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Design for a Variable-Output-Coupling Far-Infrared Michelson Laser

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DESIGN FOR A VARIABLE-OUTPUT-COUPLING FAR-INFRARED MICHELSON LASER

J. S. Wells, K. M. Evenson, L. M. Matarrese, D. A. Jennings, and G. L. Wichman

A technique for varying the coupling of power from far-infrared gas lasers and the design and construction of these lasers are described. The coupling method is based on Michelson's interferometric principle and permits a continuously variable coupling of the available power from the laser. The present laser design is the result of evolution over the last year and a half.

Key words: HCN lasers; H₂O lasers; infrared lasers; variable coupling lasers.

The first section of this note describes a method for extracting energy from far infrared gas lasers that has none of the disadvantages of the usual hole-coupling schemes. The second section includes detailed drawings of the laser and some construction explanations.

The energy extraction method employs a Michelson interferometer configuration with a polyethylene or polypropylene beam splitter. A simple film beam splitter had been previously used by the group at NPL⁽¹⁾. The configuration is similar to the Smith⁽²⁾ mode selector with the beam splitter perpendicular to that in the Smith design, and the use of identical mirrors at the beam splitter end. Some of the

advantages are: (1) Diffraction losses are kept to a minimum because the full internal beam diameter is utilized. (2) Mode distortion is minimized. (3) The coupling may be continuously adjusted from zero to four times that cf a simple beam splitter. (4) The output coupling is easily varied. (5) Line identification is simplified, as will be explained in a later part of the note. (6) The output beam is linearly polarized, a useful feature in some applications, such as in coupling to the whisker diodes used in frequency measurements. ⁽³⁾ (7) Finally, the device is relatively easy and inexpensive to build.

Figure 1 shows the design we have successfully employed for H_2O and HCN lasers operating from 28 to 373µm. The flat mirrors A and B can be translated by micrometer heads with a resolution of about 0.2µm. Mirror B serves to tune the resonator B-C. Mirror A varies the power coupled out of the polyethylene lens (the lens may be replaced by a flat window if a focused beam is not desired,) by varying the relative phase of the waves returning to the beam splitter from mirrors A and B. Since resonator AC has such a low Q, frequency pulling by AC is negligible. The dielectric beam splitter, which is set at an angle of 45^o to the laser tube axis, is a taut polyethylene or polypropylene membrance of such a thickness that provides constructive interference of the beams reflected from each of its surfaces. This thickness is an odd multiple of

$$t = 1/4 \lambda_0 (n^2 - 1/2)^{-1/2} , \qquad (1)$$

where λ_0 is the vacuum wavelength of the laser radiation, and n is the refractive index of the beam splitter material (about 1.5). For example, our HCN laser (λ_0 = 337 µm= 13.3 mil) has a membrane 2.5 mil thick. The H₂O laser (λ_0 =28 µm = 1.1 mil) uses a membrane approximately 0.6 mil thick, which is about 3 times the value given by Eq. (1), since we were unable to obtain thinner polyethylene or polypropylene film of suitable quality.

As an example of the operation of the coupling control, we show in figure 2 recorder traces of the power coupled out of an HCN laser (337µm) as function of displacement of mirror A, with laser tube current as parameter. When the two waves recombining on the beam splitter are 180° out of phase, there is practically complete cancellation of the output at current setting. Halfway between, where constructive interference is at a maximum, the laser is actually overcoupled, a desirable condition since one is then sure of obtaining maximum laser output at some intermediate setting of mirror A. If the laser gain is not high enough, there will be no oscillation in the overcoupled region. This is seen in figure 2 at laser currents of less than 0.2A, and is the normal situation with the 78- and 118-µm lines of the H₂O laser. (The water vapor laser only lases on the 28µm line unless the three

mirrors are all precisely aligned.) The table shows the powers we have been able to obtain from various lasers using this coupling method.

The side mirror has also proved useful in simplifying line identification. With mirror B fixed, one need only measure the translation of mirror A from one 180[°] phase point to the next as on figure 2.

The power relectivity of the film at these wavelengths is about 4% so that the maximum fraction of power coupled out of the laser is about 16%. This can be increased even more, if the laser gain permits, by using a compound beam splitter, - that is two parallel membranes with the appropriate interspace between them.

A disadvantage of this scheme which we have noticed is the tendency for drumhead resonances to appear in the membrane if the plasma current is modulated. These can be eliminated, but at a sacrifice of output power, by using a much thicker membrane.

Construction notes and detailed drawings comprise the remainder of this note.

The vacuum seals involve O-rings which have been lightly greased. The laser tube has O-rings clamped between a flat surface and a 45[°] chamfered surface which causes a seal between the O-ring and the glass and at the same time allows the glass to slide as it heats

and expands in length. A similar detail allows the micrometer rods to pass thru on O-ring seal. The cathode and anode seals contact O-rings which rest on a 30 mm flared section of glass with differential pressure performing the previous function of the clamp. Other O-ring seals are in conventional grooves.

Epoxy is used to provide a seal at the interface of a ground glass donut and the curved mirror, C. Epoxy (or type W black wax of the low pressure variety) is also used to fasten the mirrors A and B to aluminum mounting disks which are attached to coupling rods to the micrometers.

Pairs of ball bushings (supporting the rods to which hold the mirrors) were quite effective in insuring proper translation of the mirrors. Two ball bushings were needed to overcome the changing torque and resulting mirror tipping as the relatively massive mirror was moved axially.

The beam splitter polyethylene is kitchen variety wrapping material. Typically this material will have dents and imperfections when taken from the container. Our technique is to stretch this tightly and attach it to a frame with two-sided adhesive tape, then heat it slightly with a hot air gun until the dents and imperfections disappear. It is then attached to the beam splitter frame with rubber cement.

The laser is aligned by tightening screws which compress the O-rings separating the laser proper from supports for the mirrors. Once the laser is aligned optically, three reference screws are tightened and used as stops for automatic alignment after subsequent laser disassembly and reassembly.

The water cooled cathodes are constructed almost entirely from standard copper plumbing items; the lone exception is the item into which the 1/4" water lines feed. A standard quick connect makes the water seal at the upper end. This permits one to change the insert (consisting of the inner pipe with the reducer hard soldered to it) by merely changing one soft solder joint and redoing it. Under certain discharge conditions, an electron beam from the cathode has melted a hole in the glass. This possibility has been eliminated by placing a semicircular stainless steel insert about 3cm. long below the cathode.

We have found the following alignment procedure to be very useful:

1. Align the end mirrors B and C with a 6328 A laser or sighting down the bore and use the reference screws to precisely reposition the first mirror aligned. If mirror C is aligned first, mirror A may be aligned at the same time as mirror B by causing reflected laser light from mirror A to be superposed on that from B

and the beam splitter at some distance from the laser. Mirror C is then accurately repositioned by the reference screws.

2. With the laser oscillating on the 337μ m line for HCN or 28μ m line for the H₂O laser, mirrors B and C are alternately slightly readjusted until the output power is maximized.

3. Liquid crystal is positioned at the focal point of the polyethylene lens for the final adjustment. Mirror A is adjusted until beams from mirrors A and B are superposed as evidenced by a single spot rather than two on the liquid crystal. Another manifestation of this alignment is the absence of interference fringes on the liquid crystal when it is held next to the polyethylene lens rather than at its focal point. After this step is completed, a detector is placed at the focal point and mirror A is very finely aligned to give the maximum fluctuation in the output signal as mirror A is translated. The laser then should be properly aligned.

We would like to thank V. Lecinski for the fine draftsmanship and K. Gebert for his contributions regarding the cathode construction.

Table: Powers available from H Oand HCN Michelson Lasers. The lasers were 8 meters long and of folded confocal geometry. The power was measured with an "aquadag" blackened copper cone calorimeter.

Laser	λ	Inside Diameter	Power	Gas Mixtures
HCN	337 µm	133 mm	150 mW*	Ammonia
HCN	311 µm	133 mm	50 mW*	11
H ₂ O	118 µm	75 mm	20 mW	H O vapor d hydrogen
H ₂ O	79 <u>u</u> m	75 mm	15 mW	11
H ₂ O	78 µm	75 mm	40 mW	H
H ₂ O	28 µm	37 mm	450 mW (Multimode)	11

* The HCN laser discharge was adjusted for maximum spectral purity and not maximum gain. Good spectral purity is evidenced by stationary striations in the methane and ammonia discharge.

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Schematic drawing of HCN and H₂O variable coupling far infrared laser. The HCN Laser does not have a cooling jacket. Figure 1.





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