

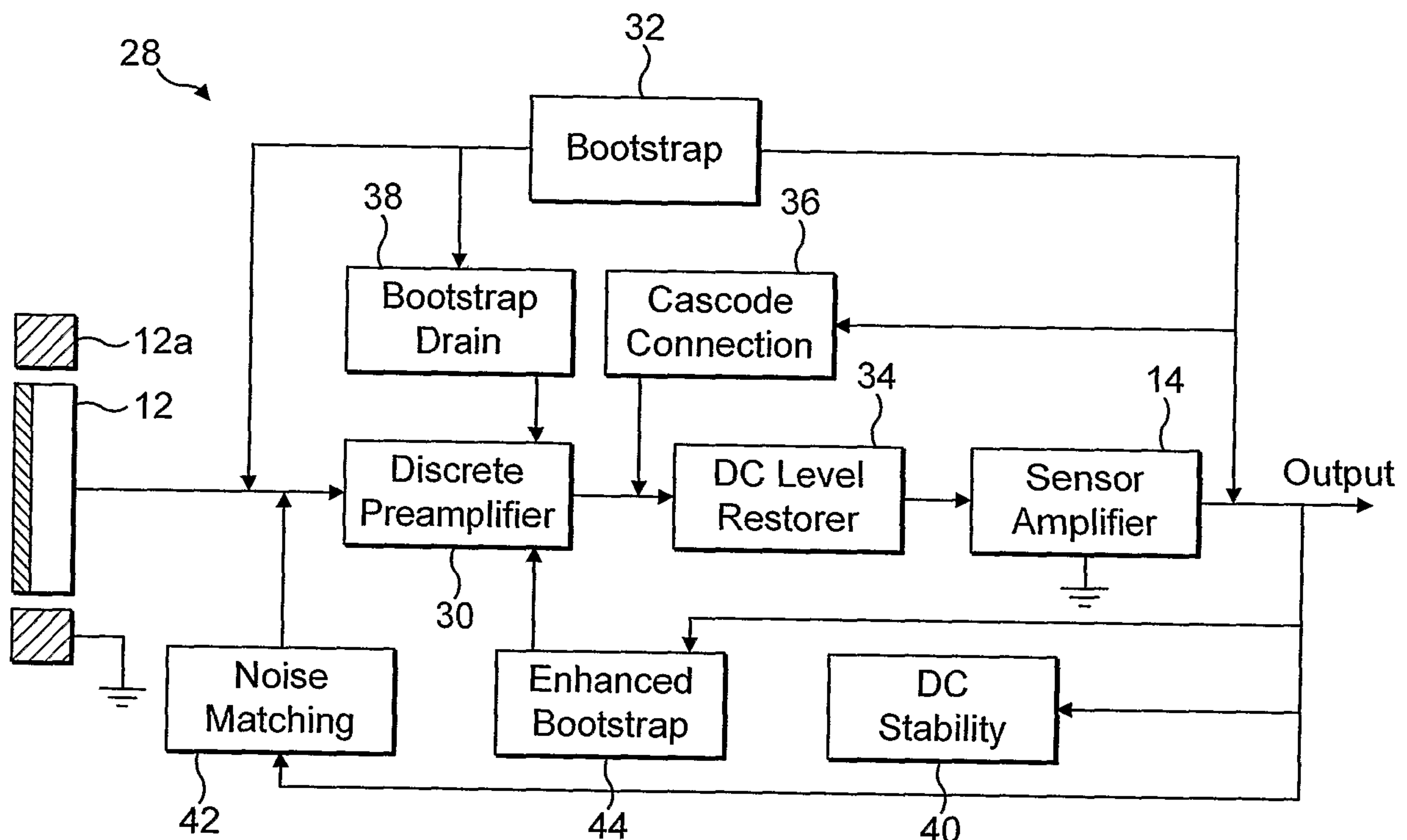


(86) **Date de dépôt PCT/PCT Filing Date:** 2007/02/13
(87) **Date publication PCT/PCT Publication Date:** 2007/09/27
(45) **Date de délivrance/Issue Date:** 2015/11/24
(85) **Entrée phase nationale/National Entry:** 2008/09/19
(86) **N° demande PCT/PCT Application No.:** GB 2007/000490
(87) **N° publication PCT/PCT Publication No.:** 2007/107689
(30) **Priorité/Priority:** 2006/03/21 (GB0605717.8)

(51) **Cl.Int./Int.Cl.** *G01R 29/12* (2006.01),
G01R 19/00 (2006.01)
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(54) **Titre : CAPTEUR DE POTENTIEL ELECTRIQUE**

(54) **Title: ELECTRIC POTENTIAL SENSOR**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

The present invention provides an electric potential sensor (28) for the measurement of potentials non-invasively. The sensor comprises at least one detection electrode (12) arranged for capacitive coupling with a sample under test and for generating a measurement signal, and a sensor amplifier (14) adapted to receive the measurement signal as input and to supply an amplified detection signal as output. Input impedance enhancing means (12a, 32, 36, 38, 44) are included for providing a high input impedance to the sensor amplifier for increasing the sensitivity of the electrode to reduced electric potentials, and a discrete pre-amplifier stage (30) is arranged to co-operate with the sensor amplifier to reduce the input capacitance of the amplifier.

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
27 September 2007 (27.09.2007)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2007/107689 A1

(51) International Patent Classification:

G01R 29/12 (2006.01) **G01R 19/00** (2006.01)

(21) International Application Number:

PCT/GB2007/000490

(22) International Filing Date:

13 February 2007 (13.02.2007)

(25) Filing Language:

English

(26) Publication Language:

English

(30) Priority Data:

0605717.8 21 March 2006 (21.03.2006) GB

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(81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM,

AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP, KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, LY, MA, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RS, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, SV, SY, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.

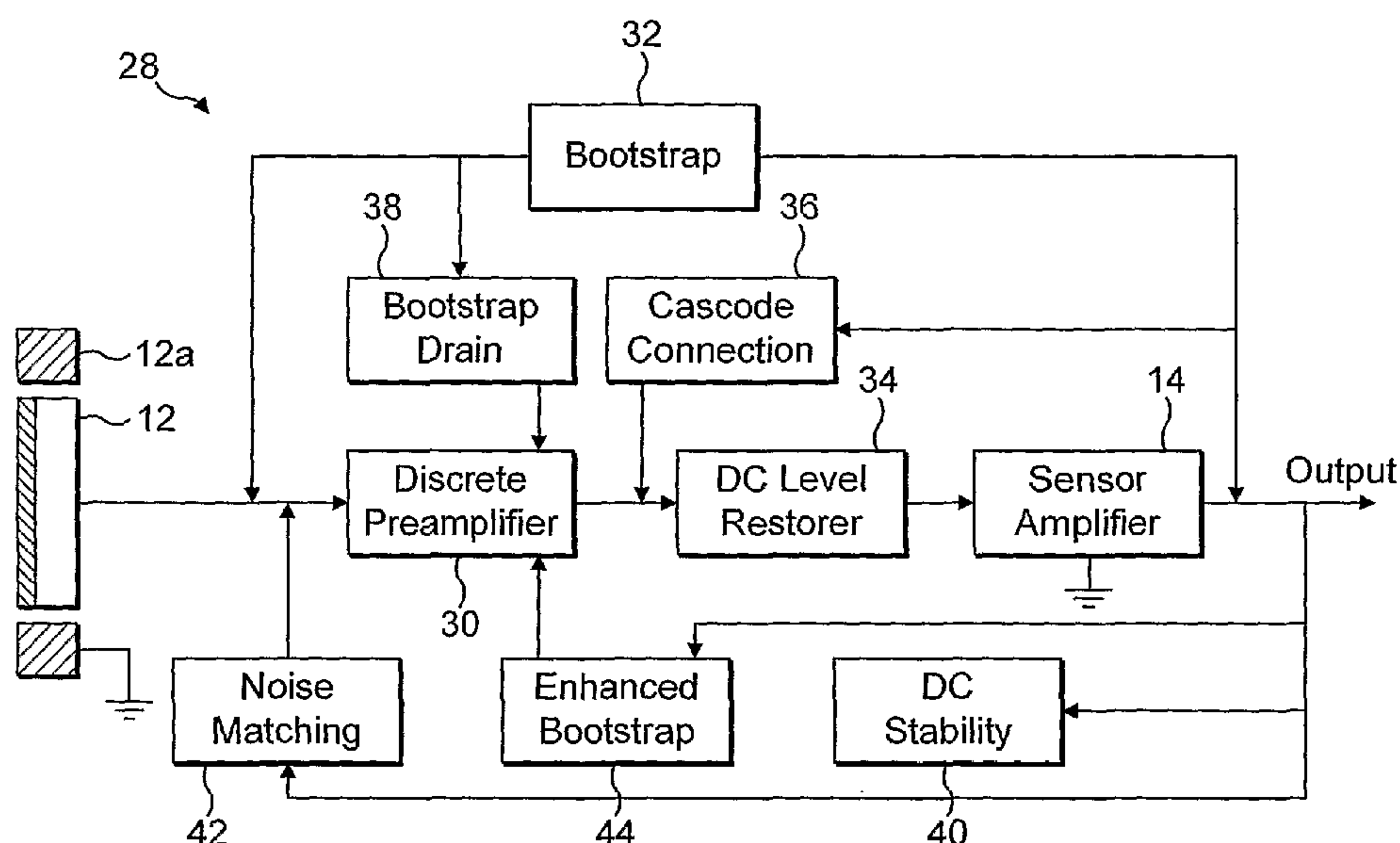
(84) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available): ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, NA, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Published:

- with international search report
- before the expiration of the time limit for amending the claims and to be republished in the event of receipt of amendments

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

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WO 2007/107689 A1

ELECTRIC POTENTIAL SENSOR

Field of the Invention

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The present invention concerns electric potential sensors for use for the measurement of potentials non-invasively in a wide variety of applications, for example in the fields of medical diagnostics and biometric sensing.

Background to the Invention

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In order to create a sensitive electrodynamic measuring device, it is customary to provide a high input impedance and thereby reduce the power of the input signal required to operate the device. However, electronic circuits with a very
15 high input impedance tend to be unstable, and so practical devices are usually a compromise between achieving the necessary degree of sensitivity, providing the desired input impedance and ensuring an acceptable degree of stability.

In International Patent Application No. WO 03/048789, an electrodynamic
20 sensor is disclosed in which different circuit techniques are combined to achieve several orders of magnitude improvement in sensitivity, by comparison with previously known electrodynamic sensors, whilst still maintaining sufficient stability to permit a relatively unskilled operator to make measurements in everyday conditions. According to this earlier application, an
25 electrodynamic sensor is provided, which comprises a high input impedance electrometer adapted to measure small electrical potentials originating from an object under test by means of at least one input probe, which has no direct electrical contact with the object. The circuit arrangement of the electrometer of this invention comprises an amplifier which includes a combination of

ancillary circuits arranged cumulatively to increase the sensitivity of said electrometer to said small electrical potentials whilst not perturbing the electrical field associated therewith, the ancillary circuits serving to provide at least two of guarding, bootstrapping, neutralisation, supply rail drift correction, supply modulation and offset correction for said sensor.

Whilst these features assist in providing a sensor with high input impedance and a relatively stable operation, nevertheless, in situations where there may be weak capacitive coupling to, or a signal of small amplitude generated by, a source or sample under test, noise problems may still remain and may inhibit or prevent accurate signal measurement. This is particularly the case in certain medical and microscopic applications in which there is only a weak capacitive coupling and yet highly accurate signal measurement is essential, for example in a remote off-body mode of sensing in which the or each probe has no physical contact with the human body and typically the weak capacitive coupling would be $<1\text{pF}$.

More particularly, in applications where there is a weak coupling between a sample under test and the sensor electrode, the capacitive coupling to the sample may be comparable with or much smaller than the input capacitance of the sensor. In this case, the measurement signal received by the sensor is attenuated by the capacitive potential divider formed by the coupling capacitance and the input capacitance and may be difficult to capture.

There is thus a significant need for an electric potential sensor in which the possibility for accurate signal measurement is enhanced in cases of weak capacitive coupling to a sample under test.

Such a need is especially pronounced in cases where accuracy of signal measurement is crucial, for example in cases of biometric and medical measurement.

- 5 There is also a significant need for an electric potential sensor in which the signal to noise ratio is substantially improved.

Summary of the Invention

- 10 The present invention seeks to overcome the problems described above and to provide a novel electric potential sensor which is capable of highly accurate and non-invasive signal measurement.

- 15 The present invention, at least in the preferred embodiments described below, also seeks to provide an electric potential sensor in which the signal to noise ratio is significantly enhanced.

- The present invention further seeks to provide various techniques and combinations of techniques for enhancing the signal to noise ratio in an electric
20 potential sensor.

According to the invention, there is provided an electric potential sensor comprising:

- 25 at least one detection electrode arranged for capacitive coupling with a sample under test and for generating a measurement signal;
a sensor amplifier adapted to receive the measurement signal as input and to supply an amplified detection signal as output;

input impedance enhancing means for providing a high input impedance to the sensor amplifier for increasing the sensitivity of the electrode to reduced electric potentials; and
a discrete pre-amplifier stage arranged to co-operate with the sensor amplifier to reduce the input capacitance of the amplifier.

According to the invention, the discrete pre-amplifier stage serves to increase the amplitude of the input measurement signal and thereby to increase the signal to noise ratio and enhance signal measurement. The discrete pre-amplifier stage may, for example, be provided by a high electron mobility transistor, or a FET arrangement.

The input impedance enhancing means may comprise at least one of a guard circuit, a bootstrapping circuit and a neutralisation circuit. The input impedance enhancing means may also further comprise one or more circuits for supply rail drift correction, supply modulation and offset correction for the sensor.

In a preferred embodiment described below, the detection electrode is juxtaposed with a conducting element connected to a zero reference potential in order to reduce effective source impedance, the conducting element being in the form of an annular ring surrounding the detection electrode.

In a further embodiment of the invention, there is provided in addition means for reducing the noise amplitude in order to increase the signal to noise ratio. For example, such means for reducing the noise amplitude may comprise at least one of a dc stability gain setting circuit, a noise matching circuit, and an enhanced bootstrap circuit.

The present invention thus aims to increase the signal to noise ratio either by increasing the amplitude of the signal or by decreasing the amplitude of the noise or both.

5 The present invention will now be described further, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a circuit diagram of an electrodynamic sensor according to the prior art;

10 Figure 2 is a block diagram of an electrodynamic sensor according to the present invention;

Figure 3 is a circuit diagram of a first embodiment of a discrete pre-amplifier stage employed in the sensor of Figure 2, with bootstrapping;

Figure 4 is a circuit diagram of a modification of the Figure 3 circuit;

15 Figure 5 is a circuit diagram of a further embodiment of discrete pre-amplifier stage provided by a FET, with bootstrapping and a DC level restorer circuit;

Figure 6 is a circuit diagram of a modification of the Figure 5 circuit having a cascode circuit for bootstrapping the source of the FET;

20 Figure 7 is a circuit diagram of a further modification of the Figure 5 circuit having a drain bootstrapping circuit for bootstrapping the drain of the FET;

Figure 8 is a circuit diagram of a DC stability gain setting circuit shown in Figure 2;

25 Figure 9 is a circuit diagram of a noise matching circuit shown in Figure 2;

Figure 10 is a circuit diagram of a modification of the noise matching circuit of Figure 9;

Figure 11 is a circuit diagram of an enhanced bootstrapping circuit shown in Figure 2; and

Figure 12 is a circuit diagram of a modification of the enhanced bootstrapping circuit of Figure 11.

5

Referring to Figure 1, an electrodynamic sensor as disclosed in International Patent Application No. WO 03/048789 will first be described.

As shown in Figure 1, an electrodynamic sensor 10 according International
10 Patent Application number WO 03/048789 comprises a detection electrode 12 connected to the non-inverting input of a sensor amplifier 14. In use, the detection electrode 12 supplies a measurement signal to the sensor amplifier 14, whose output supplies an amplified detection signal as output.

15 The detection electrode 12 includes an electrode disc 16 mounted on a conductive stem 18, the electrode disc 16 comprising a surface oxide layer 20 on a substrate 22. The sensor amplifier 14 has a fixed input resistance 24, connected between the electrode 12 and the non-inverting input of the amplifier 14, to provide a steady input bias current to the amplifier 14. In practice, the
20 input resistor 24 will generally have a high resistance of the order of 100 GΩs or greater. The sensor amplifier 14 also has a guard 26 physically surrounding the input circuitry including the electrode 12 and the resistor 24 and providing a shield driven by the output of the amplifier 14. Stray capacitance is thus alleviated by means of this positive feedback technique by maintaining the
25 same potential on the guard or shield 26 as on the input detection electrode 12.

In addition to the guard 26, further circuit components may be provided for bootstrapping and neutralisation of the sensor as described in International Patent Application number WO 03/048789.

The earlier sensor shown in Figure 1 may be employed as a sensor probe for electrodynamic body sensing to obtain biometric measurements either in a contact mode, in which case the oxide layer 20 forms a capacitor providing relatively strong electrical coupling to the skin of a person under observation, or in an electrically isolated sensing mode, in which case the oxide layer 20 may be omitted and capacitive couple providing a relatively weak electrical coupling may be achieved through clothing or other intervening layers.

A sensor 28 according to the present invention will now be described with reference to Figure 2, such sensor effectively comprising the sensor 10 of Figure 1, with its detection electrode 12 and sensor amplifier 14, but with the inclusion of further and different components to increase the accuracy of signal measurement, particularly in cases where a weak capacitive coupling to the subject under test is present.

One such additional component comprises an annular conducting element 12a surrounding the electrode 12 and connected to a reference voltage potential V_r , such as earth or a zero potential point on the sensor amplifier 14. The effect of the annular element 12a is to reduce the source impedance, ie the coupling impedance between the sample under test and the input of the sensor amplifier 14 as provided by a combination of coupling resistance R_c and coupling capacitance C_c , by reducing the effective distance from the electrode 12 to the earthing point for the sensor amplifier 14. The element 12a does not need to be annular but may have other configurations.

Further additional components are included in the circuitry of the sensor itself. More particularly, the sensor 28 of the present invention employs a discrete pre-amplifier stage 30, having an intrinsically lower device input capacitance

than is available in commercial operational amplifiers, in conjunction with the features of the sensor 10 of Figure 1. Such a discrete pre-amplifier stage 30 is shown diagrammatically in Figure 2, and embodiments of this discrete device are described with reference to Figures 3 to 6. The invention may also employ
5 various bootstrapping techniques in conjunction with the pre-amplifier stage 30 in order to enhance the operation of the discrete device, as shown for example respectively in Figures 2 to 6. In addition, or instead, the invention may employ techniques for reducing the amplitude of the noise, as shown for example in Figures 2 and 7 to 9.

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Figure 2 is a block diagram of the sensor 28 according to the invention illustrating how these different techniques may be applied to the sensor to enhance significantly the signal to noise ratio. One embodiment of the discrete pre-amplifier stage 30, which is in practice inserted between the detection
15 electrode 12 and the sensor amplifier 14, is shown in detail in, and further described in relation to, Figures 3 and 4. This embodiment includes a bootstrapping circuit 32 shown separately in Figure 2. Another embodiment of discrete pre-amplifier stage 30, also employing the bootstrapping circuit 32 as well as a DC level restorer circuit 34, is illustrated in Figure 5.

20

The discrete pre-amplifier stage 30 of Figure 5 may be further enhanced by means of additional bootstrapping, for example provided by a cascode circuit connection 36 as shown in Figure 6 to bootstrap the source of a FET employed as the pre-amplifier stage 30, and/or provided by a drain bootstrap circuit 38 as
25 shown in Figure 7 to bootstrap the drain of the FET.

Further techniques for noise reduction, illustrated in Figures 8 to 12, may also be applied to the sensor 28. Such techniques may include the provision of a dc stability gain setting circuit 40 shown in Figure 8 for overcoming the problem

of low frequency instability, and/or of a noise matching circuit 42 shown in Figures 9 and 10 for addressing the problem of low frequency noise, and/or of an enhanced bootstrap circuit 44 shown in Figures 11 and 12 for addressing the problem of drift reduction. These additional circuits are all applicable generally to operational amplifier based sensors, as well as particularly to the versions of the sensor 28 including a discrete pre-amplifier stage 30 as described in relation to Figure 2. In the case of weak coupling between the detection electrode 12 and a sample under test, however, the maximum signal to noise ratio will be obtained by utilising both a discrete pre-amplifier stage 30, as described below with reference to Figures 2 to 7, and at least one of the techniques as described below in relation to Figures 8 to 12.

Discrete pre-amplifier stage

For situations where the coupling capacitance C_c between a sample under test and the sensor 28 is much less than the input capacitance C_{in} of the sensor 28, the available measurement signal is attenuated by a capacitive potential divider made up of the capacitances C_c and C_{in} . This is the case in practice for many remote monitoring applications and for microscopic probes, particularly for example in the field of biometric sensing. In this situation, the best way of increasing the signal to noise ratio would be to reduce the input capacitance C_{in} to be less than or comparable with the coupling capacitance C_c . However, commercially available operational amplifiers typically have input capacitances C_{in} ranging from 1-10pF, and these cannot be reduced further. The present invention is based on the realisation that a discrete pre-amplifier stage 30 having an input capacitance as low as 0.1pF may be employed in conjunction with the detection electrode 12 and sensor amplifier 14 effectively to achieve a lower input capacitance. The use of such a device as a front end pre-amplifier will increase the available signal by a large factor (x10-x100).

In one embodiment of the sensor 28 as shown in Figure 3, the pre-amplifier stage 30 is achieved using a high electron mobility transistor (HEMT) device 50 situated between the detection electrode 12 of the known sensor, represented in Figure 3 by an input V_{in} , and the operational amplifier 14 of the known sensor. The HEMT device 50 displays very low noise characteristics due to the extremely high mobility of the charge carriers in the semiconducting channel of the device. The HEMT device 50 is configured in this instance as a common source amplifier, with the property of inverting voltage gain. A resistor R_d limits the current flowing through the channel of the HEMT device 50, and the DC operating point is set by the voltage applied to a gate resistor R_g connected to the gate of the HEMT device 50. The output signal, taken from the drain of the HEMT device 50, is amplified by an operational amplifier OPA1, constituting the sensor amplifier 14, with the gain of the operational amplifier OPA1 set by a feedback connection of two resistors R_1 , R_2 and a capacitor C_1 .

An attenuated version of the output from the operational amplifier OPA1 is fed back and amplified by way of a positive feedback loop including the bootstrap circuit 32 (see Figure 2) comprising a further operational amplifier OPA2 arranged to provide a bootstrap signal via a capacitor C_2 for the gate resistor R_g , thereby increasing the input impedance of the sensor 28. The gain of the operational amplifier OPA2 is set by two resistors R_3 and R_4 . In addition, a resistor R_5 provides a DC path for the input bias current required by the HEMT device 50.

25

Further enhancement of the signal to noise ratio may also be achieved by physically separating the first stage transistor 50, providing the pre-amplifier stage 30, from the following electronics and operating at a reduced temperature, for example as shown in Figure 4. The circuit of Figure 4 is

similar to that of Figure 3, with the exception that the portion of the circuit to the left of the dashed line is maintained at cryogenic temperatures for reduced temperature operation and the portion to the right is at room temperature.

5 It is to be noted that the HEMT device 50 may take the form either of a pre-amplifier in front of the sensor amplifier 14, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, or else may be incorporated within the feedback loop of the following amplifier OPA1. Further, the HEMT device 50 may comprise two or more devices if used differentially.

10

In another embodiment shown in Figure 5, a silicon dual gate MOSFET 60 (or two FETs so connected) is employed as the pre-amplifier stage 30. The MOSFET 60 is biased by means of an appropriate drain resistor R_d to give an inverting voltage gain. The input signal from the sensor electrode 12 is
15 coupled to gate G2 of the MOSFET 60, with gate G1 of the MOSFET 60 being held at an appropriate bias voltage by means of a further resistor R_{G1} . An input bias current in this example is provided by a high value resistor R_b , typically having a resistance in the range 10 – 100 G Ω , to which is connected the bootstrap circuit 32, here comprising a parallel connection of a capacitor C4
20 and resistor R10 providing the necessary coupling and DC bias to the resistor R_b .

The output of the MOSFET 60 in this embodiment, taken from the drain D, contains both the amplified input signal and an unwanted DC offset. This DC
25 offset may be removed by means of the DC level restoring circuit 34 in conjunction with the following operational amplifier circuit OPA3, which is configured as a differential amplifier and which represents the sensor amplifier 14 of the sensor 28. For this purpose, the gain of the operational amplifier OPA3 is set by resistors R6 and R8 for its inverting input and by resistors R7

and R9 for its non-inverting input. In addition, a capacitor C3 is connected across the resistor R9, so as to act as a low pass filter which rejects the AC component of the signal coupled to it, thereby leaving the DC offset. Hence, the difference signal, which is amplified by the operational amplifier OPA3, consists only of the wanted signal. This technique has the advantage that it responds to any DC drift present in the output of the MOSFET 60 and removes this from the signal below a corner frequency set by the time constant of the filter components.

The output from the operational amplifier OPA3 is suitable to provide a positive feedback signal for the guard circuit as shown in Figure 1 and the bootstrap circuit 32 as already described, as well as a neutralisation circuit as described in International Patent Application No. WO 03/048789. An input capacitance $<1\text{pF}$ for the sensor 28 with the configuration of Figure 5 has been measured in experimental trials using this embodiment.

It should be noted that the DC input bias current described above as being provided by the resistor R_b may in practice be provided by one or a combination of three means: First, by leakage through the bootstrap capacitor C4 (usually the effective resistance of the capacitor is much lower than the resistance of the bias resistor); second, by the addition of the resistor R10 in parallel with the bootstrap capacitor C4; and third, by including a resistor to ground from the junction of the bias resistor R_b and the bootstrap capacitor C4.

The embodiments shown in Figures 6 and 7 are variants of the circuit shown in and described with reference to Figure 5, and these will now be described. Like parts are designated by the same reference signs, and will not be described further in detail.

In the version of the Figure 5 embodiment shown in Figure 6, the silicon dual gate MOSFET 60 is connected in a cascode configuration where the device is internally bootstrapped to the source S so that internal bootstrapping is provided within the pre-amplifier stage. Such cascode connection 36 (see
5 Figure 2) has the effect of greatly reducing the input capacitance C_{in} both of the MOSFET 60 and, since the MOSFET 60 is the input stage of the sensor 28, of the overall sensor. For this circuit, the voltage gain of the first discrete pre-amplifier stage provided by the MOSFET 60 is unity and non-inverting. The output of the MOSFET 60 is again fed through the DC level restorer circuit 34
10 including the operational amplifier OPA3 (amplifier 14) and is then coupled to an inverting amplifier OPA4 to provide the correct phase of feedback signal for the bootstrap circuit 32. The gain of the operational amplifier OPA4 is set by two resistors R11 and R12. A fraction of the output from the operational amplifier OPA4 is used for the bootstrap circuit 32 as before. An input
15 capacitance $<0.2\text{pF}$ has been measured in experimental trials using this configuration for the sensor 28.

A further enhancement of the Figure 6 embodiment with the cascode circuit connection 36 is possible as shown in the embodiment of Figure 7. According
20 to this embodiment, an additional bootstrap 38 to the drain D of the MOSFET 60 as well as the bootstrap to the source S enables the intrinsic input capacitance to be further reduced. This additional bootstrap 38 is achieved in this instance using a bootstrap capacitor C5 connected between the MOSFET end of the parallel connection of the capacitor C4 and resistor R10 and the
25 drain D of the MOSFET 60. It is alternatively possible to employ an independently derived bootstrap signal obtained e.g. from the other end of the parallel connection of C4/R10.

By way of example, the input capacitance may be reduced to $<0.1\text{pF}$ using the circuit of Figure 7. This implies that so long as there is a coupling capacitance of $\sim 0.1\text{pF}$ or greater, an optimum signal to noise ratio would be obtained. However, for this configuration of circuit, it is anticipated that the signal would
5 remain measurable, with a 10:1 signal to noise ratio, for coupling capacitances down to $\sim 10^{-15}\text{F}$, assuming a 1 volt signal at the source.

The circuits of Figures 3 to 7 significantly enhance the overall response of the electric potential sensor 28 to the sample under test in situations where weak
10 coupling occurs to the sample. However, in certain circumstances, indicated below, problems still may arise at low frequencies of operation. The circuits shown in and described with reference to Figures 8 to 12 address these problems.

15 **DC stability gain setting circuit**

The optimum noise performance of most amplifiers is achieved when the closed loop gain is considerably greater than unity, typically $\times 30$ - $\times 100$. Incorporating large voltage gain within the electric potential sensor 28
20 produces improvements in the noise performance, but may also introduce low frequency instability and increase the settling time of the sensor. One approach to alleviating this problem employs a low frequency negative feedback stabilisation loop as described in International Patent Application No. WO 03/048789. Another simple and effective technique is to introduce AC
25 coupling into the gain setting network by employing a DC stability gain setting circuit 40 (see Figure 2) as shown in detail Figure 8. Such DC stability gain setting circuit 40 may advantageously be employed in combination with one or more of the techniques described with reference to the embodiments of Figures 3 to 7 but it may also offer benefits when employed alone in its own right.

More especially, the DC stability gain setting circuit 40 of Figure 8 comprises a series connection of a resistor R_f and a capacitor C_f between a negative feedback loop at the output of the sensor amplifier 14 of the sensor 28 and ground, for setting the time constant for lower frequencies of operation of the sensor 28, where the time constant is given by:

$$f_c = 1/2\pi R_f C_f$$

The effect of this is to reduce the gain of the sensor amplifier 14 to unity at DC whilst maintaining a high gain at the signal frequencies, hence stabilising the sensor and improving the settling time. Hence, it is possible to achieve low noise performance with high voltage gain and stability.

Noise matching circuit

The noise performance of a differential input amplifier, such as the sensor amplifier 14 of the sensor 28, depends on many factors. Amongst the parameters to be considered are the level of the source impedance, ie the coupling impedance between the sample under test and the input of the sensor amplifier 14 as provided by a combination of coupling resistance R_c and coupling capacitance C_c , compared to the input impedance, provided by a combination of input resistance R_{in} and input capacitance C_{in} for the amplifier 14, and the extent to which the relative contributions of the voltage and current noise combine to create overall frequency dependent noise as observed at the output of the amplifier 14. For a situation in which the coupling impedance between the sample and the input is very high (i.e. $R_c \gg R_{in}$ and/or $C_c \ll C_{in}$), this factor may have a very large effect on the frequency dependent noise.

Close impedance matching between the inverting and non-inverting inputs of the sensor amplifier 14 serves not only to maximise the common mode rejection ratio, but also to minimise the noise. This may be achieved by the inclusion of a frequency dependent matching network, for example as shown in Figure 9, providing the noise matching circuit 42 of Figure 2. In this network, a parallel combination consisting of a resistor R_m and a capacitor C_m , where $R_m=R_c$ and $C_m=C_c$, is added to the input of the sensor amplifier 14 to achieve this balance condition and hence a reduction in the frequency dependent noise observed at the output of the sensor amplifier 14.

In a variation of the Figure 9 circuit, the parallel components R_m , C_m could be replaced by a parallel combination of a FET and a varactor diode, with suitable biasing components, as shown in Figure 10, to allow remotely tunable values for the resistance and capacitance for signal to noise optimisation. Bias voltages V_g and V_v control the resistance of the FET channel and the capacitance of the varactor diode respectively.

As in the case of the Figure 8 circuit, the noise matching circuit 42 of Figures 9 or 10 may advantageously be employed in combination with one or more of the techniques described with reference to the embodiments of Figures 3 to 7 but it may also offer benefits when employed alone in its own right.

Bootstrap with gain

The use of a positive feedback loop with a high pass characteristic to bootstrap the input bias network as described in International Patent Application No. WO 03/048789 significantly enhances the performance of the basic sensor 10 by increasing the input impedance. However, this technique may become difficult to implement at very low frequencies (say $<1\text{Hz}$) due to the long time constant

required, as set by the values chosen for the resistor R and capacitor C of the bootstrap circuit. In other words, the signal to noise ratio is reduced at low frequency. One way of addressing this problem comprises the use of an enhanced bootstrap circuit 44 as shown in Figures 2 and 11, which utilises a higher gain output (e.g. x10) available from the sensor amplifier 14. For example, the provision of two gain setting resistors 9R and R at the output of the amplifier 14, signifying a 9:1 ratio for their resistance values, gives a gain of x10. The bootstrap signal must then be precisely x1 if maximum bootstrap and stable operation is to be achieved. In this enhanced bootstrap circuit 44, the output signal from the amplifier 14 is fed back through the bootstrap capacitor C to a 1/10 resistive attenuator, comprising further resistors R and 9R in a 9:1 ratio, shown on the left hand side of the capacitor C in Figure 11, to provide the x1 bootstrap signal. This results in a x10 (for this example) increase in the time constant, therefore leading to smaller values for the capacitor C for a given lower operating frequency, or lower frequency operation.

A variation on the enhanced bootstrap circuit 44 of Figure 11 uses a high pass filter to set the lower operating frequency of the bootstrap circuit as shown in Figure 12. Here, the time constant is set by two resistor-capacitor pairs (RC) connected in the feedback circuit from the output of the amplifier 14, which RC pairs, together with a high impedance buffer amplifier OPA6, form a second order high pass filter. The gain is provided by two gain setting resistors R1 and R2.

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It will be appreciated that the variation of Figure 12 may employ either a passive high pass filter followed by a high impedance buffer amplifier or an active high pass filter, both of which enable low frequency operation to be achieved with convenient values of R and C.

Again, the enhanced bootstrap circuit 44 may advantageously be employed in combination with one or more of the techniques described with reference to the embodiments of Figures 3 to 7 but it may also offer benefits when employed
5 alone in its own right.

It should also be appreciated that the circuits described with reference to Figures 8 to 12 may be employed individually or in combination with the techniques described with reference to the embodiments of Figures 3 to 7.
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CLAIMS:

1. An electric potential sensor comprising:
at least one detection electrode arranged for capacitive coupling with a
sample under test and for generating a measurement signal;
a sensor amplifier having an inverting input, a non-inverting input and an
output, the sensor amplifier being arranged to receive the measurement
signal as input and to supply an amplified detection signal as output;
input impedance enhancing means including a bootstrapping circuit, said
input impedance enhancing means providing a high input impedance to the
electric potential sensor for increasing the sensitivity of the electrode to
reduced electric potentials; and
a discrete pre-amplifier stage for increasing the amplitude of the
measurement signal input to the sensor amplifier in order to increase the
signal to noise ratio, the discrete pre-amplifier stage being inserted between
the detection electrode and the sensor amplifier so as to reduce the input
capacitance of the electric potential sensor, the detection electrode being
connected to an input of the discrete pre-amplifier stage; wherein the
bootstrapping circuit provides a bootstrapping signal from the output of the
electric potential sensor to said input of the discrete pre-amplifier stage.
2. The electric potential sensor according to claim 1 in which the detection
electrode is juxtaposed with a conducting element connected to a zero
reference potential.
3. The electric potential sensor according to claim 2 in which the conducting
element is an annular ring surrounding the detection electrode.

4. The electric potential sensor according to claim 1, 2 or 3 in which the input impedance enhancing means comprises at least one of a guard circuit and a neutralisation circuit.
5. The electric potential sensor according to claim 1, 2 or 3 in which the input impedance enhancing means comprises a guard circuit and a neutralisation circuit.
- 10 6. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-5 in which the discrete pre-amplifier stage is physically separated from the sensor amplifier in a zone which is maintained at a different temperature from the sensor amplifier.
- 15 7. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-6 in which the discrete pre-amplifier stage comprises a high electron mobility transistor.
- 20 8. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-7 in which the discrete pre-amplifier stage comprises a FET arrangement.
9. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-8 in which an output of the discrete pre-amplifier stage is supplied to the sensor amplifier by way of a DC level restorer circuit to remove at least one of unwanted DC drift and offset.
- 25

10. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-9 in which the discrete pre-amplifier stage is internally bootstrapped.
- 5 11. The electric potential sensor according to any one of claims 1-10 further comprising means for reducing noise amplitude in order to increase signal to noise ratio.
- 10 12. The electric potential sensor according to claim 11 in which the means for reducing noise amplitude comprises at least one of a dc stability gain setting circuit, a noise matching circuit and an enhanced bootstrapping circuit.

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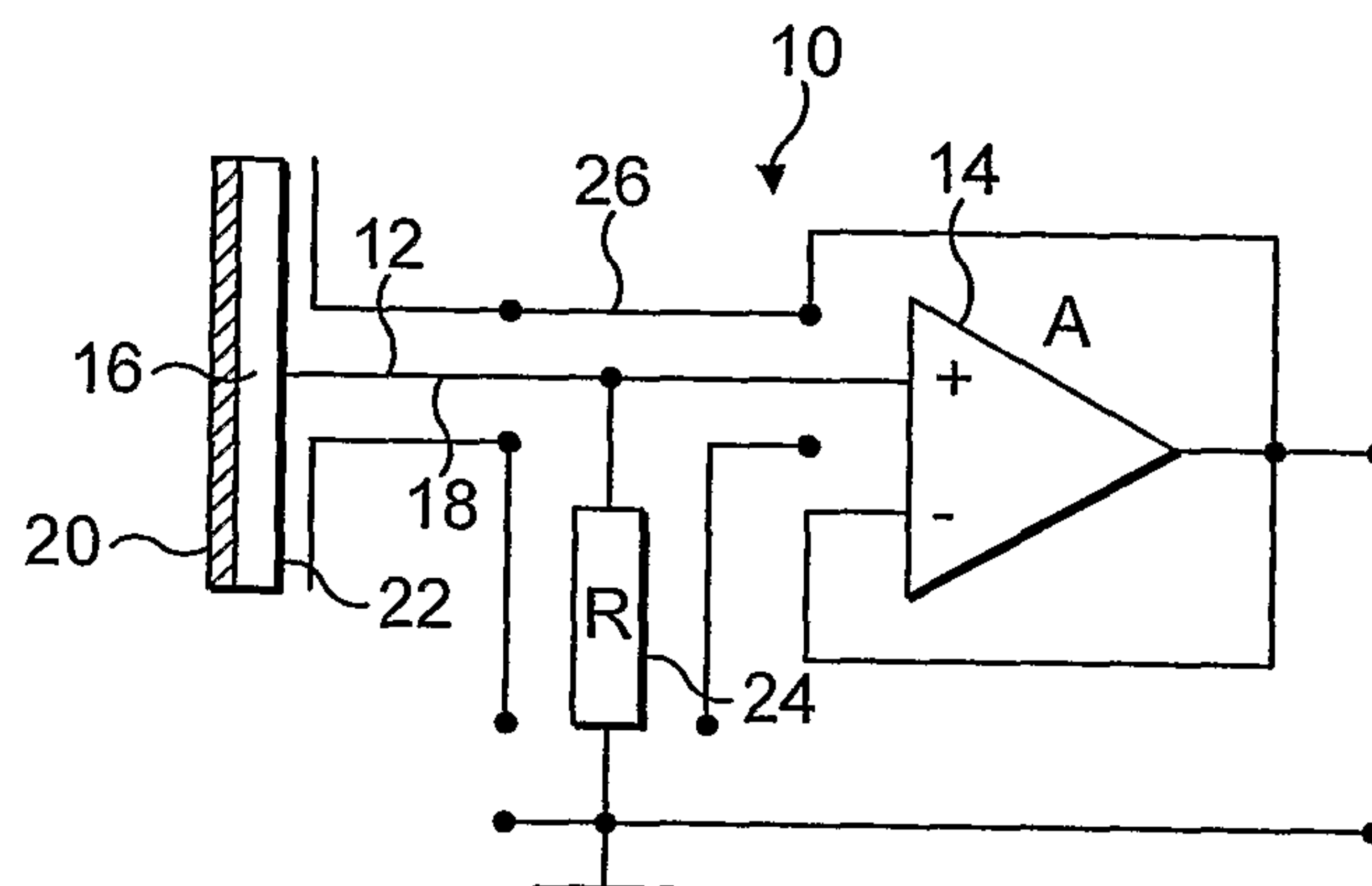


FIG. 1

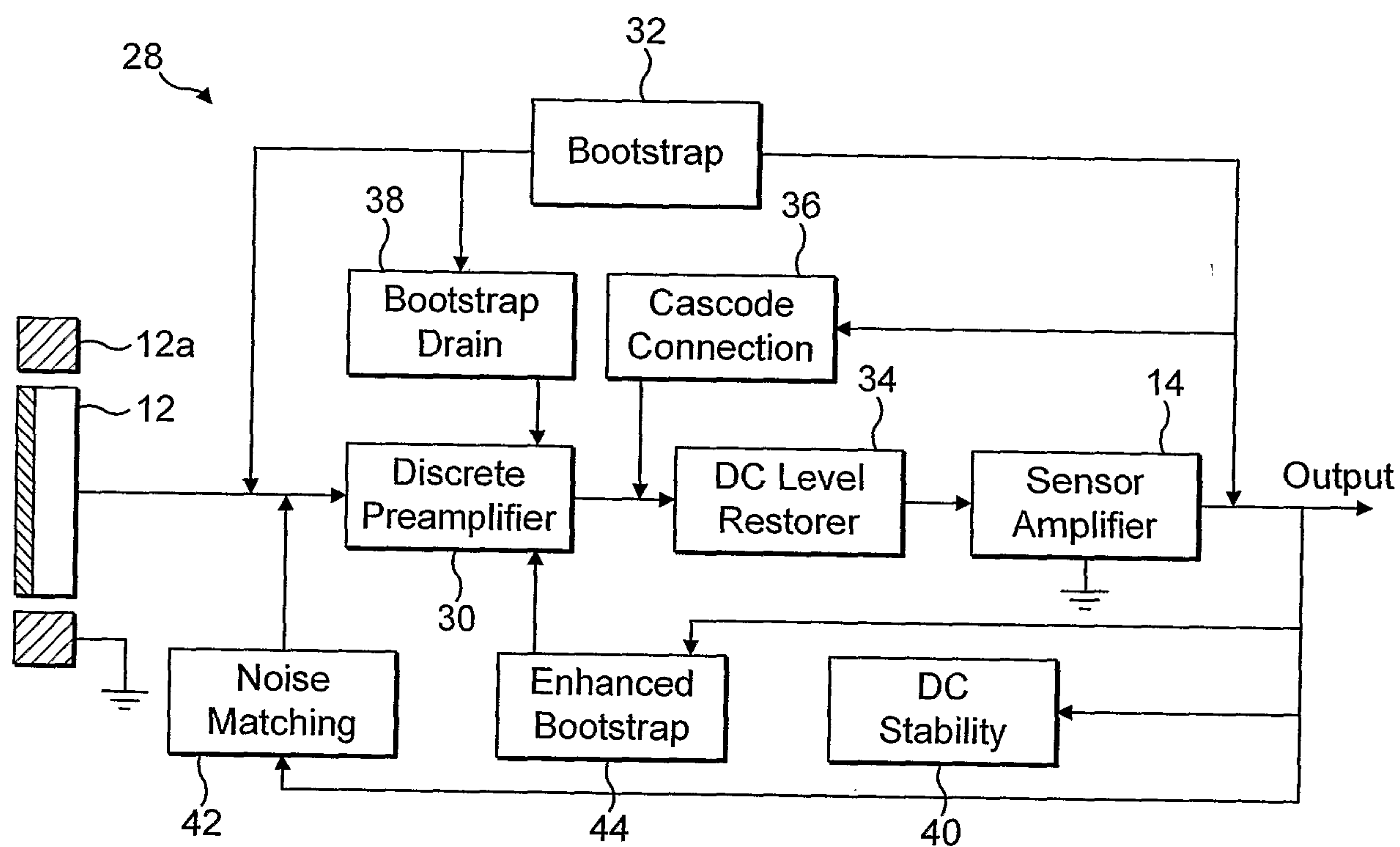


FIG. 2

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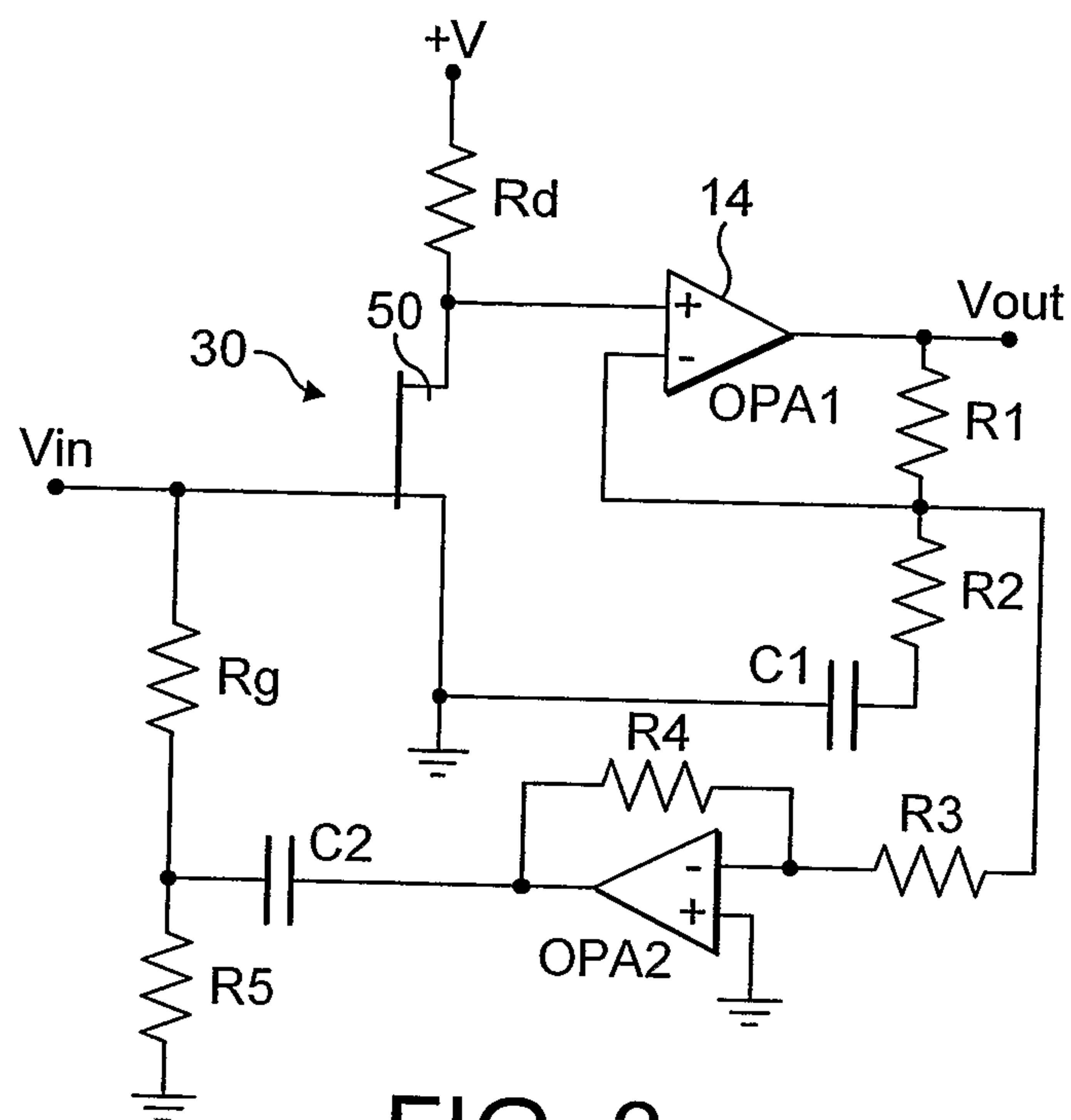


FIG. 3

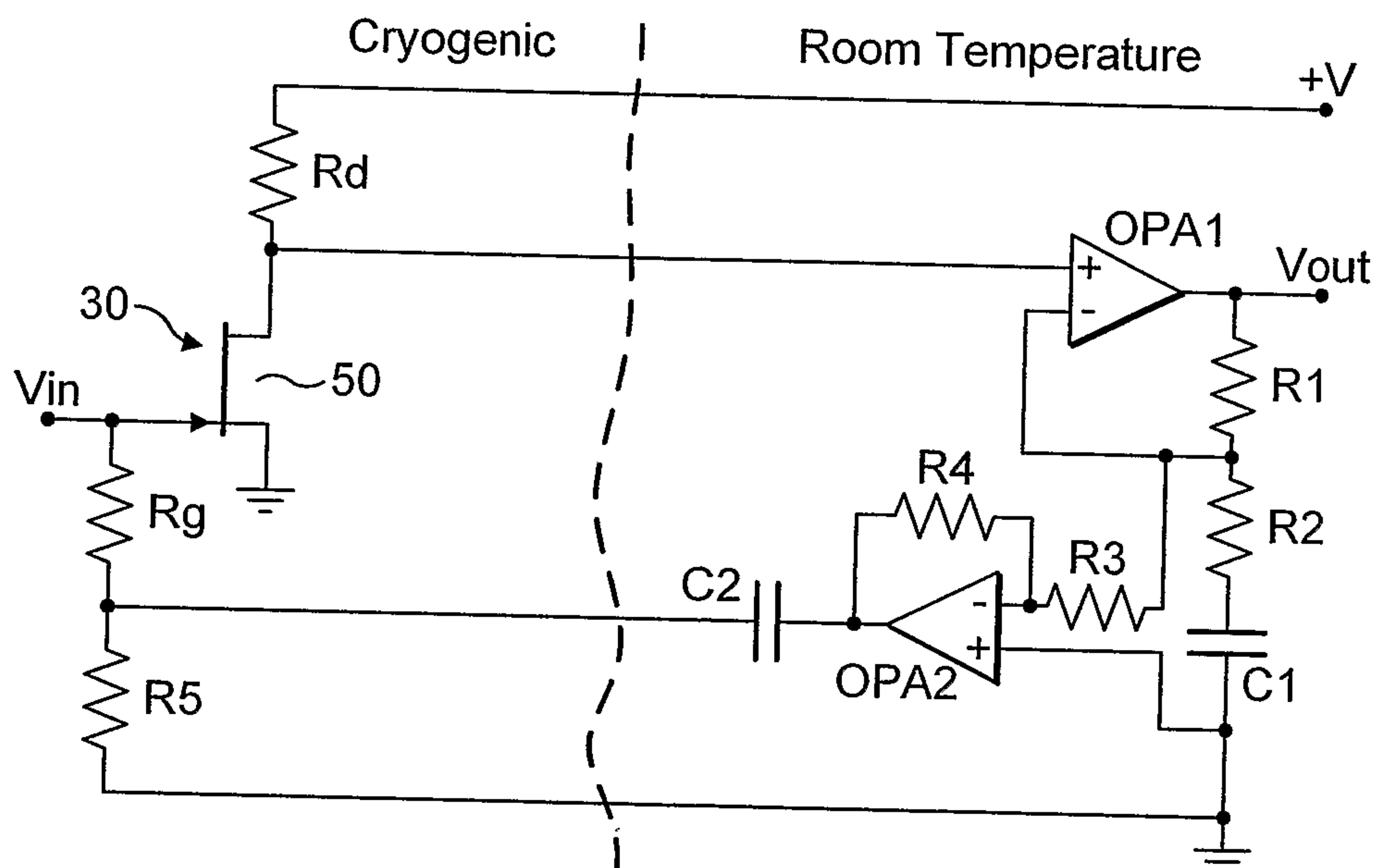


FIG. 4

3 / 5

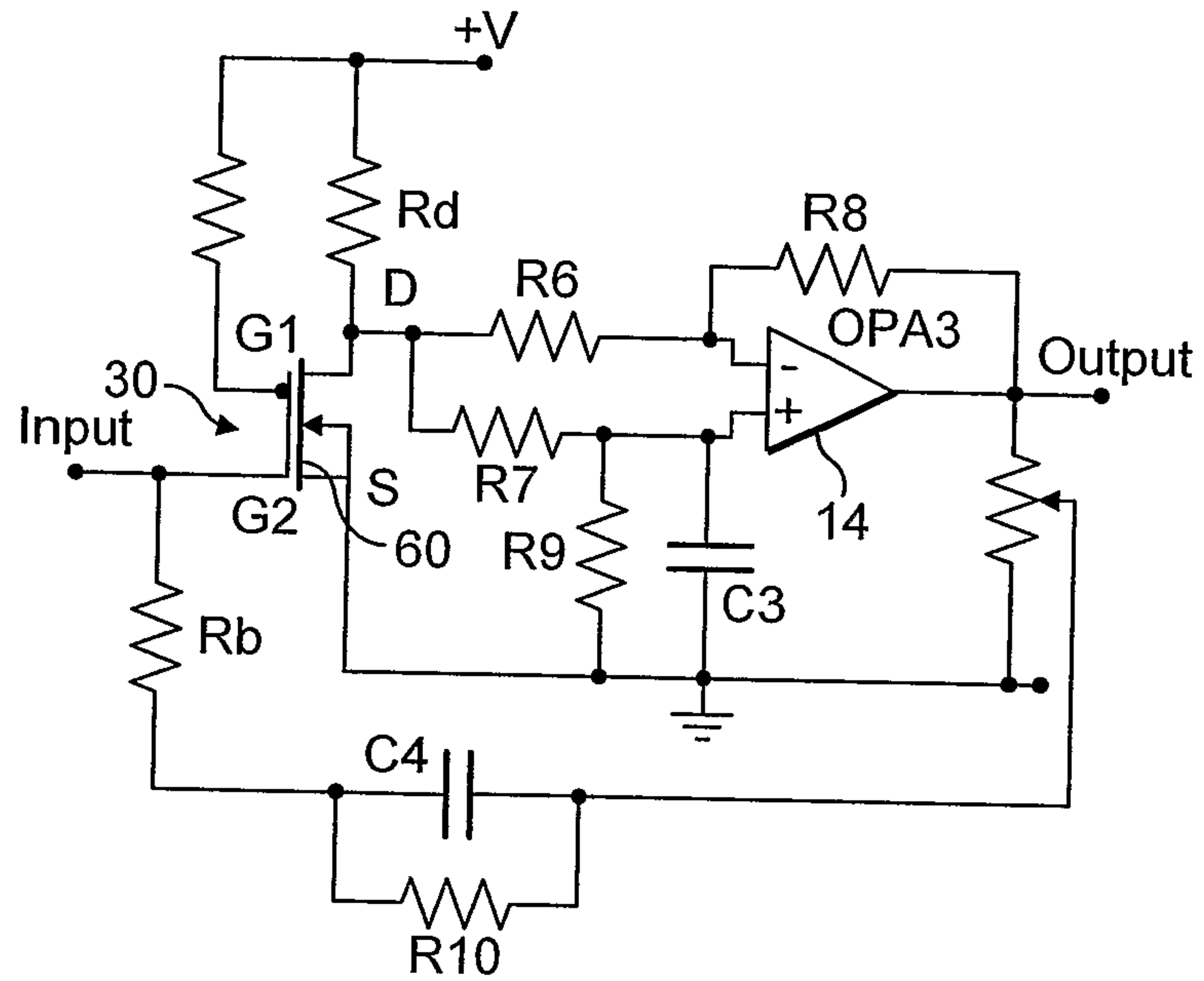


FIG. 5

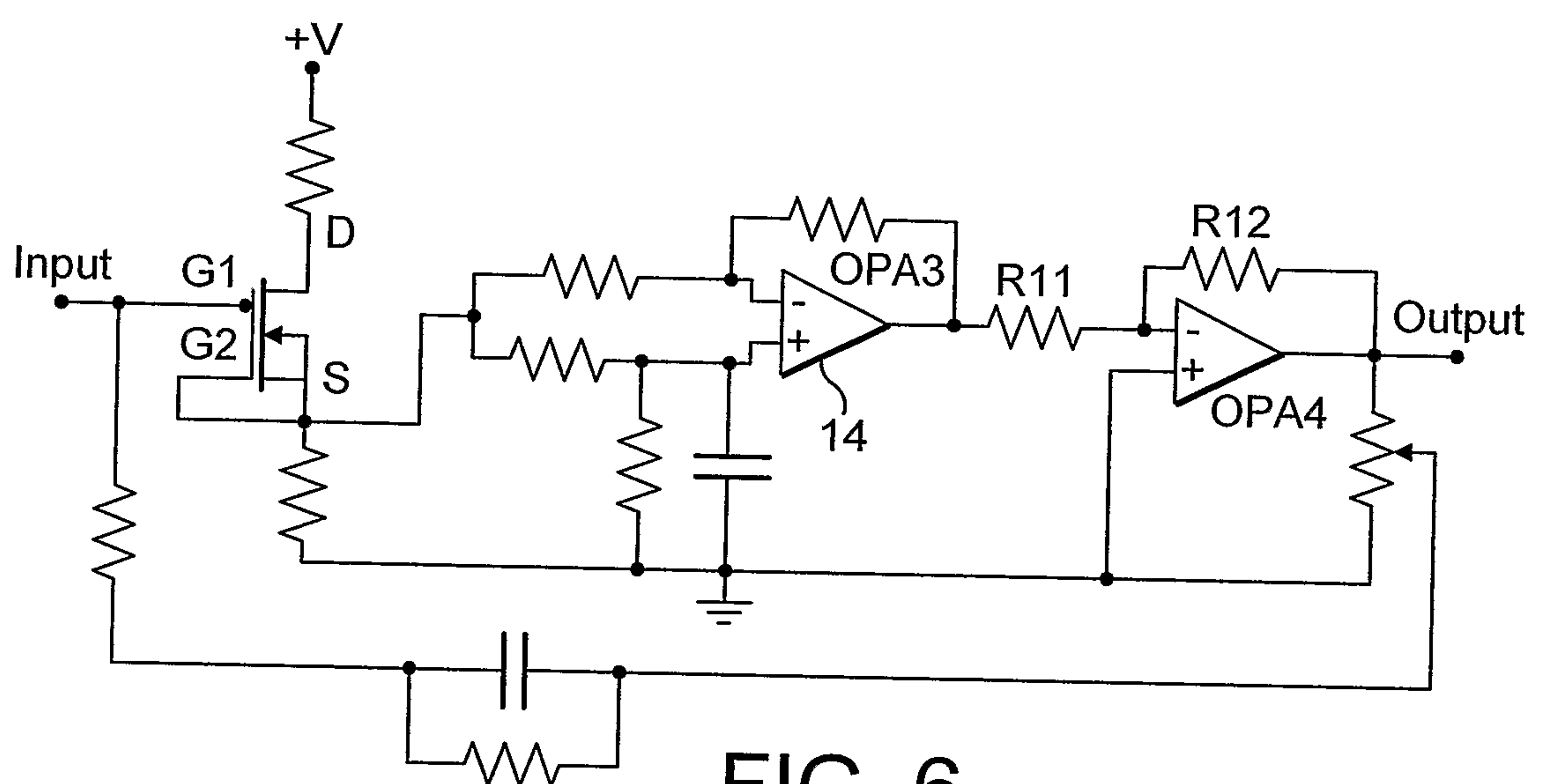


FIG. 6

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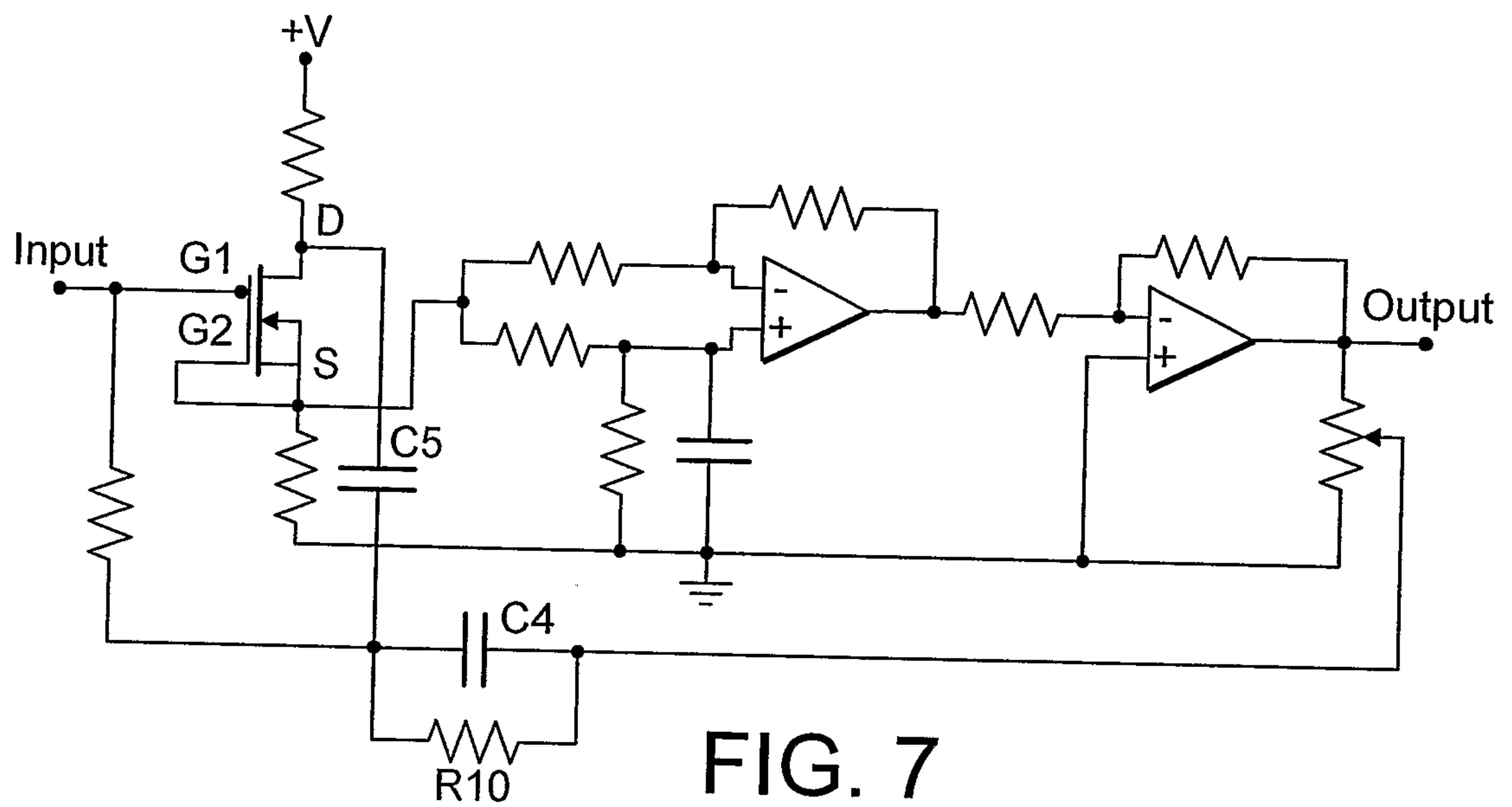


FIG. 7

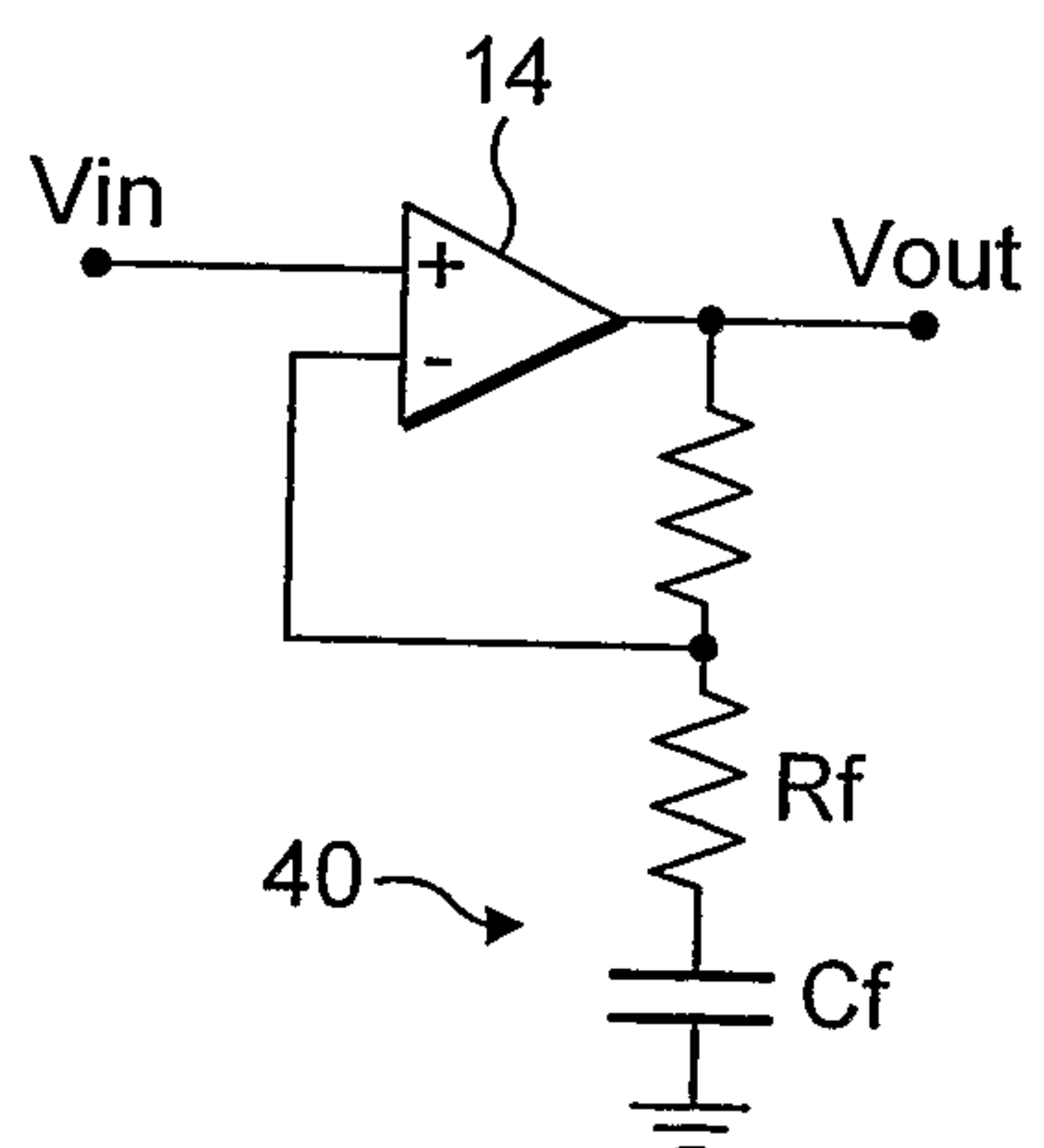


FIG. 8

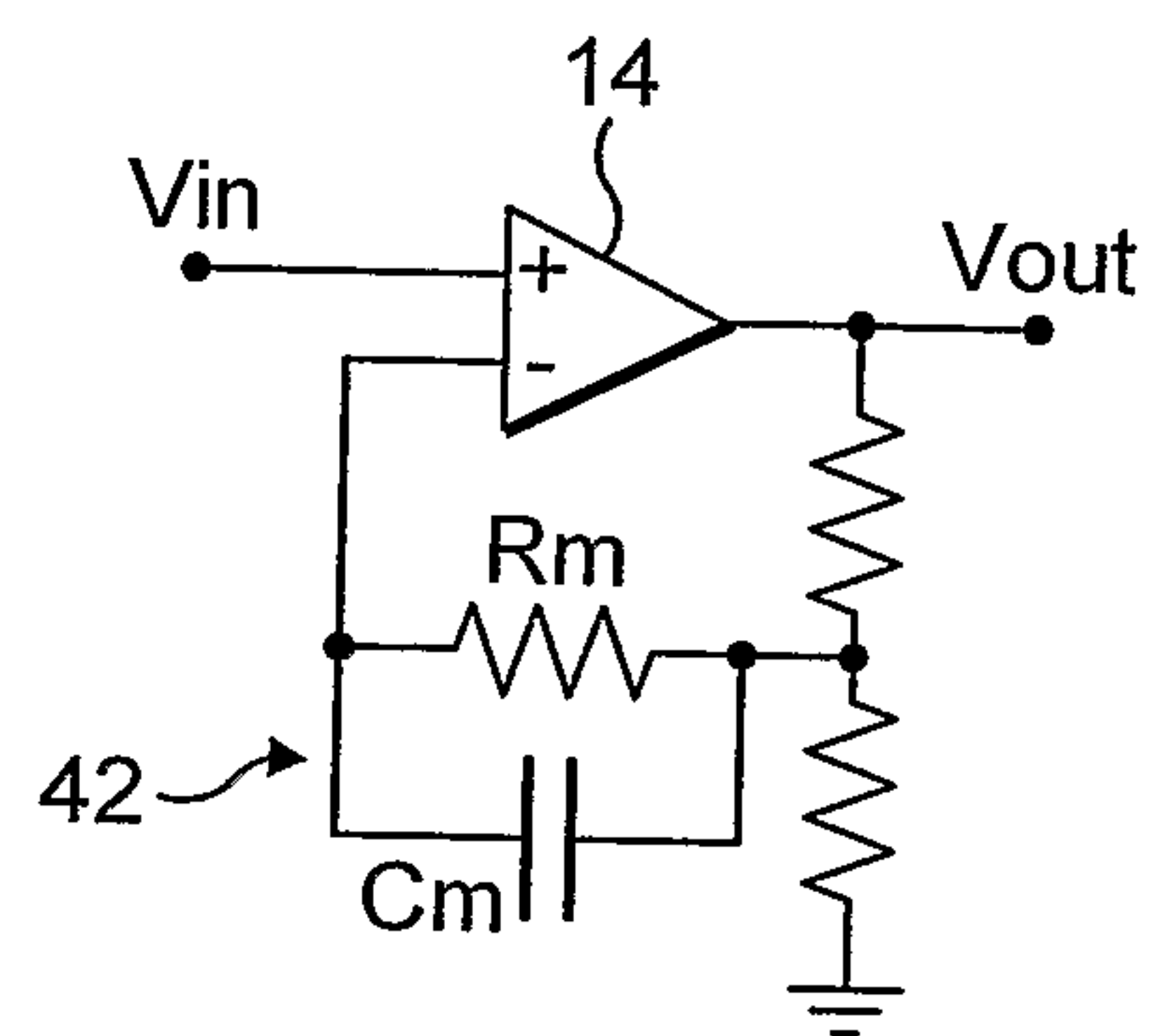


FIG. 9

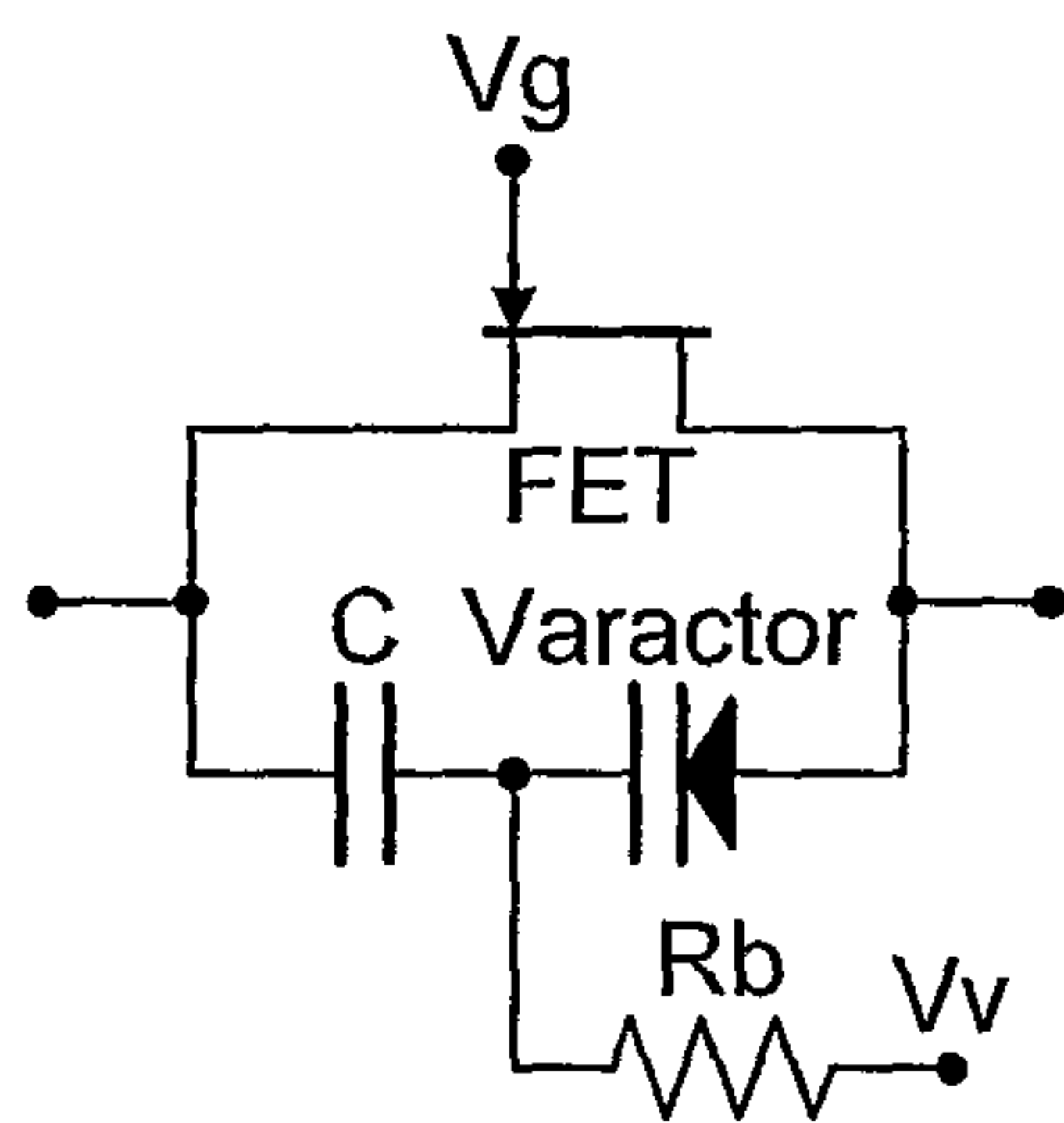


FIG. 10

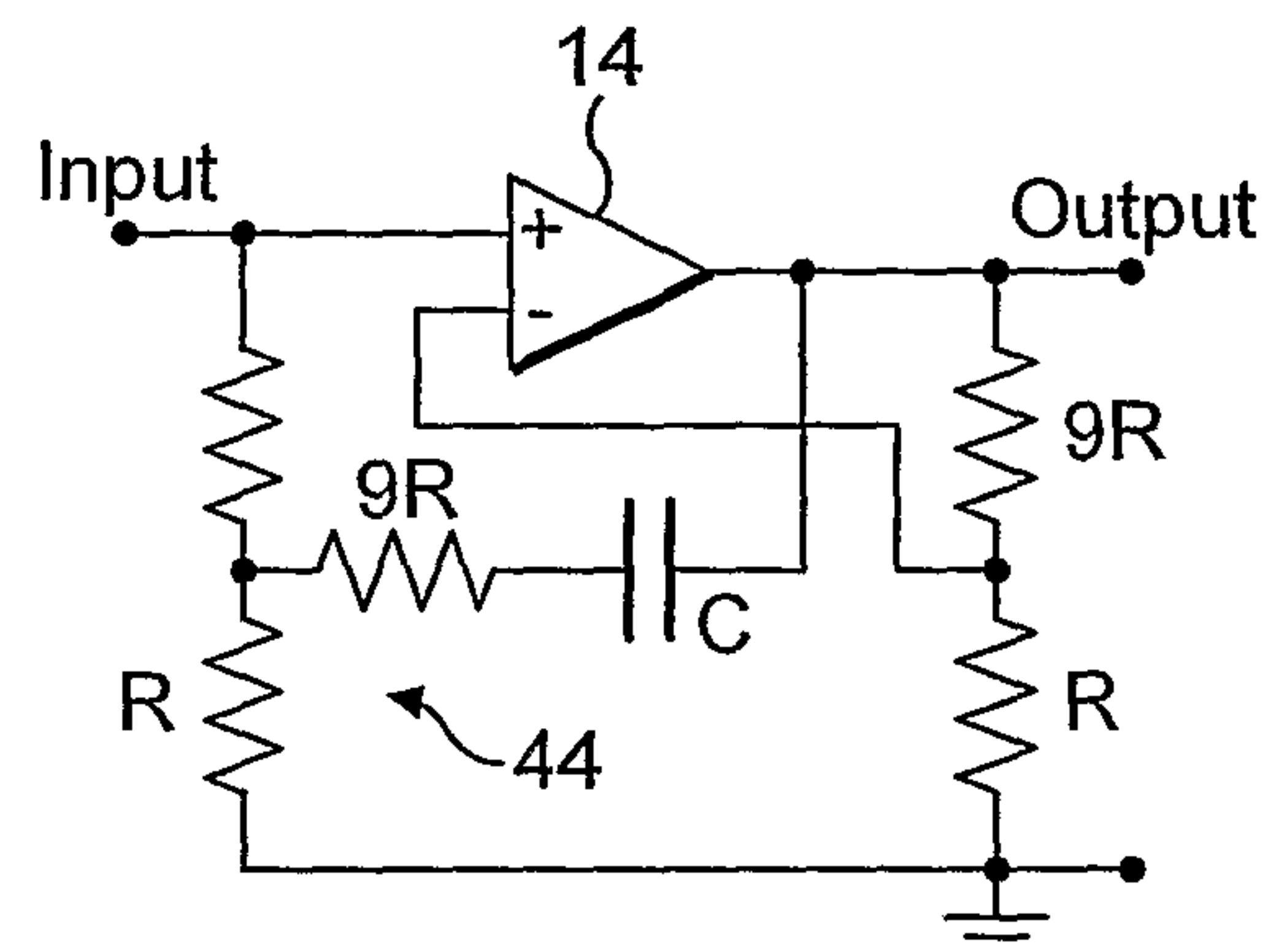


FIG. 11

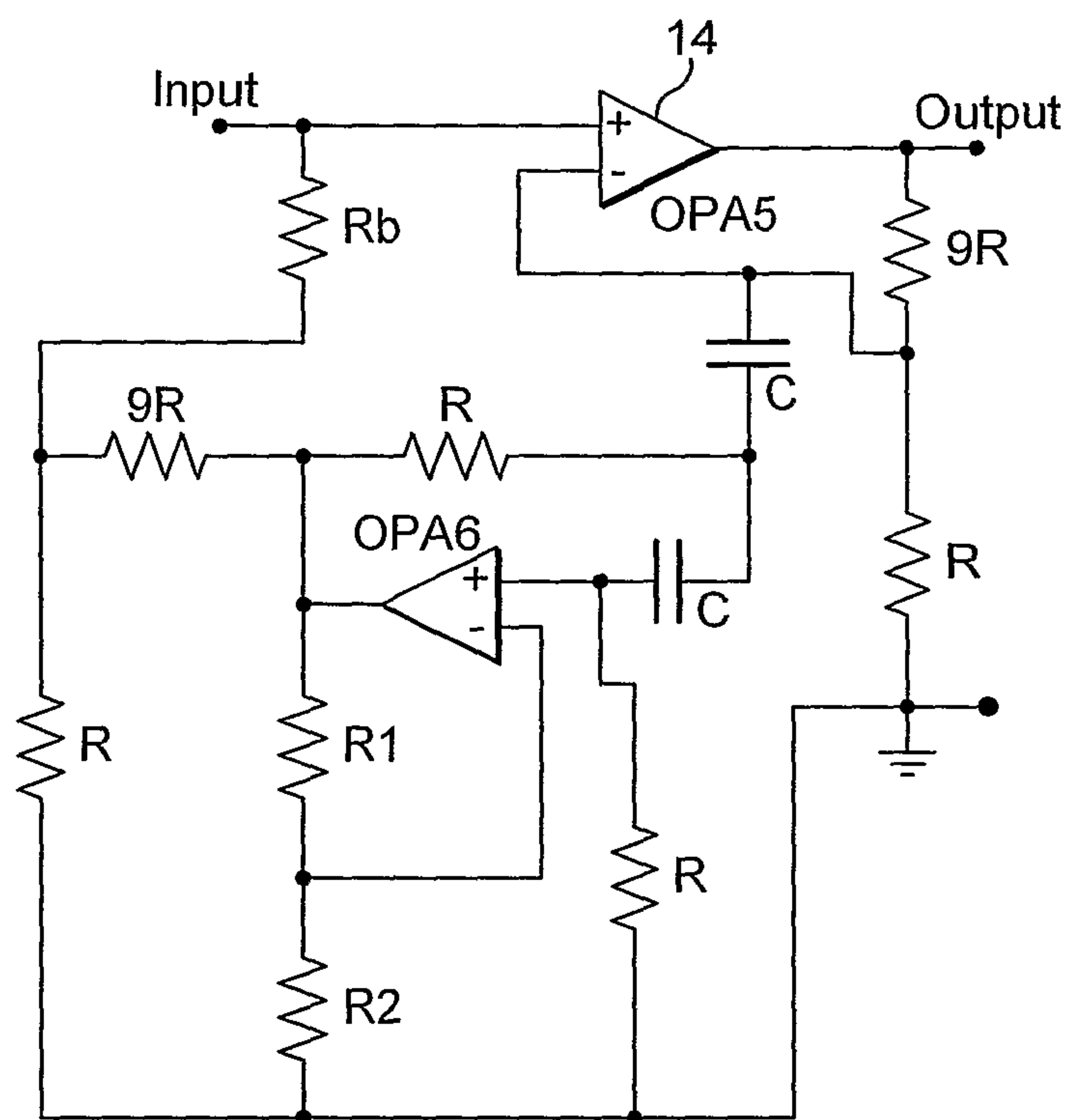


FIG. 12

