IJARSCT

International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology

International Open-Access, Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Multidisciplinary Online Journal

ISSN: 2581-9429

Volume 6, Issue 11, May 2026

Impact Factor: 8.2

Beyond the Straight Line: High-Precision Diversion of A Monochromatic Beam

Vishal K. Pandit[1], Rushikesh Dnyaneshwar Wadane[2], Vishal Sominath Wabale[3], Akash Zende[4] , Zarekar Sarthak[5]

[12345]Department of Engineering Physics

Adsul Technical Campus, Chas

Abstract: *We report the design, realization, and experimental validation of a magnetically levitated fast-steering mirror system capable of diverting a monochromatic laser beam with unprecedented angular precision. The actuator exploits a frictionless active magnetic suspension that completely eliminates mechanical hysteresis, while the mirror tilt is measured with an optical lever using a quadrant photodiode and a single-mode 532 nm probe beam. Closed-loop digital control provides an angular resolution of*

0.8 nrad Hz−1/2 for the mirror tilt, corresponding to a beam-steering resolution of 1.6 nrad Hz−1/2 above 10 Hz. The mirror can deflect the monochromatic beam over a full range of ±2 mrad with a static non-linearity below 0.01 % and a long-term pointing stability of ±2 nrad over one hour. Step-response measurements show that a 20 nrad beam angle step is settled within 5 ms with less than 2 % overshoot. A detailed noise budget confirms that the measured sensitivity is close to the fundamental limits imposed by laser relative intensity noise and seismic disturbances. This work demonstrates a viable path to active beam steering with sub-nanoradian control, enabling applications in free-space optical communication, gravitational-wave detection, and quantum-optical experiments where the straight-line propagation of light must be adjusted with extreme fidelity.

Keywords: beam steering, magnetic levitation, fast-steering mirror, optical lever, nanoradian pointing, monochromatic beam, quadrant photodiode

I. INTRODUCTION

Precise diversion of a monochromatic light beam is a critical function in numerous high-technology fields, including intersatellite laser links, coherent beam combining, precision metrology, and quantum state manipulation [1–3]. In many of these applications the required angular stability and resolution are of the order of a few nanoradians over a dynamic range of several milliradians. Conventional fast-steering mirrors (FSMs) based on piezoelectric actuators and flexural bearings suffer from hysteresis, creep, and friction-induced nonlinearities that limit their repeatability to typically a few hundred nanoradians [4,5]. Even the most advanced flexure-guided FSM designs exhibit open-loop hysteresis of several parts in 10^3, making sub-nanoradian open-loop operation impossible without sophisticated feed-forward compensation.

Magnetic levitation offers a compelling alternative because it replaces mechanical contact by actively controlled electromagnetic forces, thereby removing static friction and virtually eliminating hysteresis [6,7]. Combined with an ultra-sensitive angular sensor, a magnetically levitated mirror can be positioned with accuracy limited only by the sensor noise and the control electronics. Over the past decade, several groups have demonstrated magnetically suspended mirrors for high-precision beam steering, achieving angular noise floors down to 10 nrad Hz−1/2 [8,9]. However, further reduction of the noise floor is required for next-generation missions such as the Laser Interferometer Space Antenna (LISA) or deep-space optical communication terminals, where pointing errors must be kept below 1 nrad Hz−1/2 [10,11].

DOI: 10.48175/568

In this paper we present a magnetically levitated fast-steering mirror that, together with a tailored optical lever and a high-performance digital controller, achieves a beam-steering resolution of 1.6 nrad Hz−1/2 over a ±2 mrad range. The system operates with a 532 nm monochromatic source, ensuring freedom from chromatic aberrations in the steering optics and allowing a simple, robust angle sensor based on a quadrant photodiode. We provide a full theoretical model of the actuator dynamics, a detailed noise budget of the optical sensor, and an extensive set of experimental characterizations. The results demonstrate that frictionless magnetic suspension can indeed bring beam-steering precision into the sub-nanoradian regime, truly going "beyond the straight line" in the control of optical paths.

II. SYSTEM DESIGN AND MODELING

2.1. Magnetically Levitated Fast Steering Mirror

The core of the beam-diversion system is a single-axis (tip-tilt) moving-magnet actuator whose cross-section is sketched in Fig. 1. A 10 mm-diameter, 1 mm-thick fused-silica mirror is bonded to a lightweight aluminum holder that carries two SmCo permanent magnets. The assembly is levitated between two stationary electromagnetic cores that provide passive centering stiffness and active torque generation. The mirror is designed to rotate about its center, so the optical path length does not change to first order. The rigid-body equation of motion for the mirror angular coordinate θ (tilt angle) is

$$J \ddot{\theta} + c \dot{\theta} + K\theta \, \theta = Kt \, i + \tau ext,$$

where J is the moment of inertia about the rotation axis, c the viscous damping coefficient (dominated by eddy-current losses in the vacuum enclosure), Kθ the magnetic spring stiffness, Kt the torque constant, i the coil current, and τext any external disturbance torque. With the chosen geometry and materials we calculated J = 1.2 × 10−9 kg•m². Finite-element analysis of the magnetic circuit gave Kθ = 15 N•m•rad−1 and Kt = 0.05 N•m•A−1. The resulting undamped mechanical resonance is fn = (2π)−1 √(Kθ/J) ≈ 17.8 kHz, well above the desired closed-loop bandwidth, which simplifies control design. The actuator is operated in a vacuum chamber at 10−4 mbar to eliminate air damping and refractive index fluctuations along the optical lever path.

[Figure 1 - Cross-section of the magnetically levitated tip-tilt actuator]

Fig. 1 Schematic cross-section of the moving-magnet fast-steering mirror (not to scale).

2.2. Optical Tilt Sensing

The mirror tilt is sensed by an optical lever (Fig. 2). A small fraction of the monochromatic 532 nm beam (or a separate dedicated probe laser) is expanded to a 1 mm diameter, directed onto the mirror at near-normal incidence, and the reflected beam passes through a plano-convex lens of focal length f = 200 mm. A quadrant photodiode (QPD, Hamamatsu S5980) is placed exactly in the back focal plane of the lens. A mirror tilt θ produces an angular deviation of 2θ in the reflected beam, resulting in a lateral spot displacement on the QPD of

$$\Delta x = 2f\,\theta.$$

The QPD output voltages are processed by a low-noise transimpedance amplifier (gain Rf = 104 V/A, bandwidth 100 kHz) and digitized at 20 kS/s. The differential signal Vdiff = (VA+VD)−(VB+VC) is proportional to the spot displacement, while the sum signal VΣ is used to normalize against laser power fluctuations. The small-signal sensitivity is S = ∂Vdiff/∂x = (4 √(2/ π) ℜ Pdet Rf)/w0, where ℜ = 0.4 A/W is the photodiode responsivity, Pdet = 1 mW the total optical power on the QPD, and w0 = 0.5 mm the 1/e² spot radius. This yields S ≈ 2.55 × 104 V/m. The corresponding angle sensor scale factor is 2fS ≈ 1.02 × 104 V/rad.

Table I breaks down the principal noise contributions referred to the measured tilt angle. The total equivalent angle noise density is 0.80 nrad/ √ Hz, giving a beam-steering noise density (factor 2) of 1.6 nrad/ √ Hz.

TABLE I
MIRROR-TILT NOISE BUDGET AT 10 HZ

Noise source	Contribution (nrad $\mathrm{Hz}^{-1/2}$)
Shot noise	0.014
Amplifier current & voltage noise	0.22
Laser RIN (–130 dBc/Hz)	0.31
Seismic (after isolation)	0.70
Total (RSS)	**0.80**

[Figure 2 - Optical lever layout]

Fig. 2 Optical tilt sensing: expanded beam, steering mirror, focusing lens and quadrant photodiode.

2.3. Digital Control Architecture

The actuator is controlled by a discrete-time PID controller implemented on a field-programmable gate array (FPGA) with a sampling rate of 20 kHz. The control law is

$$i(z) = \left(K_p + K_i T_s/(1-z^{-1}) + K_d (1-z^{-1})/T_s \right) [\theta_{ref}(z)-\theta(z)],$$

where $T_s = 50$ µs, and $\theta(z)$ is the angle estimated from the optical lever. Two second-order notch filters are placed at 17.8 kHz and at the first structural mode of the mirror holder (23 kHz) to prevent spillover instability. The controller gains were tuned to give a closed-loop bandwidth of 1.5 kHz with a phase margin of 55°. An overall block diagram is shown in Fig. 3.

[Figure 3 - Digital control block diagram]

Fig. 3 Block diagram of the FPGA-based PID controller with anti-aliasing and notch

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