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Development of RSFQ circular memories for arbitrary AC waveform synthesisers

Abstract - We present the designs of circular Rapid Single Flux Quantum (RSFQ) shift registers which are to be used as local memories in an arbitrary AC waveform synthesiser for metrology applications and are based on the results of different optimisation approaches. It was possible to apply two different optimisation approaches to the circuits for comparison of the outcome. The first approach is based on fast logic simulations and results in 22 Josephson junctions per double-bit register stage, operating at a maximum clock frequency of 12 GHz at the value of 0.75 of the optimum global bias, and at 17 GHz and 21 GHz at the bias points 1.0 and 1.25, respectively. The second optimisation approach is based on solving the corresponding integro-differential equations and results in 11 junctions per double-bit stage at a maximum clock frequency of 17.6 GHz for the same value of the Stewart-McCumber parameter with bias current margins of $\pm 30\%$, which should be compared with the maximum operating frequency at the bias point of 0.75 of the logic simulation approach.

1. Introduction

Recently, a concept for on-chip integrated driving RSFQ circuitry for a pulse-driven programmable Josephson voltage standard has been introduced and developed [1], [2]. The purpose of this device is to synthesise arbitrary AC waveforms for metrology applications. One of its basic features is on-chip digitising of the desired waveform and its consequent synthesis by means of Josephson junction arrays. Key modules are circular shift registers which are used as local memories. The SFQ pulses delivered at the output of the registers are doubled and converted to voltage pulses by SFQ/DC interfaces, and then amplified by voltage drivers. To drive large Josephson junction arrays, the output of the voltage drivers has to be further amplified by semiconductor circuitry. The design of and the experimental results for voltage drivers have recently been reported in [3] and have been further improved in most recent experiments. The basic structure of the circular memory has been presented in [2] and [4]. In the following, the latest results of further developments of RSFQ circular memory devices will be presented.

2. Design approaches

The shift registers under development are of the standard z^{-1} -register type [5]. In this configuration, the data line of the register provides two simultaneous modes of SFQ pulse propagation, i.e., in co-flow and in counter-flow to the pulse propagation across the clock line. In the co-flow branch, to provide sufficient time delay, several buffer junctions are inserted between adjacent memorising cells in order to avoid racing conditions in the clock and in the data paths. The counter-flow branch does not need such delays due to the low complexity of the memorising cells and the consequent absence of racing conditions in counter-flow clocking.

Two approaches were used in the optimisation of the circular shift registers: a *physical-based* simulation approach and a *logic-based* one.

The *physical simulation approach* is an optimisation procedure based on the solving of the integro-differential equations describing the dynamics of Josephson junctions, which implies the exact simulation of the whole circuit in the time domain. In our case it is performed by means of PSCAN software [6] which is capable of simulating small- and medium-sized circuits with Josephson junctions. With increasing circuit complexity, it becomes time-inefficient due to the complexity of the equations describing the whole circuit. For higher-complexity circuits, the application of the *logic simulation approach* becomes more efficient.

The *logic simulation approach* of RSFQ circuits is based on the technique of extracting the circuit *timings* from physical simulations of the circuits (critical timings and output delays), and on their consequent utilisation in logic simulation with the help of Hardware Description Language (e.g. VHDL or Verilog [7]). *Critical timings* are the restricted delays between incoming signals at different circuit inputs, *output delays* are the delays between the incoming signal and the corresponding output signal; for details see [8]. This approach has been adapted for RSFQ design from semiconductor digital design and becomes increasingly popular among different RSFQ design groups due to the resulting fast turnaround of the design process [9], [10].

The set of basic circuits of which every complex RSFQ device is composed and which is used in the logic approach, represents the *Standard Cells Library*. These cells are optimised for acceptable parameter margins and for matching each other, i.e. in all test benches (standalone - in the surroundings of standard Josephson transmission lines (JTLs), and in connections with other cells of the library) each cell has parameter margins not smaller than the accepted fabrication-tolerant set. We optimise the circuits for variations of the global bias current $XI = \pm 30\%$, the global inductance $XL = \pm 40\%$, the global critical current density $XJ = \pm 25\%$, the individual junctions' critical currents $XJ_i = \pm 30\%$, individual bias currents $XI_i = \pm 30\%$ and individual inductances $XL_i = \pm 40\%$. Also, the spread of each output delay in all test benches must not be higher than $\pm 5\%$ at each of the three global bias points $XI = 0.75, 1.0$ and 1.25 . This is achieved by constructing all cells in such a way that at all of their inputs and outputs, buffer junctions (single-junction standard JTLs) are inserted additionally by which the cores of the cells are separated effectively from the environment [8]. This results in stable operation margins, independent of the load, and stable output delays.

An example of the standard RS flip-flop optimised in the logic framework and utilised in the shift registers under development is presented in Fig. 1. A standard JTL is added also at the clock input of each clocked logic cell, as the clock tree is based on the splitters which are designed without an output buffer junction in order to reduce signal propagation delay via the clock-tree. The addition of one further junction at the clock input of the cell introduces, on the other hand, a less crucial delay or no delay at all to the clock cycle in most of the complex circuit architectures due to the RSFQ-inherent capability of deep pipelining, see, for example, ref. [11].

Since the logic simulation is not based on the solving of the corresponding integro-differential equations, it is by a factor of some tens faster than the physical one. The disadvantage of this approach is, however, the increased number of Josephson junctions due to the presence of buffer junctions in each standard cell. This results in up to twice the lowest number of junctions required to construct the circuit, and also in a reduced maximum speed of the device. Thus, higher speed and lower

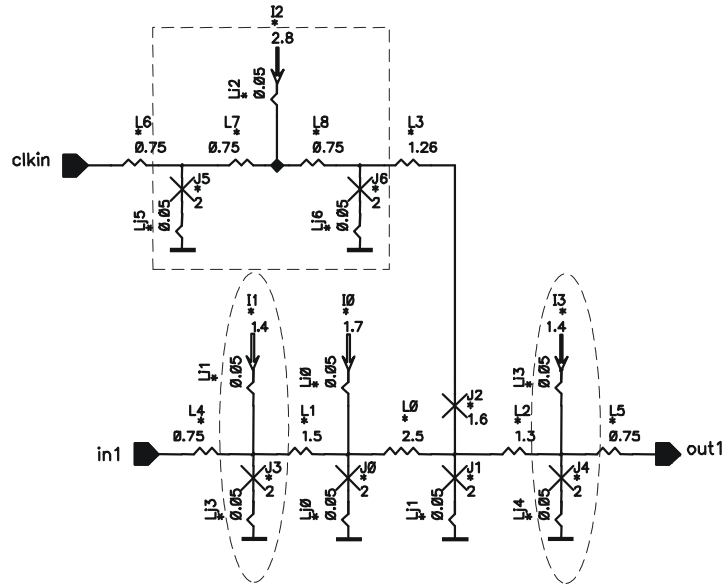


Fig. 1. RS flip-flop from the Standard Cells Library. Dashed areas show buffer junctions.

complexity are sacrificed for a fast turnaround of the design cycle. In the case of medium-sized circuits (up to 100 junctions it is still possible to simulate by means of the physical simulator), there is still a trade-off between both approaches. For large circuits (complex-stage systolic arrays, large Application-Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs)), physical simulation is virtually impossible and the logic simulation approach becomes the only acceptable one.

As the circular shift registers under development can be considered as medium-sized circuits, it is still possible to simulate the whole structure by means of the physical simulator. Therefore, both approaches were used for circuit optimisation, both resulting in different numbers of Josephson junctions per stage and different operation speeds, respectively.

3. Logic simulation approach

Logic optimisation of circular shift registers was performed on the basis of the Standard Cells Library developed at Chalmers University of Technology [12]. All the cells in the library are optimised at a value of the Stewart-McCumber parameter of $\beta_C=2$. This library is not complete as it was developed for a specific ASIC, hence one more basic element that is required for the circular shift register was optimised and added to the library, i.e., the element of a DC current-controlled switch, see Fig. 2. It enables two modes of operation depending on the control current I_1 : data rotating in the register and resetting the register to the zero state/loading new data.

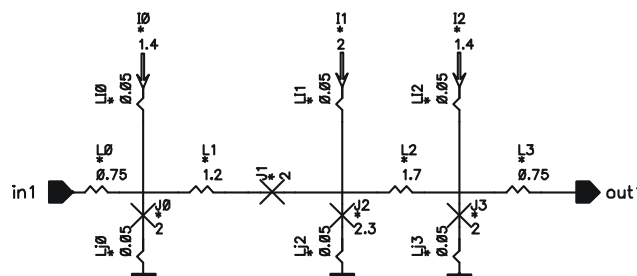


Fig. 2. DC current-controlled switch, optimised for the Standard Cells Library.

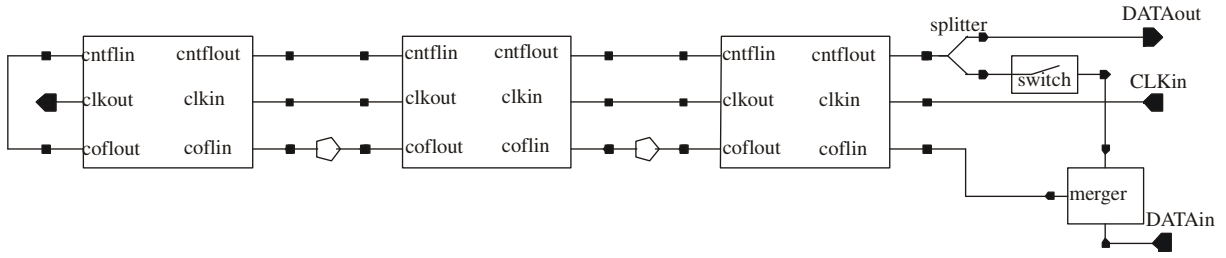
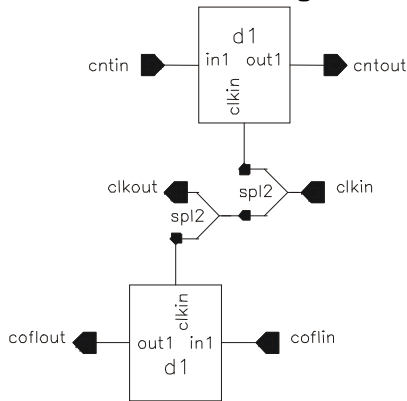


Fig. 3. Block diagram of the circular shift register (3 double-bit stages) used in logic optimisation.

Fig. 3 shows a block diagram for the logic optimisation approach of the shift register. Its double-bit stage consists of two splitters in a clock line and two RS flip-flops (d1 in Standard Cells Library) per stage, see Fig. 4. Delays for avoiding racing conditions in a co-flow line (standard JTL lines, shown as circles in Fig. 3) are optimised in this approach separately in VHDL by adjusting the number of the JTL stages and the values of β_C , resulting in a 4-junction standard JTL with $\beta_C=1.04$.

The values of the maximum clock frequency f of the shift register at three basic global bias current points resulting from the optimisation are presented in Table I (The clock frequency f corresponds to the technology parameters of the PTB-4- μm Nb SIS fabrication process with a critical current density of $j_C=1\text{kA}/\text{cm}^2$ and a characteristic voltage of $V_C=250\mu\text{V}$ [13]). The limiting factor for the frequency performance of the circuit appears to be the delay of the data path between the last and the first bit throughout the switch and the merger, see Fig. 3.



XI	f (GHz)
0.75	12
1.0	17
1.25	21

Fig. 4. Schematic diagram of a single stage of the circular shift register.

Table I. Maximum operation frequencies f at different basic global bias current points XI (logic optimisation).

The shift registers were designed in configurations with 32- and 8-double-bit stages (64 and 16 bits, correspondingly), see Fig. 5. One regular stage comprises 22 junctions and has a size of $560 \times 103 \mu\text{m}^2$; the size of the 32-stage version core is $560 \times 3500 \mu\text{m}^2$.

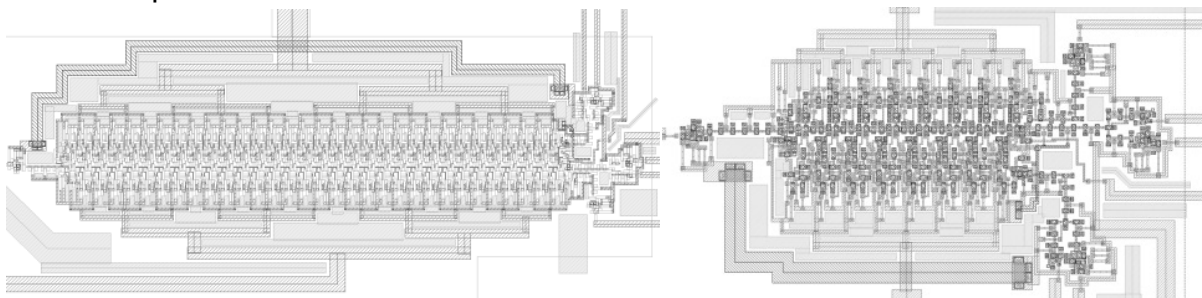


Fig. 5. Design of 64-bit (left) and 16-bit (right) circular shift registers based on the Standard Cells Library.

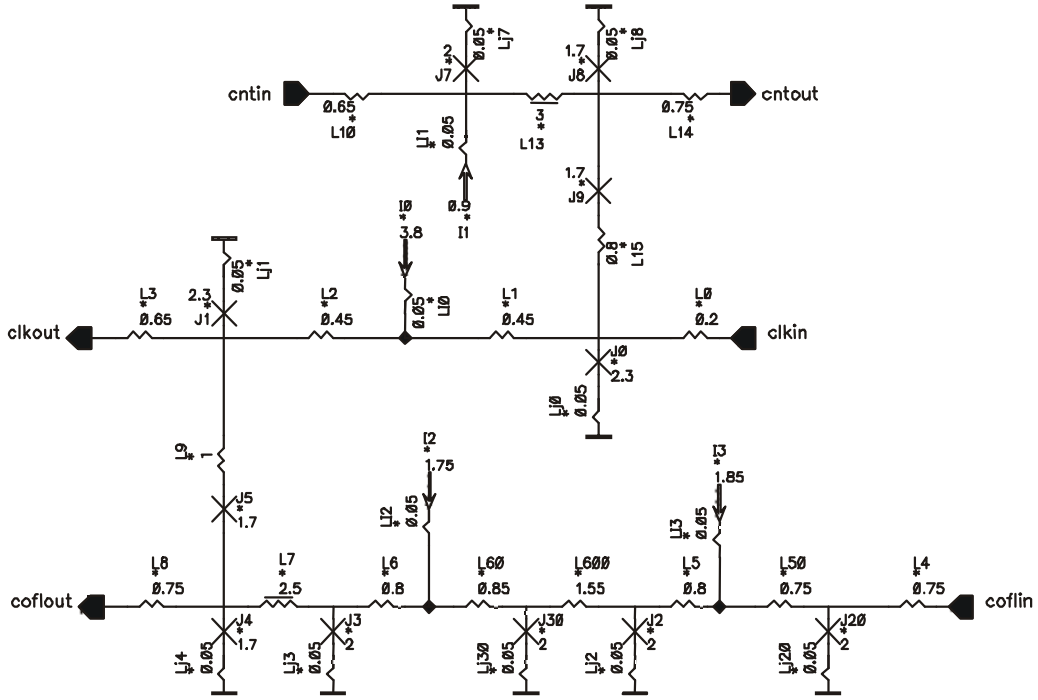


Fig. 6. Schematic diagram of one regular stage of the circular shift register optimised by physical simulations.

4. Physical simulation approach

The circular shift register optimised only by physical simulations comprises 11 Josephson junctions per regular double-bit stage, including the co-flow branch data-input delay, see Fig. 6. It was optimised for two values of the Stewart-McCumber parameter, $\beta_C = 1$ and $\beta_C = 2$. Due to the fact that there are no buffer junctions in this approach, the merger and the switch circuits have a reduced number of junctions compared to the previous approach. Since control of the circuit switching as described in the standard sfqhdl script is not always sufficient to ensure the correct operation of the whole circuit [14], a modification of the well-known technique of control check-sums was incorporated into the sfqhdl script of the shift registers and applied during the optimisation.

The circuit optimisation was performed incrementally, first on the 3 double-bit stage device, then on the one comprising 6, 12 and 16 stages. A decrease of the margins for the global bias current and the critical current density by about 2 to 6% during the transition between the first three iterations was corrected by a slight adjustment of the parameters. These corrections did not reduce the margins of the registers with a lower number of stages. During the transition to the 16-stage version these margins decreased by values of 1 to 2% only which, in turn, leads to the estimation that a further increase in the circuit complexity will not decrease the margins by more than 2 to 3% in total, assuming the first target of 64 stages.

The obtained maximum operation frequencies for the corresponding values of β_C , assuming $\pm 30\%$ margins on global bias, are presented in Table II. These values should be compared to those from the logic optimisation approach at the bias point value of 0.75 of optimum. The maximum frequencies at the optimum bias point are higher, but they are not used during physical optimisation; one can guess these values from the dependence of the maximum operation frequency for the logic approach, it should be virtually the same for both approaches, considering similar

β_C	f (GHz)
1	14.6
2	17.6

Table II. Maximum operation frequencies f at the global bias current point 0.75 of optimum value for different values of the Stewart-McCumber parameter β_C (physical optimisation).

architecture [15]. It can be seen from Tables I and II that a circuit optimised by physical simulation operates at higher speed even at lower values for β_C , due to the lower number of junctions. In this approach, the clock frequency was limited by the different relative stretching of the signal propagation delays across the clock and data paths in the co-flow branch, with global bias.

The circuits were designed for fabrication in configurations of 128-bit (64 double-bit stages) and 32-bit (16 double-bit stages) shift registers, see Fig. 7. One regular stage has a size of $370 \times 80 \mu\text{m}^2$; the 128-bit device has a size of $370 \times 5400 \mu\text{m}^2$. The circuits were designed and fabricated with the same technology process as those described in the previous section [13].

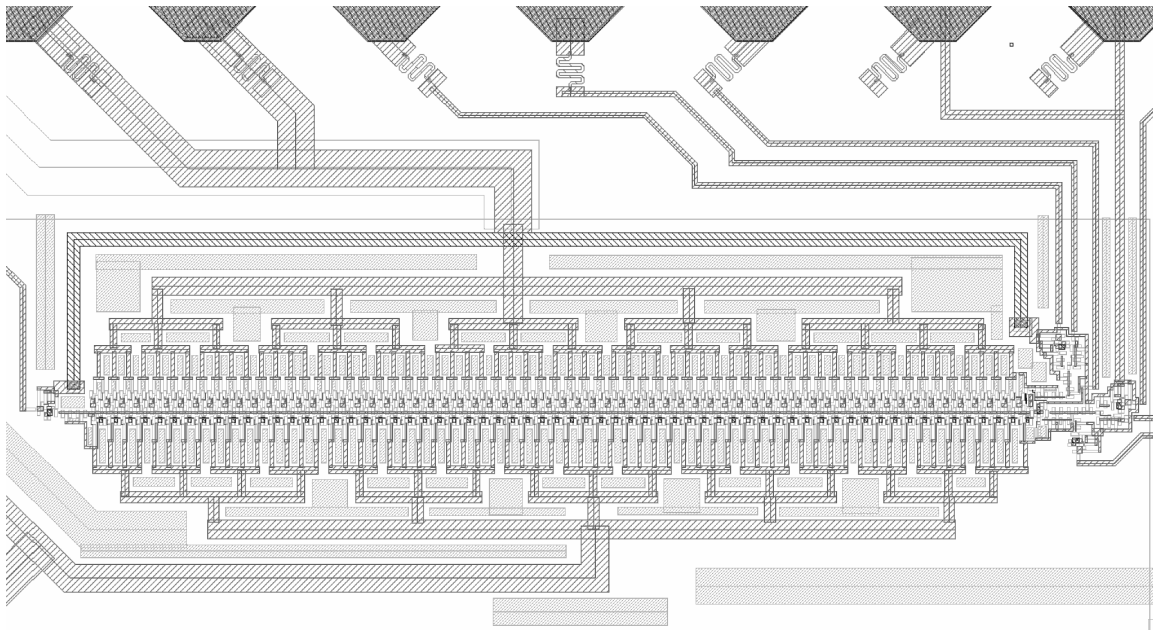


Fig. 7. Design of a 128-bit circular shift register optimised by physical simulations.

5. Conclusion

We have designed RSFQ circular shift registers for application in arbitrary AC waveform synthesisers. They were optimised within two different design frameworks according to a logic-based simulation approach and a physical-based one. The logic approach, on the one hand, resulted in a higher number of Josephson junctions (22 junctions per double-bit stage) and a lower speed (12 GHz at the bias point value of 0.75 of the optimum), which meant sacrificing higher speed and lower complexity for achieving a fast design cycle. The physical approach, on the other hand, took about 20 times longer but resulted in only 11 junctions per double-bit stage and a maximum operating frequency of 17.6 GHz for the same value of β_C at the same bias point value. The fabrication yield of these approaches is under investigation.

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