First observations with CONDOR, a 1.5 THz heterodyne receiver

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ABSTRACT

Context. The THz atmospheric “windows,” centered at roughly 1.3 and 1.5 THz, contain numerous spectral lines of astronomical importance, including three high-J CO lines, the [N II] line at 205 μm, and the ground transition of para-H₂D⁺. The CO lines are tracers of hot (several 100 K), dense gas; [N II] is a cooling line of diffuse, ionized gas; the H₂D⁺ line is a non-depleting tracer of cold (~20 K), dense gas.

Aims. As the THz lines benefit the study of diverse phenomena (from high-mass star-forming regions to the WIM to cold prestellar cores), we have built the CONDOR (CO N° Deuterium Observations Receiver) to further explore the THz windows by ground-based observations.

Methods. CONDOR was designed to be used at the Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX) and Stratospheric Observatory For Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA). CONDOR was installed at the APEX telescope and test observations were made to characterize the instrument.

Results. The combination of CONDOR on APEX successfully detected THz radiation from astronomical sources. CONDOR operated with typical Tmb = 1600 K and spectral Allan variance times of ∼30 s. CONDOR’s “first light” observations of CO 13-12 emission from the hot core Orion FIR4 (= OMC1 South) revealed a narrow line with Tmb ≈ 210 K and ∆V ≈ 5.4 km s⁻¹. A search for [N II] emission from the ionization front of the Orion Bar resulted in a non-detection.

Conclusions. The successful deployment of CONDOR at APEX demonstrates the potential for making observations at THz frequencies from ground-based facilities.

Key words. Instrumentation: detectors – Methods: observational – Submillimeter – Stars: formation – HII regions – Orion FIR4

1. Introduction

CONDOR (CO N° Deuterium Observations Receiver) is currently one of the very few instruments that can observe at Terahertz (THz) frequencies. The scarcity of astronomical data in the THz frequency regime (1-10 THz, 300-30μm) is due to the difficulty of building receivers for these frequencies, and – for ground-based observatories – also due to the poor transmission of the Earth’s atmosphere (e.g., Pardo et al. 2003).

Currently, the only astronomical, heterodyne data above 1 THz obtained from the ground are from the Heinrich Hertz Telescope (HHT) at 1.0 THz (Kawamura et al. 2002) and the Receiver Laboratory Telescope (RLT) at 1.0 and 1.5 THz (Marrone et al. 2004, 2006). In addition, [N II] emission (1.5 THz) was detected with moderate spectral resolution by the South Pole Imaging Fabry-Perot Interferometer (SPIFI) from the Antarctic Submillimeter Telescope and Remote Observatory (AST/RO) (Stacey 2005). There is also a 1.3 THz and 1.5 THz heterodyne receiver for APEX under construction at Chalmers University. The Kuiper Airborne Observatory (KAO) pioneered FIR spectroscopy, initially with incoherent instruments and moderate velocity resolution (e.g. Stutzki et al. 1988, Petuchowski et al. 1994) and later with a heterodyne receiver (e.g., Boreiko & Betz 1993). The Infrared Space Observatory (ISO) observed numerous lines in many galactic and extragalactic sources at low velocity resolution (e.g., van Dishoeck 2004 and references therein) and the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE) (e.g., Fixsen, Bennett, & Mather 1999) demonstrated the large extent of several of the important cooling lines of the ISM.

These observations have demonstrated that studies of many astronomical phenomena greatly benefit from data at THz frequencies. In order to explore the universe at THz frequencies and encouraged by both advances in mixer technology and the capabilities of the Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX) (Güsten et al. 2006) we have built CONDOR.

¹ This publication is based on data acquired with the Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX). APEX is a collaboration between the Max-Planck-Institut für Radioastronomie, the European Southern Observatory, and the Onsala Space Observatory.
2. The CONDOR Receiver

The realization of CONDOR faced two major technological challenges. First, local oscillators (LOs) that are stable and have sufficient power are difficult to build. Second, for these high frequencies, the most sensitive mixers are Hot Electron Bolometers (HEBs), but these are difficult to operate.

CONDOR has two exchangeable solid state LO’s. Radiometer Physics GmbH manufactured a LO consisting of a Gunn oscillator ($\nu \sim 125$ GHz) followed by a tripler and a quadrupler. The LO fabricated by Virginia Diode Inc. uses a YIG signal around 20 GHz that is doubled, amplified, and then multiplied by a factor of 36. Both deliver a signal of a few $\mu$W, enough to pump the mixer if little power is lost. A Martin-Puplett (MP) interferometer was used to overlay the signal with the LO beam, thus transmitting ~95% of the LO power.

We employed a superconducting HEB mixer designed and fabricated at the Universität zu Köln (Muñoz et al. 2004). The NbTiN HEB was fabricated on a thin membrane substrate, which is mounted in a waveguide mixer block. The mixer covers a broad radio frequency (RF) band of ~200 GHz and has no tuning elements. A theoretical analysis suggests a sideband ratio of about 1, as the HEB looks resistive to the RF input and has no high-Q matching. Measurements of the intermediate frequency (IF) bandwidth do not show a roll-off up to 2 GHz. However, currently, CONDOR’s IF bandwidth is limited to 1.1–1.8 GHz by a partially dysfunctional isolator placed between the HEB and the first amplifier to improve the impedance matching. Ultimately, CONDOR can be tuned to frequencies between 1.250–1.530 THz.

CONDOR is the first receiver to cool a HEB in a closed-cycle system, in order to enable easy operation at a remote site such as the Atacama desert. HEBs are very sensitive to temperature variations, as well as mechanical vibrations, which cause LO power fluctuations. Since a Pulse Tube Cooler has less mechanical vibration than, e.g., a Gifford McMahon refrigerator, it was chosen for CONDOR. To reduce the vibrations further, the mixer mount was decoupled with flexible straps. By inserting heat barriers, the short term (~1 min) thermal fluctuations could be reduced below 1 mK (Wieching et al. in prep.). A more detailed description of CONDOR and all laboratory tests will be given in Wiedner et al. (in prep).

3. CONDOR on APEX

Installation of CONDOR on APEX: In November 2005, CONDOR was installed in the Nasmyth-A cabin at APEX. CONDOR’s optics were aligned to APEX by tracing the THz beam with a cold load at various locations along the optical path. The APEX synthesizer, which includes the Doppler tracking correction, was used to lock CONDOR’s Phase Lock Loop (PLL). CONDOR’s IF was upconverted and analyzed by APEX’s Fast Fourier Transform Spectrometer (FFTS). The FFTS has 16383 channels covering 1 GHz bandwidth (Klein et al. 2006).

Performance at the telescope: The DSB receiver temperature across the IF band was ~1600 K (upper panel in Figure 1). The spectroscopic Allan variance was calculated from 40 neighbor-
The CONDOR spectrum of Orion FIR4 (Figure 2) is smoothed to a velocity resolution of 0.49 km s\(^{-1}\) and has an rms noise level of 22 K. The temperature scale is set by assuming a main beam efficiency equal to the coupling efficiency to Mars (\(\eta_c = 0.09\)). A single Gaussian function fitted to the emission line has a peak of \(T_{MB} = 210\) K, a FWHM of \(\Delta V = 5.4 \pm 0.3\) km s\(^{-1}\), and a central velocity of \(V_C = 9.0 \pm 0.1\) km s\(^{-1}\).

The width of the CO 13-12 line is less than the widths of mid-J CO lines observed from Orion FIR4, and there is little evidence for extended line wings (e.g. Rodríguez-Franco et al., 1999), suggesting that the CO 13-12 emission is more likely energized by radiation from the embedded protostar(s) than from interactions with outflows. In addition, the CO line is unlikely to stem from molecular formation in the post shock phase of a C-type shock, as the CO abundance hardly increases (Bergin, Neufeld & Melnick 1998)). The CO 13-12 line width matches the “quiescent” component (\(\Delta V = 4 - 6\) km s\(^{-1}\)) identified in CO 7-6 emission by Wilson et al. (2001) throughout the OrionKL/ORION FIR4 region, but the CO 7-6 line from an 18\arcsec beam centered at Orion FIR4 (see Figure 2) is wider and asymmetrical. The CO 9-8 emission from Orion FIR4 (8.5\arcsec beam) has a width of 8.5 km s\(^{-1}\) (see Figure 2, but Kawamura et al. (2002) identify this line as a blend of two components at \(V_C = 9.0\) and 6.0 km s\(^{-1}\). In the CO 13-12 spectrum, a second Gaussian at \(V_C = 6.0\) km s\(^{-1}\) could have a maximum of \(-10\%\) of the intensity of the component at \(V_C = 9.0\) km s\(^{-1}\).

To estimate the physical properties of the emitting region, we used the fluxes from multiple CO transitions as input to the escape probability code developed by Stutzki and Winnewisser (1985). The code models line fluxes as a function of density, kinetic temperature, and molecular column density. We assumed a width of 5 km s\(^{-1}\) for all lines, and for the (velocity-resolved) CO 7-6 and CO 9-8 spectra we used only the contribution to the flux (determined from a Gaussian fit) from a component at \(V_C = 9.0\) km s\(^{-1}\). Based on the maps of Wilson et al. (2001) and Marrone et al. (2004), the CO 7-6 and CO 9-8 emission fills the respective beams (see above). In addition, we assumed (initially) that the emission from the higher-J CO lines fills the 80\arcsec ISO beam (Sempere et al. 2000). The range of CO 13-12 fluxes shown in Figure 2 is set by the range of main beam efficiencies: the lower limit comes from using the coupling efficiency of the Moon (\(\eta_c = 0.40\)), the upper from that of Mars (\(\eta_c = 0.09\)).

Although the code indicated a range of possible fits, the most likely fit corresponded to a density of \(n(H_2) = 1.6 \pm 0.7 \times 10^7\) cm\(^{-3}\), a temperature of \(T_{kin} = 380 \pm 70\) K, and total CO column density of \(N(CO) = 6.4 \pm 2.0 \times 10^{17}\) cm\(^{-2}\). The assumption that the ISO beam is filled means that the value for \(n(H_2)\) is a minimum; in tests where we considered only partial filling of the ISO beam (\(f_{beam}\) down to 0.1), the best-fit density increased to \(n(H_2) \leq 5 \times 10^8\) cm\(^{-3}\). This range of values lies within the range \((10^5 - 10^6\) cm\(^{-3}\)) determined from the other CO line studies.

Our attempt to detect [N II] emission was unsuccessful. We observed a position along the ionization front of the Orion Bar (R.A.(J2000) = 5°35′22.44″, Dec(J2000) = −5°24′29.0″, offset −100′′, 0″) on 2005 November 29. The transmission at the mean source elevation (66°) was 18% at the [N II] line frequency.
CONDOR has been successfully deployed on the APEX telescope. CONDOR operated with typical $T_{\text{rec}} \sim 1600$ K and spectral Allan variance times of 30 s. CONDOR’s first light observations detected CO 13-12 emission from Orion FIR4. The CONDOR receiver was built by the Nachwuchsgruppe of the Sonderforschungsbereich 494, which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

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List of Objects
- Orion FIR on page 3
- S6 on page 3
- Orion Bar on page 3