

# Silver electrodeposition from water–acetonitrile mixed solvents. Part III—an in situ investigation by optical second harmonic generation spectroscopy

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**Abstract** In this work, we report an investigation based on silver electrodeposition from water–acetonitrile mixed solvents onto a polycrystalline Au electrode, based on in situ optical second harmonic generation (SHG) spectroscopy. This paper is the last one of a series attacking the same topic by cyclic voltammetry and potentiostatic current transients (Mele et al., J Solid State Electrochem in press, 1) and in situ surface-enhanced Raman scattering (Mele et al., J Solid State Electrochem in press, 2). SHG intensity transients following the application of potentiostatic cathodic steps have been measured in order to obtain detailed information on the formation of Ag clusters and nuclei during the electrodeposition process. Our SHG data have been rationalised in terms of a simple optical model accounting for SHG enhancement brought about by Ag cluster formation.

## Introduction

Many researches have been carried out showing that second harmonic generation (SHG) is an ideal spectroscopic technique for examining electrochemical interfaces in aqueous media, in particular in terms of adsorption of molecules, ions, metal atoms and reaction intermediates at metal electrodes (i.e. [1] and references therein contained). This technique, of course, is also suitable to investigate the metal/electrolyte interface in non-aqueous systems. This topic has recently gained growing interest, because the use of non-aqueous or mixed solvents offers an alternative route for several electrochemical processes, allowing

limited influence of water-related electrochemical reactions, as well as the possibility of solubilising many organics [2, 3]. The study of the interfacial electrochemistry of Ag/H<sub>2</sub>O/acetonitrile (CH<sub>3</sub>CN) systems has received some attention in the literature [4–6]. However, limited research effort was gone so far in the electrodeposition from non-aqueous phases [7–9]. In [10], a selection of non-aqueous solvent-based plating systems has been reviewed. Some surface-enhanced Raman scattering (SERS) studies of silver [5, 11] and platinum [4] in acetonitrile solutions have been also performed, but to the best of the authors' knowledge, no SHG electrochemical work has been reported concerning electrodeposition from mixed solvents.

This paper is part of a series addressing the topic of Ag electrodeposition from water–acetonitrile mixed solvents. In the previous papers of this series [11, 12], we investigated the nucleation of silver by electrochemical methods (cyclic voltammetry and potentiostatic current transients), the nucleation and growth morphology by scanning electron microscopy and the metal/electrolyte interface composition by SERS spectroscopy. In the present paper, we use in situ SHG in order to monitor the formation of Ag clusters and nuclei, giving rise to changes in SHG signal intensity ( $I_{\text{SHG}}$ ).

## Experimental

The electrodeposition baths we employed were (a) AgNO<sub>3</sub> 10 mM, NaClO<sub>4</sub> 0.1 M and 100% H<sub>2</sub>O; (b) AgNO<sub>3</sub> 10 mM, NaClO<sub>4</sub> 0.1 M, 50% H<sub>2</sub>O and 50% CH<sub>3</sub>CN and (c) AgNO<sub>3</sub> 10 mM, NaClO<sub>4</sub> 0.1 M and 100% CH<sub>3</sub>CN. The solutions were prepared from analytic grade chemicals and ultra-pure water with a resistivity of 18.2 MΩ cm. In the electrochemical literature, ClO<sub>4</sub><sup>-</sup> is often regarded as an

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inert ion: Nevertheless, if the presence of  $\text{Cl}^-$  is expected to impact the relevant experiments, careful attention should be given to the possibility of reduction of perchlorate to chloride. [13] reports work on a Ni electrode in contact with 0.1 M  $\text{HClO}_4$ , showing that at room temperature, the formation of  $\text{Cl}^-$  is vanishing in a wide potential range, whilst at  $-0.9 V_{\text{SCE}}$  at  $T > 55^\circ\text{C}$ , it becomes sizable. [14] has found that  $\text{Cl}^-$  can form at room temperature in solutions with  $\text{HClO}_4$  concentrations in excess of 1 M in a wide range of electrochemical conditions, the mildest ones—in the presence of a catalytic cathode—being potential pulsing between 0 and  $-0.2 V_{\text{RHE}}$ . Catalytic effects have been discussed for many metals, but Ag does not seem to have been studied. Furthermore, in the case of  $\text{Cl}^-$ -adsorbing cathodes, such as Pt, adsorption has been proved to inhibit further  $\text{ClO}_4^-$  reduction. Moreover, an acidic environment seems critical for the reduction of  $\text{ClO}_4^-$  to  $\text{Cl}^-$  [15]. Since—in the present investigation—we used a neutral system at room temperature with comparatively low concentrations of  $\text{ClO}_4^-$ , polarisations  $\geq -0.6 V_{\text{Ag/AgCl}}$  and, moreover, our aqueous baths are  $\text{AgNO}_3$  solutions (accumulation of  $\text{Cl}^-$  would be impeded by the precipitation of  $\text{AgCl}$ ), we have sufficient reasons to believe that the formation of  $\text{Cl}^-$  is negligible.

The SHG spectrometer, optics and control electronics were constructed in our laboratory; for details, see [16]. An yttrium lithium fluoride laser (wavelength 1,064 nm) was used, the optical second-harmonic was collected by a photomultiplier tube and its reading was ratioed to a reference channel based on a photodiode. SHG experiments were performed at  $50^\circ$  incidence angle with *p*-in/*p*-out polarisation. In situ SHG measurements were performed in a cell with a vertical Au working electrode of diameter 5 mm embedded in a Teflon cylindrical holder. The counter electrode was a Pt wire loop ( $1.25 \text{ cm}^2$ ) concentric and coplanar with the working electrode disc. An external Ag/AgCl reference electrode (RE) was used and placed in a separate compartment with the probe tip at 3 mm from the rim of the working electrode disc. The adequacy of this RE in the relevant experiments has been discussed insightfully in [12].

## Results and discussion

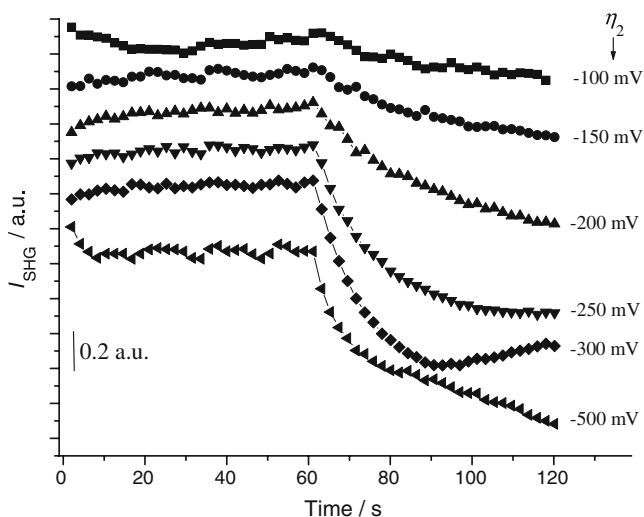
In situ SHG measurements were carried out during two types of electrodeposition experiments: (a) a potential step was applied to the electrode, initially set at an anodic stripping potential, and (b) series of five potential square waves were applied between a fixed anodic stripping potential and a given cathodic polarisation.

As far as the choice of the optical polarisation is concerned, it is known [17, 18] that with *p*-polarisation, the output SHG bears strictly surface information, whilst with *s*-polarisation both surface and bulk information can

be obtained. In our case, ‘bulk’ information can be estimated to derive from a layer of less than 100 nm. Thus, in the case of metal electrodeposition experiments—as opposed to adsorbate detection ones—such a thickness can be regarded to be typical of the ‘surface’ morphological growth features that we are interested in studying. Therefore—as hinted at in Section 2—our final polarisation choice was *p*-in/*p*-out for the highest sensitivity to the formation of Ag growth features. It is worth noting that it is possible that the diffuse signal from the electrode surface, roughened during electrodeposition, gives rise to insensitivity to both input and output polarisations [19].

In Figs. 1, 2 and 3, SHG signal intensity ( $I_{\text{SHG}}$ ) transients—following the application of potentiostatic steps at cathodic over-potentials from an anodic stripping potential of 500 mV—are reported, using the electrodeposition baths (a), (b) and (c), described in Section 2. It can be noticed that, when the anodic potential is applied,  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  is high and essentially constant over time. The application of a cathodic step gives rise to an over-shoot, better visible in the systems containing  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  and then to different  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transient shapes, depending on the solvent and the imposed over-potential. The observed over-shoot is diagnostic of Ag nucleation processes on the gold substrate; for this reason, in all the investigated systems, the higher the over-potential, the lower the observed maximum of  $I_{\text{SHG}}$ , because of higher growth rate. In the aqueous solution,  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  decreases with time and tends to reach an asymptotic value, systematically decreasing with the increase of the cathodic polarisation (Fig. 1). In the two systems containing the organic solvent (Figs. 2 and 3), after the initial  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  over-shoot at lower cathodic over-potentials, an approximately constant value is reached, higher than the one observed at anodic potentials. At higher cathodic polarisations,  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  continues to decrease reaching, also in this case, an asymptotic value, anti-correlated with the applied cathodic over-potential. The critical over-potentials discriminating between the two different kinds of trend are  $-350$  and  $-200$  mV for the mixed electrolyte and for the pure organic solvent, respectively. The different types of  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transient can be explained in terms of the formation of Ag nanoparticles, giving rise to a SHG signal enhancement, as detailed below. Unlike the measurements with pure solvents, experiments carried out in the mixed electrolyte give rise to serially correlated  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transients, owing to the reaction of acetonitrile with water [11] causing an accumulation of reaction products.

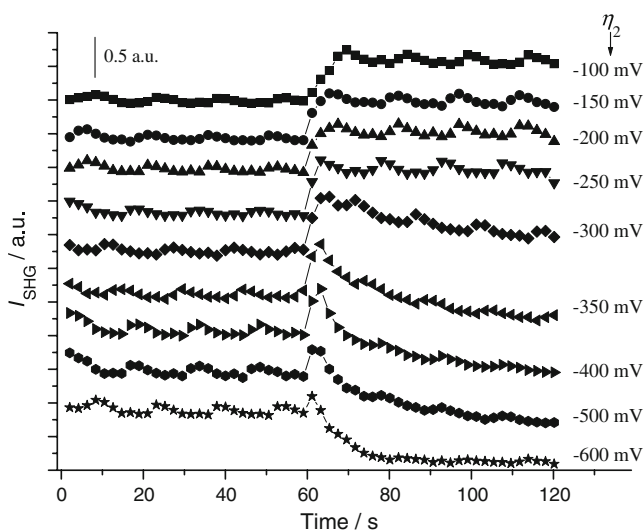
In Figs. 4 and 5, we report  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  time series, obtained by applying a sequence of five potential square waves, consisting in switching the potential between an anodic stripping potential of 500 mV (over-potential  $\eta_1$ ) and a given cathodic polarisation ( $\eta_2$ ), with pure solvents. In Fig. 6, similar results are reported, obtained with the mixed electrolyte, for some representative cathodic potentials



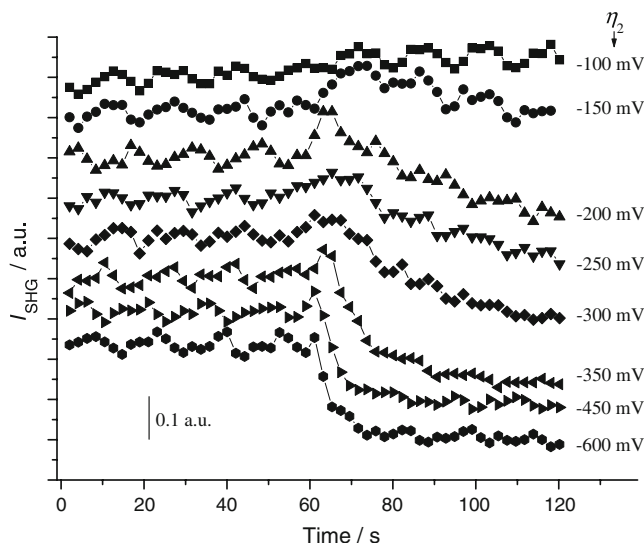
**Fig. 1** SHG signal intensity transients following the application of potentiostatic steps at cathodic over-potentials ( $\eta_2$ ) from an anodic stripping over-potential ( $\eta_1 = +500$  mV), using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M and 100%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$

(−100, −300 and −600 mV). In the experiments with pure solvents, the  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transients are more reproducible than with the mixed electrolyte, where the signal is affected by the  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  reactivity. In particular, it is worth noting that, with the mixed solvent, the reproducibility is low at low  $\eta_2$  values (Fig. 6a), it increases (even though in the presence of a drift) at higher  $\eta_2$  (Fig. 6b) and it decreases again for very high  $\eta_2$  values (Fig. 6c).

The change of  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transient shapes for a given electrochemical condition, can be quantified by the para-



**Fig. 2** SHG signal intensity transients following the application of potentiostatic steps at cathodic over-potentials ( $\eta_2$ ) from an anodic stripping over-potential ( $\eta_1 = +500$  mV), using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M, 50%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and 50%  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$



**Fig. 3** SHG signal intensity transients following the application of potentiostatic steps at cathodic over-potentials ( $\eta_2$ ) from an anodic stripping over-potential ( $\eta_1 = +500$  mV), using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M and 100%  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$

meter  $\Delta$ , defined as  $\Delta = \frac{1}{5N} \sum_{i=1}^N \sum_{j=1}^5 \frac{A_{ij} - B_i}{A_{ij}}$ , where  $A^{ij}$  are the  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  data collected during the  $j$ -th potential square wave,  $B_i$  are the  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  data collected during the single potential step and  $N$  is the number of time samples collected in each time series.  $\Delta$  has been estimated to be 1.5–13%, depending on  $\eta_2$ , in the experiments with water, 1–15% with the organic solvent and more than 40% with the mixed electrolyte. Relatively higher  $\Delta$  values are systematically found at higher over-voltages, likely owing to the build-up of deposit roughness.

As hinted above, the anomalous behaviour of the  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transients measured with the mixed electrolyte can be explained with the reactivity of acetonitrile during Ag electrodeposition, elucidated by SERS in [11]. In fact, as proposed in [20–22], under suitable conditions,  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  can react with water, in two steps: (a) acetonitrile reacts with one water molecule to produce acetamide



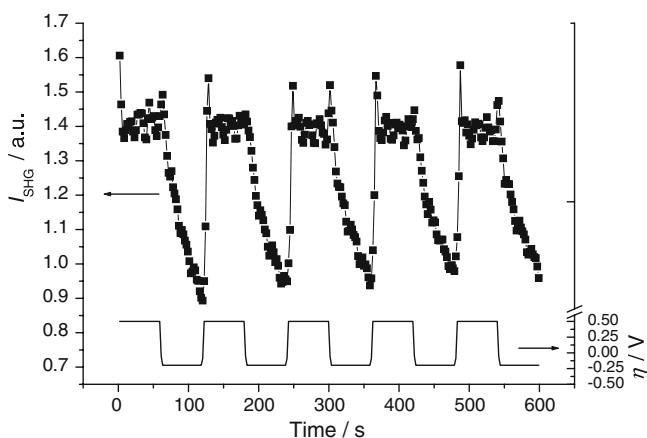
and (b) acetamide reacts with another water molecule, yielding acetic acid and  $\text{NH}_3$



Ammonia tends to complex  $\text{Ag}^+$  ions in the solution, producing the complexes  $[\text{Ag}(\text{NH}_3)_2]^+$  and consequently reducing the  $\text{Ag}^+$  activity and the electrodeposition rate.

In the presence of acetate, competition for  $\text{Ag}^+$  takes place after the reaction:





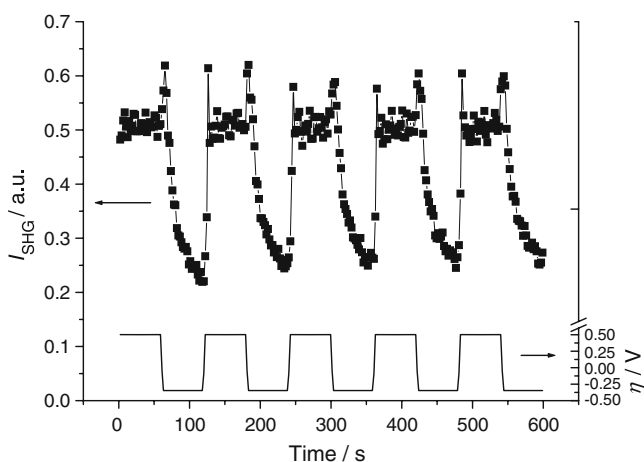
**Fig. 4**  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  time series, obtained by applying a sequence of five potential square waves, switching the potential between an anodic stripping value of +500 mV and a cathodic polarisation of -200 mV, using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M and 100%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$

$\text{CH}_3\text{COOAg}$  is a sparingly soluble salt [23] and it tends to precipitate onto the electrode, giving rise to a passivation film, obstructing the stripping process of the silver electro-deposited during the anodic square waves (Fig. 6a).

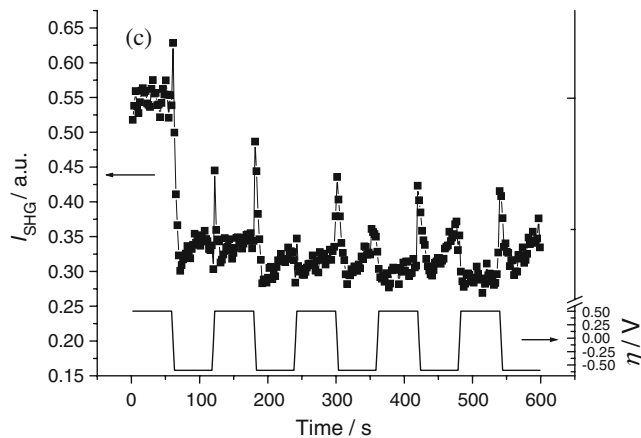
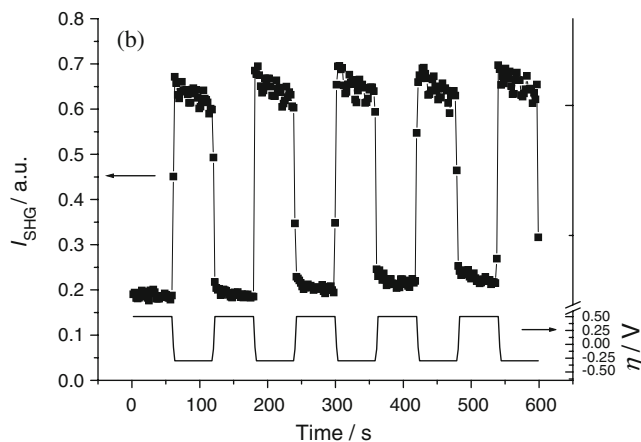
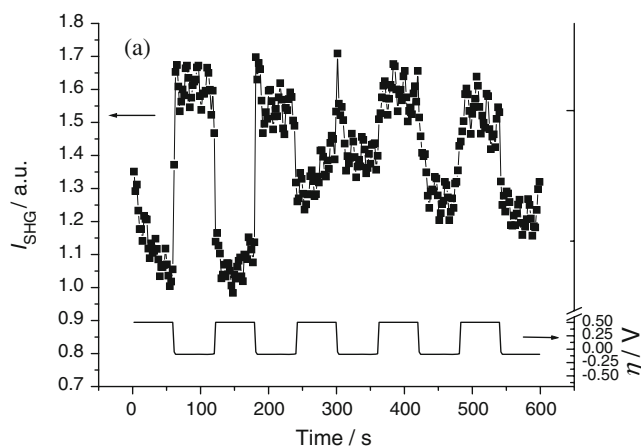
When higher cathodic over-potentials  $\eta_2$  are applied,  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  tends to decompose releasing cyanide ions [11]:



Cyanide ions  $\text{CN}^-$  can complex  $\text{Ag}^+$  in the solution giving rise to  $[\text{Ag}(\text{CN})_2]^-$ . The formation of the cyanocomplex, similarly to the case of the ammoniacal complex, reduces the activity of  $\text{Ag}^+$  in the solution. Furthermore, cyanide ions injected in the solution by  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  decomposition are good complexing agents for  $\text{Ag}^+$ , making the anodic stripping more efficient. In the presence of  $\text{CN}^-$  (Fig. 6b),



**Fig. 5**  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  time series, obtained by applying a sequence of five potential square waves, switching the potential between an anodic stripping value of +500 mV and a cathodic polarisation of -350 mV, using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M and 100%  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$

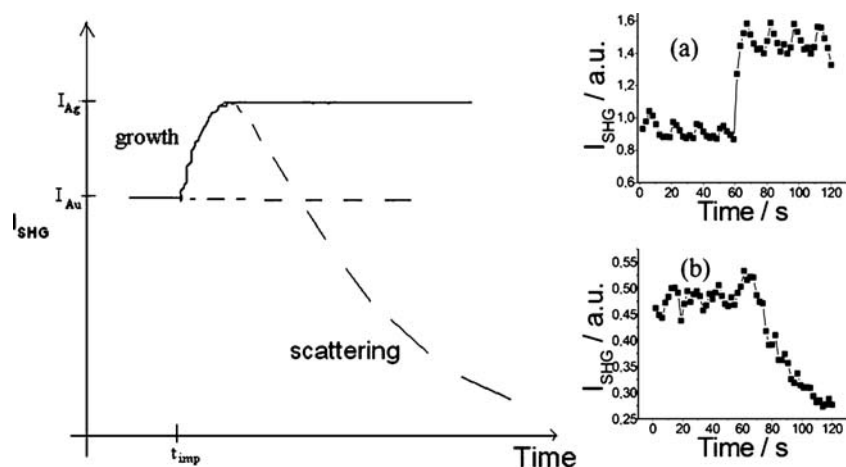


**Fig. 6**  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  time series, obtained by applying a sequence of five potential square waves, switching the potential between an anodic stripping value of +500 mV and a given cathodic polarisation (over-potential  $\eta_2$ ), using the electrodeposition bath containing  $\text{AgNO}_3$  10 mM,  $\text{NaClO}_4$  0.1 M, 50%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and 50%  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$ . **a**  $\eta_2 = -100$  mV, **b**  $\eta_2 = -300$  mV, **c**  $\eta_2 = -600$  mV

in fact, the stripping time (60 s) is enough to restore the initial optical properties of the cathode. At even higher over-potentials  $\eta_2$  (Fig. 6c), a hysteric behaviour of the  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transients can be observed, probably due to roughness effects.

In order to describe the non-linear optical response for a layer deposited onto a metal surface, a model based on the

**Fig. 7** A sketch of  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  dynamics, according to the model Eq. (7) and (8), with two typical  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  transients obtained in our measurements



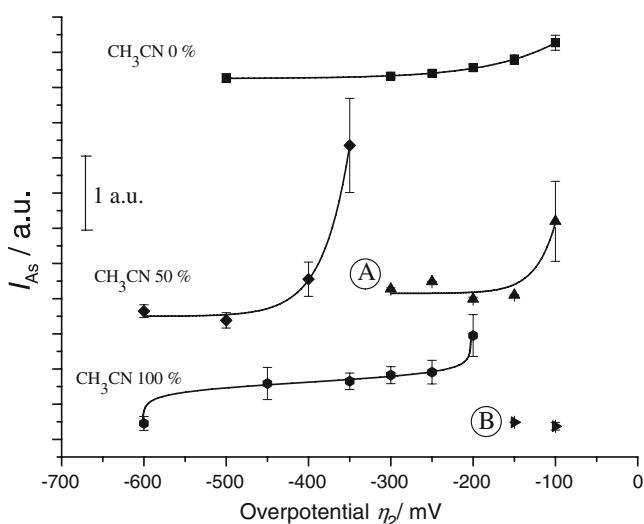
theory reported in [1] has been adopted, introducing an additional damping term  $\gamma(r)\dot{x}$ . According to this model, based on the dynamic behaviour of the valence electrons of the over-layer [17, 24], the single electron equation is:

$$\ddot{x} + \gamma(r)\dot{x} - \omega_0^2 x + \zeta x^2 = \frac{e}{m} \{E(\omega) \cos(\omega t)\} \quad (5)$$

where  $\omega_0$  and  $\zeta$  are the resonant frequency and anharmonicity of the potential field, respectively, and  $E(\omega)$  is the magnitude of the oscillating electric field associated with the incident fundamental beam. In this case, the second-order non-linear susceptibility,  $\chi^{(2)}$ , is given by:

$$\chi^{(2)}(r) = -\zeta \frac{Ne^3}{2m^2} \frac{1}{[(\omega_0^2 - \omega^2)^2 + \gamma(r)^2 \omega^2] \sqrt{(\omega_0^2 - 4\omega^2) + 4\gamma(r)^2 \omega^2}} \quad (6)$$

where  $\chi^{(2)}(r)$  is a monotonically increasing function in the range  $r \in [0; \infty)$ .

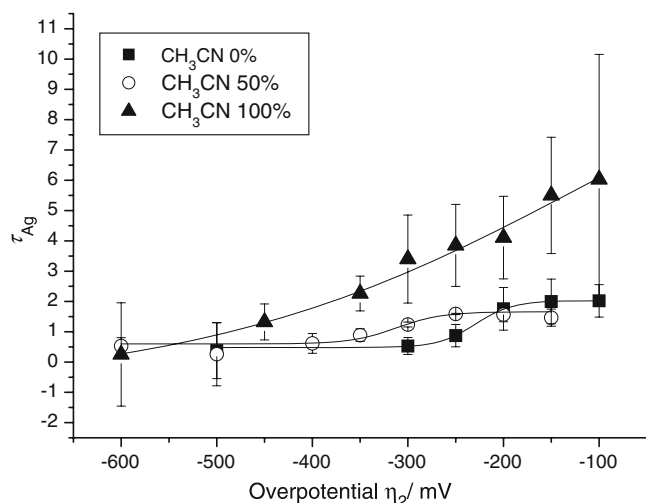


**Fig. 8** Potential-dependent  $I_{\text{as}}$  and 95% confidence intervals estimated by non-linear least-squares (NLLS) fits of experimental  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  data (Eq. 8)

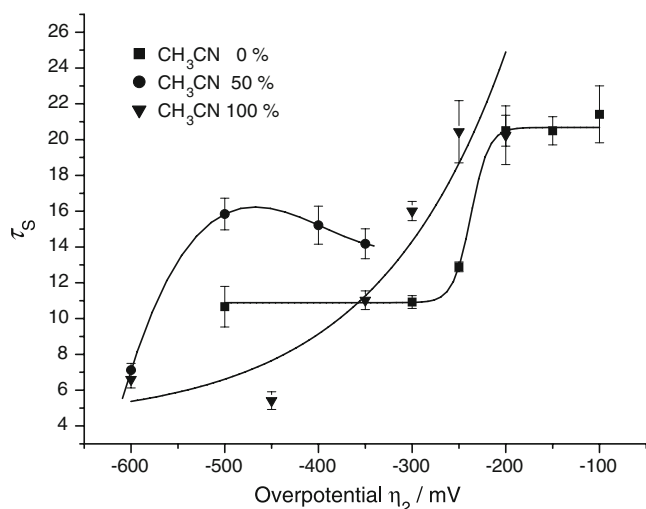
If we assume that the absorption is due to plasmon resonance of metal nanoparticles, it is possible to monitor the nucleation and growth of crystallites. In fact, the variation of  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  can be expressed in terms of changes of the damping coefficient, written in turn as a function of particle size [25]. In order to calculate  $\chi^{(2)}$ , the dielectric function of silver can be determined by additive contributions of free and bound electrons [25, 26]. In our SHG experiments, at the excitation wavelength of 1,064 nm, the gold and silver responses are chiefly free electron-like [27] and can be described by the Drude model [25], obtaining:

$$\chi^{(2)}(r, \text{Re}(\epsilon^f)) = -\zeta \frac{Ne^3}{2m^2} \frac{1}{[(\omega_0^2 - \omega^2)^2 + [\frac{\omega_p^2}{1 - \text{Re}(\epsilon^f)} - \omega^2]^2] \sqrt{(\omega_0^2 - 4\omega^2) + 4[\frac{\omega_p^2}{1 - \text{Re}(\epsilon^f)} - \omega^2]^2}} \quad (7)$$

Taking the relaxation time of the metal  $\tau = 31 \times 10^{-15}$  s for Ag and  $\tau = 9.3 \times 10^{-15}$  s for Au [28], one obtains  $\frac{\chi_{\text{Au}}^{(2)}}{\chi_{\text{Ag}}^{(2)}} = 847$ .



**Fig. 9** Potential-dependent  $\tau_{\text{Ag}}$  and 95% confidence intervals estimated by NLLS fits of experimental  $I_{\text{SHG}}$  data (Eq. 8)



**Fig. 10** Potential-dependent  $\tau_s$  and 95% confidence intervals estimated by NLLS fits of experimental  $I_{SHG}$  data (Eq. 8)

According to this result,  $I_{SHG}$  from an atomically flat Au surface should be higher than that from an atomically flat Ag surface [27] and a fortiori from scattering Ag crystallites. Consequently, the over-shoots observed in our experiments can be explained in terms of enhanced SHG from Ag nanoparticles [29]. For spherical nanoparticles with radius  $r$  larger than 1 nm and smaller than the wavelength of light  $\lambda$ , i.e. typically  $1\text{ nm} < r < \frac{\lambda}{20}$  [30, 31], their SHG signal can be described by means of Eq. 7. This equation shows a positive correlation between  $\chi^{(2)}$  and  $r$  in the range where the adopted approximations are valid. This single model permits to rationalise our experimental data. A conceptual sketch with two typical  $I_{SHG}$  transients obtained in our measurements is depicted in Fig. 7. During the initial period of 60 s, the recorded  $I_{SHG}$  corresponds to polished Au. When the cathodic potential step is applied ( $t_{\text{imp}}=60$  s), the  $I_{SHG}$  signal increases due to the growth of Ag clusters onto the Au substrate. In the experiments where  $I_{SHG}$  increases above the Au level and stays approximately constant during the deposition process (Fig. 7, inset a), essentially monodisperse nanoparticles are formed [32–34]. The cases when the  $I_{SHG}$  signal decreases after the maximum (Fig. 7, inset b) can be explained with scattering from surface roughness, developing with the growth of Ag crystallites or dendrites.

The experimental  $I_{SHG}$  data, obtained in the different systems and by applying different cathodic polarisation sequences, have been normalised with respect to the average value of the signal corresponding to polished Au and have been fitted by means of the following function:

$$I_{SHG} = \left[ 1 + I_{as} \left( 1 - \exp\left(-\frac{\bar{x}}{\tau_{Ag}}\right) \right) \right] \cdot \left[ \exp\left(\frac{t_s - \bar{x}}{\tau_s}\right) \right] \quad (8)$$

where  $I_{as}$  is the maximum value of the  $I_{SHG}$  signal or its asymptotic value,  $\tau_{Ag}$  is the characteristic time of the initial

growth of the signal,  $t_s$  is the time after which the effect of scattering is effective and  $\tau_s$  is the characteristic  $I_{SHG}$  signal decay time for scattering. The estimates of  $I_{as}$ ,  $\tau_{Ag}$  and  $\tau_s$  and their 95% confidence intervals are reported in Figs. 8, 9 and 10. In all the investigated systems,  $t_s$  has been found to be essentially equal to zero, indicating that the Ag clusters start contributing to the SHG scattering as soon as they form. The trend of the other parameters obtained by varying the cathodic over-potential can be explained in terms of formation of Ag nanoparticles, giving rise to SHG enhancement and their subsequent growth producing deposit roughness. The potential dependence of  $I_{as}$  is Butler–Volmer-like (Fig. 8), as expected for its dependence on the amount of the electrodeposited Ag. In fact, during the initial stages of electrocrystallisation, all the electrodeposited Ag can be assumed to give rise to the formation of SHG-active features, whilst at later stages, inactive and scattering crystallites tend to compete with optically active nanocrystals. Since the potential dependence of the duration of time interval preceding the descent of the  $I_{SHG}$  signal is rather weak, the amount of deposited Ag essentially scales with the current density, whence a hyperbolic-sine dependence of  $I_{as}$  on applied potential.

At lower over-potentials in the presence of an overshoot,  $I_{as}$  allows to quantify the size of Ag nanoparticles. When the deposition rate is higher, the overshoot is poorly visible and the  $I_{SHG}$  decay starts immediately. A clear discontinuity (points A and B in Fig. 8) can be noticed in the systems containing  $\text{CH}_3\text{CN}$  that can be related to the reactivity commented above (Eqs. 1 and 4) and corresponds to the resulting morphological effects.

The estimated data of  $\tau_{Ag}$  show a monotonic trend (Fig. 9), with the cathodic over-potential step, and give information on the kinetics of metal growth.

An essentially positive correlation between the estimated  $\tau_s$  values and the applied cathodic over-potential is found as expected for cathodic kinetics (Fig. 10). In particular, the system with mixed electrolyte seems slower, whereas the one with organic electrolyte is the faster.

## Conclusions

Silver electrodeposition from water–acetonitrile mixed solvents has been investigated by means of SHG spectroscopy. This non-linear optical spectroscopy carried out during Ag electrodeposition provides a useful means for the study of the properties of Ag growth features. The different types of  $I_{SHG}$  transients, observed in our experiments, can be explained in terms of the formation of Ag nanoparticles, giving rise to SHG enhancement and their subsequent growth producing deposit roughness. Differences in the kinetics of Ag clusters formation and growth,

as a function of both chemistry and reactivity, as well as of the cathodic potential, can be detected and quantified with a simple optical model proposed in this work.

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