

# MID-INFRARED COHERENT SOURCES AND APPLICATIONS

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# MID-INFRARED COHERENT SOURCES AND APPLICATIONS

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**Springer**

Published in cooperation with NATO Public Diplomacy Division

Results of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop  
on Middle Infrared Coherent Sources (MICS) 2005  
Barcelona, Spain  
6–11 November 2005

A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4020-6462-3 (PB)  
ISBN 978-1-4020-6439-5 (HB)  
ISBN 978-1-4020-6463-0 (e-book)

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Published by Springer,  
P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

*www.springer.com*

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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## PREFACE

Coherent sources of mid-infrared (mid-IR) radiation are of great interest for a wide range of scientific and technological applications from spectroscopy and frequency metrology to information technology, industrial process control, photochemistry, photobiology and photomedicine. The mid-IR spectrum, which may be defined as wavelengths beyond  $\sim 2 \mu\text{m}$ , covers important atmospheric windows, and numerous molecular gases, toxic agents, air, water, and soil pollutants, components of human breath, and several explosive agents have strong absorption fingerprints in this region. The development of practical coherent solid-state sources in the mid-IR can thus provide indispensable tools for a variety of applications in environmental monitoring and pollution control, detection of water and soil contaminants, food quality control, agriculture and life sciences, and non-invasive disease diagnosis and therapy through breath analysis. Coherent mid-IR sources also offer important technologies for atmospheric chemistry, free-space communication, imaging, rapid detection of explosives, chemical and biological agents, nuclear material and narcotics, as well as applications in air- and sea-borne safety and security, amongst many. The timely advancement of coherent mid-IR sources is, therefore, vital to future progress in many application areas across a broad range of scientific, technological, and industrial disciplines.

On the other hand, more than 40 years after the invention of laser, much of the mid-IR spectrum still remains inaccessible to conventional lasers due to fundamental limitations, most notably a lack of suitable crystalline laser gain materials. This has confined the spectral range of conventional solid-state lasers mainly to wavelengths below  $\sim 3 \mu\text{m}$ , resulting in a severe shortage of coherent laser sources at longer wavelengths, and presenting a major obstacle to the widespread advancement of mid-IR science and technology. At the same time, alternative technologies for the generation of mid-IR radiation have been proposed, devised and developed, with the goal of overcoming this persistent barrier. In particular, over the past decade, there have been major new developments in mid-IR sources, driven by the emergence of a number of new technologies and continuing innovations and refinements in many of the more established techniques. Advances in material science, crystal growth, and semiconductor material processing have led to the realisation of a new generation of coherent mid-IR sources based on novel operating principles such as quantum cascade lasers, new types of semiconductor

lasers, as well as novel diode-pumped crystalline and fiber lasers based on new solid-state laser gain materials and structures. At the same time, there has been unprecedented progress in some of the more traditional technologies for mid-IR generation, in particular nonlinear frequency conversion and parametric sources, brought about by breakthroughs in nonlinear materials, innovative device design concepts and ongoing advances in pump laser technology. The advent of a new generation of birefringent, quasi-phase-matched, doped, waveguide, fiber and semiconductor nonlinear materials together with novel solid-state, semiconductor, and fiber pump lasers have led to the development of new frequency conversion and parametric sources for the mid-IR with previously unattainable performance capabilities. The ongoing progress in related technologies including synchrotron, free-electron and gas lasers, as well as novel techniques for terahertz (THz) generation have also led to further improvements in such radiation sources with enhanced overall operating capabilities. The important advances in mid-IR science and technology have also had a major impact on new application areas, paving the way for the practical deployment of mid-IR sources in spectroscopy, environmental trace gas detection and sensing, life sciences, imaging, safety and security, and photomedicine.

The wide range of mid-IR technologies have proved highly effective in advancing coherent sources in selected spectral regions from  $\sim 1$  to  $\sim 100$   $\mu\text{m}$ , and beyond, into the THz region. The various techniques are often competitive, and in many cases complimentary. Some technologies can deliver mid-IR radiation in regions not accessible to others, while suffering from drawbacks of low power, temporal and spectral inflexibility, or high cost. There are important merits and limitations associated with each approach, making a particular technology more favorable for a given set of requirements and applications than others. However, the broad scope and multi-disciplinary nature of mid-IR technology across a wide range of disciplines (from semiconductor physics and laser engineering to nonlinear optics, material science, spectroscopy and biomedicine) has, at the same time, led to the confinement of each technology mainly to its own specialist community, resulting in a lack of connectivity among the different areas. This factor, in addition to the fundamental barriers, has contributed yet another important obstacle to a more timely advancement of mid-IR science and technology.

The aim of this book is to bring into focus this important research area and provide a comprehensive review of the research topics most pertinent to the advancement of coherent mid-IR sources and their applications. The volume brings together contributions from the most eminent international researchers in the field, covering various aspects of mid-IR technology from fundamental principles to materials, systems and applications, and addresses the most important recent advances in the field since the publication of an earlier volume in 2003 (*Solid-State Mid-Infrared Laser Sources*, I. T. Sorokina and K. L. Vodopyanov, Eds., Springer, 2003). A central theme of the present volume is the strong emphasis on

the applications of mid-IR sources to emerging areas of science and technology, with no less than 8 out of the 22 chapters dedicated to this topic. These include spectroscopic techniques for trace gas detection and sensing in environmental monitoring, life sciences, safety and security, applications of mid-IR sources in breath analysis and medicine, as well as potential applications in high-intensity and attosecond physics. It is hoped that this volume will also provide added stimulus for further progress in the field, where major challenges still remain and great potential exists for further new breakthroughs. The timely advancement of mid-IR coherent sources will undoubtedly have important implications across a broad range of scientific and technological disciplines and the field promises to remain a fertile ground for further innovation and exploitation in the future.

In preparing the book, we have relied on the timely contribution of the authors, without whose expert insight, motivation and commitment the publication of this volume would not have been possible. We, thus, extend our appreciation to all the authors. We also convey our thanks to Springer for affording us the opportunity to publish this volume and to the editorial and publishing staff, in particular Wil Bruins, for their assistance, organization and efficiency in coordinating the timely preparation and production of the book. We are also grateful to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for their valuable support of the Advanced Research Workshop on *Mid-Infrared Coherent Sources (MICS) 2005*, Barcelona, Spain, which served as the original impetus for the publication of this volume.

Majid Ebrahim-Zadeh, Irina T. Sorokina  
Barcelona, Vienna, October 2006

## CONTENTS

Preface	v
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### I CRYSTALLINE LASER AND NONLINEAR OPTICAL MATERIALS FOR THE MID-IR

1. New Monocrystals with Low Phonon Energy for Mid-IR Lasers	3
<i>L. Isaenko, A. Yelissejev, A. Tkachuk, and S. Ivanova</i>	
1 Introduction	3
2 Crystal growth and common properties of RE-doped $\text{MPb}_2\text{Hal}_5$ (M = K, Rb; Hal = Cl, Br) crystals	6
2.1 Crystal growth	6
2.2 Phase transitions	8
2.3 Structural analysis	9
2.4 Optical properties of undoped $\text{MPb}_2\text{Hal}_5$ crystals	11
2.5 Key physical properties	19
3 Spectroscopic characteristics of $\text{RE}^{3+}$ ions in $\text{MPb}_2\text{Hal}_5$ crystals	20
3.1 Optical spectra and spectroscopic parameters	22
3.2 Emission spectra in low concentrated crystals	38
4 Energy transfer and dynamics of $\text{RE}^{3+}$ levels population	46
4.1 Upconversion processes in praseodymium doped KPC crystals	48
4.2 Upconversion and dynamics of neodymium levels population	49
4.3 Upconversion and dynamics of erbium levels population	55
5 Conclusion	59
2. Orthorhombic Crystals of Lithium Thioindate and Selenoindate for Nonlinear Optics in the Mid-IR	67
<i>J.-J. Zondy, V. Petrov, A. Yelissejev, L. Isaenko, and S. Lobanov</i>	
1 Introduction	67
2 Development, growth, composition, and structure of LIS and LISe	69
3 Band-gap, transparency, and IR cut-off of LIS and LISe	73
4 Dispersion and birefringence of LIS and LISe	75
5 Nonlinear susceptibility of LIS and LISe	77



6	Thermo-mechanical properties and damage resistivity of LIS and LISe	82
7	Phase-matching in LIS and LISe	85
8	Nonlinear frequency conversion with LIS and LISe	90
8.1	Mid-IR femtosecond OPA	90
8.2	Continuous-wave DFG of mid-IR radiation	93
8.3	Nanosecond OPO	95
9	Conclusion	97
3.	Quaternary Nonlinear Optical Crystals for the Mid-Infrared Spectral Range from 5 to 12 $\mu\text{m}$	105
	<i>V. Petrov, V. Badikov, and V. Panyutin</i>	
1	Introduction	105
2	Mixed defect chalcopyrites $\text{Cd}_x\text{Hg}_{1-x}\text{Ga}_2\text{S}_4$	107
2.1	Growth and properties of CGS, HGS, and CHGS	107
2.2	Potential and frequency conversion schemes realized with quaternary CHGS crystals	117
3	Orthorhombic $\text{Ag}_x\text{Ga}_x\text{Ge}_{1-x}\text{S}_2$ crystals	125
3.1	Growth and properties of AGGS	125
3.2	Potential and frequency conversion schemes realized with quaternary AGGS crystals	133
4	Conclusion	140
4.	Microstructured Semiconductors for Mid-Infrared Nonlinear Optics	149
	<i>P. S. Kuo and M. M. Fejer</i>	
1	Introduction	149
2	Properties of zincblende semiconductors	150
2.1	Dispersion	151
2.2	Nonlinear susceptibilities	151
3	Fabrication of microstructured zincblende semiconductors	154
3.1	Stacked plate methods	154
3.2	Orientation-patterned growth	155
4	QPM in bulk microstructured zincblende semiconductors	158
4.1	Mid-IR SHG	158
4.2	Mid-IR DFG	159
4.3	Optical parametric oscillators	159
4.4	Ultrafast interactions	160
4.5	THz	164
5	Current research directions	164
5.1	Waveguides	164
5.2	Other QPM semiconductors	164

## II SOURCES IN THE MID-IR

1. Progress in Quantum Cascade Lasers	171
<i>J. Faist, T. Aellen, T. Gresch, M. Beck, and M. Giovannini</i>	
1 Introduction	171
2 Optimization of doping level	174
3 High power devices	179
4 Linewidth enhancement factor	184
5 Acknowledgements	189
2. High-Brightness 2.X $\mu\text{m}$ Semiconductor Lasers	193
<i>M. Rattunde, M. T. Kelemen, N. Schulz, C. Pfahler, C. Manz, J. Schmitz, G. Kaufel, and J. Wagner</i>	
1 Introduction	193
2 III-Sb based material system	195
2.1 Material properties	195
2.2 Growth	196
3 High brightness GaSb-based diode lasers	197
3.1 Active region design	198
3.2 Vertical epitaxial structure	200
3.3 Broad-area lasers	203
3.4 Ridge-waveguide lasers	207
3.5 Tapered lasers	208
4 GaSb-based optically pumped semiconductor disk lasers	211
4.1 Introduction	211
4.2 Epitaxial layer structure and sample characterization	212
4.3 Thermal management	213
4.4 OPSDL device performance	214
4.5 In-well optical pumping	215
5 Outlook	218
3. Broadband Mid-Infrared Solid-State Lasers	225
<i>I. T. Sorokina</i>	
1 Introduction	225
1.1 Motivation	225
1.2 Applications	226
2 Bandwidth and wavelength scaling rules	228
3 $\text{TM}^{2+}$ -based solid-state lasers	230
3.1 Historical perspective and state-of-the-art sources	230
3.2 $\text{Co:MgF}_2$ laser	232
3.3 $\text{Cr}^{2+}$ -doped II-VI lasers	234
4 Conclusion and outlook	252
5 Acknowledgements	253

4. New Regimes of Excitation and Mid-IR Lasing of Transition Metal Doped II–VI Crystals	261
<i>S. Mirov and V. Fedorov</i>	
1 Introduction	261
2 Non-traditional Cr-doped mid-IR lasers	263
2.1 Cr:ZnSe and Cr:ZnS microchip lasers	263
2.2 Hot pressed ceramic Cr:ZnSe lasers	266
2.3 Multi-line and ultrabroadband Cr:Znse laser	268
3 Fe-doped mid-IR lasers	272
3.1 Iron ions in II–VI materials	272
3.2 Sample preparation	274
3.3 Spectroscopic characterization	275
3.4 Fe <sup>2+</sup> :ZnSe laser characteristics	279
4 En-route to electrically pumped TM doped II–VI mid-IR lasers	285
4.1 TM-doped II–VI thin films for mid-IR applications	285
4.2 Excitation mechanisms of TM dopant ions in II–VI bulk semiconductors	291
4.3 Experimental verification of photoionization transitions	294
4.4 Future directions	300
5 Conclusion remarks	302
6 Acknowledgements	303
5. Advances in Mid-Infrared Fiber Lasers	315
<i>M. Pollnau and S. D. Jackson</i>	
1 Introduction	315
2 Fiber materials	316
2.1 Silicates	317
2.2 Fluorides	318
2.3 Chalcogenides	318
2.4 Ceramics	319
3 Fiber, pump, and resonator geometries	319
3.1 Fiber designs for cladding pumping	320
3.2 Fiber-laser resonators	321
3.3 Thermal issues	322
4 Overview of mid-infrared fiber lasers	323
5 Thulium-doped fiber lasers at 1.9–2.5 $\mu\text{m}$	324
5.1 Three-level lasers at 1.9–2.0 $\mu\text{m}$	324
5.2 Four-level lasers at 2.3–2.5 $\mu\text{m}$	326
6 Holmium-doped fiber lasers at 2.1–2.9 $\mu\text{m}$	326
6.1 Three-level lasers at 2.1 $\mu\text{m}$	327
6.2 Four-level lasers at 2.9 $\mu\text{m}$	328

7	Erbium-doped fiber lasers at 2.7–2.8 $\mu\text{m}$	329
7.1	Excited-state absorption and cascade lasing	330
7.2	Lifetime quenching by co-doping	331
7.3	Energy recycling by energy-transfer upconversion	333
8	Dysprosium-doped fiber lasers at 2.9 $\mu\text{m}$	335
9	Outlook	335
10	Conclusions	337
6.	Mid-Infrared Optical Parametric Oscillators and Applications	347
	<i>M. Ebrahim-Zadeh</i>	
1	Introduction	347
2	Mid-infrared optical parametric oscillators	348
3	Continuous-wave parametric oscillators	350
3.1	Singly-resonant oscillators	352
3.2	Multiply-resonant oscillators	356
4	Pulsed parametric oscillators	357
5	Applications	366
6	Summary	371
7.	Mid-Infrared Integrated Optical Parametric Generators and Oscillators with Periodically Poled Ti:LiNbO <sub>3</sub> Waveguides	377
	<i>S. Orlov, W. Grundkötter, D. Hofmann, V. Quiring, R. Ricken, H. Suche, and W. Sohler</i>	
1	Introduction	377
2	Waveguide and resonator fabrication and characterization	378
3	Experimental setup	380
4	Optical parametric generators (OPG)	381
5	Optical parametric oscillators (OPOs)	384
5.1	Singly resonant oscillators	385
5.2	Doubly resonant oscillators	387
6	Conclusions	390
8.	Optical Parametric Generators and Amplifiers	393
	<i>V. Pasiskevicius and F. Laurell</i>	
1	Introduction	393
2	Parametric generation and amplification	394
2.1	Theoretical basis	394
2.2	Phase matching considerations	398
3	Broadband optical parametric generation and amplification	404
3.1	Collinear interaction	404
3.2	Noncollinear parametric interaction	409
4	Conclusions and future outlook	412

9. Tunable THz Sources Based on Quasi-Phase-Matched Gallium Arsenide	419
<i>K. Vodopyanov</i>	
1 Introduction	419
2 Theory of optical THz generation in QPM media	421
2.1 Plane wave analysis, femtosecond pulses	421
2.2 Plane-wave analysis, picosecond pulses	424
3 Comparison of nonlinear optical crystals for THz generation	427
4 THz generation with fs-pulses from OPA/DFG ( $\lambda = 2\text{--}4.4\ \mu\text{m}$ )	428
5 THz generation using OP-GaAs pumped by a fiber laser	432
6 THz generation with a near-degenerate synchronously-pumped ps OPO	434
6.1 Extracavity THz generation	436
6.2 Intracavity THz generation	437
7 Conclusion	439
10. Semiconductor Waveguides for Nonlinear Frequency Conversion	443
<i>L. Lanco, M. Ravaro, J. P. Likforman, P. Filloux, X. Marcadet, S. Ducci, G. Leo, and V. Berger</i>	
1 Introduction	443
2 Form birefringence phase matching	444
3 Modal phase matching	448
4 Counterpropagating phase matching	453

### III APPLICATIONS

1. Semiconductor Laser Based Trace Gas Sensor Technology: Recent Advances and Applications	467
<i>F. K. Tittel, G. Wysocki, A. Kosterev, and Y. Bakirkin</i>	
1 Introduction	467
2 Trace gas detection based on photoacoustic spectroscopy using QC and IC lasers	470
2.1 Photoacoustic spectroscopic techniques	470
2.2 Quartz enhanced photoacoustic spectroscopic techniques	471
2.3 QEPAS based chemical sensor architecture	478
3 Chemical sensing based on tunable thermoelectrically cooled CW quantum cascade lasers. Gas sensing with a cw DFB QC laser was first reported in Ref. [54].	481
3.1 Detection of trace gases with widely tunable QC lasers	481
3.2 EC-QCL system configuration	482
4 Trace gas sensors using a high-finesse optical cavity	484
4.1 Cavity ringdown spectroscopy	485

4.2	Cavity enhanced absorption spectroscopy	486
5	Conclusions	487
2.	Trace Gas Analysis with Isotopic Selectivity Using DFG-Sources	495
<i>H. Waechter and M. Sigrist</i>		
1	Introduction	495
2	Mid-infrared laser sources	496
3	Detection schemes	498
4	Applications in trace gas sensing	498
5	Studies on isotopic compositions of trace gases	499
6	DFG-studies on CO, CO <sub>2</sub> and N <sub>2</sub> O isotopomers	501
6.1	DFG-source	501
6.2	Isotopomer abundances and line strengths	502
6.3	Measurements and results	503
7	Conclusions and outlook	506
3.	Photoacoustic Spectroscopy Using Continuous Wave Optical Parametric Oscillators	511
<i>A. K. Y. Ngai, S. T. Persijn, M. M. J. W. van Herpen, S. M. Cristescu, and F. J. M. Harren</i>		
1	Introduction	511
2	Physical basics of optical parametric oscillators	514
2.1	QUASI phase matching in periodically poled crystals	514
2.2	Periodically poled lithium niobate	515
3	OPO cavity design	516
3.1	Oscillation threshold for singly resonant OPO	518
4	Frequency tuning with OPO's	518
4.1	Tuning by changing the poling period and temperature	519
4.2	Tuning with intracavity elements	520
4.3	Pump tuning	521
4.4	Tuning by changing the cavity length	522
4.5	Frequency tuning by using a combination of tuning techniques	522
4.6	Wavelength coverage	523
5	High-resolution spectroscopy with cw OPO's	524
6	Trace gas detection with OPO's	524
6.1	Photoacoustic spectroscopy	525
6.2	Photoacoustics with CW OPO's	526
6.3	CO <sub>2</sub> monitoring from insect breath	527
6.4	Detection of methane and ethane using OPO cavity ring-down spectroscopy	527

4. Online Monitoring of Exhaled Breath Using Mid-Infrared Laser Spectroscopy	535
<i>M. Mürtz and P. Hering</i>	
1 Introduction	535
2 The role of trace gases in medicine and biology	537
2.1 Trace constituents of exhaled human breath	537
2.2 Other biological sources of volatile markers	539
3 Suitable laser spectroscopic approaches for online analysis	540
3.1 Multi-pass absorption	542
3.2 Cavity-enhanced techniques	542
3.3 Photoacoustics	543
3.4 Magnetic resonance	544
4 Monitoring of exhaled diseasemarkers	545
4.1 Nitric Oxide (NO)	545
4.2 Carbon monoxide (CO)	546
4.3 Ethane	547
5 Perspectives for laser spectroscopic breath monitoring	549
6 Acknowledgements	549
5. Ultrabroadband Solid-State Lasers in Trace Gas Sensing	557
<i>E. Sorokin</i>	
1 Introduction	557
2 Cr <sup>2+</sup> -based mid-IR lasers	558
3 Trace gas analysis in the atmosphere	560
4 Intracavity laser spectroscopy	563
5 Conclusions	571
6. Medical Applications of Mid-IR Solid-State Lasers	575
<i>R. Steiner</i>	
1 Introduction	575
2 Laser-tissue-interaction	576
3 Transmission systems	580
4 Medical applications	583
4.1 Holmium and thulium laser	583
4.2 Er:YAG laser	583
5 Conclusions and future aspects	587
7. Opportunities for Mid-IR Sources in Intense-Field and Attosecond Physics	589
<i>M. Ivanov, V. Yakovlev, and F. Krausz</i>	

8. Ultrawideband Mid-Infrared Spectroscopy of Semiconductor Nanostructures	599
<i>T. Müller and K. Unterrainer</i>	
1 Introduction	599
2 Generation and detection of ultrawideband mid-infrared pulses	600
2.1 Sources of ultrawideband mid-infrared pulses	600
2.2 Time-domain detection of mid-infrared pulses	603
3 Intersubband carrier dynamics in quantum wells	605
3.1 Intersubband electron relaxation in quantum wells	605
3.2 Quantum interference of intersubband transitions	609
4 Intraband carrier dynamics in quantum dots	614
4.1 Electronic states and optical intraband transitions	614
4.2 Electron capture and relaxation in quantum dots	615
Index	623