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*Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. A* 2000 **358**, 2515-2521

doi: 10.1098/rsta.2000.0664

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# The abundance and excitation of interstellar $\text{H}_3^+$

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Observations of interstellar  $\text{H}_3^+$  test a central part of theories of ion–molecule chemistry in space. It is possible to measure the abundances of cold  $\text{H}_2$ , of  $\text{H}_3^+$ , and of CO in the same parcel of gas by means of infrared absorption spectroscopy toward obscured stars. The observed populations of the lowest rotational levels of  $\text{H}_2$  and  $\text{H}_3^+$  confirm that reactive collisions tend to thermalize the ortho- and para-nuclear-spin species in interstellar clouds. The rotational population distributions in CO provide diagnostic information on physical conditions (density and kinetic temperature). Taken together, observations of these three molecules make it possible to infer the rate of ionization in neutral, molecular clouds by penetrating cosmic rays or X-rays. Recent observations and their interpretation are summarized. The prospects for detecting weak, pure rotational transitions of  $\text{H}_3^+$  are considered.

**Keywords:** interstellar molecules; infrared spectroscopy; molecular ions

## 1. Infrared absorption spectroscopy

The  $\text{H}_3^+$  molecular ion plays a pivotal role in interstellar gas-phase chemistry. Because it lacks strong transitions in other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, interstellar  $\text{H}_3^+$  is best studied through the technique of infrared absorption spectroscopy. Lines of the  $\nu_2$  fundamental vibration–rotation band at wavelengths of 3.6–4.1  $\mu\text{m}$  are formed in cold interstellar gas that lies between the observer and a background star. The star must be bright enough for spectroscopy at high resolution (preferably a resolving power  $R = \lambda/\delta\lambda \approx 10^5$  or higher) despite the extinction of light by the interstellar dust particles that accompany the molecular gas. The value of  $\text{H}_3^+$  as a chemical and physical diagnostic tracer is greatly enhanced by the fact that both  $\text{H}_2$  and CO are also observable by the same technique at wavelengths between 2 and 5  $\mu\text{m}$ . Thus it is worthwhile to summarize the general features of high-resolution infrared absorption spectroscopy that make this technique so valuable in the study of dilute astrophysical gases such as interstellar clouds.

First, the tests of interstellar chemical theory are direct and more readily interpreted than those posed by mm-wave emission-line observations. Even though cold  $\text{H}_2$  in thick interstellar clouds is detectable only by means of its quadrupole transitions, its abundance is sufficiently higher than those of  $\text{H}_3^+$  and CO that its strongest  $v = 1 \leftarrow 0$  absorption lines are at worst only a few times weaker than those of the CO first overtone band  $v = 2 \leftarrow 0$  at nearly the same wavelength and those of the  $\nu_2$  fundamental band of  $\text{H}_3^+$ . The first direct detection of cold  $\text{H}_2$  in a thick interstellar cloud was an important advance in interstellar studies (Lacy *et al.* 1994). Not only did it confirm the expected large concentrations of  $\text{H}_2$ , but it also offered a direct

calibration of the CO/H<sub>2</sub> abundance ratio. CO and its isotopomers are widely used as surrogate tracers of molecular hydrogen.

Second, various other non-polar molecules that lack radio frequency spectra are observable through infrared absorption spectroscopy. Among the important non-polar species detected in interstellar clouds in this way are CH<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>2</sub>, and CO<sub>2</sub> (Lacy *et al.* 1989, 1991; van Dishoeck *et al.* 1996).

Third, it is possible to measure and compare directly the amounts of gaseous and solid forms of the same species, e.g. H<sub>2</sub>O, CO, CO<sub>2</sub>, and CH<sub>3</sub>OH.

Fourth, the analysis and interpretation are easier for weak absorption lines than for radio frequency emission lines. For weak absorption lines the relationship between integrated intensity and column density of absorbers is linear. In practice, while the quadrupole lines of H<sub>2</sub> are usually weak in this sense, the interstellar lines of CO in its  $v = 2 \leftarrow 0$  band are often somewhat saturated, so that the derived column densities are sensitive to the Doppler velocity dispersion. The absorbing gas toward a point-like background source can be modelled as a one-dimensional atmosphere, unlike the emitting gas sampled by the more extended beam of a radio telescope. Over a restricted wavelength range, all absorption measurements probably refer to exactly the same absorbing column.

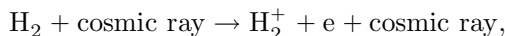
Because interstellar lines are often weak and narrow (Doppler full-width at half-peak of the profile  $\Delta V \approx 1 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ ), high resolution is essential. For example, consider the case where the total column density of H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> is  $N(\text{H}_3^+) = 4 \times 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ , the fractional population in the ortho ground level† ( $J, G$ ) = (1, 0) is 0.40, and the linewidth is  $\Delta V = 1.665 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ . The equivalent width (integrated intensity) of an absorption line is

$$W_\lambda = \int (1 - \exp(-\tau)) d\lambda,$$

where  $\tau$  is the optical depth, which includes corrections for stimulated emission in the interstellar radiation field. For the  $\nu_2 (J', G', U') \leftarrow (J'', G'') = (2, 1, +1) \leftarrow (1, 1)$  line at wavelength  $\lambda = 3.6685 \mu\text{m}$ , the equivalent width is  $W_\lambda/\lambda = 1.50 \times 10^{-6}$  in this example. At line centre the optical depth is  $\tau = 0.29$ , which yields an easily detectable 29% absorption when the line profile is resolved. In practice, existing spectrometers have resolving powers  $R = \lambda/\delta\lambda \approx 10^5$  so that such lines with  $c/\Delta V \approx 1.8 \times 10^5$  are not fully resolved. In this regime of astronomical spectroscopy, the true sensitivity of an observation is limited by the resolution as well as by the aperture of the telescope and the noise characteristics of the telescope-plus-spectrometer system. There is an additional advantage of high resolution,  $R \geq 10^5$ : when telluric atmospheric absorption is dominated by narrow lines, too, their removal from the astronomical spectrum is simpler and more accurate than at lower resolution.

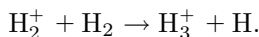
## 2. The abundance of interstellar H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup>

In the conventional theory of interstellar ion chemistry, H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> is formed by cosmic-ray-induced ionizations of H<sub>2</sub>,

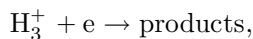


† Rotational levels in triangular H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> are labelled with the quantum numbers of total angular momentum  $J$ , its projection along the symmetry axis  $G$ , and the vibrational angular momentum  $U$ . In the degenerate bending mode  $\nu_2$ , the vibrational angular momentum takes on values  $|\ell_2| = \nu_2, (\nu_2 - 2), \dots$ , so that  $G = |K - \ell_2|$  and  $U = \pm|\ell_2|$  for the upper and lower levels of each  $\ell$ -doublet.

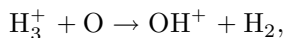
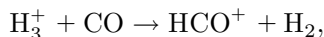
followed by the rapid reaction,



The destruction of  $\text{H}_3^+$  is accomplished by dissociative recombination,



by reactions with abundant oxygen-bearing species,



and by other less important reactions. In steady state, the resulting number density of  $\text{H}_3^+$  can be written

$$n(\text{H}_3^+) \approx \frac{1.8 \times 10^{-5} [\zeta / 10^{-17}]}{\left[ \frac{x(e)}{2 \times 10^{-6}} \right] \left[ \frac{50}{T} \right]^{1/2} + \left[ \frac{x(\text{CO})}{3 \times 10^{-4}} \right] + 0.5 \left[ \frac{x(\text{O})}{3 \times 10^{-4}} \right]} \text{cm}^{-3}$$

in molecular gas. The fractional abundances of free electrons, CO and O, by number relative to  $\text{H}_2$  are  $x(e)$ ,  $x(\text{CO})$  and  $x(\text{O})$ , respectively, and  $\zeta$  is the effective rate of ionization of  $\text{H}_2$  ( $\text{s}^{-1}$ ) to produce  $\text{H}_2^+$ . It has been assumed that dissociative recombination is rapid, with a rate coefficient  $k_{\text{DR}} \approx 1 \times 10^{-7} (300/T)^{1/2} \text{cm}^3 \text{s}^{-1}$  for ground-state ions (Larsson (1997) and references therein). This formula predicts a concentration of  $\text{H}_3^+$  that is independent of total density. It also identifies two limiting cases. When the electron fraction is small,  $x(e) \ll 10^{-4}$ , as expected in thick, dense molecular clouds, then  $n(\text{H}_3^+) \approx 1.8 \times 10^{-5} [\zeta / 10^{-17}] \text{cm}^{-3}$ . In the diffuse and translucent clouds, where one expects  $x(e) \approx 5 \times 10^{-4}$ , the concentration of  $\text{H}_3^+$  is predicted to be rather smaller,  $n(\text{H}_3^+) \approx 7 \times 10^{-8} [\zeta / 10^{-17}] \text{cm}^{-3}$  at  $T = 50 \text{K}$ .

### 3. $\text{H}_3^+$ in dense molecular clouds

The interstellar absorption lines of  $\text{H}_3^+$  had been sought unsuccessfully for many years (Oka 1981; Geballe & Oka 1989; Black *et al.* 1990) before Geballe & Oka (1996) reported detections toward the infrared sources W33A and AFGL 2136. Since that time, McCall *et al.* (1999) have presented measurements of  $\text{H}_3^+$  toward six infrared sources. A similar study of six molecular clouds has been carried out with the Phoenix spectrograph on the 2.1 m telescope of Kitt Peak National Observatory (C. A. Kulesa & J. H. Black 2000, unpublished data). Preliminary results can be summarized for three of the sources with fully analysed data, AFGL 2591, AFGL 490, and NGC 2024 IRS2.  $\text{H}_2$  is measured in its  $v = 1 \leftarrow 0 \text{S}(0)$  line toward all three; the resulting column densities in the  $J = 0$  ground level of para hydrogen lie in the range  $N(\text{H}_2) = (2 - 4) \times 10^{22} \text{cm}^{-2}$ . Upper limits on the amount of  $\text{H}_2$  in  $J = 1$  are found for the first two clouds. A marginal detection toward NGC 2024 IRS2 is consistent with an ortho/para ratio of 0.25, which is the expected ratio for thermalized populations at temperature  $T = 48 \text{K}$ . Toward that source, the kinetic temperature of the gas is well determined by the rotational population distribution of CO:  $T = 44 \text{K}$ .  $\text{H}_3^+$  is measured in its para and ortho ground levels toward all three sources. The observations are in harmony with ortho/para ratios in both  $\text{H}_2$  and

$\text{H}_3^+$  that are thermalized at the same temperature inferred from the CO rotational populations. This confirms that reactive collisions of  $\text{H}_2$  with  $\text{H}^+$  and  $\text{H}_3^+$  are able to equilibrate the ortho and para populations (Dalgarno *et al.* 1973) even in thick, dense molecular clouds. The fractional abundance of CO is directly measured with values in the range  $x(\text{CO}) = (2-5) \times 10^{-4}$ . The column density of  $\text{H}_3^+$  is measured directly, the hydrogen density can be estimated from the abundance and excitation of CO, and the destruction rate of  $\text{H}_3^+$  can then be estimated from the observed CO abundance. According to the simple theory outlined above, it is thus possible to solve for the ionization rate. The derived values are in the range  $\zeta \approx (0.8-2.0) \times 10^{-17} \text{ s}^{-1}$ , similar to what is expected for the spectrum of cosmic rays observed near Earth.

#### 4. $\text{H}_3^+$ in the diffuse interstellar medium

The discovery of  $\text{H}_3^+$  in the diffuse interstellar medium toward Cygnus OB2 No. 12 (McCall *et al.* 1998) was unexpected. The interstellar clouds that have been studied traditionally by optical absorption spectroscopy toward background stars are thin enough that ultraviolet starlight can photoionize most of the gaseous carbon, sulphur, silicon, iron, and magnesium. The resulting electron fraction,  $x(e) = n(e)/n(\text{H}_2) > 10^{-4}$ , should be high enough that  $\text{H}_3^+$  is destroyed rapidly by dissociative recombination, rather than by reactions with O and CO as in the thick, dense molecular clouds. As emphasized by McCall *et al.* (1998) and Geballe *et al.* (1999), the column density  $N(\text{H}_3^+) = 3.8 \times 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  implies that the ratio  $\zeta/k_{\text{DR}}$  be at least 10 times larger than its widely adopted value. Cecchi-Pestellini & Dalgarno (2000) have constructed a model of the interstellar line of sight to Cygnus OB2 No. 12 in which dense concentrations of molecular gas within the diffuse clouds combine to produce the observed absorbing column of  $\text{H}_3^+$  at  $\zeta = 6 \times 10^{-17} \text{ s}^{-1}$ . Absorption spectra provide further constraints on CO and  $\text{C}_2$  molecules in the same column (Geballe *et al.* 1999; Gredel & Münch 1994), although the resolution of the existing spectra is inadequate to provide an accurate description of the conditions in distinct cloud components.

There is an alternative possibility to explain the large abundance of  $\text{H}_3^+$  toward Cygnus OB2 No. 12, which takes account of the very special environment surrounding that unusual star. The Cygnus OB2 association is one of the most remarkable concentrations of hot, luminous stars in the Galaxy. Star No. 12 itself has a bolometric luminosity of  $2 \times 10^6 L_\odot$  that places it among a handful of so-called hypergiant stars. For reference, the luminosity of the Sun is  $L_\odot = 3.8 \times 10^{26} \text{ W}$ . The hotter stars in the association maintain a very large (*ca.* 100 parsec radius), low-density ( $n(e) \approx 30 \text{ cm}^{-3}$  on average) photoionized nebula. Based on the stellar data of Massey & Thompson (1991), the total output of the association is approximately  $6 \times 10^{50}$  hydrogen-ionizing photons per second. It is quite likely that the nebula is density-bounded rather than ionization-bounded, which means that it leaks hydrogen-ionizing photons into the surrounding neutral gas. Moreover, several of the O-type stars of Cygnus OB2 are among the most powerful stellar X-ray sources in the Galaxy and have large mechanical luminosities in the form of stellar winds (Waldron *et al.* 1998). Any molecular gas lying within a few hundred parsecs of Cygnus OB2 No. 12 is probably ionized by ultraviolet light and X-rays at a rate that is significantly larger than the typical cosmic-ray rate. Massey & Thompson (1991) also suggest that a large fraction of the extinction and gaseous column density seen toward Cygnus OB2 No. 12 is circumstellar rather than truly interstellar. In that case, an important component of

the absorbing column may well be located within the zone of enhanced ionization around the association. If so, then the enhanced abundance of  $\text{H}_3^+$  in this direction would reflect directly the high ionization rate rather than a more general property of an interstellar line of sight that extends over 1740 parsecs between us and the association. Thus it is important to determine whether the  $\text{H}_3^+$  is close to the Cygnus OB2 association or distributed over the entire line of sight to star No. 12. With the advent of high-resolution spectrographs on optical telescopes of 8–10 m diameter, it is now feasible to make crucial observational tests between competing explanations. For example, it would be instructive to search sensitively for interstellar absorption lines of the reactive ions  $\text{OH}^+$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}^+$ , which should be good tracers of enhanced ionization in dilute molecular gas. Further attempts should be made to observe  $\text{H}_3^+$  in other diffuse lines of sight.

### 5. Pure rotational emission lines of $\text{H}_3^+$

As pointed out by Pan & Oka (1986), the distortion-induced rotational transitions of  $\text{H}_3^+$  may be of astrophysical interest. It is worthwhile to discuss the difficulties of observing these intrinsically weak lines. With one exception, the distortion-induced rotational transitions occur at wavelengths between 24 and 254  $\mu\text{m}$ , for low-lying levels within 1000  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  of ground. Warm molecular clouds in the Galaxy almost always exhibit intense continuous radiation due to thermal emission of dust particles at these wavelengths. It is the intensity contrast of line and adjacent continuum that will limit the detectability of the IR lines of  $\text{H}_3^+$  in practice. This is illustrated with a specific example: the giant molecular cloud complex Sgr B2 near the Galactic Centre. The total column density of molecular hydrogen averaged over an angular scale of 1 arcmin toward Sgr B2 is approximately  $N(\text{H}_2) \approx 10^{24} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  (Lis & Goldsmith 1990). On this scale the radiating dust has an average temperature  $T_d \approx 32 \text{ K}$  and an average optical depth of  $\tau \approx 1$  at a wavelength  $\lambda = 100 \mu\text{m}$ . Although there exist numerous molecular condensations of higher density and temperature within the Sgr B2 complex, average values of density  $n(\text{H}_2) = 1.7 \times 10^5 \text{ cm}^{-3}$  and gas temperature  $T \approx 40 \text{ K}$  are appropriate on the scale of 1 arcmin, which corresponds to 2.5 parsecs. Geballe *et al.* (1999) have observed large column densities of  $\text{H}_3^+$  toward stars near the Galactic Centre,  $N(\text{H}_3^+) \approx 2 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ . If this column density is adopted for the Sgr B2 cloud, then the implied abundance of  $\text{H}_3^+$  is consistent with cosmic-ray ionization of  $\text{H}_2$  at a rate  $\zeta \approx 3 \times 10^{-16} \text{ s}^{-1}$ . A multi-level excitation calculation has been carried out for  $\text{H}_3^+$  under the above conditions with an assumed linewidth of 20  $\text{km s}^{-1}$ . As described previously (Black 1998) the transition probabilities and line frequencies have been adopted from Neale *et al.* (1996). A naive model of inelastic collision rates has been adopted with a typical downward rate coefficient of  $2 \times 10^{-10} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$ . Reactive collisions of  $\text{H}_3^+$  with  $\text{H}_2$  that change nuclear-spin species have also been included (cf. Uy *et al.* 1997). Under these circumstances, the four lowest rotational states,  $(J, G) = (1, 1), (1, 0), (2, 2),$  and  $(2, 1)$ , have populations that are nearly thermalized at the kinetic temperature. The  $(2, 2) \rightarrow (1, 1)$  transition has a predicted wavelength of 95.08  $\mu\text{m}$ . Its peak intensity in this model of the Sgr B2 cloud is  $I_{\text{line}} = 0.014 \text{ Jy nsr}^{-1}$ , where 1 Jy =  $10^{-26} \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ Hz}^{-1}$  and nsr stands for one nanosteradian ( $10^{-9} \text{ sr}$ ). The calculated intensity of the thermal dust continuum radiation is  $I_c = 272 \text{ Jy nsr}^{-1}$  at the same wavelength. It is clearly not feasible to



detect such a weak line in the presence of such a strong continuum. Line/continuum ratios of the other rotational transitions are similarly small.

There is an unusual distortion-induced rotational transition between the levels  $(J, G) = (4, 4)$  and  $(3, 1)$ , which are accidentally very close to each other. The transition frequency is estimated to be 217.78 GHz, based on the comparison of experimental and *ab initio* energy levels for which the differences range between 7.261 and 7.268  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (Dinelli *et al.* 1997). The upper state lies 438  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  in energy above the lowest state of  $\text{H}_3^+$ . Interestingly, this mm-wave transition is the only possible rotational transition out of the upper level  $(4, 4)$ , while two transitions of much higher probability can drain population out of the lower level  $(3, 1)$ . As pointed out previously (Black 1998), this means that the populations of these two states will naturally become inverted whenever the density is too low for the populations to be quenched by collisions. Thus it is conceivable that this transition might appear as a cosmic maser. Large column densities  $N(\text{H}_3^+) \geq 10^{17} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  and high temperatures  $T \gg 100 \text{ K}$  are probably required in order to achieve appreciable gain in such a maser. Such conditions are, in fact, expected to occur in molecular gas surrounding active galactic nuclei such as quasars and radio galaxies, where the 217.8 GHz maser line as well as the quasi-thermal far-infrared lines might be detectable (Black 1998). In the case of a molecular cloud like Sgr B2 discussed above, the predicted intensity of the 217.8 GHz line is less than 1  $\mu\text{K}$  in units of radiation brightness temperature. For comparison, the rich mm-wave spectrum of Sgr B2 is confusion-limited at a level of 10 mK or higher.

Although a simple estimate suggests that the 217.8 GHz rotational line will not be easily detectable in the ionosphere of Jupiter where infrared line emission of  $\text{H}_3^+$  is so intense, it might be rather stronger in the ionospheres of some giant, extrasolar planets. A giant planet lying closer than one astronomical unit to its parent star is expected to have a greatly distended atmosphere compared with Jupiter. Depending upon the extreme ultraviolet flux of the star and the magnetospheric properties of such a planet, it might also have an even thicker, warmer ionosphere than Jupiter. In that case, interferometric searches for maser emission in the  $\text{H}_3^+$  217.8 GHz line might offer an interesting method of detecting such an atmosphere.

## 6. Future prospects

It is now possible to use the  $\text{H}_3^+$  ion as a powerful diagnostic probe of interstellar molecular gas. Observations of the interstellar absorption spectra of  $\text{H}_3^+$ ,  $\text{H}_2$ , and CO can already be made with high-resolution spectrographs on telescopes of 2.1 m aperture toward a small sample of highly obscured stars. In 2001 the Phoenix spectrograph, with a resolving power  $R = \lambda/\delta\lambda \approx 10^5$ , will move to the 8 m Gemini South telescope. In 2003 the Cryogenic Infrared Echelle Spectrometer (CRIRES) with  $R \geq 10^5$  is scheduled to go into operation at the 8.2 m UT4 unit of the Very Large Telescope of the European Southern Observatory. With the increased light-gathering power of these large telescopes, direct observations of interstellar  $\text{H}_2$  and  $\text{H}_3^+$  will become routine and will be possible toward a much greater variety of stars within and behind molecular clouds.

Research in atomic and molecular astrophysics at Onsala Space Observatory is supported by the Swedish Natural Science Research Council and the Swedish National Space Board. A grant from the Chalmers Foundation is also gratefully acknowledged.

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