reasonable agreement between theoretical prediction and observed parametric instabilities has been documented previously in dedicated experiments using MHz oscillators [14,41], this observation serves as confirmation that models which have been built to understand the phenomenon in the complex setting of a gravitational wave interferometer are substantially correct.

A wide variety of techniques have been suggested for overcoming parametric instabilities in gravitational wave detectors [43–49], most of which fall into a few notable categories: avoid instability by changing the optical gain of the fundamental field by the excited mechanical mode [31], actively damp mechanical modes as they become excited [48], and prevent instability by increasing the loss of the test mass mechanical modes with passive dampers [35,45,46,50]. The first of these techniques has been demonstrated and found to be effective at LLO.

Theory of Parametric Instability.—Parametric instabilities (PI) operate by transferring energy from the fundamental optical mode of the interferometer, which with nearly 1 MW of circulating power can be as much as 40 J, into an interferometer optic’s mechanical mode (see Fig. 1). Energy transfer takes place via the radiation pressure driven optomechanical interaction and the modulation of the fundamental field by the excited mechanical mode [31] (see Fig. 1).

The parametric gain for a given test mass mechanical mode is given by

\[ R_m = \frac{8\pi Q_m P_{\text{arm}}}{M\omega_m^2 c\lambda} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \text{Re}[G_n] B_{m,n}^2 \]  

(1)

(using the notation of Ref. [31], and correcting an error therein [51]). The fixed parameters used in Eq. (1) are: \( c \) the speed of light, \( \lambda \) the laser wavelength, \( M \) the mass of the optic, \( \omega_m \) the angular resonant frequency of mechanical mode with index \( m \), and \( B_{m,n} \) the overlap between mechanical mode \( m \) and optical mode \( n \). Parameters subject to manipulation are, the power stored in the interferometer arm cavities \( P_{\text{arm}} \), the quality factor of a given mechanical mode \( Q_m \), and the optical gain of the optical mode \( G_n \), of which \( \text{Re}[G_n] \) is the real part.

Clearly, the potential for instability grows with increasing power, since the parametric gain of all modes is proportional to \( P_{\text{arm}} \). Active and passive damping techniques for defusing PI operate by reducing the \( Q \) of an otherwise unstable mechanical mode, while avoidance techniques work by changing the optical gain \( G_n \) to prevent instability.

The \( e \)-fold growth time for an unstable mode is given by

\[ \tau_m = \frac{2Q_m}{\omega_m(R_m - 1)} \]  

(2)

Note that for \( R_m = 0 \), this gives a negative value equal to the usual decay time of a mechanical mode with frequency \( \bar{f}_m = \omega_m/2\pi \) and quality factor \( Q_m \). For values of \( R_m > 1 \), Eq. (2) gives a positive value, indicating exponential growth.

The circulating power level \( P_{\text{arm}} \) at which a mode becomes unstable is referred to as the threshold power \( \bar{P}_m \) for that mode and is found by rearranging Eq. (1) with \( R_m = 1 \) and \( P_{\text{arm}} = \bar{P}_m \). At threshold, the optomechanical interaction is putting energy into the mode at the same rate that it is being dissipated, so \( \tau_m \to \infty \).

Observed Parametric Instability.—Parametric instability was first observed in the Advanced LIGO detector recently installed at LLO (see Ref. [52] for detailed information about the detectors). The instability grew until it polluted the primary gravitational wave output of the detector by aliasing into the detection band and saturating detection electronics (see Fig. 2). The time scale for growth was long enough to allow for manual intervention (a reduction of the...
laser power input to the interferometer) before control was lost due to this saturation of the readout electronics. The test mass (TM) mechanical mode responsible for the instability was identified as the 15.54 kHz mode shown in Fig. 3. The higher-order mode spacing of the Advanced LIGO arm cavities is \( \frac{1}{C_{6}} \) kHz, and the optical resonance width is 80 Hz, such that a 3rd order transverse optical mode can provide energy transfer from the fundamental optical mode to this mechanical mode (see Figs. 1 and 3).

By measuring the \( e \)-folding growth and decay time of the excited acoustic mode as a function of circulating power in the interferometer arm cavities, we can compute the parametric gain \( R \) and mechanical mode quality factor \( Q \) as given in Eq. (2). Our measurements were performed by operating the interferometer above the threshold power to excite the TM mechanical mode and then reducing the power below the instability threshold and watching the mode amplitude decrease, as shown in Fig. 4.

The observed unstable mode has \( R = 2 \) with \( P_{\text{arm}} = 50 \) kW, and the associated mechanical mode has \( Q = 12 \times 10^6 \). This \( Q \) factor is in the range expected given similar measurements of Advanced LIGO test masses [48,53], and the parametric gain is as predicted by Eq. (1) for a high, but far from maximal value of \( G_n \).

While the 90% confidence limit for this mode is \( R = 11 \), as seen in Fig. 5, 5% of simulated values are higher than the observed value, and 1% have \( R > 100 \).

**Defusing Parametric Instability.**—Parametric instability depends on several potentially modifiable features of a gravitational wave detector, two of which can be exploited in Advanced LIGO without modifying the interferometer core optics.

First, instability requires that a test mass mechanical mode and an arm cavity optical mode have coincident resonant frequencies [i.e., \( G_n \) in Eq. (1) must be large at the mechanical mode frequency \( \omega_m \) for an optical mode with nonvanishing overlap \( B_{m,n} \)]. Through its effect on transverse mode spacing, changing the radius of curvature (ROC) of one of the test masses in the cavity affected by PI can remove any coincidence. Advanced LIGO arm...
FIG. 5 (color online). The maximum gain expected at full power, $P_{\text{arm}} = 800 \text{ kW}$, for all potentially unstable modes (90% confidence value for a single test mass). Since the mechanical mode frequencies and optics parameters are known with limited precision, the parametric gain of a particular mode cannot be computed exactly, and Monte Carlo methods must be used [31]. The “90% confidence maximum” shown here is the value for which 90% of the 342,881 Monte Carlo computations gave a lower gain. Notably, the observed unstable mode is the mode with the highest predicted parametric gain (marked with a green star), and the observed gain is about a factor of 3 higher than the value shown here ($R = 2$ at 50 kW, or $R = 32$ at 800 kW). This is not so much bad luck as a trials factor; there are four test masses and many potentially unstable modes, and the statistics shown in Fig. 7 confirm quantitatively that the observation of at least one unstable mode was to be expected.

In anticipation of PI, all Advanced LIGO test masses were outfitted with electrostatic actuators capable of damping mechanical modes (including the observed mode) associated with PI [48]. This method of damping TM mechanical modes has been demonstrated at MIT with a prototype Advanced LIGO optic, but has not yet been tested at LLO since the required feedback loop has not been implemented, and ROC changes were immediately available and decisively effective.

Several major periods of data taking are expected with Advanced LIGO at power levels below the design power [54]. Figure 7 shows the number of modes that are likely to be unstable as a function of circulating power in the interferometer.

If a manageable number of unstable modes is encountered, the combination of the above techniques will likely prove adequate, with ROC changes reducing the number of unstable modes and electrostatic actuators actively damping the remaining instabilities. If, however, the number of unstable modes becomes so large (at the final operating...
power, for instance, more than 40 modes are likely to be unstable) that the use of the electrostatic drives requires unreasonable human commissioning time or that the drive itself begins to saturate, a passive approach may be preferable. A broadband test mass $Q$ reduction, which simultaneously targets many potentially unstable modes, may be achieved by mounting small piezoelectric dampers on the test masses [53].

**Conclusions.**—Parametric instabilities, studied in great depth and feared as a limitation to the attainable operating powers of interferometric gravitational wave detectors, have been observed for the first time in an Advanced LIGO detector. The behavior of the observed instability was found to be largely in agreement with models of the effect, implying that no significant ingredients have been omitted in the theoretical analysis.

Furthermore, the observed PI has been quenched by thermally tuning the optical resonance of the interferometer away from the resonance of the associated mechanical mode. This approach to PI, while sufficient for a small number of potentially unstable modes, may not be sufficient at higher operating powers where many modes are available for runaway excitation.

Thanks to many years of theoretical and experimental work on parametric instabilities, now informed by the observations described in this Letter, the challenge faced by high-power interferometric gravitational wave detectors is clear and well understood. While the necessary mitigation techniques are not trivial, a suitable combination of thermal tuning, active damping of excited mechanical modes, and passive reduction of mechanical mode $Q$ factors is expected to be sufficient to allow Advanced LIGO to operate stably at full power.

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