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Sensors

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Sensors

Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Sensors, February 23–25, 2016, Rome, Italy



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Preface

This book gathers scientific contributions presented at the 3rd National Conference on Sensors held in Rome, Italy from 23 to 25 February 2016. The conference has been organized by a partnership of the major scientific societies and associations involved in the research area of sensors, the Italian Society of Chemistry (SCI), the Italian Association of Electric and Electronic Measures (GMEE), the Italian Association of Ambient Assisted Living (AITAAL), the Italian Society of Optics and Photonics (SIOF), the Italian Association of Sensors and Microsystems (AISEM), the Italian Society of Pure and Applied Biophysics (SIBPA), the Italian Association of Photobiology (SIFB), the Association Italian Group of Electronics (GE) and the Association NanoItaly.

The third edition of the conference has confirmed a large participation with approximately 60 oral presentations, 80 poster presentations and over 150 delegates. The driving idea of the first conference, to gather scientists having different expertise and with different cultural background, dealing with all the different aspects of sensors, has proved to be indeed successful again.

In this perspective, the book represents an invaluable and up-to-the-minute tool, providing an essential overview of recent findings, strategies and new directions in the area of sensor research. Further, it addresses various aspects based on the development of new chemical, physical or biological sensors, assembling and characterization, signal treatment and data handling. Lastly, the book applies electrochemical, optical and other detection strategies to relevant issues in the food and clinical environmental areas, as well as industry-oriented applications.

Catania, Italy Sesto Fiorentino, Italy Rome, Italy Sesto Fiorentino, Italy Lecce, Italy Bruno Andò Francesco Baldini Corrado Di Natale Giovanna Marrazza Pietro Siciliano

Contents

Part I Physical Sensors

Integrated Thermal Flow Sensors with Programmable Power-Sensitivity Trade-Off Massimo Piotto, Filippo Dell'Agnello, Simone Del Cesta, and Paolo Bruschi	3
Single-Chip CMOS Capacitive Sensor for Ubiquitous Dust Detection and Granulometry with Sub-micrometric Resolution Marco Carminati, Pietro Ciccarella, Marco Sampietro, and Giorgio Ferrari	8
PDMS Template Generator for Wearable Thermoelectric Energy Harvesting Applications L. Francioso, C. De Pascali, A. Grazioli, V. Sglavo, and L. Lorenzelli	19
Nanostructured Superconductive Sensors Based on Quantum Interference Effect for High Sensitive Nanoscale Applications C. Granata, B. Ruggiero, O. Talamo, M. Fretto, N. De Leo, V. Lacquaniti, D. Massarotti, F. Tafuri, P. Silbestrini, and A. Vettoliere	25
A Sensor for the Measurement of Liquids Density Nicola A. Lamberti, Monica La Mura, Valerio Apuzzo, Nicola Greco, and Pasquale D'Uva	30
Temperature Sensing Properties of High Density Polyethylene Loaded with Oxidized Multi Walled Carbon Nanotubes. Heinz-Christoph Neitzert, Giovanni Landi, and Maria Rossella Nobile	37
RF Rectifier Toward Terahertz Integrated Image Detector	45

Part II Chemical Sensors

A New Chemical Sensing Material for Ethanol Detection: Graphene-Like Film	50
B. Alfano, M. Alfè, V. Gargiulo, T. Polichetti, E. Massera, M.L. Miglietta, and G. Di Francia	39
Iron Oxides Nanoparticles Langmuir-Schaeffer Multilayers for Chemoresistive Gas Sensing S. Capone, M. Benkovicova, A. Forleo, M. Jergela, M.G. Manera, P. Siffalovic, A. Taurino, E. Majkova, P. Siciliano, I. Vavra, S. Luby, and R. Rella	66
Multianalyte Biosensor Patch Based on Polymeric Microneedles P. Dardano, A. Caliò, V. Di Palma, M.F. Bevilacqua, A. Di Matteo, and L. De Stefano	73
Effective Tuning of Silver Decorated Graphene Sensing Properties by Adjusting the Ag NPs Coverage Density Maria Lucia Miglietta, Brigida Alfano, Tiziana Polichetti, Ettore Massera, Chiara Schiattarella, and Girolamo Di Francia	82
CuO-Modified Cu Electrodes for Glucose Sensing C. Espro, S.G. Leonardi, A. Bonavita, S. Galvagno, and G. Neri	90
Stable Aqueous Solution for the Fabrication of α-Fe2O3Thin Film-Based Chemoresistive SensorsA. Mirzaei, M. Bonyani, S.G. Leonardi, N. Donato, and G. Neri	97
Optimization of Cyclic Voltammetric Curve Parameters to Measure Lactate Concentration in Urine Samples Giulio Rosati, Matteo Scaramuzza, Elisabetta Pasqualotto, Alessandro De Toni, and Alessandro Paccagnella	103
Inkjet Printed Graphene-Based Chemiresistive Sensors to NO₂ C. Schiattarella, T. Polichetti, F. Villani, F. Loffredo, B. Alfano, E. Massera, M.L. Miglietta, and G. Di Francia	111
Part III Optical Sensors	

Integration of Amorphous Silicon Photosensors with Thin Film	
Interferential Filter for Biomolecule Detection	121
Domenico Caputo, Emanuele Parisi, Augusto Nascetti, Mario Tucci,	
and Giampiero de Cesare	

Contents

Chemical Sensors Based on Surface Plasmon Resonance in a Plastic Optical Fiber for Multianalyte Detection in Oil-Filled Power Transformer Nunzio Cennamo, Maria Pesavento, Antonella Profumo, Daniele Merli, Letizia De Maria, Cristina Chemelli, and Luigi Zeni	128
Surface Plasmon Resonance Sensor in Plastic Optical Fibers. Influence of the Mechanical Support Geometry on the Performances Nunzio Cennamo, Letizia De Maria, Cristina Chemelli, Maria Pesavento, Antonella Profumo, Ramona Galatus, and Luigi Zeni	135
An Integrated Interferometric Sensor for Electromagnetic Field Mario Medugno	142
Moisture Measurement in Masonry Materials Using Active Distributed Optical Fiber Sensors Aldo Minardo, Ester Catalano, Luigi Mollo, Roberto Greco, and Luigi Zeni	149
Part IV Biosensors	
Electrochemical Preparation of a MIP-Glassy Carbon Electrode for the Determination of Dimethoate Denise Capoferri, Michele Del Carlo, Nomaphelo Ntshongontshi, Emmanuel I. Iwuoha, and Dario Compagnone	157
Self Assembled and Electrochemically Deposed Layers of Thiolson Gold Compared with Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopyand Atomic Force MicroscopyJ. Castagna, F. Malvano, D. Albanese, and R. Pilloton	163
Hybrid Hydrophobin/Gold Nanoparticles: Synthesis and Characterization of New Synthetic Probes for Biological	
Applications Jane Politi, Luca De Stefano, Paola Giardina, Sandra Casale, Ilaria Rea, and Jolanda Spadavecchia	169
Real Time Flow-Through Biosensor Immacolata Angelica Grimaldi, Genni Testa, Gianluca Persichetti, and Romeo Bernini	177
Amorphous Silicon Temperature Sensors Integrated with Thin Film Heaters for Thermal Treatments of Biomolecules	183
Nicola Lovecchio, Domenico Caputo, Giulia Petrucci, Augusto Nascetti, Marco Nardecchia, Francesca Costantini, and Giampiero de Cesare	103

Contents

Opto-Plasmonic Biosensors for Monitoring Wheat End-Products Ouality	194
C. Galati, M.G. Manera, A. Colombelli, M. De Pascali, P. Rampino, C. Perrotta, and R. Rella	
Design, Fabrication and Testing of a Capillary Microfluidic Systemwith Stop-and-Go Valves Using EWOD TechnologyM. Nardecchia, P. Rodríguez Llorca, G. de Cesare, D. Caputo,N. Lovecchio, and A. Nascetti	200
Electrochemical and Photoelectrochemical Biosensors for Biomarker Detection	209
Andrea Ravalli, Francesca Bettazzi, Diego Voccia, Giovanna Marrazza, and Ilaria Palchetti	
Impedance Sensors Embedded in Culture Media for Early Detection	
Michela Borghetti, Marco Demori, Marco Ferrari, Vittorio Ferrari, Emilio Sardini, and Mauro Serpelloni	218
Ampicillin Measurement Using Flow SPR Immunosensorand Comparison with Classical Amperometric ImmunosensorMauro Tomassetti, Giovanni Merola, Elisabetta Martini,Luigi Campanella, Maria Pia Sammartino, Gabriella Sanzò,Gabriele Favero, and Franco Mazzei	229
Looking If Any Correlation Exists Between the Total Antioxidant Capacity and Polyphenol Concentration (Measured Using Two Different Enzyme Sensors) in Several Food or Feed Based Vegetables and Pharmaceutical Integrators	233
Preliminary Study of a Low-Cost Point-of-Care Testing System Using Screen-Printed Biosensors for Early Biomarkers Detection Related to Alzheimer Disease Sarah Tonello, Mauro Serpelloni, Nicola Francesco Lopomo, Giulia Abate, Daniela Letizia Uberti, and Emilio Sardini	238
Part V Multisensorial Systems	
Modeling Investigation of a Nonlinear VibrationalEnergy HarvesterBruno Andò, Salvatore Baglio, Adi Bulsara, Vincenzo Marletta,and Antonio Pistorio	249

Study on Impedance Behavior of a Telemetric System Operating with an Inkjet-Printed Resistive Strain Gauge	258	
M. Bona, E. Sardini, M. Serpelloni, B. Andò, and C.O. Lombardo		
Breath Analysis by a GC/MS Coupled to a Gas Sensor Detector S. Capone, M. Tufariello, A. Forleo, F. Casino, and P. Siciliano	267	
Multi-sensor Platform for Detection of Anomalies in Human	0-	
Sleep Patterns	276	
Bioimpedance Measurement in Dentistry: Detection of Inflamed	200	
Gloria Cosoli, Lorenzo Scalise, Graziano Cerri, Gerardo Tricarico, and Enrico Primo Tomasini	280	
Stochastic Comparison of Machine Learning Approaches toCalibration of Mobile Air Quality MonitorsE. Esposito, S. De Vito, M. Salvato, G. Fattoruso, V. Bright, R.L. Jones,and O. Popoola	294	
A Distributed Sensor Network for Waste Water Management Plant Protection	303	
S. De Vito, G. Fattoruso, E. Esposito, M. Salvato, A. Agresta, M. Panico, A. Leopardi, F. Formisano, A. Buonanno, P. Delli Veneri, and G. Di Francia	202	
Virtual Olfactory Device In EEG And Olfactory Conditioning		
Task: an OERP Study Output S. Invitto, S. Capone, G. Montagna, and P. Siciliano	315	
Wireless Electromyography Technology for Fall Risk Evaluation A. Leone, G. Rescio, A. Caroppo, and P. Siciliano	322	
A Multisensorial Thermal Anemometer System L. Pantoli, R. Paolucci, M. Muttillo, P. Fusacchia, and A. Leoni	330	
Remotely Controlled Terrestrial Vehicle Integrated Sensory System for Environmental Monitoring Emiliano Zampetti, Paolo Papa, Francesco Di Flaviano, Lucia Paciucci, Francesco Petracchini, Nicola Pirrone, Andrea Bearzotti, and Antonella Macagnano	338	

Part VI Micro-nano Technologies, Electronic Systems for Sensors	
A Compact Low-Offset Instrumentation Amplifier with Wide Input and Output Ranges	347
Improving the Performance of an AMR-Based Current Transducer for Metering Applications. G. Betta, D. Capriglione, L. Ferrigno, and A. Rasile	355
Derived Non-contact Continuous Recording of Blood Pressure Pulse Waveform by Means of Vibrocardiography Luigi Casacanditella, Gloria Cosoli, Sara Casaccia, Lorenzo Scalise, and Enrico Primo Tomasini	365
A Fall Detector Based on Ultra-Wideband Radar Sensing Giovanni Diraco, Alessandro Leone, and Pietro Siciliano	373
Capacitance Humidity Micro-sensor with Temperature Controller and Heater Integrated in CMOS Technology M. Elkhayat, S. Mangiarotti, M. Grassi, P. Malcovati, and A. Fornasari	383
Voltage-Mode Analog Interfaces for Differential Capacitance Position Transducers	388
CCII-Based Linear Ratiometric Capacitive Sensing by Analog Read-Out Circuits G. Ferri, F.R. Parente, V. Stornelli, G. Barile, G. Pennazza, and M. Santonico	398
Integrable Autonomous Devices for WSNs L. Pantoli, A. Leoni, F.R. Parente, V. Stornelli, and G. Ferri	406
A Low Cost Flexible Power Line Communication System L. Pantoli, M. Muttillo, V. Stornelli, G. Ferri, and T. Gabriele	413
MEMS-Based Transducers (CMUT) and Integrated Electronics for Medical Ultrasound Imaging Alessandro S. Savoia, and Giosuè Caliano	421

Physical Sensors

Integrated Thermal Flow Sensors with Programmable Power-Sensitivity Trade-Off

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Abstract. A thermal flow sensor integrated with a programmable electronic interface into the same chip is proposed. The sensing structure is a micro-calorimeter with a double heater configuration fabricated with a simple post-processing technique applied to chip designed with a commercial CMOS process. The electronic interface is based on a low-noise, low-power instrumentation amplifier and a configurable heater current driver. The device characterization in nitrogen confirms the possibility to manage the trade-off between the sensitivity and the power delivered to the device by means of the programmable interface.

Keywords: Thermal flow sensor \cdot Electronic interface \cdot Chopper amplifier \cdot System-on-Chip (SoC)

1 Introduction

Micromachined thermal flow sensors are used in applications that require measurement and control of small fluid flow rates with high accuracy and resolution [1, 2]. Microsensors with fast response times and low power consumption can be integrated with the read-out electronics into the same chip thanks to the development of the silicon micromachining technologies. These devices have matured from the research stage to commercial products with response times in the order of millisecond and power consumptions of a few tens of milliwatts [3]. Nevertheless, emerging battery-power applications are imposing requirements that are more stringent in terms of power consumption. Unfortunately, the sensitivity of thermal flow sensors is proportional to the power delivered to the sensing structure [4], so a trade-off between power and sensitivity has to be considered.

In this work, we propose a smart flow sensor where the power delivered to the sensing structure can be set through the integrated programmable electronic interface that performs signal reading, offset compensation and heater driving. The device belongs to the thermal sensor platform proposed in [5], which includes diverse flow sensors, acoustical particle velocity detectors and a pressure sensor based on the micro-Pirani principle. The flow sensor is a micro-calorimeter made up of two

polysilcon heaters placed between two temperature probes. The sensing structure has been fabricated by applying a simple post-processing procedure to chip designed with a commercial CMOS process of STMicroelectronics.

2 Device Description and Fabrication

The sensing structure has been integrated with the electronic interface into the chip shown in Fig. 1. The chip has been designed with the BCD6s process of STMicroelectronics and includes diverse sensors based on a thermal principle, as detailed in [5]. The structure involved in this work has been highlighted in Fig. 1. It is a calorimeter made up of two polysilcon heaters placed between two temperature probes consisting of 10 n-polysilicon/p-polysilicon thermocouples. The heaters and the hot contacts of the thermopile have been placed over suspended silicon dioxide membrane while the cold contacts of the thermopiles are in thermal contact with the silicon substrate. The suspended membranes have been obtained by applying a simple post-processing technique to the chips returned by the silicon foundry. A detailed description of the sensing structure and the fabrication process is reported in [6]. Briefly, the post-processing procedure consists of two main steps. First, dielectric layers have been selectively removed from the front-side of the chip in order to access the bare silicon substrate. The dielectric layers have been etched with a RIE (reactive ion etching) in CF₄/Ar (50%/50%) gas mixture using an 8 µm thick photoresist film (MEGAPOSIT[™] SPR[™] 220–7.0) as a mask. Second, the silicon substrate has been anisotropically etched for 150 min at 85 °C in a solution of 100 g of 5 wt% TMAH with 2.5 g of silicic acid and 0.7 g of ammonium persulfate.



Fig. 1. Photo of the chip with indication of the electronic interface and the sensing structure involved in this work. Note that the chip layout has been superimposed on the optical photograph to show the electronic circuits buried under the planarization dummies

Micrographs of the sensing structure after the silicon removal are shown in Fig. 2. In the optical micrograph, the two polysilicon heaters, placed over rectangular membranes, and the two thermopiles, placed over cantilevers, are clearly visible. In the scanning electron microscopy (SEM) micrograph it can be noted the cavity that allows the thermal insulation of the sensing structures from the substrate.



Fig. 2. Optical (*left*) and SEM (*right*) micrograph of the sensing structure after the post-processing

The electronic interface has been optimized with respect to [7] in order to minimize power consumption preserving low noise performances. It includes a low noise, low power instrumentation amplifier based on chopper modulation (gain = 200) and a programmable differential current source for biasing the heaters of the sensing structure. The differential mode component of the dual current source can be digitally tuned (10-bit resolution) to implement drift-free cancellation of the sensor offset [8]. The common mode component can be independently controlled by 2 bits in order to vary the power delivered to the heaters or, equivalently, the sensitivity. In this way, it is possible to bias the heaters with three different current values being the fourth value reserved for the power off condition. A simple digital interface allows control of the current source and instrumentation amplifier parameters.

3 Device Characterization

After post-processing, the chip was packaged in a ceramic DIP28 case and connected to a reference gas line by means of a purposely-built PMMA conveyor [6]. With the application of the conveyor to the chip surface, the sensing structure is included into a flow channel with a $0.5 \times 0.5 \text{ mm}^2$ cross section. The flow channel is connected through 0.6 mm holes to two stainless steel needles used for gas inlet and outlet. The reference gas line is equipped with two precision flow controllers (MKS 1179B), one with a 10 sccm full scale range and the other with 200 sccm full scale range.

The response to a nitrogen flow at room temperature is shown in Fig. 3. The measurement was performed setting the current of both heaters to around 0.53 mA, with a small differential component applied to reduce the output offset to the same level

as the output noise. With these settings, the power delivered to each heater was 0.6 mW, while the total current absorption of the chip, including the electronic interface, is 1.26 mA. This, at a supply voltage of 3.3 V, corresponds to a total power consumption of 4.16 mW. The curve is still monotonic up to flow rates of ± 200 sccm even if, as expected, the sensitivity progressively get worse at high flow rates.



Fig. 3. Amplifier output voltage (gain = 200) as a function of a nitrogen flow at room temperature. Negative flows are obtained by swapping the inlet and outlet connections

The dependence of the sensitivity on power has been verified by setting two different heater current values by means of the electronic interface. The response in ± 10 sccm range is shown in Fig. 4. A clear increase in the device sensitivity at the price of greater power consumption has been obtained. This demonstrates the possibility of handling the sensitivity-power trade-off by means of the programmable electronic interface.



Fig. 4. Response of the device to a nitrogen flow at room temperature with two different settings of the heater current

4 Conclusions

A micro-calorimeter with a double heater configuration has been integrated with a programmable electronic interface into the same chip. The sensing structure has been fabricated with a commercial CMOS process followed by a simple post-processing procedure. The electronic interface includes a low-power, low-noise instrumentation amplifier for the signal reading and a programmable heater driver for the offset compensation and the control of the power delivered to the sensing structure. The dependence of the device sensitivity on power has been demonstrated by means of measurements performed in nitrogen at room temperature. The possibility of handling the power-sensitivity trade-off by means of a programmable interface increases the flexibility of the proposed device.

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Single-Chip CMOS Capacitive Sensor for Ubiquitous Dust Detection and Granulometry with Sub-micrometric Resolution

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Abstract. A monolithic CMOS chip able to count single airborne particles down to a diameter of 1 μ m is presented. This mm-sized ASIC addresses the growing need for portable and miniaturized solid-state sensors monitoring air quality to be disseminated in the environment within pervasive wireless sensors networks. Particle counting and sizing are based on high-resolution capacitive detection. State-of-the-art performances (65 zF resolution with 40 Hz bandwidth) are enabled by the combination on the same chip of interdigitated microelectrodes (separated by 1 μ m distance, matched with the particle size), and ultra-low-noise electronics connected to them achieving the lowest possible parasitic input capacitance. Chip design and characterization are illustrated.

1 Introduction

The relevance of the measurement of airborne particulate matter (PM) does not require extensive explanation. The adverse effects for the environment, the cultural heritage and the human health due to high concentrations of PM in the atmosphere have been abundantly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the strategies proposed and implemented so far, particularly in urban environments, such as vehicular traffic restrictions, have proved to be ineffective, mainly because of the complexity of such a multi-scale problem (involving the spatiotemporal variability of meteorological conditions and of emission sources and targets, from local street canyons to global levels). Dust suspension in the atmosphere is both due to natural phenomena (erosion, volcanic eruptions, and dust storms originated from the Sahara desert, considered the largest source of airborne dust in the world, producing about 70 millions of tons of dust per year transported by eastbound winds, 30% of which deposit in the eastern Mediterranean countries) as well as to anthropogenic sources, significantly varying from rural to urban areas.

Limiting only to the threats for health, they span from pathologies of the cardio-respiratory system to more subtle cell-level and gene-level interactions, which are object of wide on-going research [1]. The World Health Organization estimates that

in the year 2000 in Europe the average life expectancy loss due to exposure to $PM_{2.5}$ was 8.6 months, ranging from 3 months in Finland to 12–36 months in the Po valley [2]. Other reports account for 3 million deaths worldwide ascribable to $PM_{2.5}$ [3]. Regardless of the specific toxicological pathway, the risk due to the exposure to high concentrations of PM depends on the size and the chemical composition of the particles. Even particles of inert materials can be the carrier of dangerous pathogens. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the penetration inside the respiratory tract strongly depends on the particle diameter (for non-spherical particles, an equivalent aerodynamic diameter is defined). The distribution of the particles diameter is called *granulometric* spectrum. The smaller the diameter, the lower the filtering and the deeper is the penetration and the higher the risk of diffusion in the body and endocytosis inside the cells.



Fig. 1. Depth of PM penetration in the human respiratory system varying according to particle size and corresponding technologies allowing single-particle detection and granulometry

A broad range of instruments and techniques are currently employed for the characterization of PM, which can be analyzed either on-line (i.e. in the field) and off-line. The latter are mostly sophisticated laboratory techniques, based on the collection of PM on filters by means of samplers and impactors, often requiring preliminary sample preparation, such as metallization for electron microscopy or digestion for chemo-physical assays (such as elemental analysis by means of X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy [4]). On-line techniques comprise gravimetric accumulation and weighting, absorption of beta rays and laser scattering [5]. The latter, relying on the size-dependent intensity of the light pulse originated from the scattering of a laser beam focused on a stream of PM, is the only technique allowing single-particle analysis and granulometry. Unfortunately, the cost and bulkiness of these instruments prevent a massive deployment.

In the last years, several paradigm-shifting trends including smartphone-based participatory sensing [6], aimed at gaining a better insight in such a complex problem and mostly enabled by the fast development and pervasiveness of consumer-grade sensors, are emerging also in the environmental field. New interesting horizons are disclosed by wireless sensor networks. As summarized in Fig. 1, different emerging solutions based on solid-state miniaturized sensors, thus embeddable in low-cost and compact sensing nodes, but still allowing single-particle resolution, include CMOS

cameras with pixels of area comparable with larger PM, mass-sensitive MEMS and nano-resonators machined in silicon and micro-capacitance sensing [7].

2 Capacitive Dust Detection

In order to address the challenges described in the previous section, a non-optical technique based on the combination of microelectrodes and high-resolution capacitive sensing can be adopted [8]. As illustrated in Fig. 2, when a single particles enters the electric field between a pair of electrodes, the capacitance increases due to its larger dielectric constant with respect to air ($\varepsilon_r = 1$). In order to maximize the sensitivity, the capacitor volume should be matched to the single particle size. For a parallel-plate geometry (facing electrodes of area A and distance d as in Fig. 2a), the capacitance value can be computed with the well-known expression (neglecting border effects):

$$C = \varepsilon_0 \cdot \varepsilon_r \cdot \frac{A}{d} \tag{1}$$

where ε_0 is the dielectric constant of vacuum and ε_r the relative dielectric constant of the material between the plates. With a spherical particle of radius *r* inside, the capacitance variation due to a change of a small volume fraction, can be estimated as:

$$\Delta C = \frac{4}{3} \cdot \pi \cdot \frac{r^3}{d^2} \cdot \Delta \varepsilon_r \cdot \frac{\varepsilon_0}{\varepsilon_r}$$
(2)

where $\Delta \varepsilon_r$ is the difference between the ε_r . As apparent from Eq. (2), the signal is increases with the dielectric contrast between the particle and the surrounding medium and by reducing the distance between the plates. If $\Delta \varepsilon_r$ is known, it is also possible to estimate *r* from ΔC , clearly showing the potential for granulometry. Furthermore, the uncertainty in the estimation of an average ε_r (analogously to the average refractive index assumed in laser scattering) is mitigated by the fact that $r \sim \Delta \varepsilon_r^{-1/3}$.



Fig. 2. Parallel-plate \mathbf{a} and coplanar \mathbf{b} microelectrodes configurations, both suitable for single particle capacitive detection when d and G are matched with the particle diameter

The advantage of this geometry the homogeneity of the electric field, allowing simple analytical expressions for the design. On the other hand, the major limit is the risk of clogging when shrinking down d in the micrometric domain. A coplanar geometry (Fig. 2b) composed by a pair of electrodes (W by L) separated by a distance G, allows overcoming this risk, at the price of spatially inhomogeneous field that requires of the use of conformal mapping expressions [9] to estimate the capacitance:

$$C = 2\varepsilon_0 \cdot \frac{\varepsilon_r}{\pi} \cdot \ln\left[\left(1 + \frac{2W}{G}\right) + \sqrt{\left(1 + \frac{2W}{G}\right)^2 - 1}\right] \cdot L$$
(3)

Thanks to lithography, micrometric values for *G* can be easily achieved. A first proof-of-concept that capacitive detection of single micrometric airborne particles has been demonstrated with gold microelectrodes ($G = 4 \mu m$) patterned on glass and coupled with a low-noise amplifier realized with off-the-shelf discrete components [8]. The minimum resolution of this system was ~1 aF, resulting in a minimum detectable diameter of ~7 μm . In order to detect smaller particles, a single-chip solution has been developed, leveraging the combination of CMOS lithography and minimum stray capacitance at the input of the amplifier integrated on the same chip.

3 Design of a CMOS Monolithic PM₁ Detector

3.1 Electrodes and Architecture

The design starts from sizing the microelectrodes. The electrodes are fabricated on the topmost metal layer (metal 4 in the AMS 0.35 μ m process here employed) and exposed to air by opening a window in the nitride passivation the same way used to expose bonding pads. Interestingly, this approach does not require any additional post processing of the chip that can be fabricated in any CMOS foundry and can be used as received. Under the electrodes no metal is present, in order to reduce the stray capacitance and the distance from the silicon substrate is 4 μ m (Fig. 3a). An interdigitated geometry is chosen in order to cover uniformly the detection area. Finite-element numerical simulations (Fig. 3b) have been employed for optimal sizing of the electrodes. Targeting PM₁, *W* and *G* have been set to 1 μ m, (slightly larger than the minimum 0.6 μ m allowed by this technology for reliability considerations). With these dimensions, a sphere of 1 μ m diameter (and minimum $\varepsilon_r = 2$) produces a capacitance change $\Delta C = 700$ zF.

Having set the electrode width and spacing, the second major choice concerns the total collection area and its partition into smaller "pixels". From system level considerations, mostly related to the interfacing with proper fluidics forcing the collection of PM, the minimum detection area is set to 1 mm². If this area were covered by a single couple of interdigitated electrodes, the total sensor capacitance would be 15 pF (with a stray capacitance to ground of about 3 pF). In these conditions, it would be impossible to detect the signal due to a single particle, being $\Delta C/C = 50$ ppb (corresponding to a dynamic range of 146 dB and an environmental stability better than 50 parts per billion). In order to reduce the dynamic range, allowing single particle resolution, two solutions have been adopted:



Fig. 3. a Cross-section of the CMOS PM sensor showing the capacitance-sensing electrodes fabricated in the highest metal level (M4) and exposed to air. b COMSOL simulations of the expected capacitance variation ΔC obtained when a single particle of diameter D deposits between these electrodes

- a *differential* architecture is chosen, so that only the differential signal is amplified by the chain when an unbalance is created by the deposition of a particle on one of the two combs. In order to avoid the risk that a large particles covering both couples produces a zero signal, the layout of the electrode has been arranged (Fig. 4) separating the positively-excited electrodes (+), from the negatively-excited electrodes (-). In one half of the array, the interdigitation is between (+) electrodes and the common input of the amplifier (virtual ground), while analogously, in the other half, the serpentine gaps separate (-) electrodes and the amplifier input. The symmetry is thus maintained and the two halves (C_{UP} and C_{DW}) are separated by a ground line. Furthermore, the differential configuration allows rejection of common mode disturbances (including thermal drifts) as well as the noise due to the voltage generator [10]. The only minor complication implied by this architecture is that the signal can be either positive or negative, depending on which half of the array the particle lands.
- the total sensing area has been *partitioned* in 32 slices of area 500 μm by 70 μm. Correspondingly, the analog conditioning chains are replicated in 32 parallel channels. The pixel area corresponds to an input capacitance smaller than 0.5 pF, suitable for achieving excellent noise performance.

The whole architecture of the readout circuit is shown in Fig. 4. It consists of 32 identical channels including the electrodes and the conditioning chain, which comprises the amplification stages, the square-wave multiplier (synchronous with the square-wave stimulation of the electrodes at 100–500 kHz, biased alternatively at V_{REF} and GND, as commonly performed to read half-bridge differential capacitive sensors such as in inertial MEMS [11]) and a g_m-C low-pass filter with a selectable bandwidth (40, 85, 360, 750 Hz) completing the *lock-in* block.

A sensor bandwidth of 85 Hz per channel is enough to correctly sample single deposition events considering typical PM concentrations (max \sim 50 particles/liter for



Fig. 4. Architecture of the electronics: each of the 32 channels comprises two sets of interdigitated differential electrodes and a low-noise signal conditioning chain

 PM_{10}) and sampling flow-rates (~liter/min), with a very low coincidence probability, giving a total data rate of ~3 kSa/s. Given such a relatively slow rate of information to be processed, the chip is connected to an external ADC with a single output by means of a 32:1 multiplexer (MUX) controlled by 5 parallel bits. It should be noted that the low-pass filter must be placed before the MUX (thus requiring 32 filters instead of a single one and, unfortunately, much more silicon area) in order to avoid the long settling time required by a single filter which should update its voltage after each switching of the MUX (and would be limiting the scanning frequency to ~1.6 Hz in the case of the narrowest bandwidth).

3.2 Front-End

Given the capacitive nature of the sensor, the optimal choice for the front-end amplifier is a transimpedance stage with capacitive feedback (Fig. 5). This allows frequencyindependent gain and minimum noise [12]. The size of the input transistors is set in order to match the amplifier input capacitance with the sensor capacitance, in order to achieve minimum noise. The feedback capacitance C_F of the first stage is set equal to 20 fF. A transistor in feedback operating in sub-threshold regime handles the input DC leakage current. A second stage with a similar topology and high gain (40) is cascaded in order to reduce the impact of the g_m -C filter.



Fig. 5. Scheme of the analog amplification chain

In order to compensate the mismatch between the two pairs of electrodes, an automatic auto-zeroing network has been also implemented. It is composed by a Digital-to-Capacitance Converter (DCC) and a control logic. The DCC comprises a fixed compensation capacitor of 4.6 fF connected at the chain input and driven by a 5-bit resistive DAC featuring a LSB = 150 aF and measured DNL of 15 aF. Finally, a current-subtracting network allows reducing the noise at low frequency by a factor 4.

4 Experimental Results

The fabricated prototype is shown in Fig. 6. The total chip area is 2.5 mm by 2.4 mm and current consumption is 25 mA (at 3.3 V power supply) [13]. The bonding pads are located on one side, in order to leave the other sides free from bonding wires for easier coupling the chip with proper fluidics. After the functional tests confirmed the circuit performances, such as amplifier bandwidth (10 kHz–2 MHz) and noise (65 zF at 40 Hz) are in agreement with the simulations, the chip has been validated with the real-time deposition of single particles.

Consistently with the previous experiments with the discrete-component setup, mineral talc (abundant, nontoxic, with an average diameter of 8 μ m and $\varepsilon_r = 2.4$) is employed. Talc powder was suspended in air by means of a properly-driven vibrating loudspeaker, placed in the same Faraday cage. Before starting the experiments, microphotographs of the electrodes surface are taken. Then the speaker is activated and, when a channel displays a capacitance step, the experiment is stopped and another photograph of that channel is taken, in order to correlate the measured ΔC with a microscope image of the deposited particle. By adjusting the concentration of talc loaded on the loudspeaker and its distance from the detector, it is possible to easily achieve the condition of single depositions with rates of a few events per minute. Fixed defects or previously deposited particles act as reference points, useful when comparing images taken in different moments.



Fig. 6. Chip microphotographs: 32 parallel channels are visible, the sensing area is 1.15 mm²

A typical deposition event is shown in Fig. 7: the capacitance recording (sampled with a temporal resolution better than 100 ms) shows a clear jump of 1 aF, due to the deposition of a single talc particle with a diameter of about 1.5 μ m, extracted from the microscope image. Despite the uncertainties in the estimation of the equivalent diameter of non-spherical particles from bidimensional microscope image, good agreement is observed between the measured jumps, the imaged particles and the simulation of Fig. 3b. Thanks to the measured noise floor of 65 zF, a 1 μ m particle (giving a $\Delta C = 700$ zF for the minimum ε_r) is detected with a SNR >20 dB.



Fig. 7. Real-time capacitive tracking of the deposition on the interdigitated electrodes of a single dust particle ($\varepsilon_r = 2.4$) of 1.5 µm diameter producing a capacitance increase of 1 aF

Figure 8 reports several deposition events, corresponding to two dust clouds, showing the operation of the acquisition system (based on the acquisition board NI PCI-6289 controlled by a custom LabView program) in multichannel tracking.



Fig. 8. Multichannel tracking of several PM particles depositing from talc clouds in two rounds

5 Conclusions

The first single-chip CMOS sensor for counting and granulometry of particles in the $20-1 \mu m$ range has been presented, illustrating the key design aspects required to achieve deep sub-attoFarad resolution (and improving by more than two orders of magnitude what achieved with discrete components).

Conductive particles do not represent a sever risk of shorting thanks to the insulating layer constituted by the thin native aluminum oxide that naturally forms on the exposed electrodes. Instead, humidity in the form of water droplets can produce large artifacts and false counts (due to the large $\varepsilon_r = 80$ of water). To prevent this issue, analogously to laser-scattering instruments, heated probes can be employed, as well as on-chip heaters or proper layout of the hottest power dissipating areas on chip.

Thanks to the abrupt change in capacitance produced by the PM deposition, slow drifts (due for instance to temperature drifts which, in any case, are mitigated by the differential architecture) do not prevent detection on long measuring times.

Finally, for the deployment in the environment in a pervasive and ubiquitous ways, the micro-system should be completed with:

- a particles concentration and capture system. For instance, electric fields, fluidodynamic impactors or thermophoretic forces could be combined with this CMOS platform for enhanced low-concentration operation.
- a surface cleaning system for periodical removal of deposited PM and restoring of the initial condition for long term operation (based for instance of vibrating mechanical energy or local air jets). The low cost of silicon for large production volumes, allows also considering alternative employment scenarios including disposable cartridges.

The feasibility of the capacitive technique has been demonstrated down to PM_1 and the detector has been optimized from the point of view of noise. Further engineering is clearly required: power dissipation, electrode geometry, total detection area and number of channels can be tuned and adapted to the final application of the chip, spanning from fixed urban nodes, to portable dosimeters or even embedment inside consumer devices such as smartphones.

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18 M. Carminati et al.

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PDMS Template Generator for Wearable Thermoelectric Energy Harvesting Applications

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Abstract. Thermoelectric pastes based on Sb, Bi, Te powders were prepared, characterized and used to fabricate a flexible thermoelectric generator (TEG) for wearable harvesting applications. By Finite Element Method (FEM) simulations, the TEG design was finalized to optimize electrical model and match typical thermal resistances of human body skin, in order to maximize its thermoelectric performance. The thermopile is composed by 450 couples of p-Sb₂Te₃ and n-Bi₂Te₃ deposited by blade coating into vertical parallel cavities of a patterned polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) through-holes layer. Each leg has diameter of 1.5 mm and height of 2.5 mm. The p-n couples were electrically connected by printed silver contact. By preliminary functional tests, a Seebeck coefficient of about 75 μ V/K for p-n couple on best conditions was measured.

Keywords: Thermoelectric generator · Energy harvesting · Screen printing

1 Introduction

Energy harvesting represents a new promising technology, by means of which fully exploitation of self-powered wearable devices in practical implementations can be achieved. The human body heat can be directly converted into electricity by Seebeck effect to partially or totally supply ultra-low power wearable health monitoring sensors. TEGs are particularly attractive devices, because compact, robust, lightweight, silent, maintenance-free and devoid of moving parts. The flexible technology represents a key for their unobtrusive application in wearable systems, which integrate different materials and functionalities on the same flexible support. A flexible TEG adapts better to the natural curvature of the human body, with the advantage of enhancing the heat transferred from the human body to the device.