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Performance and Characterization

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A 2-D Ultrasound Transducer With Front-End ASIC and Low Cable Count for 3-D Forward-Looking Intravascular Imaging: Performance and Characterization

Jovana Janjic, Mingliang Tan, Verya Daeichin, Emile Noothout, Chao Chen, Zhao Chen, Zu-Yao Chang, Robert H. S. H. Beurskens, Gijs van Soest, Antonius F. W. van der Steen, Martin D. Verweij, Member, IEEE, Michiel A. P. Pertijs, Senior Member, IEEE, and Nico de Jong, Member, IEEE

Abstract—Intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) is an imaging modality used to visualize atherosclerosis from within the inner lumen of human arteries. Complex lesions like chronic total occlusions require forward-looking IVUS (FL-IVUS), instead of the conventional side-looking geometry. Volumetric imaging can be achieved with 2-D array transducers, which present major challenges in reducing cable count and device integration. In this work, we present an 80-element lead zirconium titanate matrix ultrasound transducer for FL-IVUS imaging with a front-end application-specific integrated circuit (ASIC) requiring only four cables. After investigating optimal transducer designs, we fabricated the matrix transducer consisting of 16 transmit (TX) and 64 receive (RX) elements arranged on top of an ASIC having an outer diameter of 1.5 mm and a central hole of 0.5 mm for a guidewire. We modeled the transducer using finite-element analysis and compared the simulation results to the values obtained through acoustic measurements. The TX elements showed uniform behavior with a center frequency of 14 MHz, a -3-dB bandwidth of 44%, and a transmit sensitivity of 0.4 kPa/V at 6 mm. The RX elements showed center frequency and bandwidth similar to the TX elements, with an estimated receive sensitivity of 3.7 pV/Pa. We successfully acquired a 3-D FL image of three spherical reflectors in water using delay-and-sum beamforming and the coherence factor method. Full synthetic-aperture acquisition can be achieved with frame rates on the order of 100 Hz. The acoustic characterization and the initial imaging results show the potential of the proposed transducer to achieve 3-D FL-IVUS imaging.

Index Terms—Forward looking (FL), front-end application-specific integrated circuit (ASIC), intravascular ultrasound (IVUS), piezoelectrical transducer.

I. INTRODUCTION

ISCHEMIC heart disease is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide [1], caused by reduced blood flow in the coronary arteries that supply the heart. The development of atherosclerotic plaques within the coronary arteries leads to either a gradual narrowing of the free lumen or sudden blockage due to plaque rupture and subsequent thrombosis [2], [3]. Intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) is nowadays employed to assess the pathophysiology of atherosclerosis from within the vessel lumen, and to guide minimally invasive therapeutic interventions with stents [4]. IVUS is an imaging modality that uses a small catheter (approximately 1 mm diameter) with an integrated ultrasound transducer to visualize arteries from inside. Most commercially available IVUS catheters provide a cross-sectional view of the vessel. This is achieved by rotating a single-element transducer, mounted on the side of the catheter and transmitting ultrasound waves in the radial direction from the catheter. The ultrasound waves are then reflected back from the vessel wall to the transducer [5], [6]. An electronically steered IVUS catheter also exists (Eagle Eye, Volcano Therapeutics) consisting of an array of 64 transducer elements mounted around the tip of the catheter and interfaced with integrated circuits requiring seven electrical wires [7], [8].

Side-looking IVUS catheters are restricted to use in nonocclusive lesions by their imaging geometry, limiting their application in the treatment of very complex lesions, such as chronic total occlusions (CTOs) [9]. CTOs are plaques that have grown to completely fill the vessel lumen. They typically have a highly heterogeneous tissue composition, with variable...
mechanical properties and presence of microchannels [10]. Treatment consists of passing the lesion with a thin (0.3 mm) guidewire and opening the vessel with a balloon and stent. Imaging the plaque with forward-looking (FL) ultrasound transducers, integrated into a steerable catheter may direct the physician to optimal locations for wire entry, providing imaging guidance during the crossing procedure and enhancing the device dexterity.

Early work in the development of FL-IVUS consisted of single-element transducers with a rotating mechanism that is either converted into a scanning motion of the FL element [11], [12] or directly applied to rotate an element oriented at a 45° angle [13]. In the first case, 2-D FL scans can be achieved, whereas with the second approach a cone of visualization is created ahead of the catheter tip. Other approaches for single-element FL imaging include a rotating reflecting surface [14] that reflect the ultrasound beam with different angles ahead of the catheter tip and a mechanically wobbling transducer with shape-memory alloys [15]. These approaches require the need to develop complex mechanisms, making the whole catheter bulky.

Considerable effort has been put into the development of multielement arrays, which do not need rotation. Miniaturized linear arrays that provide 2-D FL ultrasound images [16]–[18] can achieve volumetric imaging by mechanically scanning the transducer and combining different 2-D planes into a 3-D volume data set. This procedure is complex and easily affected by motion artifacts. The 2-D matrix transducers can provide volumetric imaging without moving the probe. However, integration of multielement transducers in intravascular catheters is challenging because of the complexity of wiring the many elements to a signal acquisition system. Matrix and ring arrays with approximately 100 individually connected elements have been pioneered for IVUS applications [19], [20]. However, there is usually not enough space in the catheter for these large wire assemblies. Electronic circuits with pulser and multiplexer, integrated with the 2-D matrix transducer, can reduce the cable count. This approach has been used in the development of FL intravascular and intracardiac transducers based on capacitive micromachined ultrasonic transducers (CMUT) [21]–[27], which are fabricated using silicon-based technologies and can be cointegrated with front-end electronics to reduce the interconnection complexity [28], [29]. FL CMUT-based transducers for intravascular and intracardiac applications requiring 13 wires have been proposed [25], [26].

In an elegant combination of a side-looking and a FL array [30], [31], the distal part of a 64-element circular side-looking array was cut and used to generate forward waves in the 3-1 mode. With the resulting annular array, the number of transceiver firings can be optimized to yield 3-D FL imaging with reasonable side and grating lobe level (−20-dB sidelobe and almost −30-dB grating lobe level at a steering angle of 30°). Experimentally, a sidelobe level of approximately −15 dB was realized, probably due to missing elements [31]. Moreover, since 3-D FL imaging is achieved using only a narrow ring of elements, power dissipation and sensitivity remain a concern.

An intracardiac side-looking lead zirconium titanate (PZT)-based array with an application-specific integrated circuit (ASIC) has been integrated into a 10 Fr (3.3 mm) steerable catheter and tested in vivo [32]. This device consists of a 2-D matrix transducer with an aperture of $2.5 \times 6.6 \text{ mm}^2$, a pitch of 180 μm, and a center frequency of 5.6 MHz. The element-matched connection with the ASIC was realized via a flexprint and a dematching layer between the ASIC and the PZT in order to minimize the acoustic energy transport into the backing.

Next to FL imaging, minimally invasive procedures could benefit from steerability of intravascular devices. Single-element FL imaging using a steerable catheter and an optical shape-sensing system has been demonstrated in a previous publication by our group [33]. For each degree of freedom (DOF), two pulling wires are required. To accommodate multiple pulling wires, hence improving device dexterity, it is important to reduce the number of coaxial cables.

We propose here a PZT-based FL-IVUS matrix transducer built on a front-end ASIC that requires only four micro-coaxial cables to address a 2-D matrix array with a total of 80 elements. The micro-coaxial cables could easily fit in an intravascular catheter and leave space for a guidewire and up to eight pulling wires, hence enabling steering with four DOFs. The PZT has been mounted directly on the ASIC with gold ball contacts and conducting glue resulting in a shorter rigid segment at the tip compared to [7] and [8]. The ASIC and transducer have been designed in conjunction, as their mutual performance is tightly linked. The electronic design of the ASIC was reported previously [34]. In this paper, we focus on the design, the fabrication process, and the quantitative characterization of the FL-IVUS transducer built on top of the ASIC. We also performed FL volumetric imaging of three spherical reflectors in water.

In Section II, we investigate different transducer designs using field-II simulations [35]–[37]. Based on the simulation results, we estimate the effects of a practical implementation and we present the final device design, the finite-element analysis (FEA) model used to simulate the acoustic behavior, and the experimental setup for ultrasonic characterization in Section III. FEA and measurement results are presented in Section IV, and the discussion and conclusions are given in Section V.

II. Optimal Transducer Layout Analysis

Intracoronary ultrasound catheters have a maximum outer diameter of 1.5 mm and should accommodate a ~0.3-mm-diameter flexible guidewire for accurate delivery. To meet these requirements, the most suitable approach is to build the transducer directly on top of an ASIC, similar to [23] and [25]. The envisioned block diagram of the ASIC is shown in Fig. 1.

The ASIC will employ HV switches to connect one or multiple transmit (TX) elements to an external pulser, whereas a multiplexer will connect one of the receive (RX) elements to an analog front-end (AFE) that consists of a transimpedance amplifier (TIA) with very small input impedance, a programmable gain amplifier (PGA) with three gain settings, and a
buffer which serves as a cable driver. The ASIC should enable synthetic-aperture imaging where acoustic pulses are transmitted using one or multiple TX elements, and the reflected echoes are received by the RX elements one element at a time. Beside the described analog approach, the ASIC will also be capable of locally digitizing the received signals, providing more robust signal transmission [34]. However, since the main focus of this work is the acoustic characterization of the 2-D matrix transducer on top of the ASIC, we considered the ASIC in analog mode only.

Considering the available area for the ASIC and the dimensions of each chip components, we estimated that the ASIC could address a maximum of approximately 100 receive elements. This number can only be achieved by minimizing the number of transmit elements since the high-voltage (HV) switch sets are the largest components (approximately $100 \times 100 \mu m^2$) occupying the ASIC area. Based on these considerations, the maximum number of transmit elements was set to 16.

The target center frequency is 14 MHz, which is lower than standard IVUS frequencies (20–40 MHz), but can provide more penetration depth suitable for FL imaging [26], [30]. For reduced grating lobes, a pitch smaller than the wavelength $\lambda$ is desirable. However, the available transducer fabrication process, which is described later, limits the pitch to a minimum of 100 $\mu m$. We summarize the transducer requirements and the constraints due to the ASIC and the fabrication process in Table I.

With these considerations in mind, we investigated, through ultrasound field simulations in field-II, different 2-D matrix designs. The investigated designs are described in Table II. In the first three designs, the TX and the RX elements were arranged on a regular grid with a pitch of 100 $\mu m$ and a kerf of 20 $\mu m$. Transducers with these layouts can be manufactured using a diamond dicing saw. The last design consisted of TX and RX elements arranged in a nongridded pattern. In particular, the receivers were placed according to a tapered spiral pattern [38] with variable pitch ($\geq 100 \mu m$). A transducer with this configuration can be manufactured with laser cutting technology.

For each design, we computed the pulse-echo (PE) beam profile on a half spherical surface with a radius of 6 mm [Fig. 2(a)] and we simulated the 3-D synthetic-aperture imaging of three point scatterers [Fig. 2(b)]. The transducer is simulated in the $xy$ plane with $z$ the propagation axis. For each PE beam profile, we also extracted the maximum sidelobe level at each elevation angle as shown in Fig. 3.

In design A, where four TX elements are organized at the top, bottom, left, and right side of the transducer aperture, the simulated PE field showed maximum sidelobe levels of $-15 \text{ dB}$ at approximately $10^\circ$ as shown in Fig. 3. Increasing the number of TX elements and positioning them in a cross-like pattern (design B) reduced the maximum sidelobe level to approximately $-19 \text{ dB}$. However, the beam profile showed still a significant spread in the energy around the main beam as shown in Fig. 2. By positioning the TX elements around the inner hole (designs C and D), both the sidelobe level and the beam spread were reduced. The nongridded configuration of the RX elements in design D gave the narrowest beam spread.
and the smallest sidelobe level. Nevertheless, the improvement over design C was not as significant as compared to the other designs. Laser cutting transducer elements which are mounted on top of an ASIC are not trivial and require accurate control of the cutting depth to avoid damage to the chip. On the other side, the cutting depth of the mechanical dicing saw can be more easily controlled.

Therefore, in this work, we opted for design C to prove the concept of 3-D FL-IVUS imaging using a 2-D matrix transducer with a front-end ASIC and a low cable count. A comparison of our approach with previous work is provided in Table III. Our proposed transducer with front-end ASIC requires the lowest number of cables and, using the highest number of firings (1024), results in grating lobes of approximately $-30$ dB when steering by $30^\circ$ with frame rates suitable for real-time imaging ($\sim 100$ Hz).

### III. TRANSDUCER DESIGN AND CHARACTERIZATION

#### A. Final Transducer Layout

The final transducer design was further adjusted to accommodate the five bond pads for the ASIC connection to four micro-coaxial cables and to ground. Since these pads, in the current ASIC design, are located on the same side of the

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**Fig. 2.** (a) Simulated PE profiles on a half spherical surface with a radius 6 mm. (b) Maximum projections along y-axis of simulated synthetic-aperture images of three point scatterers.

**Fig. 3.** Maximum lobe level at each elevation angle. Curves are extracted from Fig. 2(a).

**TABLE III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Design C</th>
<th>[30] and [31]</th>
<th>[19]</th>
<th>[25]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency [MHz]</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diameter [mm]</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cables</td>
<td>4 (coaxial)*</td>
<td>7 (coaxial)</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of elements</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibrating mode relative sensitivity</td>
<td>$d_{11}/100%$</td>
<td>$d_{33}/50%$</td>
<td>$d_{33}/100%$</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed number of firing</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grating lobe level at 30 deg steering [dB]</td>
<td>$-30$</td>
<td>$-30$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$&lt;40$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>PZT on ASIC</td>
<td>PZT on flexprint</td>
<td>PZT on flexprint</td>
<td>CMUT on ASIC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Although measurements were done with 4 coax cables, the chip can operate with 3 coax cables and 1 unshielded power cable.
ASIC as the transducer array, transducer elements could not be placed at their location. Each pad has a size of 100 $\mu$m $\times$ 100 $\mu$m and a safety distance of 70 $\mu$m from the transducer elements.

To integrate the five bond pads in the limited chip area, the number of RX elements was decreased to 64, leading to a design that had a total of 80 elements (16 TX and 64 RX elements) with an element size of 80 $\mu$m $\times$ 80 $\mu$m and a pitch of 100 $\mu$m $\times$ 100 $\mu$m. The layout is shown in Fig. 4 together with the simulated PE beam profile and the maximum projection from a synthetic-aperture image of three scatterers. The $-6$-dB lateral width of the point scatterer at 6.5 mm is 540 $\mu$m.

The changes in the layout due to the inclusion of the bond pads lead to a spread in energy around the main beam and an increase in the sidelobe level compared to design $C$ (Fig. 2). However, the maximum sidelobe level at 10° is below $-20$ dB [Fig. 4(c)], which is still better than both designs $A$ and $B$.

### B. Finite-Element Modeling

We modeled the transducer on top of the ASIC and simulated its acoustic performance using FEA software (PZFlex LLC, Cupertino, CA, USA). The 3-D model geometry consisted of three transducer elements where only the central one is active (Fig. 5). The layer stack consists of, bottom to top, the silicon substrate containing the ASIC, a nonconductive epoxy filling the gaps between the electrical connections, a conductive adhesive backing, the PZT active layer, a conductive matching layer, and a thin aluminum ground electrode. The kerfs between the elements were kept void, and the overall transducer was loaded with water. The material properties and thicknesses of each layer are described in Table IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Thickness</th>
<th>Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silicon</td>
<td>300 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=2330$ kg/m$^3$, $c_p=7526$ m/s, $c_s=4346$ m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold (Electrical connection)</td>
<td>30 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=19700$ kg/m$^3$, $c_p=3240$ m/s, $c_s=1200$ m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffer epoxy</td>
<td>30 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=2220$ kg/m$^3$, $c_p=2613$ m/s, $c_s=1289$ m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conductive glue</td>
<td>Backing: 40 $\mu$m, Top of Matching: 7 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=3330$ kg/m$^3$, $c_p=1873$ m/s, $c_s=970$ m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PZT CTS3203HD</td>
<td>100 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=7820$ kg/m$^3$, $c_{11}=137$, $c_{12}=88$, $c_{13}=92$, $c_{33}=126$, $c_{44}=22$, $c_{55}=25$ MPa, $\varepsilon_{11}=1306$, $\varepsilon_{33}=1200$ C/m$^2$, $\varepsilon_{13}=16$, $\varepsilon_{33}=9$, $\varepsilon_{44}=22$ C/m$^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium (ground connection)</td>
<td>7 $\mu$m</td>
<td>$\rho=2690$ kg/m$^3$, $c_p=6306$ m/s, $c_s=3114$ m/s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 6. (a) ASIC micrograph. (b) Matrix array on top of the ASIC after dicing. (c) Matrix array after ground foil application and wire bonding. Bond pads for the cables are highlighted in red, whereas the transducer aperture is delimited by orange lines.

and \( y = 0 \); hence, only a quarter of the model needed to be
simulated.

To study the transmit performance of the single-element,
a half-period sinusoidal pulse with a 28-\( V_{pp} \) amplitude and a
pulsewidth of 25 ns is applied to the element. The \(-3\) dB fractional
bandwidth of the pulse is approximately 180%. Using
the Kirchhoff extrapolation technique [39], the simulated pressure
at the surface is propagated into water over 6 mm in
the axial direction. Using PZFlex, we also extrapolated the
element impedance at resonance, which was used to design
the AFE in the ASIC.

The receive behavior of the individual element is investi-
gated through simulations by defining close to the transducer
surface the same pressure load that was obtained from the
measurements in transmission. For these simulations, we also
took into account the input impedance of the AFE in the
ASIC. First, a SPICE-type simulator (Spectre Circuit simu-
lator, Cadence Design Systems, Inc., San Jose, CA 95134,
USA) was used to obtain the magnitude and phase of the AFE
input impedance over different frequencies. Then, we fit the
resulting value to an \( RC \) equivalent circuit, which was modeled
in PZFlex as connected in parallel to the element.

C. Transducer Fabrication

The fabrication process of the 2-D matrix on top of the
ASIC was based on the PZT-on-CMOS integration described
in [40]. Briefly, the bond pads on the ASIC that are used
to electrically connect each individual element were arranged
in the same configuration and with the same pitch as the
transducer matrix layout [Fig. 6(a)].

Metal studs were applied on top of the bond pads and the
gap in between was then filled with nonconductive epoxy
(5.8 MRayl, Oldelft B.V., Delft, The Netherlands). The excess
epoxy was grinded down to expose the metal and form elec-
trical contacts. A next layer of conductive glue (6.2 MRayl,
Oldelft B.V., Delft, The Netherlands) was used to electrically
connect the back electrode of the PZT to the electrical
connections on the ASIC. This procedure is very delicate
since the conductive glue should not cover the five bond pads
[red squares in Fig. 6(b)] that will be wire bonded later on for
electrical connection.

The individual elements PZT (CTS3203HD) elements were

cut with a dicing saw until the buffer layer and the kerfs
were left void. The entire matrix was then covered with a
ground foil to create a common ground electrode for all the
elements. Due to the fabrication process, diced transducer
elements without electrical connection were also present in the
inner hole reserved for the guidewire [Fig. 6(b)]. An extra step
should be considered in the future to remove these elements
when integrating the transducer in a catheter with a guidewire,
ideally employing laser cutting techniques to minimize the
damage to those elements located at the edge of the inner
hole. The chip with the transducer was then mounted on a
custom printed circuit board (PCB) for testing purposes, and
from the five bond pads on the ASIC, 18-\( \mu \)m-thick aluminum
wire bonds were used to provide electrical connection to the
PCB [Fig. 6(c)].

D. Measurement Setup

The measurement setup is depicted in Fig. 7. A small water
bag made of acoustically transparent material was placed on
top of the 2-D FL-IVUS transducer, which was mounted on
the PCB.

To characterize the TX elements in terms of transmit sen-
sitivity, bandwidth, center frequency, and directivity, a 75-\( \mu \)m
needle hydrophone (SN1302, Precision Acoustics, Dorchester,
U.K.) was placed in the water bag above the transducer
using a positioning stage (Newport Corporation, Irvine, CA,
USA) that allowed placing the hydrophone accurately 6 mm
away from the transducer surface. Each transducer element
was excited with a pulser (AVR-4D-B, Avtech Electrosys-
tems Ltd, Ogdensburg, New York, USA) that was manu-
ally programmed to generate a unipolar pulse with a width
of 25 ns and an amplitude of 28 V, as measured on the PCB.
The external transmit pulse was then delivered to the specific transmit element through the HV switches on the ASIC. The acoustic pressure recorded by the hydrophone was amplified by a 58-dB amplifier (AU1519, Miteq, Long Island, New York, USA), recorded by a digital oscilloscope (DL9710L, Yokogawa, Tokyo, Japan) and transferred to a PC. To acoustically characterize the center frequency and bandwidth of the RX elements, the hydrophone was replaced by a tungsten wire (50 μm) that was mounted parallel to the surface of the transducer. PE measurements were performed with all the TX elements excited simultaneously, whereas the signals received from each RX element were recorded one by one. The transmit pulse was the same as in the hydrophone measurement except that the switches on the ASIC connected the external pulse to all the transmit elements simultaneously. The echo reflected back from the wire was converted by each element into an electrical signal that was transferred via a multiplexer to the AFE. The received signal was amplified by 18 dB through thePGA and stored on the PC. For both the TX and RX measurements, the signal stored on the PC was digitally filtered with a 5–30-MHz passband filter. To identify the functional elements, for each A-line, we computed the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) as the ratio of the rms amplitude value in a region including the transducer element signal over the rms amplitude in a region without the element signal. The elements with an SNR more than 6 dB below the mean value were identified as not working; hence, they were not considered further in the analysis.

To measure the receive sensitivity, a flat steel plate was placed in the water bag on top of the transducer and PE measurements were performed transmitting with a single TX element and receiving with the neighboring RX element. The output signal $V_{out}$ of the receive element can be expressed as

$$V_{out} = P_{in} S_{rx} G$$

where $P_{in}$ is the acoustic pressure at the element, $S_{rx}$ is the element receive sensitivity, and $G$ is the electric circuit gain. To decouple the performance of the RX element from the performance of the receive electronics on the ASIC, we first computed the transfer function of the AFE using the response measured on one of the test inputs available on the ASIC [Fig. 6(a)], while keeping the RX elements disconnected from the AFE. Using an arbitrary waveform generator (33522A, Agilent, Santa Rosa, CA, US) and a manual step attenuator (355D, Agilent, Santa Rosa, CA, US) set to 20 dB, we applied to the test input 3-cycle sinusoidal burst signals with a frequency varying from 10 to 20 MHz and with four different peak-to-peak amplitudes (50, 100, 200, and 500 mV).

Since the LNA chosen for the ASIC was a TIA, an on-chip resistor was implemented to convert the external test voltage signal into a current. Both the input and output voltages were recorded through the oscilloscope. The ratio between their amplitudes was used to compute the analog gain at different frequencies, obtaining the transfer function of the electric circuit chain. Based on that, we divided the PE signal recorded from the flat steel reflector by the AFE gain, yielding the current signal out of each transducer element. The measured current was then compared to the theoretical result computed through PZFlex simulations.

We also measured the input referred noise spectrum of the analog receive chain, and we compared it to the simulated value from the SPICE-type simulator. In addition, by sweeping the test input signal from 1 nA to 6 μA, we computed the dynamic range under the three gain settings of the PGA available.

To test the imaging capabilities of the matrix transducer, three needles with steel spheres at the tip were placed in the water bag at different distances from the transducer surface and 3-D FL imaging was performed with only four cables interfacing the 16 TX elements and the 64 RX elements. The synthetic-aperture imaging scheme was as follows: each of the 16 TX elements was excited individually and the echoes received by the 64 RX elements were acquired in 64 successive PE sequences. The resulting RF lines were beamformed resulting in a low-resolution volume for each transmit element. The final volume was obtained by averaging the 16 low-resolution volumes.

Images were created by beamforming the received echoes by the traditional delay-and-sum (DAS) approach and by coherence factor (CF) weighting [41] applied to the delayed lines before summation. We then compared the measured $–6$-dB lateral width to the values obtained from field-II simulations.

IV. TRANSDUCER PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

A. Transmit Characterization

The simulated transmit acoustic pressure wave obtained in PZFlex is shown in Fig. 8(a), whereas Fig. 8(b) shows the pressure wave measured with the hydrophone for a representative TX element. The measured SNR [Fig. 9(a)] together with the center frequency and $–3$-dB bandwidth of each TX element [Fig. 9(b)] demonstrates the functionality and the low variation across the 16 TX elements. Fig. 9(c) shows the measured directivity of five transmit elements together with the averaged directivity pattern. The $–6$-dB angle was measured to be approximately ±30°.

Table V compares the average values from the measurements to the simulated values in terms of center frequency, bandwidth, and peak-to-peak pressure at 6 mm, showing good agreement between the values. Based on the measured pressure and the input voltage amplitude, we estimate an average transmit sensitivity of 0.4 kPa/V at 6 mm. From the PZFlex simulations, we estimated an output pressure of 50 kPa/V at the surface of one element, in agreement with [42]–[45].

B. Receive Characterization

Fig. 10(a) shows the SNR for all the 64 RX elements as computed from the PE measurements using the tungsten wire. The four values marked in red correspond to the elements having an SNR more than 6 dB below the mean value. Fig. 10(c) shows that these elements are located at the edges of the transducer aperture, which is the most critical area in
terms of mechanical stability. The poor performance of these elements can be attributed to the fabrication process, which requires removal of any epoxy residue from the area of the five bond pads. This process is presently difficult to control and can easily lead to damages of the elements on the edges.

Fig. 10(b) shows, for the remaining 60 RX elements, the center frequency, and -6-dB bandwidth. The average center frequency is 14 MHz, and the average -6-dB bandwidth is 42%, in agreement with the values obtained for the TX elements. RX elements with index 19 and 57, although having SNR values close to 20 dB, have quite narrow bandwidth (less than 20%), which could be caused by defects in the material layers, since also these elements are located at the edge [Fig. 10(c)].

PZFlex simulation results showed an element impedance of approximately 5 kΩ at resonance. For the AFE, the SPICE-type simulator showed an input impedance of approximately 2 kΩ at resonance. With these impedance values, more than 70% of the signal can be read-out by the AFE, which is acceptable since the attenuation can be compensated by the PGA in the AFE. The RC equivalent circuit that was fit to the simulated impedance of the AFE resulted in a resistance and capacitance value of 8.05 kΩ and 6.45 pF, respectively. These values were used in PZFlex for the receive sensitivity computation.

To compute the receive sensitivity, we first characterize the gain of the receive signal chain with the PGA set to 18 dB [Fig. 11(a)]. The average gain at the center frequency (14 MHz) is 111.6 dBΩ. The PE peak-to-peak voltage amplitude obtained from the steel plate for neighboring TX/RX elements is then corrected for the electronic transfer function in receive giving the peak-to-peak current values

### TABLE V

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Simulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( f_c ) [MHz]</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( BW_{6%} ) [%]</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure peak-to-peak</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@ 6 mm [kPa]</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 8. Transmit pressure at a depth of 6 mm and the corresponding spectra from (a) FEM simulations and (b) measurements of one TX element.

Fig. 9. Measured (a) SNR and (b) center frequency with -3-dB bandwidth across the 16 TX elements. (c) Directivity for five transmit elements and average directivity pattern.
shown in Fig. 11(b), with an average value of 3 \( \mu \)A. The simulated current through the element for the same pressure load as in the measurements and with the element electrically loaded by the equivalent model of the front-end receiver input impedance is 2.9 \( \mu \)A. The simulated and measured current values are in a very good agreement. Therefore, we estimate the (electrically unloaded) receive sensitivity based on simulation results, since PZFlex allows modeling the element in unloaded condition and computing the voltage over the element for a certain input pressure. The receive sensitivity value thus found is 3.7 \( \mu \)V/Pa.

We also simulated and measured the input referred noise of the analog receive signal chain [Fig. 12(a)]. The measured integrated noise within the bandwidth of 10–16 MHz is around 2.53 nA, in good agreement with the simulated value of 2.3 nA. The transducer in-band rms noise is around 4.4 nA, hence dominating over the AFE, as desirable. The overall noise figure is approximately 1.2 dB. Considering the transducer element impedance at resonance (approximately 5 k\( \Omega \)) and the element receive sensitivity, the expected minimum detectable pressure is approximately 10 Pa. Fig. 12(b) shows the dynamic range for the three gain settings of the PGA. The minimum detectable signal can be obtained at the 0-dB cross-point in the lowest gain setting and the maximum signal that the circuit can handle can be obtained at the SNR saturation cross point in the highest gain setting. Therefore, the dynamic range is approximately 55 dB.

C. Imaging

Fig. 13(a) shows the maximum projections along \( y \) and \( x \) of the 3-D image of the three spheres obtained using DAS, whereas Fig. 13(b) shows the maximum projections for the image obtained using the CF method.

For the scatterer at 6.5 mm, the \(-6\text{-dB} \) lateral width is 560 \( \mu \)m using standard DAS, in agreement with the value obtained from the simulated field-II image [Fig. 4(d)]. By implementing the CF method, the \(-6\text{-dB} \) lateral width is reduced to 320 \( \mu \)m. Overall, the image obtained using the CF shows fewer artifacts and better resolution. The 3-D rendering of the three spherical targets is shown in Fig. 13(c).
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this work, we have presented a 14-MHz 2-D matrix ultrasound transducer for FL-IVUS imaging that is integrated with a front-end ASIC requiring only four cables. We first investigated potential transducer designs using field II. The design with the transmit elements around the inner hole and the receivers on a regular grid pattern (design C) shows good performances with low sidelobe levels. Since this design can be manufactured using well-established dicing technology, we opted for it and further adjusted it to accommodate the five bond pads required to connect four cables (with the fifth pad connected to the ground shield). Compared to [30] and [31], our transmit aperture is smaller; hence, the PSF is degraded compared to a ring array. However, we used the $d_{33}$ mode which is 2 times more sensitive than the $d_{31}$ used in [30] and [31].

The switches and multiplexer on the ASIC allow transmitting with one or multiple TX elements, whereas the received signal can be acquired with one RX at the time. Considering that the maximum imaging depth required for FL-IVUS is \(~\text{10 mm}\) [9], a full synthetic-aperture scheme can be achieved with volume frame rates on the order of 100 Hz, which is adequate for real-time imaging of CTOs.

We have successfully manufactured the complete transducer on top of the ASIC and characterized it acoustically both in transmit and in receive. Fairly good agreement is present between the simulated and measured results for the transmit and receive behavior. Despite inaccuracies in the simulations,
such as the material properties, the PZFlex model provided an acceptable estimate of the overall transducer behavior, allowing also estimating the element receive sensitivity in unloaded conditions.

We performed imaging measurements using spherical steel reflectors, showing the capability of the device to generate 3-D FL images. Artifacts behind the main signal of the sphere are visible in the images. The cause of these artifacts is the presence of the ASIC behind the transducer, which does not act as a standard backing and causes ringing. A proper dematching layer should be developed to reduce the ringing effect [46] similar to the approach in [32]. Moreover, some elements on the edges showed poor performance, resulting in low SNR and poor bandwidth. These elements are in general more prone to damage due to their peripheral location and proximity to the bondpads, which leads to mechanical instability.

The acoustic characterization and the initial imaging measurements showed promising results. In the future, parylene coating should be used to insulate the transducer. The thickness of this layer is of only 1–2 microns; therefore, we do not expect significant changes in the acoustic properties.

Future work will also include the development of 2-D matrix transducers using laser cutting technology. By laser cutting the individual transducer elements, nongridded 2-D matrix transducers with variable pitch can be achieved. This will lead to better imaging capability and reduced artifacts as shown in the simulation results for design D in Fig. 2.

In conclusion, the proposed 2-D matrix transducer with front-end ASIC and low cable count opens the doors for different possibilities that could lead to FL-IVUS catheters with steerable mechanisms for image guidance during CTO crossing procedures.

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REFERENCES


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