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## **Oxidation of CH<sub>4</sub> by CO<sub>2</sub> in a dielectric barrier discharge**

L.M. Martini<sup>a</sup>, G. Dilecce<sup>a c d</sup>, G. Guella<sup>a</sup>, A. Maranzana<sup>b</sup>, G. Tonachini<sup>b</sup>, P. Tosi<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Trento, Via Sommarive 14, I-38123 Povo, Italy*

<sup>b</sup> *Dipartimento di Chimica, Università di Torino, Corso Massimo D'Azeglio 48, I-10125, Torino, Italy*

<sup>c</sup> *Istituto di metodologie inorganiche e dei plasmi - CNR - UOS di Bari, via Orabona,  
4 - 70125 Bari, Italy*

<sup>d</sup> *Istituto dei materiali per l'elettronica e il magnetismo - CNR - UOS di Trento, via alla cascata 56 c,  
I-38123 Povo, Italy*

\* *Corresponding author. +39 0461 281557 email: paolo.tosi@unitn.it*

### **Abstract**

In the plasma dry reforming, CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> are dissociated by electron collisions producing fragments that in turn react to form new molecules. While the production of CO, H<sub>2</sub>, and small hydrocarbons has been investigated extensively, much less is known about the plasma synthesis of oxygenated molecules, which is the target of the present work. In addition to experimental results, gas phase reactions for the production of acetic, formic and propanoic acid were investigated by DFT calculations.

keywords: dry reforming; dielectric barrier discharge; CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation; CO<sub>2</sub>; TST

## 1. Introduction

The conversion of CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> to useful chemicals, although not a feasible route for an effective reduction of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, is a central topic in current research on renewable and sustainable energy [1]. Beyond established methods, non thermal plasmas (NTP) have been explored for their capability to create, at low temperature, highly reactive species, which can activate very stable molecules as methane and carbon dioxide. Depending on the particular experimental set-up and the specific operational features, different chemicals are produced into the discharge in addition to the most abundant products CO and H<sub>2</sub>: gaseous hydrocarbons [2,3,4] liquid hydrocarbons [5] and oxygenates [6,7]. Despite some significant efforts [8,9], little is known so far about both the reaction mechanisms and the possibility of controlling the product selectivity. Progress was recently made in understanding the synergistic effect of NTP and heterogeneous catalysis: although the use of plasma in combination with solid catalysts has shown to enhance the conversion efficiency [10], in the present work we have chosen to avoid the use of catalysts, trying to get some insights on the pure plasma-synthesis of oxygenates. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the fundamental processes involved, rather than aiming to the achievement of better yield. We show that a partial control of the product selectivity can be achieved by modulating the electrical power delivered to the discharge, via a variable duty-cycle square wave (the duty cycle is defined as  $(T_{on}/T) \times 100$ , see figure 2). In such a way, we could control the residence time of the reactants into the discharge of a plug-flow reactor without changing the gas flux. By starting with the same molar amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>, the main oxygenates observed (listed according to their relative abundance) are methanol CH<sub>3</sub>OH, acetic acid CH<sub>3</sub>COOH, formic acid HCOOH, ethanol CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>OH, propanoic acid CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>COOH, and butanoic acid CH<sub>3</sub>(CH<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub>COOH. Higher yields of the heavier acids

(propanoic and butanoic) are obtained when the duration of the discharge phase is increased, which suggests a possible way to control the product selectivity. To offer an interpretation of the experimental findings, the reactions have been followed by investigating the stable structures that correspond to energy minima, and the transition structures (TS) which connect them.

## 2. Experimental

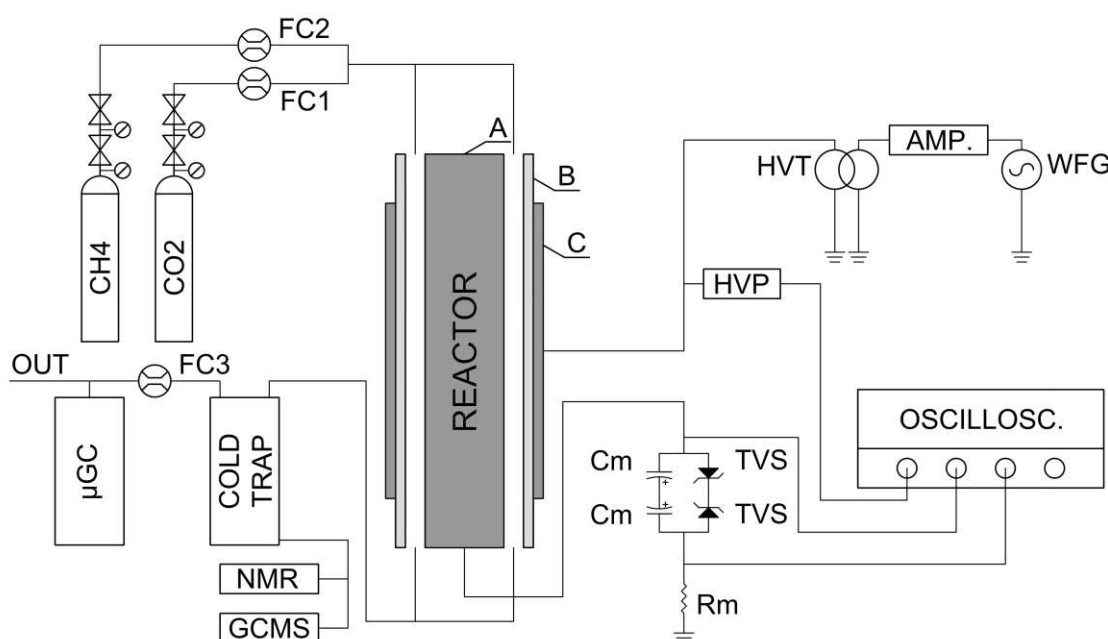


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the experimental set-up. WFG waveform generator; HVT high voltage transformer; HVP high voltage probe;  $C_m$  and  $R_m$  measurement capacitors and resistors, respectively; TVS transient suppressor voltage diode; FC1, FC2 mass flow controller; FC3 mass flow meter.

Figure 1 shows a diagram of the plasma reactor. The feed gases  $\text{CH}_4$  and  $\text{CO}_2$  (mixing ratio =1) was treated in a DBD reactor working at atmospheric pressure. It consists of a quartz tube (B, internal diameter 10 mm, external diameter 13 mm), externally coated with silver paint that acts as high voltage electrode (C), containing a concentric stainless steel cylinder (A, outer diameter 8 mm) that acts as grounded electrode. The reactor length is 170 mm. The gas mixture flows in the annular gap between the outer quartz tube (B) and the grounded electrode (A).  $\text{CH}_4$  and  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rates are both fixed at 0.1 SLM by mass

flow controllers FC1 and FC2, which implies a flow time between the electrodes of about 1.4 s. A trap cooled at approximately  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  by ice and salted water is placed downstream the reactor to collect liquid products. Volatile products were analyzed by sampling the exhausts downstream the trap by a micro Gas Chromatograph mGC (Agilent 3000). Liquid compounds condensed into the cold trap were diluted in  $\text{C}_3\text{D}_6\text{O}$  or  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  and quantitatively analyzed both by Gas Chromatography Mass Spectrometry GC-MS (Thermo-Finningan Trace GC - DSQ, DB-WAX Agilent J&W GC columns) and NMR (Avance 400 Bruker).

The DBD power supply is composed of a low voltage waveform generator (WFG, Agilent 33220A) coupled to a bridged class-D audio amplifier (Hypex UCD2k OEM). The amplifier is connected to a step-up high voltage transformer (Amp-Line AI-T1000.7-P100) operating in the range from 6 kHz to 11 kHz. The sinusoidal voltage at 8 kHz is modulated by a square wave of variable duty cycle and period  $t=1.12$  s, see figure 2. The voltage applied to the electrodes is  $17.5 \text{ kV}_{\text{pp}}$  and is monitored by a high voltage AC probe (Tektronix P6015A). The internal electrode is connected to ground via a measurement circuit, made by an anti-series of tantalum capacitors  $C_m$  ( $1 \mu\text{F}$ ) connected in parallel with an anti-series of zener unidirectional diodes, which act as overvoltage protection. The parallel is then connected in series with a  $10 \Omega$  resistor,  $R_m$ . Electrical signals are digitalized by a four channels oscilloscope (Agilent Infiniium 54831B) and used to estimate the power delivered to the discharge.

The electrical power is estimated by the Falkenstein-Coogan reformulation of the Manley's equation [11,12]. The power value was  $47 \pm 6$  W (duty cycle 100%). As it is shown in figure 3, the discharge phase, occurring each half cycle, consists of several spatially separated discharge filaments. As a consequence only the fraction of the gas flow that is located into the filament is treated by the plasma. By changing the duty cycle we basically

vary the total number of micro discharges and therefore the specific energy deposition in the system.

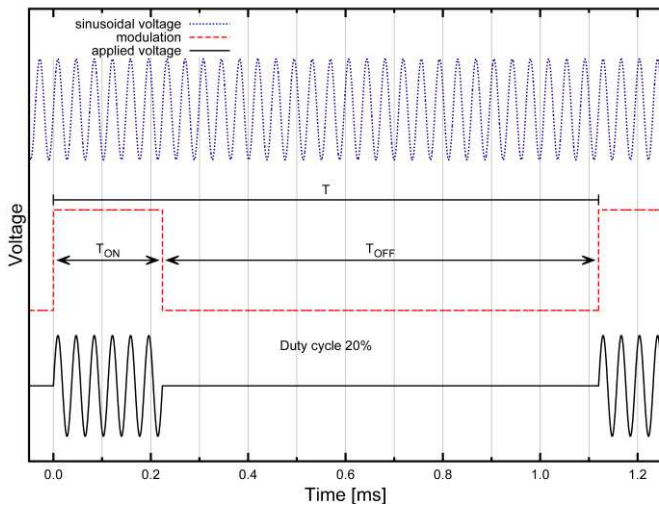


Figure 2: Modulation of the applied voltage by a square wave. The duty cycle is defined as  $(T_{on}/T) \times 100$

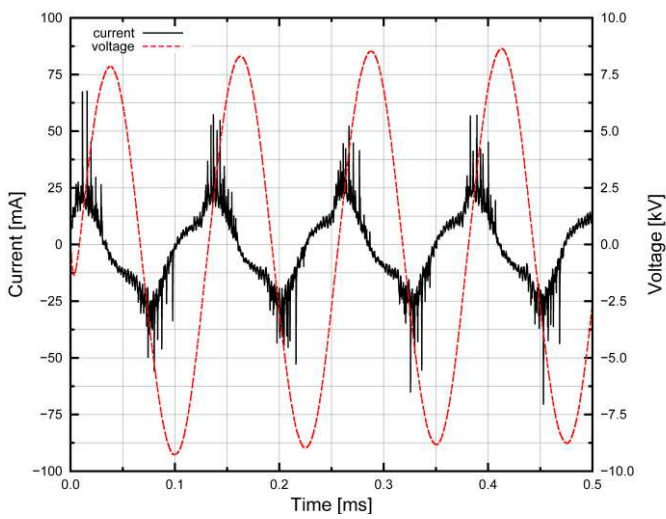


Figure 3: Plot of current and voltage versus time in our DBD

### 3. Computational methods

The attempt to offer an interpretation of the experimental results was conducted by carrying out quantum mechanical calculations, within the Density Functional Theory,[13] with the functional M06-2X.[14,15,16,17] Dunning's cc-pVTZ basis set was used.[18] The energy hypersurface was explored by gradient procedures.[19,20,21,22,23] This computational level, conventionally labelled as DFT(M06-2X)/cc-pVTZ, has been adopted for geometry optimizations and the subsequent vibrational analyses and thermochemistry assessments. For structures with diradicaloid character (two unpaired electrons in quasi-degenerate orbitals), the singlet energies were corrected for spin contamination by the triplet, by using a formula suggested by Yamaguchi.[24,25] The (corrected, if necessary) energies  $E$  were used in conjunction with the vibrational analysis data to evaluate the activation Gibbs free energies ( $\Delta G^\ddagger$  at 400K), and zero-point vibrational energies ( $E_{\text{ZPE}}$ ) [26]. When a first order saddle point, corresponding to a transition structure (TS), was present on the energy hypersurface, rate constants were estimated by using the Eyring equation within the Transition State Theory approximation [27]. When no TS on the energy hypersurface could be found (radical coupling) only an all-downhill path to the intermediate product was present. The  $G$  surface was then probed, looking for a possible maximum, by drawing  $G$  profiles along a path defined by series of constrained optimizations on the  $E$  surface, at fixed values of the distance  $R$  between the two moieties. Then, a vibrational analysis was performed by projecting out the vibrational frequency corresponding to the reaction coordinate [28].  $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}$  energy differences with respect to the reactants are reported in figures 6-8, while some computed  $G$  barriers are reported in the text, on the basis of which a rough estimate of the order of magnitude of the kinetic constants can be attempted (all energetics in  $\text{kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$  throughout the paper). All calculations were carried out by using the GAUSSIAN 09 program [29].



Geometrical parameters and total energies of reactants, products and transition structures are reported in the Supplementary Material.

#### 4. Results and discussion

The percentage composition of the gaseous products detected on-line by the mGC indicates CO (48%) and H<sub>2</sub> (41%) as the more abundant species, followed by C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> (8.5%), C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>8</sub> (1.5%) and traces (<1%) of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>2</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>. This trend appears to be in general agreement with values reported in literature [7, 30]. The percentage of the gaseous products does not change with the duty cycle, while the total yield increases. The CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> conversions vary linearly from about 2% at duty cycle 20 up to 12% and 6%, respectively, at duty cycle 100.

The mass balance indicates that, in addition to light gaseous species, about 2% (by weight) of the products condense into the cold trap, and are subsequently analyzed by GC-MS and NMR analysis. Results are shown in figures 4 and 5 as a function of the duty cycle of the discharge. Several oxidized products are formed into the discharge. NMR analysis carried out in D<sub>2</sub>O (residual signal at  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 4.82$  ppm) shows the presence of methanol ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 3.43$  ppm, singlet), ethanol ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 3.73$  ppm, quartet;  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 1.26$  ppm, triplet), formic, ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 8.34$  ppm, singlet), acetic ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 2.17$  ppm, singlet), propanoic ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 2.47$  ppm, quartet;  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 1.17$  ppm, triplet) and butanoic acid ( $\delta_{\text{H}} = 2.42$  triplet;  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 1.67$  ppm, sextet;  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 0.98$  ppm, triplet). Moreover, a strong singlet signal at  $\delta_{\text{H}} = 4.90$  ppm can be attributed to  $-\text{O}-\text{CH}_2-\text{O}-$  repeating unit of polyoxymethylene glycols. The origin of the latter relies on the plasma production of formic aldehyde which promptly reacts with water/methanol (in gas and/or liquid phase) leading to a complex mixture of polyoxymethylene glycols such as  $\text{RO}(-\text{CH}_2-\text{O})_n-\text{OR}'$  (R,R' = H and/or CH<sub>3</sub>).

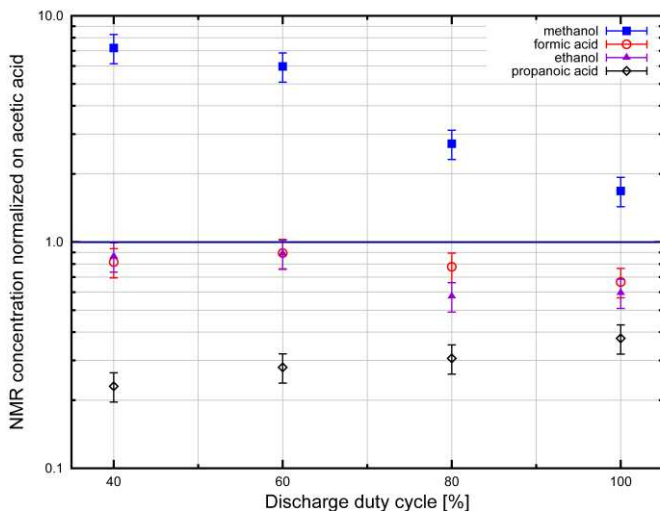


Figure 4: Relative concentration of different oxygenates (normalized on that of acetic acid, whose concentration is assumed to be equal to 1) as a function of the discharge duty cycle, as measured by NMR

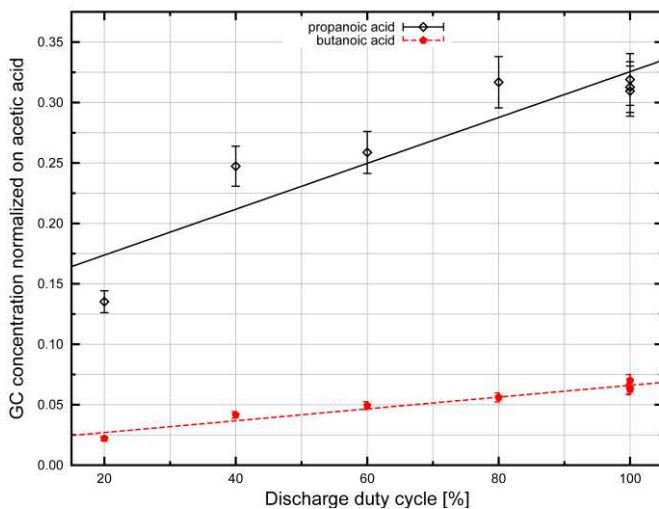


Figure 5: Concentration of different acids (normalized on that of acetic acid) as a function of the discharge duty cycle as measured by GC-MS

It is clear that by increasing the duty cycle of the discharge, i.e. the extent of the sinusoidal excitation, relative concentrations (normalized on that of acetic acid) of  $C_3$  and  $C_4$  compounds increase, while those of  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  compounds decrease. This result is in line with previous observations that at a constant discharge power, a low feed flow rate leads to produce higher hydrocarbons [10]. It is worth noting that while the selectivity depends on the product branching ratio, we have evidence that both terms of the ratio increase with the duty cycle. Thus the selectivity trend we are here discussing is not simply due to a decrease of acetic acid production. All together these findings support the idea that the

product selectivity can be switched from simple to more complex molecules by controlling the exposure of the species to the discharge phase, and thus the energy deposited in the system. To rationalize experimental findings, we have theoretically investigated the gas-phase formation of acetic, formic and propanoic acid, in particular estimating the relevant kinetic constants. For some of them a comparison of our results with experimental data is possible, for others these are not available. Electron impact processes on CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> mainly produce CH<sub>3</sub>, H, CO and O. These species initiate a complex kinetic chain eventually resulting in the observed products. Hereafter we suggest possible pathways to the formation of acids.

#### 4.1 Acetic acid formation

Three mechanisms could in principle lead to the acetic acid. They are shown in figure 6. The first one is the addition of carbon monoxide to a methyl radical, as it was already proposed [31]. The process (figure 6a) is characterized by a small barrier ( $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}^{\ddagger} = 23.8 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ) and leads to the acetyl radical. A barrierless OH addition on the acetyl radical forms the acetic acid. The reaction between CH<sub>3</sub> and CO is well known in literature. Theoretical [32] and experimental [33] studies reported the rate coefficients for a large range of temperatures. At 400K the experimental rate is about  $1.5 \times 10^{-16} \text{ molec}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^3$  [34], which is in satisfactory agreement with our theoretical value  $5.2 \times 10^{-15} \text{ molec}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^3$  (calculated at the same temperature), once the accuracy attainable at our computational level is accounted for. It has to be stressed that the aim of this study is not to give quantitative estimates or reproduce accurately experimental rate constants, for which more accurate theoretical methods are mandatory, but to understand the possible pathways leading to the acids.

The acid could form also by a hydrogen abstraction from CH<sub>4</sub>, operated by acetoxyl, or by a barrierless addition of H to acetoxyl CH<sub>3</sub>CO<sub>2</sub> (figure 6b). However, acetoxyl radical is not

stable with respect to the reactants  $\text{CH}_3 + \text{CO}_2$ , with a high formation barrier ( $80.3 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ).

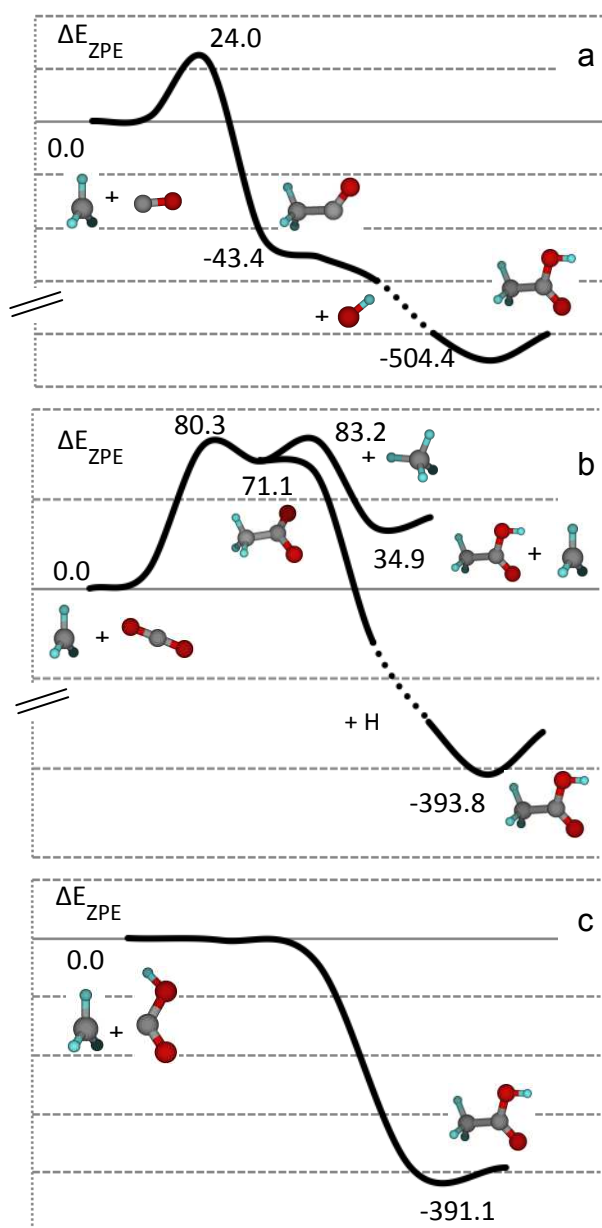


Figure 6. Acetic acid formation mechanisms: (a) methyl radical + CO, followed by HO addition; (b) methyl radical +  $\text{CO}_2$ , followed by H abstraction from  $\text{CH}_4$ , or H addition; (c) Methyl radical + HO-C=O radical.  $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}$  energy differences in  $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ , with respect to the reactants.

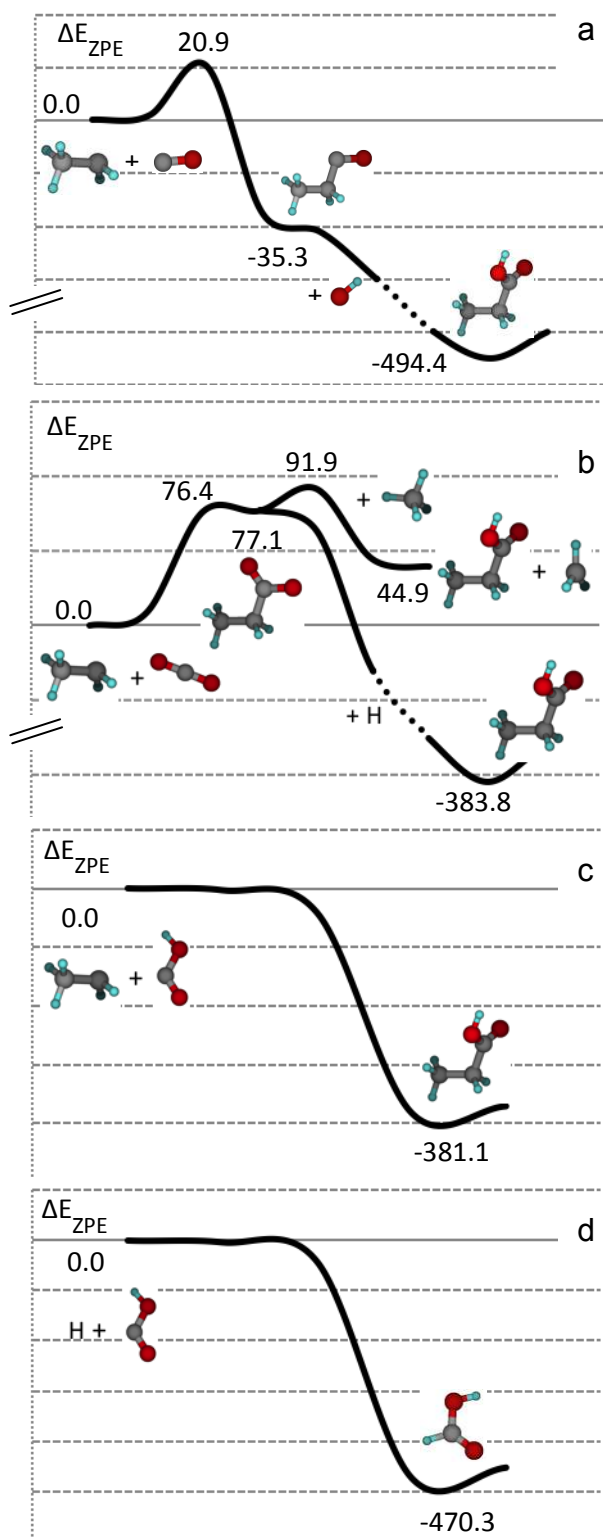
A further pathway leading to acetic acid is the coupling reaction between methyl and carboxyl radicals (figure 6c), which occurs without any barrier on the potential energy

surface. To the best of our knowledge, no rate constant estimation is available for this reaction. The rate constant estimation is laborious, since no maximum along the energy profile is present, and a maximum can be found only along the approximate free energy profile itself. A series of constrained optimizations on the COOH + CH<sub>3</sub> system was carried out, in which the energy was minimized in correspondence of fixed values of the inter-carbon distance R between the two moieties. At each point the energy was corrected for spin contamination (see Method section). G was estimated by projecting out the imaginary frequency related to the relative motion along R. The G profile so obtained has a maximum for the rather large value R = 4.8 Å. The best estimate of the free energy barrier height results to be 23.8 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> (with respect to the reactants), and the corresponding rate constant is consequently roughly estimated of the order of 10<sup>-10</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> s<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4.2 Propanoic and formic acid formation

The mechanisms for propanoic acid formation in figure 7 are similar to those described above for acetic acid. The barriers for intermediate and product formations and their stabilities are similar to those shown for acetic acid: the differences are within 10 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>. CO addition to the ethyl radical (figure 7a) has been experimentally studied [35,36] and the reported rate constant at 400 K is 5.9×10<sup>-16</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup> [36], which is in good agreement with our theoretical estimate of 3.0×10<sup>-16</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>. The addition of CO<sub>2</sub> is clearly unfavourable, as can be seen in figure 7b.

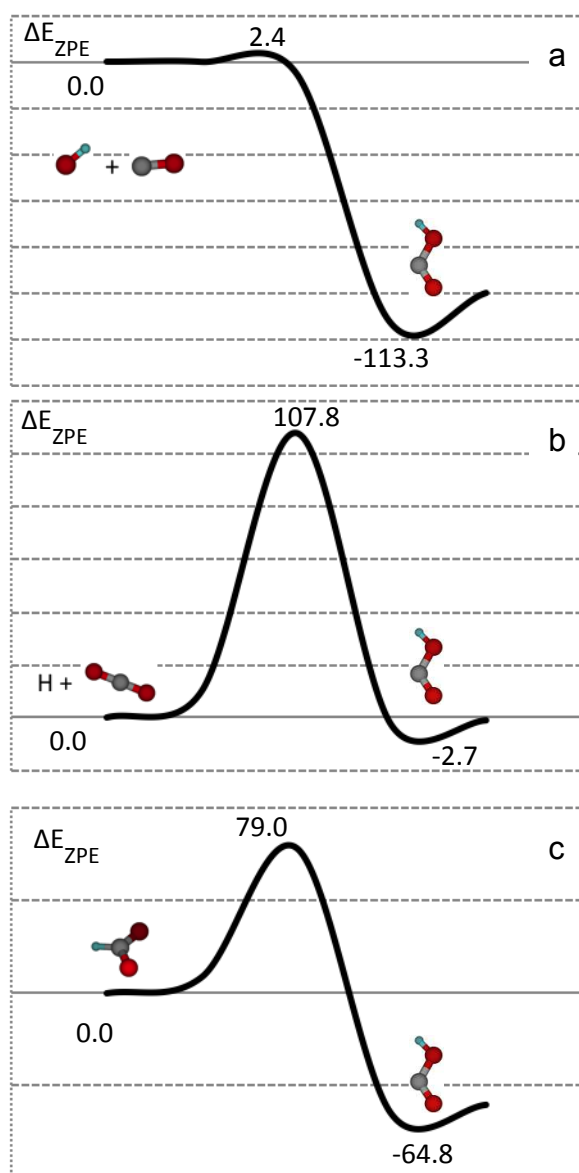
The C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub> + COOH (figure 7c) rate constant was estimated as described in the preceding paragraph. The maximum on the free energy surface was found at R = 4.8 Å. The free energy barrier, with respect to C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub> and COOH, is 28.2 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> and the rate constant is therefore roughly estimated of the order of 10<sup>-10</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>.



**Figure 7.** Propanoic and formic acid formation mechanisms: (a) ethyl radical + CO, followed by HO addition; (b) ethyl radical +  $\text{CO}_2$ , followed by H abstraction from  $\text{CH}_4$ , or H addition; (c) ethyl radical +  $\text{HO-C=O}$  radical; (d) H +  $\text{HO-C=O}$  radical coupling.  $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}$  energy differences in  $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ , with respect to the reactants.

Formic acid (figure 7d) could be obtained by radical coupling between H and carboxyl radicals. In this case, the free energy barrier is 23.4 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> (R = 3.7 Å), and the rate is roughly estimated at 400 K of the order of 10<sup>-10</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>.

### 4.3 Carboxyl radical formation



**Figure 8.** COOH radical formation: (a) HO radical + CO; (b) H + CO<sub>2</sub>; (c) COOH isomerization.  $\Delta E_{\text{ZPE}}$  energy differences in kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>, with respect to the reactants.

The COOH radical seems to play a role on the acid formations, so it is important to understand how it could form. Of the three mechanisms shown in figure 8, the first one, CO + OH addition, shows the minimum barrier, 2.4 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> only, much lower than the barriers for the other two processes: H addition to CO<sub>2</sub> requires overcoming a barrier of ca. 108 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>, whereas the barrier for the isomerisation formyl radical - carboxyl radical is ca. 79 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>.

The CO + OH reaction has been theoretically extensively studied [37,38,39,40,41,42]. Our estimation for the carboxyl radical rate constant (at 400 K) is 1.5×10<sup>-12</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>, very similar to the rate coefficient at high pressure limit reported by Klippenstein et al. (1.2×10<sup>-12</sup> molec<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>) [41]. Our barrier (2.4 kJ mol<sup>-1</sup>) comes out to be identical to that computed at CCSD(T)/cc-pVTZ by Yu et al. [42].

Reporting the reaction rates is not sufficient to identify the dominant mechanism for the formation of any of the oxygenates. As an example, by assuming a second order rate law, the rate of reaction for a radical-radical process becomes comparable with that of a radical-molecule process if the ratio between their rate constants is inversely proportional to the ratio between the respective densities. Consider reactions c and b in figure 6: an estimate of the ratio  $k_c/k_b$  gives 10<sup>12</sup> and therefore their respective contributions to the production of acetic acid are comparable if the [COOH]/[CO<sub>2</sub>] ratio is around 10<sup>-12</sup>. Thus to resolve this issue it is necessary to know the radical concentrations. While progress is being made, mainly based on optical spectroscopy techniques [43], some hints come from a recent computational study [30] where the ratio between overall radical and molecular densities is estimated to be ≈10<sup>-4</sup>. As a consequence, the rate of reaction in figure 6c becomes comparable with that of reaction in figure 6b if the concentration of COOH is 10<sup>-8</sup> that of the radicals. This specific example suggests that reactions between radicals may still play a role, even with very small reactant concentrations.



No matter what reactions give the main contributions, since acetic and propanoic acids are formed from  $\text{CH}_3$  and  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5$  respectively (see reactions in figures 6 and 7), the ratio of propanoic to acetic acid is function of the ratio of  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5$  to  $\text{CH}_3$ . However  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5$  is produced starting from  $\text{CH}_3 + \text{CH}_3$  and thus depends on  $[\text{CH}_3]^2$ . Eventually the ratio  $[\text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2\text{COOH}]/[\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}]$  is a function of  $[\text{CH}_3]$ . This fact qualitatively explains the increase of  $\text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2\text{COOH}$  with respect to  $\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}$  as a function of the discharge duty cycle, as increasing the duty cycle involves the increase of  $[\text{CH}_3]$  due to electron dissociation of  $\text{CH}_4$ .

## Conclusions

In recent years, the interest in the process of dry reforming by plasma techniques has grown. While the production of syngas ( $\text{H}_2$  and  $\text{CO}$ ) is relatively well understood, much less is known about the synthesis of oxygenates. In the present work we report on the formation of various acids in a DBD of  $\text{CH}_4$  and  $\text{CO}_2$  at atmospheric pressure. The branching ratio of the oxygenates changes depending on the duty cycle of the discharge: it is observed that by increasing the duty cycle the ratio of propanoic-butanoic acids to acetic acid increases. In order to rationalize the experimental results, we have theoretically investigated possible mechanisms for the synthesis of acetic, formic and propanoic acids, suggesting some significant reactions and their rate constants. The selectivity of oxygenated products can be qualitatively explained by the dependence of the  $\text{CH}_3$  production on the energy deposited in the system, via variation of the discharge duty cycle.

## Acknowledgements

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