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## Abstract

Recent research has shown remarkable performance in leveraging multiple extraneous conditional and non-mutually-exclusive semantic concepts for sound source separation, allowing the flexibility to extract a given target source based on multiple different queries. In this work, we propose a new optimal condition training (OCT) method for single-channel target source separation, based on greedy parameter updates using the highest performing condition among equivalent conditions associated with a given target source. Our experiments show that the complementary information carried by the diverse semantic concepts significantly helps to disentangle and isolate sources of interest much more efficiently compared to single-conditioned models. Moreover, we propose a variation of OCT with condition refinement, in which an initial condition vector is adapted to the given mixture and transformed to a more amenable representation for target source extraction. We showcase the effectiveness of OCT on diverse source separation experiments where it improves upon permutation invariant models with oracle assignment between estimated and target sources and obtains state-of-the-art performance in the more challenging task of text-based source separation, outperforming even dedicated text-only conditioned models.

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# OPTIMAL CONDITION TRAINING FOR TARGET SOURCE SEPARATION

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown remarkable performance in leveraging multiple extraneous conditional and non-mutually-exclusive semantic concepts for sound source separation, allowing the flexibility to extract a given target source based on multiple different queries. In this work, we propose a new optimal condition training (OCT) method for single-channel target source separation, based on greedy parameter updates using the highest performing condition among equivalent conditions associated with a given target source. Our experiments show that the complementary information carried by the diverse semantic concepts significantly helps to disentangle and isolate sources of interest much more efficiently compared to single-conditioned models. Moreover, we propose a variation of OCT with condition refinement, in which an initial condition vector is adapted to the given mixture and transformed to a more amenable representation for target source extraction. We showcase the effectiveness of OCT on diverse source separation experiments where it improves upon permutation invariant models with oracle assignment between estimated and target sources and obtains state-of-the-art performance in the more challenging task of text-based source separation, outperforming even dedicated text-only conditioned models.

**Index Terms**— Conditional sound separation, optimal condition, condition embedding refinement, text-based separation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humans possess the remarkable ability to isolate sounds from a noisy auditory input stimuli and associate them with objects and actions seamlessly. Auditory machine perception aims to mimic and even enhance this ability in a digitized manner, wherein the main challenge is how to train audio source separation models effectively.

Early works in deep-learning based audio source separation leveraged fundamental differences between the statistics of the sources of interest and interfering sources in a mixture, making implicit assumptions on their semantic attributes. Thus, specialist models were developed by dedicating an output slot to recovering only a given sound of interest, such as for speech enhancement [1–4] or instrument demixing [5]. Eventually, more general training procedures such as deep clustering [6] and permutation invariant training (PIT) [7, 8] became the conventional ways of training separation systems, mainly because of their minimal a priori assumptions on the types of sources. However, PIT’s flexibility in training source separation networks does not come without a price. PIT suffers from instability [9] and cannot be used to explicitly specify a source of interest (i.e., PIT cannot solve the output sources’ assignment

problem). In contrast to semantically agnostic approaches, conditionally informed systems do not need to fix the order of the output sources and sometimes outperform PIT models [10–12]. Such works include models where an extra input condition vector might carry information about speaker characteristics, musical instrument type, or general sound-class semantics, as proposed for speech [13–17], music [18–20], and universal sound separation [21–23].

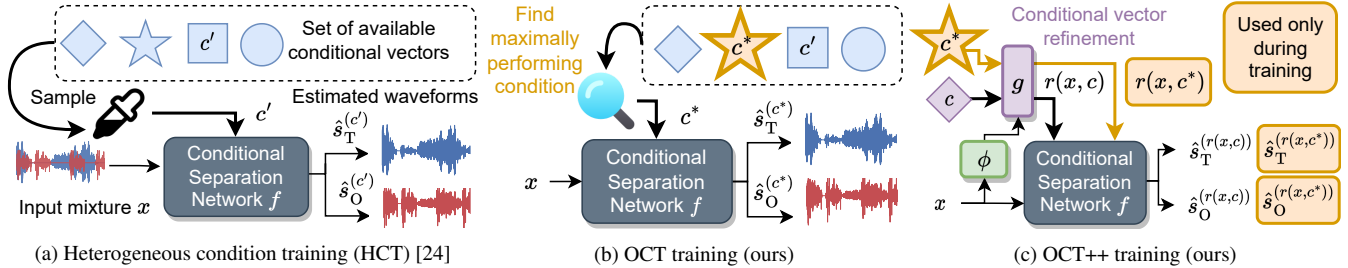
Lately, there has been a resurgence of interest towards conditional separation models [24, 25], not only for boosting their performance but also to give the user more flexibility to query the model. In particular, heterogeneous speech separation [24] was recently proposed as a conditional source separation training procedure where non-mutually-exclusive concepts are used to discriminate between a mixture’s constituent sources. The resulting model not only can be queried using a diverse set of discriminative concepts (e.g., distance from the microphone, signal-level energy, spoken language, etc.), but also leverages the extra semantic information at training time to outperform PIT. Other follow-up works include single-conditioned models using a natural language description of the sources of interest [26] and/or encoded audio-snippet queries [27].

Since a target source may be queried using multiple equivalent conditions, we investigate whether, for a given input mixture, an initial conditioning may be reformulated into a new conditioning that leads to better separation under signal-level metrics. As an intermediate step towards that goal, we first consider a system that for a given target focuses on reaching the best target extraction performance among all equivalent conditions. Our novel training method, optimal condition training (OCT), performs a gradient step using the best-performing condition vector. We then propose OCT++, which combines OCT with an on-the-fly condition vector refinement module to reformulate, based on the input mixture, an initial query into a representation which can lead to better source target extraction. We also extend the original heterogeneous training framework [24] to conduct conditional separation experiments with arbitrary sounds using more diverse and easy-to-use discriminatory semantic concepts such as *text*, *harmonicity*, *energy*, and *source order*. Our experiments show that OCT yields a much higher upper bound for conditional separation based on the complementary semantic information of the diverse associated discriminative concepts, surpassing all single-conditioned models and PIT. Notably, OCT++ yields state-of-the-art performance on text-based sound separation and outperforms all dedicated text-based methods by a large margin.

## 2. METHOD

We formulate the problem of conditional source separation as follows. Given an input mixture  $x$  consisting of the sum  $x = \sum_{i=1}^M s_i$  of  $M$  sources  $\mathbf{s} = (s_1, \dots, s_M)$ , we consider a target waveform  $s_T = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{A}} s_j$  corresponding to a (potentially empty) subset  $\mathcal{A} \subseteq \{1, \dots, M\}$  of target sources which can be described as associated

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**Fig. 1:** Different conditional separation training procedures for a given input mixture  $x$ . 1a: a heterogeneous condition vector  $c'$  (associated with the target waveform  $s_T$ ) is sampled at random and a gradient step is performed. 1b: all available conditions are first evaluated and the error corresponding to the maximally performing condition vector  $c^*$  is backpropagated. 1c: an initial condition vector of interest  $c$  is first converted to a more amenable representation  $r(x, c)$  using the trainable mappings  $\phi$  and  $g$ , and the parameters are updated based on a regular OCT gradient update as well as the backpropagated errors from the regular path (black).

with a condition  $v$ . Expressing  $v$  as a condition vector  $c = c(v)$ , we aim to train a model  $f$  with parameters  $\theta_f$  which outputs estimates for both the target submix  $s_T$  and the non-target (“other”) submix  $s_O = \sum_{j \notin \mathcal{A}} s_j$  of the mixed input sources  $s$ :

$$\hat{s}_T^{(c)}, \hat{s}_O^{(c)} = f(x, c; \theta_f). \quad (1)$$

The condition  $v$  could be any discriminative concept which is associated with semantic characteristics of the target waveform  $s_T$ . In this work, we consider the set of signal characteristics  $\mathcal{C} = \{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{H}, \mathcal{O}, \mathcal{T}\}$ , where  $\mathcal{E}$  denotes the signal energy (with values low/high),  $\mathcal{H}$  is the harmonicity of the target source (harmonic/percussive),  $\mathcal{O}$  the order of appearance of the source in time (first/second), and  $\mathcal{T}$  the text description of the target sound class(es) (e.g., a text embedding representing the words “a dog barking” given a mixture of sounds from an audio recording at a park). Importantly, several conditions  $v$  (and the corresponding condition vector  $c(v)$ ) may be associated with the same target waveform  $s_T$ . A schematic representation for all different conditional separation training methods discussed in this work is displayed in Fig. 1.

### 2.1. Permutation invariant training (PIT)

Usually, PIT [7, 8] is employed for supervised training of unconditional source separation models by backpropagating the error using the best permutation  $\pi \in \mathcal{P}_M$  of the set  $\{1, \dots, M\}$  aligning the estimated sources  $\hat{s}$  with the ground-truth sources  $s$  as shown next:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{PIT}}(s, \theta_f) = \min_{\pi \in \mathcal{P}_M} [\sum_{i=1}^M \mathcal{D}(\hat{s}_{\pi(i)}, s_i)], \quad \hat{s} = f(x, -; \theta_f) \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathcal{D}$  is any desired signal-level distance or loss used to penalize the reconstruction error between the estimates and their corresponding targets, and  $-$  indicates the absence of conditioning. Notice that for the problem of target source separation, unconditional PIT models need to be considered in combination with a speaker selection scheme, since they do not solve the ordering problem of the estimated sources. Thus, we use the oracle permutation of sources, to study the upper bound of their separation performance.

### 2.2. Heterogeneous condition training (HCT)

The concept of heterogeneous condition training, introduced in [24] for conditional speech separation, can be readily extended to general target sound source separation tasks. In essence, the model is fed with an input mixture  $x$  as well as a one-hot encoded condition vector  $c_H(v) = \mathbb{1}[v] \in \{0, 1\}^{|\mathcal{V}|}$  for the desired semantic concept  $v$ , where in [24]  $\mathcal{V}$  was a set of speaker discriminative concept values such as “highest/lowest energy speaker” or “far/near field speaker.” During training, a mixture  $x$  is drawn or synthetically generated and

an associated discriminative concept  $v$  (corresponding to an encoded condition vector  $c = c(v)$ ) is drawn from a sampling prior  $P(v)$  to form the desired target submix  $s_T$  containing all the sources  $s_i$  associated with  $v$ . The model tries to faithfully recover the target and non-target waveforms for  $v$  by minimizing the following loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{HCT}}(s_T, s_O, c; \theta_f) = \mathcal{D}(\hat{s}_T^{(c)}, s_T) + \mathcal{D}(\hat{s}_O^{(c)}, s_O), \quad (3)$$

where we explicitly stated  $s_T, s_O, c$  as parameters of  $\mathcal{L}_{\text{HCT}}$  to indicate that multiple combinations of conditions and targets may be considered. In [24], it was shown that a model trained with multiple heterogeneous pairs of condition queries and targets could achieve an overall separation performance improvement.

### 2.3. Optimal condition training (OCT)

As the same target waveform may be associated with multiple conditions, the question remains whether some conditions lead to better separation accuracy than others, and whether the system may benefit from modifying the condition vector based on the input, in other words to “rephrase the query” in light of the actual input. One reasonable goal to reach when modifying the conditioning would be the conditioning that obtains maximum performance for the given input mixture and target waveforms. A heterogeneous model may however need to balance its performance under multiple conditions, leading to suboptimal separation accuracy for the best conditioning, and thus ultimately for a system relying on modifying an original conditioning by replacing it or making it closer to the best one. Thus, we first consider training a model that solely focuses on optimizing performance for the maximally performing condition.

OCT follows a greedy approach in which instead of sampling a heterogeneous condition vector  $c$ , we first sample several (potentially all) vectors  $c'$  from the set of all possible condition vectors  $\mathcal{C}$  that are associated with the target waveform  $s_T$ , and evaluate them using the current parameters of the model. Then, we update the parameters of the network based on the condition that minimizes the overall error. Formally, we write the loss function as:

$$c^* = \operatorname{argmin}_{c' \in \mathcal{C}} [\mathcal{D}(\hat{s}_T^{(c')}, s_T) + \mathcal{D}(\hat{s}_O^{(c')}, s_O)], \quad (4)$$

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{OCT}}(s_T, s_O; \theta_f) = \mathcal{L}_{\text{HCT}}(s_T, s_O, c^*; \theta_f),$$

where  $c^*$  is the optimal condition (i.e., the one obtaining the smallest loss) for the input mixture  $x$  and the target  $s_T$ . We consider updating the model’s parameters using condition vectors which are 1) associated with the ground-truth target submix  $s_T$  under various contexts and 2) are sampled from the available signal characteristics  $\mathcal{C} = \{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{H}, \mathcal{O}, \mathcal{T}\}$ . For example, if one wants to train a conditional separation system based on text queries  $\mathcal{T}$ , there might be more ef-

fective ways to disentangle and isolate the same sources of interest based on complementary semantic information like the energy, the harmonicity, or the order of appearance of the sources. The evaluation of the ideal condition vector  $c^*$  is straightforward since we have access to the model  $f$  and the ground-truth waveforms  $s_T$  and  $s_O$  during training. Of course, at inference time, one does not have access to the set of equivalent conditions to a given condition  $v$ , so focusing on improving only the optimal condition is not guaranteed to be a viable solution. This procedure was intended to serve as the basis for a method in which an auxiliary network refines an original condition by mapping it to the optimal equivalent one in light of the input mixture. One may in fact expect that focusing solely on maximally performing conditions, or in other words the easiest queries, may harm performance for other conditions. Surprisingly, the final conditional model learns to associate sources of interest with their corresponding semantic concepts and the overfitting problem can be easily avoided using an extra gradient update based on the condition of interest. OCT models can perform better compared to dedicated systems trained and tested on the same input condition information.

#### 2.4. OCT++: OCT with embedding refinement

Going a step further, there are cases where the input condition information might not be informative enough by itself to lead to a condition vector that appropriately specifies the sources of interest, and one may hope to obtain an improved condition vector by letting the system look at both the input mixture and the original condition vector to output an improved condition vector. We thus consider introducing a learnable transformation  $g(\cdot)$  of the condition vector  $c$  to refine the conditional information so that it may be better utilized by the framework. For example, if the input mixture contains a guitar and a bass with different starting times, a query that corresponds to which instrument was played first ( $c_O$ : source order query) could be more informative than the textual description of the target musical instrument ( $c_T$ : text query). In that case, even if the user gives as an input *retrieve the bass*, the learnable transformation  $g$  could be used to map the less informative textual condition input  $c_T$  to something that resembles the ideal (oracle) condition vector  $c^* = c_O$ . That transformation would in effect relieve the extraction network from making a difficult source selection and let it focus on the extraction. We let the learnable mapping  $g$  take into account information about both the input mixture, via a time-invariant encoded representation  $\phi(x; \theta_\phi)$ , and the initial condition vector  $c$ , computing the refined (or reassigned) condition vector  $r(x, c)$  as:

$$r(x, c) = g(\text{concat}(\phi(x; \theta_\phi), c); \theta_g). \quad (5)$$

The final loss to be minimized combines the heterogeneous loss of Eq. 3 on the refined condition  $r(x, c)$  and the OCT loss of Eq. 4, where  $c^*$  is the condition which leads to maximal performance after refinement. The loss is computed based on the refined counterpart  $r(x, c^*)$ , as well as an extra regularizer term which aims to promote consistency at the conditional refinement mapping  $g$  (e.g. steer the refined condition vector  $r(x, c)$  towards the ideal one  $r(x, c^*)$ ):

$$c^* = \underset{c' \in \mathcal{C}}{\text{argmin}} \left[ \mathcal{D}(\widehat{s}_T^{(r(x, c'))}, s_T) + \mathcal{D}(\widehat{s}_O^{(r(x, c'))}, s_O) \right], \quad (6)$$

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{OCT++}}(s_T, s_O, c; \theta) = \mathcal{L}_{\text{HCT}}(s_T, s_O, r(x, c); \theta_f) + \mathcal{L}_{\text{HCT}}(s_T, s_O, r(x, c^*); \theta_f) + \|r(x, c) - r(x, c^*)\|^2,$$

where the set of trainable parameters  $\theta = \{\theta_f, \theta_g, \theta_\phi\}$  contains all the main network's  $f$  parameters, the parameters of the conditional refinement mapping  $g$ , and the parameters of the mixture encoder  $\phi$ . In this case, the model tries to both optimize the separation perfor-

mance of its estimate  $\widehat{s}_T$  as well as the reassignment mapping  $g$  as it tries to make the input condition vector look mostly like the highest performing condition query after the transformation  $r(x, c^*)$ .

### 3. EXPERIMENTAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1. Datasets

We extract the following three mixing datasets based on different portions of the FSD50K [28] audio data collection, which consists of 200 sound classes. Each training epoch consists of the on-the-fly generation of 20,000 mixtures of 5 s length, sampled at 8 kHz and mixed at random input SNRs  $\mathcal{U}[0, 2.5]$  dB with at least 80% overlap (harder set) or  $\mathcal{U}[0, 5]$  dB with at least 60% overlap (easier set). The validation and test sets for each one of the following datasets are similarly generated, with 3,000 and 5,000 mixtures, respectively.

**Random super-classes:** We first randomly sample two distinct sound classes (out of the available 200), then sample a representative source waveform for each class and mix them together.

**Different super-classes:** We select a subset of classes from the FSD50K ontology corresponding to six diverse super-classes of sounds, namely: *Animal* (21 subclasses), *Musical Instrument* (35 subclasses), *Vehicle* (15 subclasses), *Domestic & Home Sounds* (26 subclasses), *Speech* (5 subclasses) and *Water Sounds* (6 subclasses). Each mixture contains two sound waveforms that belong to distinct super-classes.

**Same super-class:** Following the super-class definition from above, we force each mixture to consist of sources that belong to the same abstract category of sounds to test the ability of text-conditioned models in extremely challenging scenarios.

#### 3.2. Separation Model

We follow [24] and use the same conditional Sudo `rm -rf` model [29] with a trainable FiLM [30] layer before each U-ConvBlock, with a mixture consistency layer at the output sources [31], except that we here use only  $B = 8$  U-ConvBlocks since they were empirically found to be adequate for our universal conditional separation experiments. For the OCT++ embedding refinement part, we use as  $\phi$  the downsampling encoder part of one U-ConvBlock block with a similar configuration of 512 intermediate channels and four 4-strided depth-wise convolutional layers, and we reduce the time axis using a two-head attention pooling similar to [32]. The resulting vector is concatenated with the condition vector  $c$  and passed through  $g$ , which is a two-layer MLP with ReLU intermediate activations to form the refined condition vector  $r(x, c)$ .

#### 3.3. Baseline systems

**Text-based separation [26]:** We follow the previous state-of-the-art text-based source separation system proposed in [26] and use a pre-trained BERT [33] encoding for the class of each sound. The final class encoding is computed after passing the first output token of the sequence model through a linear layer with a ReLU activation.

**Proposed text-based separation:** We also propose a stronger baseline for the text-based separation, wherein we replace the language model with a sentence-BERT model [34] and the first token with a mean average pooling operation and a trainable linear layer on top which better describes the linguistic information for shorter sentences like in audio-class based information (see results in Table 1).

**HCT [24]:** We train the system with equal sampling probability over all the available signal characteristics  $\mathcal{C} = \{\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{H}, \mathcal{O}, \mathcal{T}\}$ .

### 3.4. Training and evaluation details

We train all models using the losses described in Sec. 2. For the OCT text-based separation experiments we always perform a gradient update with both the text-query  $c_T$  and the best performing condition  $c^*$  to avoid overfitting to the rest of the heterogeneous conditions. We use a batch size of 6 and the Adam [35] optimizer with an initial learning rate of  $10^{-3}$ , halving it every 15 epochs.

We evaluate the source reconstruction fidelity at 110 epochs, after empirically finding that all models had converged, using the mean scale-invariant signal-to-distortion ratio (SI-SDR) [36] between the estimate  $\hat{s}_T$  and the ground-truth target  $s_T$ . For the unconditional PIT oracle models, we measure the permutation invariant SI-SDR.

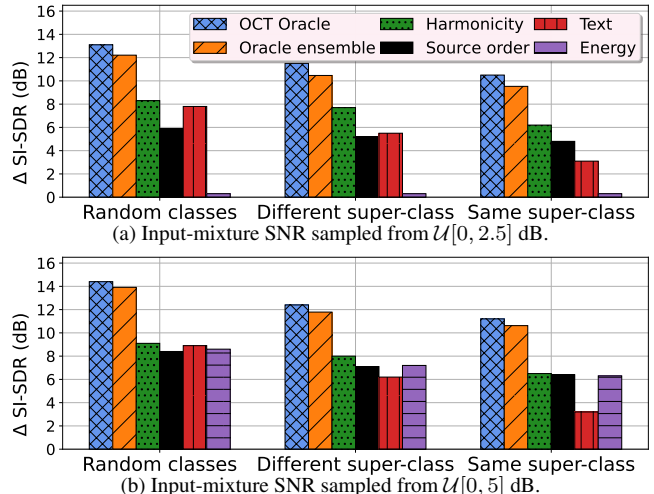
## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Importance of the appropriate condition vector

In Fig. 2, we show the performance of several single-condition models (trained to only handle a single type of query) and their oracle ensemble (where, for a given target, we select the highest-performing query and corresponding single-condition model) versus our proposed oracle OCT approach for target sound extraction. It is evident that several of the conditions fail dramatically on challenging data, while the best performing condition remains more robust, which indicates the importance of providing the right context for the task of target sound separation. For instance, the energy condition cannot be used when there is an ambiguity regarding the loudest source, as in cases where the input SNR is close to 0 dB (see Fig. 2a). Notably, the text-based condition, which is the most convenient to be used, performs poorly in the more challenging setups where the super-classes of sounds being mixed are similar (last column), which enhances our belief that one needs to steer the condition embedding vector towards the highest performing condition based on the given input mixture. Surprisingly, the OCT oracle model performs better than the oracle best single-conditioned model which hints that integrating sound sources’ semantic information through gradient-based updates can be an effective way for more robust source separation.

### 4.2. OCT against state-of-the-art methods

We choose text-based separation as our main benchmark since it is the most challenging condition and simultaneously the one that a user would likely use to describe the sources of interest. We measure the separation performance for the three universal separation datasets, as summarized in Table 1. It is evident that the oracle OCT method gives the best results even compared to the PIT oracle, which does not solve the problem of assigning the estimated sources. We can thus assume that the complementary conditional information might be used to better disentangle the sources. Although our proposed single-conditioned text-based model surpasses the previous state-of-the-art text-based condition method [26] under all dataset configurations, it still performs poorly, especially for the harder to disentangle mixtures with input SNR in the  $[0, 2.5]$ dB range. Surprisingly, OCT, which was trained using the error signal from the best condition (which could be different from the text query), outperforms the dedicated text-based models, leveraging the complimentary information from the rest of the discriminative semantic concepts. OCT yields a significant improvement over heterogeneous training, which indicates that it is potentially a more efficient way of performing cross-semantic information training for source separation. Finally, our proposed embedding refinement method OCT++ outperforms the previous state-of-the-art text-based



**Fig. 2:** Mean test SI-SDR (dB) for target source separation with single-conditioned models using either *harmonicity* ( $\mathcal{H}$ ), *source order* ( $\mathcal{O}$ ), *text* ( $\mathcal{T}$ ), or *signal-level energy* ( $\mathcal{E}$ ) versus their oracle ensemble, which uses the best condition vector, and an oracle OCT model trained and tested with the highest performing query.

**Table 1:** Mean test SI-SDR (dB) results for text-based sound source separation using mixing strategies with two levels of difficulty: input-SNRs  $\mathcal{U}[0, 2.5]$ dB and at least 80% overlap (left) and  $\mathcal{U}[0, 5]$ dB with at least 60% overlap (right). **Bolded** and *Italic* numbers denote the best non-oracle and oracle models trained to perform text-based source separation, respectively.

Training method * Denotes our implementation.	Input-SNR $\mathcal{U}[0, 2.5]$ dB			Input-SNR $\mathcal{U}[0, 5]$ dB		
	Super-classes in-mixture Random	Diff.	Same	Super-classes in-mixture Random	Diff.	Same
Text only [26]*	6.1	3.9	2.2	8.6	6.0	2.9
Text only (ours)	7.9	5.6	3.1	9.0	6.3	3.3
HCT [24]	6.8	4.8	2.3	7.0	4.3	2.4
(Proposed) OCT (No $\phi$ and $g$ )	8.4	6.0	3.3	<b>9.3</b>	6.5	3.6
(Proposed) OCT++	<b>8.7</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>
(Oracle) OCT (No $\phi$ and $g$ )	13.1	<i>11.5</i>	10.5	14.4	12.4	11.2
(Oracle) OCT++	<i>13.2</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>10.6</i>	<i>14.7</i>	<i>12.6</i>	<i>11.5</i>
(Oracle) PIT [8]	12.4	10.7	9.8	12.4	10.7	9.8

separation method by 0.7 to 2.6 dB SI-SDR and yields a consistent improvement on top of the OCT by converting the condition vector to a more amenable representation for text-based separation. We hypothesize that future work could provide much larger improvements by employing more sophisticated mixture encoders  $\phi$  and refinement embedding maps  $g$ .

## 5. CONCLUSION

We have introduced a new training method for source separation which leverages the backpropagation of the optimal condition vector signal. OCT outperforms all previous state-of-the-art single- and multi-condition (aka heterogeneous) training methods for the more challenging and easier-to-use text-based conditioning. Oracle OCT also outperforms unconditional models trained and evaluated with permutation invariance. OCT++ enables further refinement by transformation of the conditional information vectors to a more amenable to separation form adapted to the input mixture. In the future, we aim to pair the proposed training methods with self-supervised approaches and explore in more detail the effectiveness of OCT.

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