

An electrospray mass spectrometric study of methylmercury(II) nitrogen base derivatives and their ligand exchange reactions

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Abstract

Electrospray mass spectra have been observed for solutions of a number of methylmercury(II) complexes of the type $[\text{MeHgL}]^+$ (L = neutral nitrogen base, e.g. *N*-methylpyrazoles, bis(pyridin-2-yl)methane, etc.) and PhHg(II) complexes of creatinine and in all cases the intact ion was observed. Electrospray mass spectrometry is a convenient technique with which to investigate ligand exchange reactions in solution, and the reactions of the *N*-methylpyrazole complex $[\text{MeHg}(\text{C}_4\text{H}_6\text{N}_2)]^+$ have been studied with a variety of reagents including other nitrogen bases, phosphines and phosphine sulfides and selenides.

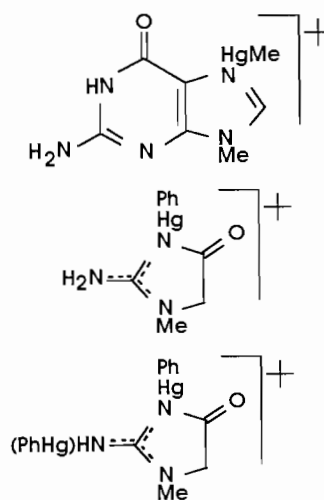
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Introduction

Methylmercury(II) is important in the environment since it is the end product of microbiological processes involving many forms of Hg(II) [1–3]. MeHg(II) prefers to bind to one other ligand to give linear complexes and examples of monodentate nitrogen base ligands which give such linear MeHg(II) complexes include *N*-methylpyrazoles and 3,5-dimethylpyridine [4, 5]. Polydentate nitrogen donor ligands often induce higher coordination numbers than the classic linear arrangement in the solid state, although the geometries at mercury are irregular and are based on only one strong Hg–N interaction. Ligands which are known from crystallographic studies to give high coordination numbers for MeHg(II) include bidentate bis(pyridin-2-yl)methane (py_2CH_2) [6], and the tridentate ligands 4,4',4''-triethylterpyridyl (Et_3terpy) [6], and tris(pyridine-2-yl)methanol (py_3COH) [7]. Complexes of py_2CH_2 , Me_3terpy , py_3COH and the related bidentate ligands 4,4'-diethylbipyridyl (Et_2bipy) [6] and bis(*N*-methylimidazol-1-yl)methanol (mim_2CHOH) [8] are included in this study, together with a 9-methylguanine complex [9] and PhHg(II) complexes of creatinine [10, 11]. Structures of the latter complexes are shown in Scheme 1.

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Electrospray mass spectrometry (ESMS) provides a new method of transferring pre-existing ions from solution to the gas phase. At low ion source energies the transfer is very soft with minimal fragmentation. The ES technique has been developed largely by Fenn and co-workers [12–14] and its most impressive successes



Scheme 1. Structures of cationic MeHg(II) complexes of 9-methylguanine (9-MeGua), $[\text{MeHg}(9\text{-MeGua})]\text{NO}_3$, and creatinine ($\text{C}_4\text{H}_7\text{N}_3\text{O}$, Hcreat), $[\text{PhHg}(\text{Hcreat})]\text{NO}_3$ and $[(\text{PhHg})_2(\text{creat})]\text{NO}_3$.

have been concerned with large bio-molecules such as proteins [15–17]. These are multiply protonated by the mobile phase ($\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{MeOH}/\text{HOAc}$) to give species with accessible m/z values.

We have been investigating the application of ESMS to inorganic and organometallic systems, many of which are already ionic and for which observation of their ES mass spectra does not depend upon protonation by the mobile phase [18–26]. A feature of these studies is that the intact ion is almost always observed, often as the only significant peak in the mass spectrum.

In this paper we report an ESMS study of the methylmercury(II) complexes described above. A characteristic feature of the chemistry of methylmercury(II) is the ready exchange of ligands coordinated to it [27], so some exchange reactions of methylmercury(II) in solution have also been investigated by ESMS.

Experimental

The $[\text{MeHgL}]\text{NO}_3$ compounds were prepared as described previously [4–10] as were $\text{PPh}_3(\text{E})$, $\text{Ph}_2\text{P}(\text{E})\text{CH}_2\text{PPh}_2$ and $\text{Ph}_2\text{P}(\text{E})\text{CH}_2\text{P}(\text{E})\text{Ph}_2$ ($\text{E}=\text{S}$ or Se) [28]. Solutions for ES mass spectrometry were prepared by dissolving about 1 mg of material in methanol (1 ml) and diluting this solution 1:10 with methanol. The diluted solution was injected directly into the spectrometer as described below. For exchange reactions, a few drops of a solution containing the new ligand were added before the dilution step. The nitrogen base ligands were generally soluble in methanol but the phosphine based ligands were usually added in dichloromethane solution.

Electrospray mass spectra were obtained with a VG Bio-Q triple quadrupole mass spectrometer (VG Bio-Tech, Altrincham, Ches., UK) using a water/methanol/acetic acid (50:50:1%) mobile phase. The diluted solutions of the compounds, prepared as described above, were injected directly into the spectrometer via a Rheodyne injector equipped with a 10 μl loop. A Phoenix 20 micro LC syringe pump delivered the solution to the vaporisation nozzle of the electrospray ion source at a flow rate of 3 $\mu\text{l min}^{-1}$. Nitrogen was used as both a drying gas and for nebulisation with flow rates of approximately 3 l min^{-1} and 100 ml min^{-1} , respectively. Pressure in the mass analyser region was usually about 3×10^{-5} torr. The compounds in this study give strong signals in their ES mass spectra and typically 8–10 signal averaged spectra were required to give a good signal to noise ratio. Increasing the voltage on the first skimmer electrode (B1) may induce fragmentation caused by collisions with solvent molecules in the region of the nozzle where the pressure is close

to atmospheric. Measurements were made at a B1 voltage of 40 V unless stated otherwise.

Results and discussion

Peaks in the ES mass spectra are identified by the most intense m/z value in the isotopic mass distribution. In all cases the experimental and calculated isotopic mass distributions were in excellent agreement. ESMS data for all the methylmercury(II) complexes are summarised in Table 1.

ES mass spectra of nitrogen base complexes of $[\text{MeHg}]^+$

Figure 1(a) shows the ES mass spectrum at low ion source energy (B1=40 V) for a solution of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3$ ($\text{Me}_3\text{pz}=3,5\text{-dimethyl-}N\text{-methylpyrazole}$, $\text{C}_6\text{H}_{10}\text{N}_2$) and the peak at m/z 327 corresponds to the intact ion $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]^+$. Figure 1(b) shows the ES mass spectrum at a higher ion source energy (B1=70 V) and the daughter ion $[\text{MeHg}]^+$ (m/z 217) is formed by collisions with solvent molecules in the ion source, where the pressure is close to atmospheric. A peak at m/z 111 is due to the protonated ligand formed in the ion source by reaction with the mobile phase after dissociation of the ligand. Figure 1(c) shows the comparison between the experimental and calculated isotopic mass distribution of the intact ion. The ES mass spectrum of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3$ is remarkably simple, but this is typical for most of the compounds discussed in this paper, as demonstrated by the ES mass spectra for the other complexes containing monodentate nitrogen bases (Table 1). However, $[\text{MeHg}(9\text{-MeGua})]\text{NO}_3$ did not give any $[\text{MeHg}]^+$ at higher ion source energies.

A correspondingly simple behaviour is observed for $[\text{MeHg}(\text{py}_2\text{CH}_2)]\text{NO}_3$ which contains a bidentate nitrogen base, but both $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Et}_2\text{bipy})]\text{NO}_3$ and $[\text{MeHg}(\text{mim}_2\text{CHOH})]\text{NO}_3$ failed to form $[\text{MeHg}]^+$ at higher ion source energies. In the case of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Et}_2\text{bipy})]\text{NO}_3$ a peak is observed at m/z 227 only at high ion source energies (B1=80 V) and this corresponds to the ion $[\text{MeEt}_2\text{bipy}]^+$ (corresponding to $[\text{HEt}_2\text{bipy}]^+$). $[\text{MeHg}(\text{mim}_2\text{CHOH})]\text{NO}_3$ gives a peak at m/z 299 (containing mercury) which is weak at low ion source energies, but becomes stronger relative to the peak due to the intact ion at higher ion source energies. It corresponds to loss of one ring and the CHOH group, followed by protonation, to give the ion $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Hmim})]^+$. At low ion source energies there is a strong peak due to the protonated ligand $[\text{Hmim}_2\text{CHOH}]^+$ (m/z 193), but at higher ion source energies a stronger peak appears at m/z 175, presumably formed by loss of H_2O .

TABLE 1 ES mass spectrometric data for methylmercury(II) compounds

Compound	Ions at low ion source energy (B1 = 40 V) (<i>m/z</i>)	Ions at higher ion source energies (B1 > 40 V) (<i>m/z</i>)
[MeHg(Me ₃ pz)]NO ₃	[MeHg(Me ₃ pz)] ⁺ (327)	[MeHg] ⁺ (217)
[MeHg(Mepz)]NO ₃	[MeHg(Mepz)] ⁺ (299)	[MeHg] ⁺ (217); [HMepz] ⁺ (83)
[MeHg(3,5-Me ₂ py)]NO ₃	[MeHg(3,5-Me ₂ py)] ⁺ (324)	[MeHg] ⁺ (217)
[MeHg(9-MeGua)]NO ₃	[MeHg(9-MeGua)] ⁺ (382), [H9-MeGua] ⁺ (166)	
[MeHg(py ₂ CH ₂)]NO ₃	[MeHg(py ₂ CH ₂)] ⁺ (387), [Hpy ₂ CH ₂] ⁺ (171)	[MeHg] ⁺ (217)
[MeHg(Et ₂ bipy)]NO ₃	[MeHg(Et ₂ bipy)] ⁺ (429); [HEt ₂ bipy] ⁺ (213)	[MeEt ₂ bipy] ⁺ (227)
[MeHg(mim ₂ CHOH)]NO ₃	[MeHg(mim ₂ CHOH)] ⁺ (409), [MeHg(Imim)] ⁺ (299), [Hmim ₂ CHOH] ⁺ (193)	[Hmim ₂ C] ⁺ (175)
[MeHg(Me ₃ terpy)]NO ₃	[MeHg(Me ₃ terpy)] ⁺ (492), [MeHg(Me ₂ bipy)] ⁺ (401), [Hg(Me ₃ terpy) ₂] ²⁺ (376)	(307); [HMe ₃ terpy] ⁺ (276)
[MeHg(py ₃ COH)]NO ₃	[MeHg(py ₃ COH)] ⁺ (480); [Hpy ₃ COH] ⁺ (264)	[MeHg(py)] ⁺ (296); [py ₃ C] ⁺ (246)
[PhHg(Hcreat)]NO ₃	[PhHg(Hcreat)] ⁺ (392)	[PhHg] ⁺ (279)
[(PhHg) ₂ (creat)]NO ₃	[(PhHg) ₂ (creat)] ⁺ (668); [PhHg(Hcreat)] ⁺ (392)	

The ES mass spectrum of [MeHg(Me₃terpy)]NO₃ is more complicated. At low ion source energy (B1 = 40 V) the base peak is at *m/z* 492 which is the intact ion [MeHg(Me₃terpy)]⁺ but there are peaks of significant intensity at *m/z* 401 and 376 assigned to [MeHg(Me₂bipy)]⁺ and [Hg(Me₃terpy)₂]²⁺. The isotope pattern of the peak at *m/z* 376 confirms that it is due to a doubly charged cation. At higher ion source energies the intensity of the peak at *m/z* 401 increases relative to that of the intact ion, suggesting that [MeHg(Me₂bipy)]⁺ is formed within the ion source by collisional activation. Under these conditions there is a peak at *m/z* 276 which is due to the protonated ligand but the base peak at *m/z* 307 (not containing mercury) is unidentified.

At low ion source energies the compound [MeHg(py₃COH)]NO₃ gives an ES mass spectrum in which the base peak is at *m/z* 264 which is due to [Hpy₃COH]⁺ together with a strong peak at *m/z* 480 due to the intact ion [MeHg(py₃COH)]⁺. With B1 = 70 V the dominant peaks are at *m/z* 246 due to [py₃C]⁺, which has been observed previously in other systems [25, 26], and *m/z* 296 which is assigned to [MeHg(py)]⁺.

The compound [PhHg(Hcreat)]NO₃ gave the intact ion [PhHg(Hcreat)]⁺ (*m/z* 392) as the only peak containing mercury at low ion source energies, but at higher energies [PhHg]⁺ (*m/z* 279) was observed. The closely related complex [(PhHg)₂(creat)]NO₃ gave only a weak peak for the intact ion [(PhHg)₂(creat)]⁺ (*m/z* 668), but a strong peak was observed for [PhHg(Hcreat)]⁺ (*m/z* 392) formed by loss of one PhHg group followed by protonation within the ion source.

Exchange reactions

Most of the exchange reactions were carried out using an approximately 2 mM methanol solution of [MeHg(Mepz)]NO₃ (Mepz = *N*-methylpyrazole, C₄H₆N₂) and adding an excess of the extra ligand in methanol (nitrogen bases) or dichloromethane (phosphine based ligands). This mixed solution was then diluted 1:10 with methanol and injected into the spectrometer.

With the nitrogen bases *p*-toluidine, 3,5-Me₂pz and ethylenediamine the only mercury containing species observed in the ES mass spectrum in each case was [MeHgL]⁺ (Table 2) with no remaining [MeHg(Mepz)]⁺. These results confirm the known [27] lability of ligands bound to the [MeHg]⁺ moiety.

The ES mass spectrum of an approximately equimolar mixture of [MeHg(Mepz)]NO₃ and PPh₃ gave a very strong peak at *m/z* 479 which is due to [MeHg(PPh₃)]⁺. Addition of more PPh₃ did not result in the observation of a peak which could be assigned to [MeHg(PPh₃)₂]⁺, which serves to emphasise that [MeHg]⁺ strongly prefers to coordinate only one additional ligand. Reaction of triphenylphosphine selenide with [MeHg(Mepz)]NO₃ gave an ES mass spectrum with only one peak at *m/z* 557 due to [MeHg(PPh₃Se)]⁺ (Fig. 2(a)).

Reaction between [MeHg(Mcpz)]NO₃ and the potentially bidentate ligand dpm (dpm = Ph₂PCH₂PPh₂) resulted in a ES mass spectrum containing only one peak at *m/z* 601 due to [MeHg(dpm)]⁺. Interaction between [MeHg(Mepz)]NO₃ and dpmSe also results in only a single peak in the ES mass spectrum at *m/z* 679 due to [MeHg(dpmSe)]⁺ (Fig. 2(b)) and es-

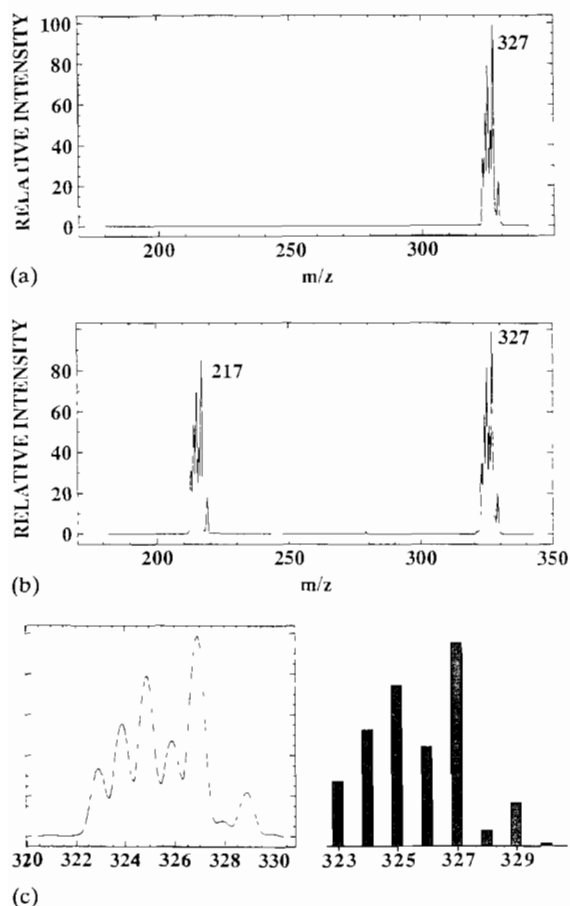


Fig 1. Positive ion ES mass spectrum of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3$ (a) $B1 = 40 \text{ V}$, (b) $B1 = 70 \text{ V}$, (c) comparison between experimental and calculated isotopic mass distributions.

entially similar results are obtained for a mixture of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ and dpmSe_2 with a strong peak being observed at m/z 759 due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)]^+$, but there is also a weaker peak at m/z 643 which is

assigned to $[\text{Hg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)_2]^+$. This cation has been characterised previously by multi-NMR methods from the reaction of $\text{Hg}(\text{ClO}_4)_2$ with dpmSe_2 [29]. When a small amount of PPh_3 was added to the mixture of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ and dpmSe_2 , the ES mass spectrum shown in Fig. 2(c) was obtained. It shows strong peaks assigned to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)]^{2+}$ (m/z 759), $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe})]^+$ (m/z 679) and $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{Se})]^+$ (m/z 557) and no peak due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3)]^+$ (m/z 479). These observations are entirely in accord with the known chemistry of phosphine selenides [30, 31]. Phosphorus-selenium bonds are labile in solution at room temperature and selenium transfer between phosphines is common. In particular, dpmSe_2 in which there is considerable steric crowding, very readily transfers one selenium atom to another phosphine to give dpmSe and the selenide of the second phosphine. Thus, in this case the small amount of added triphenylphosphine is converted to its selenide and methylmercury complexes are formed by PPh_3Se , dpmSe and the remaining dpmSe_2 . All of the added PPh_3 was converted to PPh_3Se as shown by the absence of a peak due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3)]^+$.

Phosphorus-sulfur bonds are known to be non-labile [30, 31] at room temperature although sulfur transfer does occur at a reasonable rate at about 120°C . Therefore, somewhat different observations are expected in attempted sulfur exchange reactions on methylmercury. When PPh_3S is added to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ the ES mass spectrum shows a single peak at m/z 511 due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{S})]^+$ and corresponding results are obtained when dpmS and dpmS_2 are each added to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ (Table 2). When PPh_3 is added to an approximately equimolar mixture of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ and dpmS_2 , the resulting ES mass spectrum is dominated by the peaks due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3)]^+$ (m/z 479) and $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmS}_2)]^+$ (m/z

TABLE 2 Ions formed by exchange reactions

Mixture	Ions observed (m/z)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + p\text{-toluidine}$	$[\text{MeHg}(p\text{-tol})]^+$ (324)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + 3,5\text{-Me}_2\text{pz}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_2\text{pz})]^+$ (313)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{en}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{en})]^+$ (277)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{PPh}_3$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3)]^+$ (479)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{PPh}_3\text{Se}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{Se})]^+$ (557)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpm}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpm})]^+$ (601)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmSe}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe})]^+$ (679)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmSe}_2$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)]^+$ (759); $[\text{Hg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)_2]^{2+}$ (643)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmSe}_2 + \text{PPh}_3$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)]^{2+}$ (759), $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe})]^+$ (679), $[\text{Hg}(\text{dpmSe}_2)_2]^+$ (643); $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{Se})]^+$ (557)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{PPh}_3\text{S}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{S})]^+$ (511)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{terpy})]\text{NO}_3 - \text{dpmS}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmS})]^+$ (633); $[\text{Hg}(\text{dpmS})_2]^{2+}$ (517)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmS}_2$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmS}_2)]^+$ (665)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmS}_2 + \text{PPh}_3$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmS}_2)]^+$ (665); $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3)]^+$ (479)
$[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dam}$	$[\text{MeHg}(\text{dam})]^+$ (689)

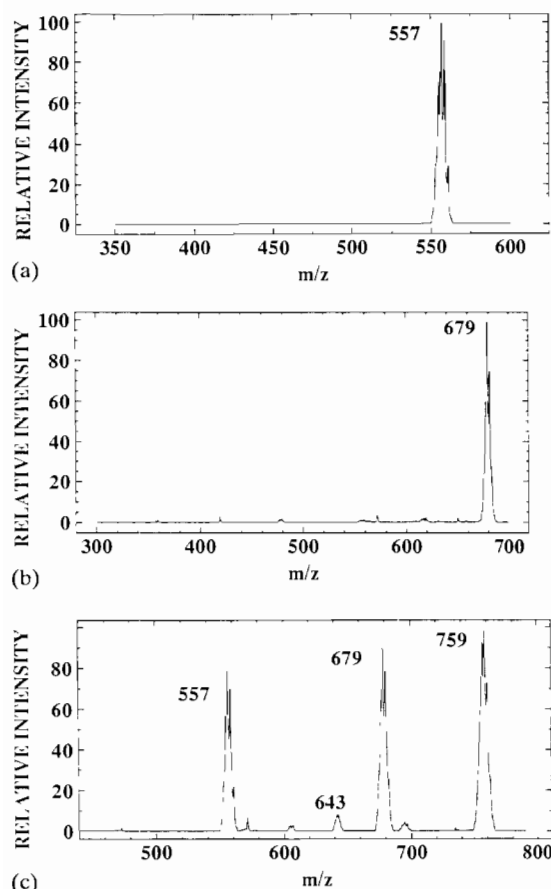


Fig 2. Positive ion ES mass spectra (B1=40 V) of (a) $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{PPh}_3\text{Se}$, (b) $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmSe}$, (c) $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmSe}_2 + \text{small amount of PPh}_3$.

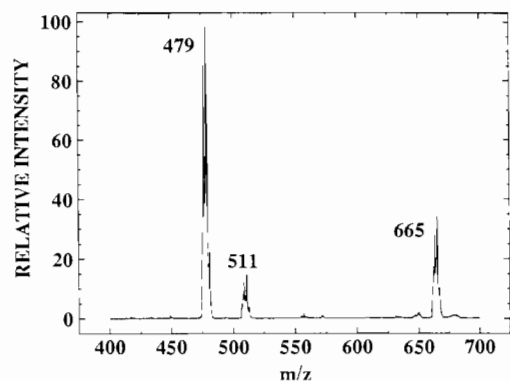


Fig 3. Positive ion ES mass spectrum of $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Me}_3\text{pz})]\text{NO}_3 + \text{dpmS}_2 + \text{small amount of PPh}_3$

665) as shown in Fig. 3. There is a small peak at m/z 511 due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{PPh}_3\text{S})]^+$, but there is no corresponding peak due to $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmS})]^+$ (m/z 633). Therefore, the PPh_3S cannot have been formed by sulfur transfer from dpmS_2 , and its formation is best attributed to reaction within the ion source of PPh_3 with a small amount of elemental sulfur impurity in the dpmS_2 , remaining from its preparation by reaction

of dpm with sulfur. However, even with this impurity present it is obvious that most of the triphenylphosphine remains and sulfur transfer does not occur between dpmS_2 and PPh_3 , in contrast to the selenides.

The potentially bidentate arsenic ligand dam ($\text{dam} = \text{Ph}_2\text{AsCH}_2\text{AsPh}_2$) displaces the nitrogen base from $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ to give $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dam})]^+$ (m/z 689), but triphenylstibine failed to react with $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ and was the only ligand investigated which did not displace the pyrazole ligand.

Conclusions

In this paper we have demonstrated that ESMS is a powerful new technique with which to investigate the labile methylmercury complexes with nitrogen bases. The ES mass spectra of the complexes themselves serve to confirm that ESMS does indeed give a good indication of the ionic species present in solution, since in these cases the identities of the species were known from previous NMR studies. ESMS readily confirms that exchange between different nitrogen bases is facile. The exchange reactions between $[\text{MeHg}(\text{Mepz})]\text{NO}_3$ and the phosphine based ligands reveal some new, but not unexpected, chemistry. It is important to note that ESMS does not give any information on the coordination number of mercury, nor on the mode of coordination of the ligand in an ion such as $[\text{MeHg}(\text{dpmSe})]^+$ in solution, so detailed multi-NMR studies would be needed if this information was sought.

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