SAW Synthesis With IDTs Array and the Inverse Filter: Toward a Versatile SAW Toolbox for Microfluidics and Biological Applications

Antoine Riaud, Michael Baudoin, Jean-Louis Thomas, and Olivier Bou Matar

Abstract—Surface acoustic waves (SAWs) are versatile tools to manipulate fluids at small scales for microfluidics and biological applications. A nonexhaustive list of operations that can be performed with SAW includes sessile droplet displacement, atomization, division, and merging but also the actuation of fluids embedded in microchannels or the manipulation of suspended particles. However, each of these operations requires a specific design of the wave generation system, the so-called interdigitated transducers (IDTs). Depending on the application, it might indeed be necessary to generate focused or plane, propagating or standing, and aligned or shifted waves. Furthermore, the possibilities offered by more complex wave fields such as acoustical vortices for particle tweezing and liquid twisting cannot be explored with classical IDTs. In this paper, we show that the inverse filter technique coupled with an IDTs array enables us to synthesize all classical wave fields used in microfluidics and biological applications with a single multifunctional platform. It also enables us to generate swirling SAWs, whose potential for the on-chip synthesis of tailored acoustical vortices has been demonstrated lately. The possibilities offered by this platform are illustrated by performing many operations successively on sessile droplets with the same system.

Index Terms—Acoustofluidics, inverse filter, microfluidics, surface acoustic wave (SAW).

I. INTRODUCTION

S INCE the seminal work of Shiokawa *et al.* in 1989 on the atomization of droplets [1], the potential of surface acoustic waves (SAWs) for fluid actuation at microscale has been widely explored in the literature: progressive waves synthesized by straight interdigitated transducers (IDTs) enable sessile droplets displacement [2]–[5] or fluid pumping in a microchannel [6], [7]. Acoustic fields generated by pairs of IDTs can be combined to synthesize stationary waves and manipulate collectively particles [8]–[15], or cells [10], [16]–[21] in droplets or embedded in a

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microfluidic chamber. Focused waves synthesized by concentric IDTs are suitable for the fusion of droplets [22] or for high-power applications such as droplet atomization [23]. Finally, more complex operations such as mixing at low Reynolds number through chaotic advection or droplet division may require some fancy combination of plane waves with either rotating [24] or shifted [25] wavefronts. So far, it has thus been demonstrated that SAWs enable to perform many basic operations required in microfluidics and biological applications [26], [27].

Nevertheless, each of these operations requires a specific optimized design, which is not compatible with a multifunctional actuation platform required for the development of many labs-on-chips. One strategy developed recently to perform several operations with a single transducer is to use phononic crystal superstrates to shape the acoustic field [28], [29]. Nevertheless, only a limited number of operations can be obtained with these systems. Moreover, neither classical IDTs nor superstrates allow the synthesis of swirling SAWs [30] envisioned for the on-chip synthesis of tailored acoustical vortices [31] and consequently, 3-D single particle manipulation [32] and vorticity control [33]. To overcome these shortcomings, we developed an array of 32 optimized IDTs driven by a programmable electronics that enables independent control of each transducer. To synthesize the targeted wave field, the inverse filter technique [34] originally developed for bulk waves has been adapted for SAWs [30]. In this paper, we show that it is possible to synthesize plane waves in different directions, focused waves with the focal point located at an arbitrary position, and swirling SAWs with the same device. The potential of this system is illustrated on sessile droplets by showing successively droplet controlled displacement, division, fusion, and nebulization with the same platform.

II. METHODS

Rayleigh SAWs (R-SAWs) are synthesized at the surface of an X-cut, 1.05-mm thick, niobate lithium (LiNb03) piezoelectric substrate by an array of 32 unidirectional IDTs (SPUDT IDTs) (see Fig. 1). The X-cut was chosen for its good electromechanical coefficients along the z ($K^2 = 5,9\%$) and y ($K^2 = 3,1\%$) directions and its weaker anisotropy compared with the 128° Y-cut generally used for unidirectional IDTs. The IDTs array (IDTA) was fabricated using a liftoff process.

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Fig. 1. Optimized array of 32 interdigitated unidirectional transducers used for the synthesis of various SAW-fields (focused, plane, swirling) and the manipulation (displacement, division, fusion, atomization) of droplets. The central black zone is a gold layer used as a mirror for the measurement of the transducer response with the Michelson interferometer. The straight lines around the system correspond to the alignment marks used to keep track of the orientation of the lithium niobate crystal along the fabrication process.

- 1) The substrate is coated with an AZ15-10 photoresist sacrificial layer patterned with the conventional photolithography technique.
- A titanium (Ti) layer of 20 nm and a gold (Au) layer of 200 nm are deposited by evaporation (titanium is used for its good adherence on LiNbO3 and gold for its good electrical conductivity).
- 3) The sacrificial layer is washed out by a developer.

The IDTA has been designed for a working frequency of 11.9 MHz, with a wavelength adapted to each wave propagation direction of the anisotropic LiNbO3 crystal. Compared with [30], the design has been further optimized by placing the IDTs on a slowness curve and slightly curving the IDTs to promote diffraction. Each curved IDT is designed as a truncated annular transducer described in [35]. The diffraction pattern of the transducers can be estimated from the (far-field) Green function provided in [35]. We proceeded iteratively to find the optimal aperture of the IDT. We placed each IDT along the wave surface of the substrate to compensate for beam stirring. These two modifications improve the illumination by each transducer of the central zone (radius of 5 mm) of the substrate that we call the acoustical scene and where microfluidic operations are performed. An optimal spatial coverage is indeed essential for the synthesis of a wide variety of acoustic wave fields.

Each of the IDTs is excited independently with a dedicated programmable electronics that enables the synthesis of wave packets at carrying frequencies up to 12 MHz. Impedance matching for each transducers was achieved with external electronic components (inductances). Finally, the inverse filter method [34] was used to determine the optimal input signal for each IDT to synthesize a targeted wave field. Indeed, the inverse filter is a very general method to synthesize a specific wave field in a linear medium given a set of independent programmable sources. This process can be basically decomposed into three distinct stages. First, the signal emitted by each transducer (impulse response) is measured in the acoustics scene. In practice, this response is recorded in a number of control points whose distance cannot exceed $\lambda/2$ according to the Nyquist-Shannon sampling principle. This allows to define, in the Fourier space, a transfer matrix $H_{ii}(\omega)$ (called the propagation operator) between the Fourier transform of the entrance signal emitted by transducer j, $E_i(\omega)$, and the response signal at control point i, $S_i(\omega)$: $S_i = H_{ij}E_j$ (with Einstein notations). In the present experiments, the surface vibrations of the substrate at control point *i* (typically of the order of a few nanometers) are measured by a home-made polarized Michelson interferometer whose principle is given in [30]. Then, the targeted output signal S is defined and the transfer matrix H is inverted to compute the optimal input signal $E = H^{-1}S$. Finally, the optimal signal is synthesized by each transducer. If $e_i(t)$, $s_i(t)$, and $h_{ii}(t)$ are the inverse Fourier transforms of $E_i(\omega)$, $S_i(\omega)$, and $H_{ij}(\omega)$, it is worth noting that the output time signal s(t) is the convolution product of $h_{ij}(t)$ and $e_j(t)$

$$s_i(t) = h_{ij}(t) * e_j(t).$$

While the inverse filter method is simple in principle, some complexity arises when implementing it. Indeed, the propagation operator is generally ill-conditioned since small errors in the measurements produce very large errors in the reconstructed results. Then, the number of control points is not necessarily the same as the number of sources (transducers) and thus the propagation operator is not necessarily a square matrix. So, the pseudoinverse of the propagation operator is obtained through singular value decomposition. Finally, the inverse filter technique had been initially developed to generate acoustical wave fields in 3-D media. In this case, the target field is a surface and has a smaller dimensionality (2-D) than the propagative medium (3-D), whereas for SAWs, the target field has the same dimensionality as the propagative medium (both 2-D). So the control points are not independent and the wave field must fulfill the dispersion relation. This requires some refinements in the method (see [30]).

To enable droplet manipulation, the central zone was treated with a hydrophobic self-assembled monolayer [36]. Otherwise, the droplet would spread on the gold layer at the center of the niobate lithium substrate, since it is a perfect wetting medium. Nevertheless, the adherence of alkane-thiol molecules on the central gold layer was not optimal leading to a contact angle below 90° ($\theta \approx 70^{\circ}$), large hysteresis, and thus pinning of the contact line. Despite these bad properties of the hydrophobic layer, we nevertheless succeeded to control the drop displacement with the IDTA as we will see in the following section. The droplet dynamics was recorded with a Pointgrey Flea 3 camera on an MZ1 Viewsolution macroscope at 75 frames/s. A sketch of the experimental setup is shown in Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Sketch of the experimental setup used for the synthesis of various wave fields and the actuation of droplets.



Fig. 3. (a) and (b) Phase of plane progressive SAWs synthesized with the IDTA in two different directions. The maximum peak-to-peak amplitude in the two directions are, respectively, 6 and 10 nm.

III. RESULTS

A. Complex Wave Fields Synthesis

To demonstrate the potential of the SAW toolbox for fluid sample actuation, we first investigated the possibilities offered by the IDTA and the inverse filter technique to synthesize the main SAW-fields used in the literature: plane, focalized, and swirling SAWs.

While our setup is optimized for the synthesis of focalized waves and swirling SAWs (since the IDTs are disposed radially around the slowness curve), we have shown that it is possible to synthesize waves with plane wavefronts in the desired direction with peak-to-peak amplitudes larger than 5.5 nm, that is to say, well above the values classically used for droplets displacement [4], [5]. We provide in Fig. 3 two examples of plane progressive waves synthesized in different directions. These results show that despite the curvature of the IDTs, the wavefront aberration is weak in the acoustical scene and is compensated by the inverse filter.

Then, we synthesized focalized waves with different positions of the focal point in the acoustical scene and apodization around a preferential direction ϕ_o (see Fig. 4). It is important to note that contrary to previous attempts to synthesize focalized waves for microfluidic applications with concentric IDTs [26], the anisotropy of the piezoelectric medium

Focalized anisotropic SAWs



Fig. 4. (a) and (b) Phase and amplitude of focalized propagative anisotropic SAWs converging at two different focal points. The maximum peak-to-peak amplitude for the two different focal points are, respectively, 60 and 100 nm. Colorbar: peak-to-peak amplitude $\times 10^{-2}$ nm.

is considered here in the definition of the targeted wave field

$$\mathcal{F}(r,\theta) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_{-\pi}^{\pi} h(\phi - \phi_0, \sigma) e^{ik_r(\phi)r\cos(\phi - \theta)} d\phi$$

with

$$h(\phi - \phi_0, \sigma) = \exp\left[-\frac{\|\phi - \phi_0\|^2}{4\pi^2 \sigma^2}\right]$$

 (r, θ) the polar coordinates, $k_r(\phi) = \omega/c_R(\phi)$, the radial wave vector, $c_R(\phi)$, the phase speed of R-SAWs in the ϕ direction (defining the anisotropy of the medium, σ the aperture (here $\sigma^2 = 0.2$) and the symbol \parallel denotes the shorter angular distance [which can be computed as follows $\|\phi - \phi_0\| = \arccos(\cos(\phi - \phi_0))]$. The function *h* then represents an apodization over an aperture σ .

Consideration of the anisotropy is indeed essential to ensure real focalization of the acoustic wave. Excellent results are obtained (see Fig. 4) with the maximum normal amplitude of the R-SAW of up to 100 nm. Naturally, small discrepancies are observed compared with the targeted wave field (the phase does not exactly follow the slowness curve) owing 1) to the finite numbers of transducers used for the field synthesis and 2) to the finite number of measurement points obtained with the interferometer and used for the reconstruction of the experimental acoustic field.

Finally, anisotropic swirling SAWs of the topological order 0 and 2 have been synthesized with the new transducers array presented in this paper (see Fig. 5). The targeted wave field is defined according to the formula introduced in [30]

$$\mathcal{W}_l(r,\theta) = \frac{1}{2\pi i^l} \int_{-\pi}^{+\pi} e^{il\phi + ik_r(\phi)r\cos(\phi-\theta)} d\phi \qquad (1)$$



Fig. 5. (a) and (b) Phase and amplitude of anisotropic swirling SAWs of topological order 0 and 2. The maximum peak-to-peak amplitude of the \mathcal{W}_0 and \mathcal{W}_2 swirling SAWs are, respectively, 108 and 80 nm. Colorbar: peak-to-peak amplitude $\times 10^{-2}$ nm.

with l as the topological order of the swirling SAW. It is interesting to note that swirling SAWs of order 0 are nothing but focalized waves with no angular apodization. These waves are not appropriate for particle tweezing or vorticity control since they do not have phase singularity (and thus dark spot) at their center to trap particles and they do not carry angular momentum contrary to higher order swirling SAWs. Nevertheless, they can be of much practical use for applications where high intensity is required at the focal point.

B. Droplet Manipulation With the Platform

These specific wave fields have been used to perform operations on water droplets of initial volume 2 μ l. Since it is not possible to synthesize continuous wave fields with the programmable electronics, some burst of duration 25 μ s, carrying frequency 11.9 MHz and variable repetition rates of a few kilohertz have been used for droplet actuation (for each operation, the exact sequence used for actuation is described in the corresponding figure). Since droplet displacement is the result of cumulative nonlinear effects (radiation pressure and acoustic streaming), and the characteristic hydrodynamic times associated with droplets motion are slow compared with the repetition rates, the forcing is essentially seen as a continuous forcing. Nevertheless, the repetition rates of several kilohertz are compatible with droplets of high-order inertiocapillary vibrations [5], [37]–[39], which may explain why spurious atomization of the drop has been observed. Indeed, both the frequency of the excitation and the acoustical powers used in the present experiments are compatible with droplet nebulization [38] (larger power than usual was used in the present experiments to overcome the retention of the contact line). Nevertheless, this shortcoming could be simply overcome with



Fig. 6. Stack of images showing the displacement forward and backward of a $2-\mu l$ droplet in the acoustical scene. The displacement is obtained with focalized waves propagating successively in the opposite directions. The time elapsed between two successive images is 53 ms. See also \square S1.

appropriate hydrophobic treatment of the surface with low hysteresis [40].

Droplet displacement (Fig. 6, \square S1), fusion (Fig. 7, \square S3) and atomization (Fig. 8, second part of \square S3) were obtained, respectively, with focalized waves, swirling SAWs of second and zero order. The characteristics of the wave field are summarized in the corresponding figure. For the droplet division (Fig. 9, \square S2), we used a different method than the one proposed in [25]: we alternatively synthesized some burst of focalized waves with two different focal points as presented in the previous section. With this specific wave field, we were able to separate droplets even at such high contact line hysteresis.

IV. DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have shown that the combination of IDTA and the inverse filter technique enables the synthesis of the most common SAW-fields used for actuation of fluids at the microscale: plane waves in different directions, anisotropic focalized SAWs, and anistropic swirling SAWs. As a proof of concept, we show that this SAW toolbox enables to perform many basic operations required in droplet-based digital microfluidics: droplet displacement, division, fusion, and atomization. Since it is virtually possible to synthesize any acoustic wave field compatible with the anisotropy of the substrate, it might be easily demonstrated that it is possible to perform other operations previously demonstrated in the literature such as micromixing, collective particle manipulation with standing waves, or jetting. In the same way, it might be possible to demonstrate the versatility of this platform for fluid sample manipulations in microchannels.

The most thrilling perspectives of this SAW toolbox nevertheless lie in the development of new operations that cannot be achieved with other techniques, such as selective 3-D manipulation of one or a few particles or cells (displacement, rotation), precise vorticity control independent of

Anistropic swirling SAWs



Fig. 7. Stack of images showing the fusion of two droplets of 2 μ l. The fusion is obtained with centered swirling SAWs of topological order 2. The time elapsed between two successive images is 27 ms. See also \blacksquare S3.



Fig. 8. Stack of images showing the atomization (nebulization) of a $2-\mu 1$ droplet. It is obtained with a high intensity centered swirling SAW of order 0 (annular wave). The time elapsed between two successive images is 13 ms. See also second part of \bigcirc S3.

the boundary conditions with swirling SAWs, or collective manipulation of several sessile droplets. This last operation is indeed not possible with a limited number of transducers, since 1) there is a shadow zone behind each droplet that prevents the displacement of a second droplet situated behind it due to the strong absorption of Rayleigh waves by liquid samples, and 2) it would be necessary to localize the droplets position in real time. These problems could be overcome with IDTA and the inverse filter method. Indeed, the combination of the acoustic waves emitted by each transducer enables better spatial coverage of the substrate and the inverse filter method allows adaptive focusing in the heterogeneous and absorbing media [41], [42]. The procedure would thus consist of the following.



Fig. 9. Stack of images showing the asymmetric division of a $2-\mu 1$ droplet into two daughter droplets of different volumes. It is obtained with waves focalized at two focal points situated on both sides of the drops and with an angular apodization. The time elapsed between two successive images is 27 ms. See also **1** S2. Blue and red pulses represent successive pulses of focalized waves at different positions and directions as shown in Fig. 4.

- 1) Acquiring a set of databanks of impulse responses for the substrate and the shadowing droplet.
- 2) Using the inverse filter method to determine which signal must be produced by the IDTA to get the targeted signal for the second drop, depending on its relative position compared with the shadowing drop.
- 3) Using the IDTA as sensors to localize in real time both droplets with either an echo [3] or a transmission method [43], [44].

This work opens prospects toward the design of potentially the most versatile toolbox for active control of small fluid samples, for microfluidics and biological applications.

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