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How to cite:

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Version: Version of Record
Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1103/PhysRevB.79.172102
http://prb.aps.org/abstract/PRB/v79/i17/e172102

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Oxygen diffusion in Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$: A molecular dynamics study


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(Received 25 March 2009; published 12 May 2009)

Oxygen diffusion in Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ is investigated using molecular dynamics simulations in conjunction with an established set of Born model potentials. We predict an activation energy of diffusion for 1.56 eV in the temperature range of 1000–1400 K. We observe extensive disordering of the oxygen ions over a subset of lattice sites. Furthermore, oxygen ion diffusion both in the a-b plane and along the c axis requires the same set of rate-limiting ion hops. It is predicted that oxygen transport in Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ is therefore isotropic.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.79.172102 PACS number(s): 66.30.Lw, 82.47.Ed, 61.43.Bn

New solid-oxide fuel cell (SOFC) electrode materials must show improved performance at lower temperatures and resistance to degradation during operation. In that respect perovskite-related materials such as cobalt-based oxides are important candidate cathode materials for the next-generation SOFC because of their catalytic properties in addition to their high electronic and oxide conductivity. The primary aim of the present study is to predict the oxygen-diffusion mechanisms of inorganic materials. The infinite periodic crystal lattice is constructed from a supercell of $6 \times 6 \times 3$ unit cells (containing 7992 ions), tesselated throughout space through the use of periodic boundary conditions, which are defined by the crystallographic lattice vectors. Newton’s equations of motion were integrated using the velocity Verlet algorithm. Ions were assigned a Gaussian distribution of velocities and with

$$E_L = \sum_{j>i} \left[ \frac{q_i q_j}{4 \pi \varepsilon_0 r_{ij}} + A_{ij} \exp \left( \frac{-r_{ij}}{\rho_{ij}} \right) - \left( \frac{C_{ij}}{r_{ij}^6} \right) \right],$$

where $r_{ij}$ is the interionic separation, $q_i$ is the charge of ion $i$, $\varepsilon_0$ is the permittivity of free space, and $A_{ij}$, $\rho_{ij}$, and $C_{ij}$ are the short-range parameters of the Buckingham pair potential (see Table I). The short-range parameters used here were reported previously, and their efficacy was established by comparing the predictions to experimental lattice properties. For Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ the predicted unit-cell volume is within 0.7% of the experimental volume.

The initial configurations for the present simulations are based on the structure of Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ determined by Istomin et al. The infinite periodic crystal lattice is constructed from a supercell of $6 \times 6 \times 3$ unit cells (containing 7992 ions), tesselated throughout space through the use of periodic boundary conditions, which are defined by the crystallographic lattice vectors. Newton’s equations of motion were integrated using the velocity Verlet algorithm. Ions were assigned a Gaussian distribution of velocities and with

FIG. 1. (Color online) In the crystal structure of Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ the CoO$_6$ octahedra layers alternate with oxygen-deficient layers that consist of O3, O4 (occupancy factor of $\frac{1}{4}$), and Co1 atoms.

1098-0121/2009/79(17)/172102(4) 172102-1 ©2009 The American Physical Society
TABLE I. Buckingham interionic potential parameters [see Eq. (1)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>$A_{ij}$ (eV)</th>
<th>$r_{ij}$ (Å)</th>
<th>$C_{ij}$ (eV Å$^6$)</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O$^2-$O$^2-$</td>
<td>9547.96</td>
<td>0.2192</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr$^{2+}$O$^2-$</td>
<td>682.17</td>
<td>0.3945</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y$^{3+}$O$^2-$</td>
<td>1766.40</td>
<td>0.33849</td>
<td>19.43</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co$^{3+}$O$^2-$</td>
<td>1226.31</td>
<td>0.3087</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iterative velocity scaling, a stable temperature was achieved. The system was equilibrated for 5000 time steps (~5 ps) before carrying out the production runs that were used in the analysis. We used the variable time step option as implemented in the DL_POLY code for efficient sampling of the dynamic behavior.\textsuperscript{33,34} Typical time steps are on the order of 1 fs, and up to 250 000 time steps were used to investigate the diffusion processes in the temperature range of 500–1500 K. Simulations were run in the constant number of atoms-pressure-temperature (NPT) ensemble to predict the equilibrium lattice parameters and the constant number of atoms-volume-temperature (NVT) ensemble to predict the diffusion properties. The temperature, and where necessary the pressure, was corrected with the use of the Nosé-Hoover thermostat.\textsuperscript{35,36}

In the present MD simulations ionic transport was determined by monitoring the evolution of the mean-square displacement (MSD) of ions as a function of time for a range of defect temperatures. Extensive simulation times were used to consider a sufficient number of diffusion events for effective statistical sampling. The MSD of an ion $i$ at a position $r_i(t)$ at time $t$ with respect to its initial position $r_i(0)$ is defined by

$$
\langle r_i^2(t) \rangle = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} [r_i(t) - r_i(0)]^2,
$$

where $N$ is the total number of ions in the system. All the cations considered (i.e., Sr, Y, and Co) oscillate around their equilibrium positions; above 900 K, however, oxygen ions demonstrate an increasing MSD with time. This in turn indicates that oxygen self-diffusion is significant at high temperatures, whereas the cation self-diffusion is insignificant on the time scales considered.

The oxygen-diffusion coefficient $D$ can be obtained directly from the slopes of MSD for a range of temperatures using\textsuperscript{37}

$$
\langle [r_i(t) - r_i(0)]^2 \rangle = 6Dt + B,
$$

where $[r_i(t) - r_i(0)]$ is the displacement of an ion from its initial position and $B$ is an atomic displacement parameter that can be attributed to thermal vibrations. Here we predict values for $D$ over the range of temperatures 1000–1400 K and these are presented in the Arrhenius plot of Fig. 2. We find that over this temperature range, oxygen transport in Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ can be described by the Arrhenius relation with an activation energy of 1.56 eV. At lower temperatures we would expect a lower frequency of events that would necessitate simulation times that are beyond our computational resources. The energy required for an oxygen ion to migrate from an O4 site to an adjacent unoccupied O4 site is very small, about 0.1 eV. These events, however, do not lead to a net diffusion of the oxygen atoms.

Figure 2 compares the present predicted values of oxygen-diffusion coefficient with previous experimental results from studies of related cobalt oxides such as La$_{0.5}$Sr$_{0.5}$CoO$_{3-\delta}$ (van Doorn et al.\textsuperscript{7}), Sm$_{0.5}$Sr$_{0.5}$CoO$_{3-\delta}$ (Fullarton et al.\textsuperscript{7}), and La$_{0.6}$Sr$_{0.4}$Fe$_{0.8}$Co$_{0.2}$O$_{3-\delta}$ (Benson et al.\textsuperscript{8}). Interestingly, in spite of their compositional differences, these observed diffusivities are in good agreement with the present predicted diffusivities.

A significant advantage of MD over other techniques is that it can reveal the transport mechanisms of atoms by the direct observation of ion trajectories and hence reveal any significant anisotropy. The calculated oxygen MSD in the $a$ (or $b$ as they are symmetrically equivalent) and $c$ directions are surprisingly almost equal and therefore the transport of oxygen is predicted to be isotropic. Figures 3(a) and 3(b) represent an example of the oxygen-diffusion pathways on two (001) plane slices ($z=0$ and $z=0.25$) in Sr$_{0.75}$Y$_{0.25}$CoO$_{2.625}$ at 1300 K.

At temperatures above 700 K, the oxygen ion at the O4 sites hops around the four equivalent sites [see Fig. 3(a)], in excellent agreement with previous experimental (neutron) studies\textsuperscript{14,15} as a result of the low activation energy for this process. At higher temperatures the thermal ellipsoid describing the O2 site becomes increasingly distorted along the (111) direction toward the neighboring partially occupied O4 sites [see Fig. 3(c)]. Additionally, at temperatures over 1000 K there is significant intermingling of the oxygen ions from O2 and O4 sites [see Fig. 3(c)]. Hopping analysis reveals the possibility of a distinct O5 site (0.35, 0.35, 0.07) at high temperatures near O2 and this will be investigated further.

The disorder between the O2 and O4 sites does not pro-
O1/O2 octahedra, which leads to migration in the mechanism is the movement of these vacancies to the Co-O1/O2 sites. The dominant diffusion pathway for bulk oxygen diffusion. It does, however, provide a supply of oxygen vacancies at the O2 site. These vacancies move to the Co-O1/O2 sites. These vacancies move to the partially occupied O4 sites creating vacancies at O2 sites. These vacancies move to the Co-O1/O2 octahedra (a-b-plane migration) and along the O2-O1-O2 pathway (c-axis migration). The effect of oxygen stoichiometry on the diffusion mechanism is currently under investigation.

In summary, molecular dynamics simulations predict that oxygen transport in Sr0.75Y0.25CoO2.625 at 1300 K along (a) the (001) plane at z=0, (b) the (001) plane at z=0.25, and (c) the (110) plane through the origin (half the unit cell), showing the diffusion pathways.

FIG. 3. (Color online) Calculated oxygen-density profiles in Sr0.75Y0.25CoO2.625 at 1300 K along (a) the (001) plane at z=0, (b) the (001) plane at z=0.25, and (c) the (110) plane through the origin (half the unit cell), showing the diffusion pathways.

In the present study we have examined the migration of oxygen vacancies around the Co-O1/O2 octahedra (note that analysis of oxygen-density profiles reveals that O2-O1 hops occur at almost the same rate as O1-O1 hops), leading to a migration probability and therefore diffusivity that is isotropic. Finally, it is predicted that the O3 ions do not effectively participate in the dominant oxygen-diffusion mechanism, although very limited exchange of O3 with O4 is observed at very high temperatures.

The authors thank Andrey Berenov for useful discussions. The work was supported by UKERC from NERC TSEC program under Grant No. NE/C513169/1. Computing resources were provided by the HPC facility of Imperial College London.

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