

# Electrons, Electrodes and Electron Tubes

**T**HE electron tube is a marvelous device. It makes possible the performing of operations, amazing in conception, with a precision and a certainty that are astounding. It is an exceedingly sensitive and accurate instrument—the product of coordinated efforts of engineers and craftsmen. Its construction requires materials from every corner of the earth. Its use is world-wide. Its future possibilities, even in the light of present-day accomplishments, are but dimly foreseen, for each development opens new fields of design and application.

The importance of the electron tube lies in its ability to control almost instantly the flight of the millions of electrons supplied by the cathode. It accomplishes this control with a minimum of energy. Because it is almost instantaneous in its action, the electron tube can operate efficiently and accurately at electrical frequencies much higher than those attainable with rotating machines.

## Electrons

All matter exists in the solid, liquid, or gaseous state. These three forms consist entirely of minute divisions known as molecules, which, in turn, are composed of atoms. Atoms have a nucleus which is a positive charge of electricity, around which revolve tiny charges of negative electricity known as **electrons**. Scientists have estimated that electrons weigh only 1/30-billion, billion, billion, billionths of an ounce, and that they may travel at speeds of thousands of miles per second.

Electron movement may be accelerated by the addition of energy. Heat is

one form of energy which can be conveniently used to speed up the electron. For example, if the temperature of a metal is gradually raised, the electrons in the metal gain velocity. When the metal becomes hot enough, some electrons may acquire sufficient speed to break away from the surface of the metal. This action, which is accelerated when the metal is heated in a vacuum, is utilized in most electron tubes to produce the necessary electron supply.

An electron tube consists of a cathode, which supplies electrons, and one or more additional electrodes, which control and collect these electrons, mounted in an evacuated envelope. The envelope may be made of glass, metal, ceramic, or a combination of these materials.

## Cathodes

A cathode is an essential part of an electron tube because it supplies the electrons necessary for tube operation. When energy in some form is applied to the cathode, electrons are released. Heat is the form of energy generally used. The method of heating the cathode may be used to distinguish between the different forms of cathodes. For example, a directly heated cathode, or filament-cathode, is a wire heated by the passage of an electric current. An indirectly heated cathode, or heater-cathode, consists of a filament, or heater, enclosed in a metal sleeve. The sleeve carries the electron-emitting material on its outside surface and is heated by radiation and conduction from the heater.

A filament, or directly heated cathode, such as that shown in Fig. 1 may