

Metal Matrix Composites

Custom-made Materials for Automotive
and Aerospace Engineering

Edited by
Karl U. Kainer



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Preface

Metal matrix composites can no longer be excluded from daily life. The individual consumer is not aware of the variety of material systems and their application; in many cases they are even unknown. Examples are carbides for machining of materials in product engineering, noble metal composite systems for contacts in electronics and electro-technology, copper-graphite sliding contacts for generators and electric motors and multicomponent systems for brake linings in high speed brakes. After the massive effort in recent years to develop metal matrix composites (MMCs) with light metal matrixes the successful application of these materials has taken place in traffic engineering, especially in automotive and transport technology. New applications are, for example, partially fiber-reinforced pistons and hybrid reinforced crank cases in passenger cars and truck engines, and particle-reinforced brake discs for light trucks, motorcycles, passenger cars and rail-mounted vehicles. A further application area of these materials is in civil and military air and space flight. These innovative materials are of great interest for modern material applications due to the possibility to develop MMCs with specific properties. Ongoing from this potential, the metal matrix composites meet the desired concepts of the design engineer, because they represent custom-made materials. This material group is becoming of interest for construction and functional materials, if the property profile of conventional materials does not meet the requirement of lightweight construction. The advantages of metal matrix composites are of use if a meaningful cost-performance relationship is possible during production of the components. Of special economic and ecological interest is the need for integration of processing residues, cycle scrap and waste products from these materials into the material cycle.

In the area of communication and power engineering, the replacement of the currently dominant structural materials with functional materials based on non-ferrous and noble metals is a development aim. For example, good electrical and thermal properties combined with high strength and wear resistance are demanded. Although the application of metal matrix composites in the area of contact materials has been known for years, it has been necessary to carry out further optimization for the use of new or modified material systems. Of special interest are materials which are able to dissipate the heat which develops during the use of electrical and electronic units (heat sinks). Additional requirements concerning the effect

of temperature on resistance are development challenges. In many cases improvements in wear resistance will be of benefit, leading to the development of multifunctional material systems.

This book gives an overview of the current state of research and development as well as a realistic introduction to materials in various application areas. Besides basic knowledge of metal matrix composites, the idea of appropriate material systems and production and processing methods, special importance is attached to the presentation of the potential of materials and their application possibilities. This summary arose from a further education seminar of the same name, presented by the German Society of Material Science, which has taken place regularly since 1990. Because of the overview character of the book it is addressed to engineers, scientists and technicians in the material development, production and design areas. As the editor I would like to thank all the authors for their efforts in providing appropriate articles. A special thanks to the publisher Wiley-VCH, represented by Dr. Jörn Ritterbusch, for the support grants and excellent supervision, especially necessary in the critical phases.

Geesthacht, December 2005

Prof. Dr.-Ing. habil. Karl Ulrich Kainer

Contents

Preface V

1	Basics of Metal Matrix Composites	1
	<i>Karl Ulrich Kainer</i>	
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Combination of Materials for Light Metal Matrix Composites	4
1.2.1	Reinforcements	4
1.2.2	Matrix Alloy Systems	6
1.2.3	Production and Processing of Metal Matrix Composites	7
1.3	Mechanism of Reinforcement	12
1.3.1	Long Fiber Reinforcement	13
1.3.2	Short Fiber Reinforcement	16
1.3.3	Strengthening by Particles	20
1.3.4	Young's Modulus	22
1.3.5	Thermal Expansion Coefficient	24
1.4	Interface Influence	26
1.4.1	Basics of Wettability and Infiltration	27
1.4.2	Objective of Adhesion	35
1.5	Structure and Properties of Light Metal Composite Materials	40
1.6	Possible Applications of Metal Matrix Composites	48
1.7	Recycling	52
	References	52
2	Particles, Fibers and Short Fibers for the Reinforcement of Metal Materials	55
	<i>Hajo Dieringa and Karl Ulrich Kainer</i>	
2.1	Introduction	55
2.2	Particles	56
2.2.1	Fibers	59
2.3	Continuous Fibers	61
2.3.1	Monofilaments	62
2.3.2	Multifilament Fibers	65
2.3.2.1	Carbon Fibers	65

2.3.2.2	Oxide Ceramic Fibers	68
2.3.2.3	SiC Multifilament Fibers	70
2.3.2.4	Delivery Shapes of Multifilament Fibers	72
2.4	Short Fibers and Whiskers	73
	References	75
3	Preforms for the Reinforcement of Light Metals – Manufacture, Applications and Potential	77
	<i>R. Buschmann</i>	
3.1	Introduction	77
3.2	Manufacturing Principle of Preforms	78
3.2.1	Short Fiber Preforms	78
3.2.2	Hybrid Preforms	85
3.3	Current Applications	88
3.3.1	Aluminum Diesel Piston with Fiber Reinforced Combustion Bowl	88
3.3.2	Aluminum Cylinder Heads with Fiber Reinforced Valve Bridges	90
3.3.3	Cylinder Liner Reinforcement in Aluminum Crankcases, Lokasil	90
3.3.4	Al-MMC Bearing Blocks for Crankshafts	92
3.3.5	Al-MMC Brake Disks	92
3.4	Summary and Outlook	93
	References	94
4	Aluminum-matrix Composite Materials in Combustion Engines	95
	<i>E. Köhler and J. Niehues</i>	
4.1	Introduction	95
4.2	Cylinder Crankcase Design Concepts and Cylinder Surface Technology	96
4.2.1	ALUSIL®	98
4.2.2	Heterogeneous Concepts	99
4.2.3	Quasi-monolithic Concept	100
4.2.4	The LOKASIL® Concept [9]	101
4.3	Production of LOKASIL® Cylinder Crankcases	103
4.3.1	Introduction	103
4.3.2	Preform Manufacture	103
4.3.3	Casting Process	105
4.4	Summary and Outlook	108
	References	108
5	Production of Composites or Bonding of Material by Thermal Coating Processes	111
	<i>B. Wielage, A. Wank, and J. Wilden</i>	
5.1	Introduction	111
5.2	Thermal Spraying	112
5.2.1	Spraying Additive Materials	113
5.2.2	Substrate Materials	115

5.2.3	Surface Preparation	115
5.2.4	Structure and Properties of Spray Coatings	116
5.2.5	Adhesion of Thermally Sprayed Coatings	119
5.2.6	Thermal Spraying Processes	120
5.2.6.1	Flame Spraying	120
5.2.6.1.1	Powder Flame Spraying	120
5.2.6.1.2	Plastic Flame Spraying	121
5.2.6.1.3	Wire/Rod Flame Spraying	121
5.2.6.2	Detonation Spraying	122
5.2.6.3	High Velocity Flame Spraying	123
5.2.6.4	Cold Gas Spraying	125
5.2.6.5	Arc Spraying	126
5.2.6.6	Plasma Spraying	127
5.2.6.6.1	DC Plasma Spraying	127
5.2.6.6.2	HF Plasma Spraying	128
5.2.7	New Applications	129
5.2.8	Quality Assurance	131
5.2.9	Environmental Aspects	132
5.3	Cladding	132
5.3.1	Coating Material	133
5.3.2	Substrate Materials	137
5.3.3	Cladding Processes	137
5.3.3.1	Autogenous Cladding	137
5.3.3.2	Open Arc Cladding (OA)	137
5.3.3.3	Underpowder Cladding (UP)	138
5.3.3.4	Resistance Electro Slag Welding (RES)	139
5.3.3.5	Metal Inert Gas Welding	140
5.3.3.6	Plasma MIG Cladding	141
5.3.3.7	Plasma Powder Transferred Arc Welding (PTA)	142
5.3.3.8	Plasma Hot Wire Cladding	143
5.4	Summary and Outlook	144
	References	145
6	Machining Technology Aspects of Al-MMC	147
	<i>K. Weinert, M. Buschka, and M. Lange</i>	
6.1	Introduction	147
6.2	Machining Problems, Cutting Material Selection and Surface Layer Influence	147
6.3	Processing of Components of Metal Matrix Composites	152
6.3.1	Materials, Cutting Materials and Process Parameters	153
6.3.2	Evaluation of Machinability	154
6.3.3	Turning of SiC-particle-reinforced Brake Drums	154
6.3.4	Boring of Si-particle- and Al ₂ O ₃ -fiber-reinforced Al Cylinder Surfaces	161
6.3.4.1	Pre-boring Operation	161

6.3.4.2	Finish Bore Processing	163
6.3.5	Drilling and Milling of TiB ₂ -particle-reinforced Extruded Profiles	166
6.3.5.1	Drilling	166
6.3.5.2	Milling	168
6.4	Summary	171
	References	171

7 Mechanical Behavior and Fatigue Properties of Metal-Matrix Composites 173

H. Biermann and O. Hartmann

7.1	Introduction	173
7.2	Basics and State of Knowledge	174
7.2.1	Thermal Residual Stresses	174
7.2.2	Deformation Behavior of Metal-Matrix Composites	174
7.2.3	Determination of the Damage in Composites	176
7.2.4	Basic Elements and Terms of Fatigue	178
7.2.5	Fatigue Behavior of Composites	183
7.3	Experimental	185
7.3.1	Materials	185
7.3.2	Mechanical Tests	186
7.4	Results and Comparison of Different MMCs	186
7.4.1	Cyclic Deformation Behavior	186
7.4.2	Fatigue Life Behavior	188
7.4.3	Damage Evolution	192
7.5	Summary	193
	Acknowledgement	194
	References	194

8 Interlayers in Metal Matrix Composites: Characterisation and Relevance for the Material Properties 197

J. Woltersdorf, A. Feldhoff, and E. Pippel

8.1	Summary	197
8.2	The Special Role of Interfaces and Interlayers	197
8.3	Experimental	198
8.4	Interlayer Optimisation in C/Mg–Al Composites by Selection of Reaction Partners	199
8.5	Interlayer Optimisation in C/Mg–Al Composites by Fiber Precoating	205
	Acknowledgements	211
	References	211

9 Metallic Composite Materials for Cylinder Surfaces of Combustion Engines and Their Finishing by Honing 215

J. Schmid

9.1	Introduction	215
-----	--------------	-----

9.2	Composites Based on Light Metals	215
9.2.1	Manufacturing Possibilities	215
9.2.1.1	Casting of Over-eutectic Alloys	215
9.2.1.2	Infiltration	216
9.2.1.3	Sintering	216
9.2.1.4	Stirring of Hard Particles into the Melt	216
9.2.1.5	Spray Forming	218
9.2.1.6	Addition of Reactive Components into the Melt	218
9.2.1.7	Thermal Coating	218
9.2.1.8	Laser Alloying	218
9.2.2	Selection Criteria	219
9.2.2.1	Strength	219
9.2.2.2	Tribology	220
9.2.2.3	Flexibility	220
9.2.2.4	Design Criteria	220
9.2.2.5	Processing and Machining	221
9.2.2.6	Strength of the Material Composite	221
9.2.2.7	Heat Transmission Ability and Heat Expansion	221
9.2.3	Fine Processing	221
9.2.3.1	Processing before Honing	222
9.2.3.2	Honing Step 1	222
9.2.3.3	Honing Step 2	223
9.2.3.4	Honing Step 3	224
9.2.4	Marginal Conditions	228
9.2.4.1	Expanding systems	228
9.2.4.2	Cooling Lubricants	228
9.2.4.3	Cutting Speeds	229
9.2.5	Summary	229
9.3	Plasma Coatings	230
9.3.1	General	230
9.3.1.1	Coating Materials	231
9.3.1.1.1	Layer Characteristics and Tribological Properties	231
9.3.1.1.2	Application Potential	232
9.3.1.2	Comparison of Honing with other Processing Technologies	232
9.3.2	Definition of the Process Task	234
9.3.2.1	Process Adding, Geometry	234
9.3.2.2	Requirements of the Surface Processing	234
9.3.3	Results of Honing Tests	236
9.3.3.1	Investigation of Adhesion	236
9.3.3.1.1	Adhesion of the Plasma Coating at High Machining Rates (Rough Honing)	236
9.3.3.1.2	Adhesion Strength during Honing of Thin Coatings	236
9.3.3.2	Surface Qualities, Removal of Spalling	237
9.3.3.3	Reachable Form Accuracies	239
9.3.3.4	Processing of Metal–Ceramic Coatings	239

9.3.3.5	Cooling Lubricants	241
9.3.3.5.1	Honing of Pure Metallic Plasma Coatings	241
9.3.3.5.2	Metal Composites	241
9.3.4	Summary	241
	References	242

10 Powder Metallurgically Manufactured Metal Matrix Composites 243

Norbert Hort and Karl Ulrich Kainer

10.1	Summary	243
10.2	Introduction	243
10.3	Source Materials	245
10.3.1	Metallic Powders	245
10.3.2	Ceramic Reinforcement Components	248
10.4	Manufacture of MMCs	249
10.4.1	Mechanical Alloying	253
10.4.2	<i>In situ</i> Composite Materials	258
10.4.3	Mixing	259
10.4.4	Consolidation	260
10.4.5	Spray Forming	262
10.4.6	Subsequent Processing	262
10.5	Materials	263
10.5.1	Magnesium-based MMCs	263
10.5.2	Aluminum-based MMCs	264
10.5.3	Titanium-based MMCs	266
10.5.4	Copper-based MMCs	267
10.5.5	Iron-based MMCs	269
10.5.6	Nickel-based MMCs	271
10.6	Summary and Outlook	272
	References	272

11 Spray Forming – An Alternative Manufacturing Technique for MMC Aluminum Alloys 277

P. Krug, G. Sinha

11.1	Introduction	277
11.2	Spray Forming	280
11.3	Techniques	281
11.3.1	Rapid Solidification (RS) Technique	281
11.3.2	Spray Forming Technique	282
11.3.3	Melting Concept	283
11.3.4	Atomisation of the Metal Melt	284
11.3.5	Nozzle Unit	284
11.3.6	Primary Gas Nozzle	285
11.3.7	Secondary Gas Nozzle	285
11.3.8	Plant Safety	287
11.3.9	Re-injection of Overspray Powder	288

11.3.10	Functional Ways of Injecting for Re-injection	288
11.4	Materials	289
11.4.1	Spray Forming Products for Automotive Applications	289
11.4.2	Spray Forming MMC Materials	290
	Acknowledgement	293
	References	293
12	Noble and Nonferrous Metal Matrix Composite Materials	295
	<i>C. Blawert</i>	
12.1	Introduction	295
12.2	Layer Composite Materials	295
12.2.1	Contact- and Thermo-bimetals	296
12.2.2	Wear-protection Layers with Embedded Ceramic Particles	298
12.3	Particle Reinforced Composites	299
12.4	Infiltration Composites	302
12.5	Fiber Reinforced Composites	303
	References	306
	Subject Index	309

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1

Basics of Metal Matrix Composites*Karl Ulrich Kainer*

1.1

Introduction

Metal composite materials have found application in many areas of daily life for quite some time. Often it is not realized that the application makes use of composite materials. These materials are produced *in situ* from the conventional production and processing of metals. Here, the Dalmatian sword with its meander structure, which results from welding two types of steel by repeated forging, can be mentioned. Materials like cast iron with graphite or steel with a high carbide content, as well as tungsten carbides, consisting of carbides and metallic binders, also belong to this group of composite materials. For many researchers the term metal matrix composites is often equated with the term light metal matrix composites (MMCs). Substantial progress in the development of light metal matrix composites has been achieved in recent decades, so that they could be introduced into the most important applications. In traffic engineering, especially in the automotive industry, MMCs have been used commercially in fiber reinforced pistons and aluminum crank cases with strengthened cylinder surfaces as well as particle-strengthened brake disks.

These innovative materials open up unlimited possibilities for modern material science and development; the characteristics of MMCs can be designed into the material, custom-made, dependent on the application. From this potential, metal matrix composites fulfill all the desired conceptions of the designer. This material group becomes interesting for use as constructional and functional materials, if the property profile of conventional materials either does not reach the increased standards of specific demands, or is the solution of the problem. However, the technology of MMCs is in competition with other modern material technologies, for example powder metallurgy. The advantages of the composite materials are only realized when there is a reasonable cost – performance relationship in the component production. The use of a composite material is obligatory if a special property profile can only be achieved by application of these materials.

The possibility of combining various material systems (metal – ceramic – non-metal) gives the opportunity for unlimited variation. The properties of these new

materials are basically determined by the properties of their single components. Figure 1.1 shows the allocation of the composite materials into groups of various types of materials.

The reinforcement of metals can have many different objectives. The reinforcement of light metals opens up the possibility of application of these materials in areas where weight reduction has first priority. The precondition here is the improvement of the component properties. The development objectives for light metal composite materials are:

- Increase in yield strength and tensile strength at room temperature and above while maintaining the minimum ductility or rather toughness,
- Increase in creep resistance at higher temperatures compared to that of conventional alloys,
- Increase in fatigue strength, especially at higher temperatures,
- Improvement of thermal shock resistance,
- Improvement of corrosion resistance,
- Increase in Young's modulus,
- Reduction of thermal elongation.

To summarize, an improvement in the weight specific properties can result, offering the possibilities of extending the application area, substitution of common materials and optimisation of component properties. With functional materials there is another objective, the precondition of maintaining the appropriate function of the material. Objectives are for example:

- Increase in strength of conducting materials while maintaining the high conductivity,
- Improvement in low temperature creep resistance (reactionless materials),
- Improvement of burnout behavior (switching contact),
- Improvement of wear behavior (sliding contact),
- Increase in operating time of spot welding electrodes by reduction of burn outs,
- Production of layer composite materials for electronic components,
- Production of ductile composite superconductors,
- Production of magnetic materials with special properties.

For other applications different development objectives are given, which differ from those mentioned before. For example, in medical technology, mechanical properties, like extreme corrosion resistance and low degradation as well as biocompatibility are expected.

Although increasing development activities have led to system solutions using metal composite materials, the use of especially innovative systems, particularly in the area of light metals, has not been realised. The reason for this is insufficient process stability and reliability, combined with production and processing problems and inadequate economic efficiency. Application areas, like traffic engineering, are very cost orientated and conservative and the industry is not willing to pay additional costs for the use of such materials. For all these reasons metal matrix composites are only at the beginning of the evolution curve of modern materials, see Fig. 1.2.

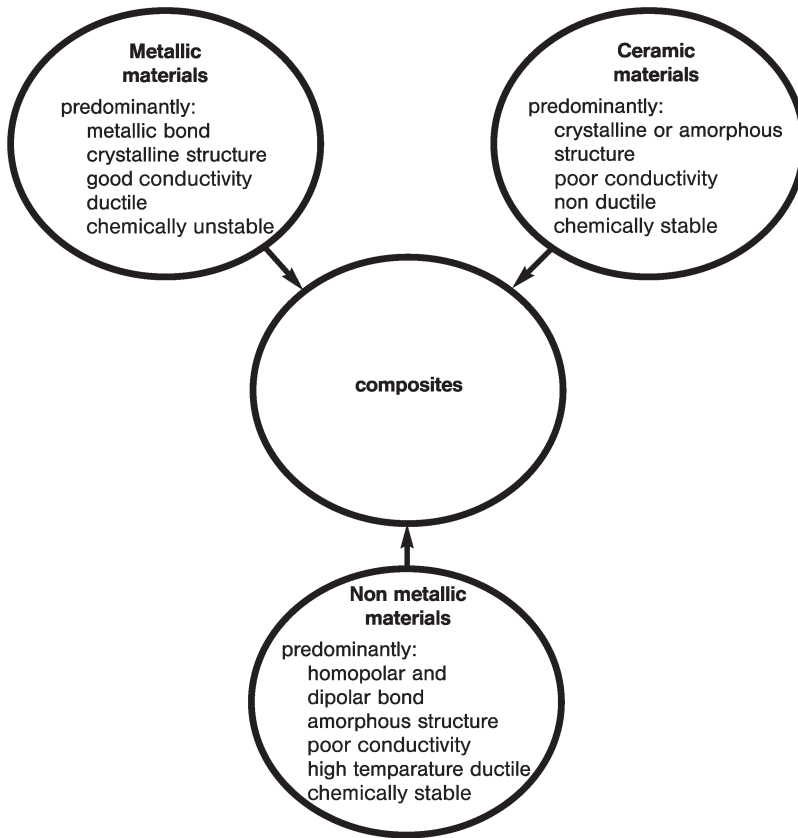


Fig. 1.1 Classification of the composite materials within the group of materials [1].

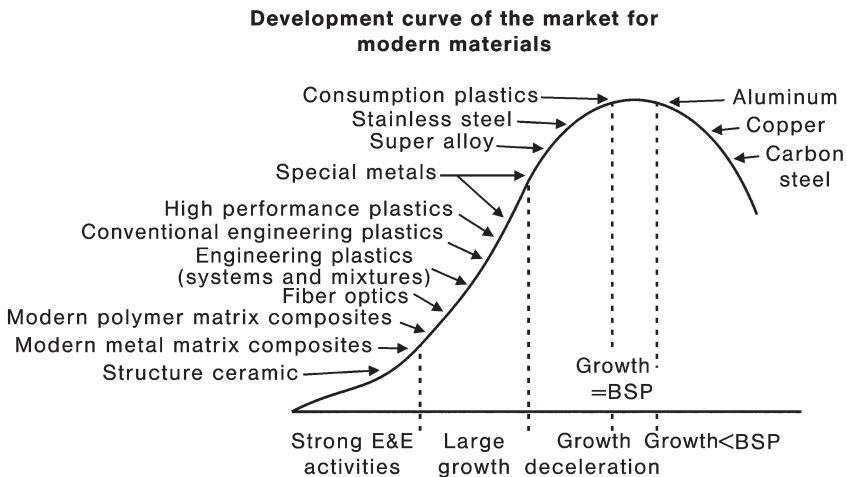


Fig. 1.2 Development curve of the market for modern materials [2].

Metal matrix composites can be classified in various ways. One classification is the consideration of type and contribution of reinforcement components in particle-, layer-, fiber- and penetration composite materials (see Fig. 1.3). Fiber composite materials can be further classified into continuous fiber composite materials (multi- and monofilament) and short fibers or, rather, whisker composite materials, see Fig. 1.4.

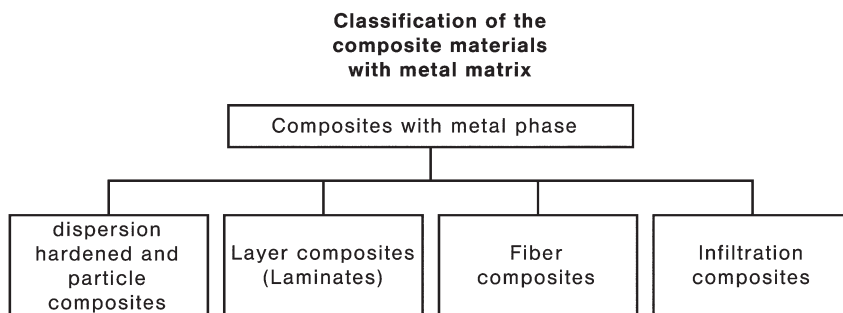


Fig. 1.3 Classification of composite materials with metal matrixes.

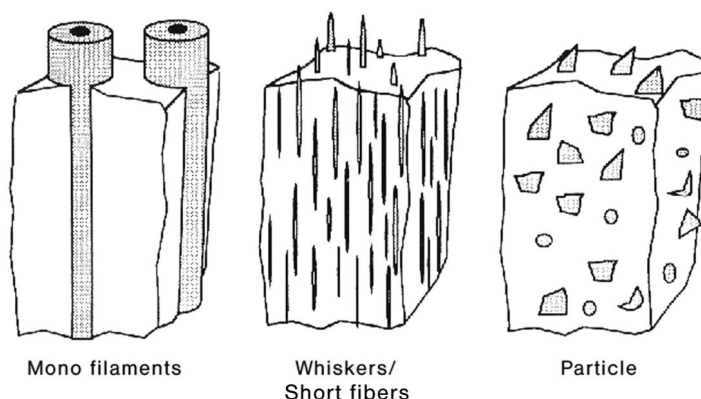


Fig. 1.4 Schematic presentation of three shapes of metal matrix composite materials [3].

1.2

Combination of Materials for Light Metal Matrix Composites

1.2.1

Reinforcements

Reinforcements for metal matrix composites have a manifold demand profile, which is determined by production and processing and by the matrix system of the composite material. The following demands are generally applicable [4]:

- low density,
- mechanical compatibility (a thermal expansion coefficient which is low but adapted to the matrix),
- chemical compatibility,
- thermal stability,
- high Young's modulus,
- high compression and tensile strength,
- good processability,
- economic efficiency.

These demands can be achieved only by using non-metal inorganic reinforcement components. For metal reinforcement ceramic particles or, rather, fibers or carbon fibers are often used. Due to the high density and the affinity to reaction with the matrix alloy the use of metallic fiber usual fails. Which components are finally used, depends on the selected matrix and on the demand profile of the intended application. In Refs. [4, 5] information about available particles, short fibers, whiskers and continuous fibers for the reinforcement of metals is given, including data of manufacturing, processing and properties. Representative examples are shown in Table 1.1. The production, processing and type of application of various reinforcements depends on the production technique for the composite materials, see Refs. [3, 7]. A combined application of various reinforcements is also possible (hybrid technique) [3, 8].

Every reinforcement has a typical profile, which is significant for the effect within the composite material and the resulting profile. Table 1.2 gives an overview of possible property profiles of various material groups. Figure 1.5 shows the specific strength and specific Young's modulus of quasi-isotropic fiber composite materials with various matrixes in comparison to monolithic metals. The group of discontinuous reinforced metals offers the best conditions for reaching development targets; the applied production technologies and reinforcement components, like short fibers, particle and whiskers, are cost effective and the production of units in large item numbers is possible. The relatively high isotropy of the properties in comparison to the long-fiber continuous reinforced light metals and the possibility

Tab. 1.1 Properties of typical discontinuous reinforcements for aluminium and magnesium reinforcements [6].

Reinforcement	Saffil (Al_2O_3)	SiC particle	Al_2O_3 particle
crystal structure	δ - Al_2O_3	hexagonal	hexagonal
density ($g\ cm^{-3}$)	3.3	3.2	3.9
average diameter (μm)	3.0	variable	variable
length (μm)	ca. 150	–	–
Mohs hardness	7.0	9.7	9.0
strength (MPa)	2000	–	–
Young's Modulus (GPa)	300	200–300	380

Tab. 1.2 Property potential of different metal matrix composites, after [2].

MMC type	Properties Strength	Young's modulus	High temperature properties	Wear	Expansion coefficient	Costs
mineral wool: MMC	*	*	**	**	*	medium
discontinuous reinforced MMC	**	**	*	***	**	low
long fiber reinforced MMC: C fibers	**	**	**	*	***	high
other fibers	***	***	***	*	**	high

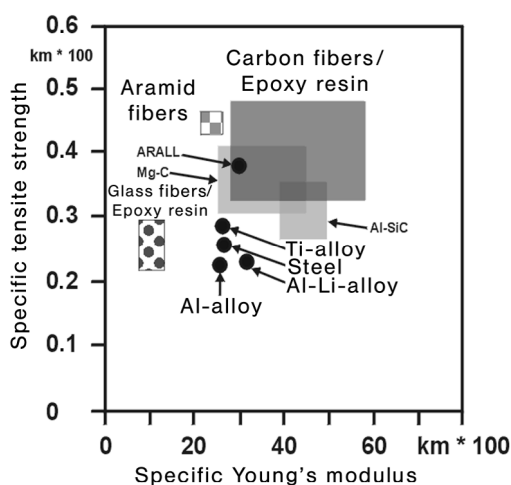


Fig. 1.5 Specific tensile strength and specific Young's modulus of different quasi-isotropic fiber composite materials in comparison to some metal alloys, after [2].

of processing of composites by forming and cutting production engineering are further advantages.

1.2.2

Matrix Alloy Systems

The selection of suitable matrix alloys is mainly determined by the intended application of the composite material. With the development of light metal composite materials that are mostly easy to process, conventional light metal alloys are applied as matrix materials. In the area of powder metallurgy special alloys can be applied due to the advantage of fast solidification during the powder production. Those systems are free from segregation problems that arise in conventional solidification. Also the application of systems with oversaturated or metastable structures is possible. Examples for matrix configurations are given in Refs. [7, 9–15]:

- conventional cast alloys
 - G-AlSi12CuMgNi
 - G-AlSi9Mg
 - G-AlSi7 (A356)
 - AZ91
 - AE42
- conventional wrought alloys
 - AlMgSiCu (6061)
 - AlCuSiMn (2014)
 - AlZnMgCu1.5 (7075)
 - TiAl6V4
- special alloys
 - Al–Cu–Mg–Ni–Fe-alloy (2618)
 - Al–Cu–Mg–Li-alloy (8090)
 - AZ91Ca

For functional materials non-alloyed or low-alloyed non-ferrous or noble metals are generally used. The reason for this is the demand for the retention of the high conductivity or ductility. A dispersion hardening to reach the required mechanical characteristics at room or higher temperatures is then an optimal solution.

1.2.3

Production and Processing of Metal Matrix Composites

Metal matrix composite materials can be produced by many different techniques. The focus of the selection of suitable process engineering is the desired kind, quantity and distribution of the reinforcement components (particles and fibers), the matrix alloy and the application. By altering the manufacturing method, the processing and the finishing, as well as by the form of the reinforcement components it is possible to obtain different characteristic profiles, although the same composition and amounts of the components are involved. The production of a suitable precursor material, the processing to a construction unit or a semi-finished material (profile) and the finishing treatment must be separated. For cost effective reasons prototypes, with dimensions close to the final product, and reforming procedures are used, which can minimize the mechanical finishing of the construction units.

In general the following product engineering types are possible:

- Melting metallurgical processes
 - infiltration of short fiber-, particle- or hybrid preforms by squeeze casting, vacuum infiltration or pressure infiltration [7, 13–15]
 - reaction infiltration of fiber- or particle preforms [16, 17]
 - processing of precursor material by stirring the particles in metallic melts, followed by sand casting, permanent mold casting or high pressure die casting [9, 10]

- Powder metallurgical processes
 - pressing and sintering and/or forging of powder mixtures and composite powders
 - extrusion or forging of metal-powder particle mixtures [11, 12]
 - extrusion or forging of spraying compatible precursor materials [7, 18, 19]
- Hot isostatic pressing of powder mixtures and fiber clutches
- Further processing of precursor material from the melting metallurgy by thixocasting or -forming, extrusion [20], forging, cold massive forming or super plastic forming
- Joining and welding of semi-manufactured products
- Finishing by machining techniques [21]
- Combined deformation of metal wires (group superconductors).

Melting metallurgy for the production of MMCs is at present of greater technical importance than powder metallurgy. It is more economical and has the advantage of being able to use well proven casting processes for the production of MMCs. Figure 1.6 shows schematically the possible methods of melting metallurgical production. For melting metallurgical processing of composite materials three procedures are mainly used [15]:

- compo-casting or melt stirring
- gas pressure infiltration
- squeeze casting or pressure casting.

Both the terms compo-casting and melt stirring are used for stirring particles into a light alloy melt. Figure 1.7 shows the schematic operational sequence of this procedure. The particles are often tend to form agglomerates, which can be only dissolved by intense stirring. However, here gas access into the melt must be absolutely avoided, since this could lead to unwanted porosities or reactions. Careful attention must be paid to the dispersion of the reinforcement components, so that the reactivity of the components used is coordinated with the temperature of the melt and the duration of stirring, since reactions with the melt can lead to the dissolution of the reinforcement components. Because of the lower surface to volume ratio of spherical particles, reactivity is usually less critical with stirred particle reinforcement than with fibers. The melt can be cast directly or processed with alternative procedures such as squeeze casting or thixocasting. Melt stirring is used by the Duralcan Company for the production of particle-strengthened aluminum alloys [9, 10]. At the Lanxide Company a similar process is used, with additional reactions between the reinforcement components and the molten matrix being purposefully promoted to obtain a qualitatively high-grade composite material [16]. In the reaction procedures of the Lanxide Company it may be desirable that the reinforcement component reacts completely with the melt to form the component *in situ*, which then transfers the actual reinforcement effect to the second phase in the MMC.

In gas pressure infiltration the melt infiltrates the preform with a gas applied from the outside. A gas that is inert with respect to the matrix is used. The melting

- , plasma mig- 141
 - , plasma powder transferred arc- 142f.
 - , resistance electro slag- 139f.
 - , underpowder- 138
 - Classification 4
 - Coating materials 127, 130, 133, 134, 230, 231, 295
 - Coating techniques, thermal 111, 218
 - Coefficients of thermal expansion 279
 - Cold gas spraying 112, 118, 125
 - Cold isostatic pressing (CIP) 260, 281
 - Combustion bowl 88
 - fiber reinforced 88
 - Combustion engine 231
 - Comparison of 232
 - Comparison of different MMCs 186
 - Compo-casting 8
 - Composites 215
 - aluminum matrix 49, 50, 56, 90, 95, 96, 101, 174, 223, 241, 265
 - characterization 180
 - fatigue behavior 87, 94, 174, 180, 183, 184
 - fiber
 - infiltration
 - in situ 1, 8, 152, 177, 197, 198, 199, 200, 244, 248, 249, 258, 259, 264, 266, 267, 270, 271
 - light metal 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 18, 21, 22, 24, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 49, 77, 86, 94, 95, 113, 147, 148, 215, 216, 218, 219, 220, 224, 229, 241
 - metal matrix
 - noble metal 298, 301, 305
 - nonferrous metal matrix 295
 - particle
 - Concepts 52, 95, 96, 99, 100, 108, 282
 - Consolidation 249, 252, 259, 260, 264, 267, 270, 281
 - Continuous fibers 5, 41, 52, 61, 73, 81
 - Cooling lubricants 228, 229, 241
 - metal composites 241
 - Copper-based MMCs 267
 - Crack 38
 - Crankcases 90, 95 ff, 147, 152–154, 162, 163, 171, 221, 239
 - Crankshafts 92
 - Cutting material selection 147
 - Cutting parameter 155, 159, 163, 169
 - Cutting speed 154, 157, 158, 159, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 168, 169, 229
 - CVD-diamond 154
 - – thick film 156
 - Cyclic deformation behavior 186, 187
 - Cyclic hardening 186–187
 - Cyclic softening 187
 - Cylinder crankcase concepts 95, 96, 155, 161, 162, 163
 - Cylinder crankcases 103, 104, 106, 108
 - Cylinder liner reinforcement 90
 - Cylinder liners 289
 - Cylinder surface 91
- D**
- DaimlerChrysler AG 289
 - Damage 176–178, 192, 193
 - DC plasma spraying 127
 - Deformation behavior 15, 174, 175, 186, 187, 193
 - Degassing 282
 - Deposit layer 286
 - Design criteria 220
 - Detonation spraying 122, 123, 124
 - Diamond tools 262
 - Diesel piston 88
 - Dilution 132ff.
 - Direct squeeze casting 11
 - DISPAL 277
 - Dispersion strengthening 280
 - Drilling 101, 108, 141, 152, 154, 155, 165–168, 171, 218, 220, 221–223, 229, 232, 234, 239
- E**
- Edge angle 27
 - Effective geometry factor 23
 - Embedded ceramic particle 239, 241
 - Expanding system 228
 - Expansion coefficient, thermal 5, 20, 24, 25, 45, 46, 47, 50, 55, 174, 296, 305
 - Extrusion 260, 261
 - profiles, particle reinforced 152, 166, 171
- F**
- Fatigue 173, 178, 183, 184
 - Basquin law 181, 189, 193
 - crack growth rate 182
 - cyclic deformation curve 179, 186–188
 - cyclic stress–strain curve 180
 - Manson-Coffin law 181, 189, 193
 - stress-strain hysteresis loop 179
 - Fatigue life 189–191, 194
 - – behavior 188
 - Fatigue properties 173, 256
 - Fiber 248, 261
 - application 304

- damage 261
- long 248
- production 303
- reinforced composites 303
- reinforcement 153
- short 248
- Fiber composites 13
- Fiber reinforcement 13, 16, 102, 186, 193, 194, 205, 248, 306
- Filler wires 127, 133, 138
- Fine bore processing
- Fine processing 221
- Finish bore processing 163
- Flakes
- Flame spraying 100, 112, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 127, 130
- Forging 260
- Form accuracy
- Fracture 38
- Fracture toughness 277, 278

G

- Gas atomization 281
- Gas pressure infiltration 8

H

- Hard metal alloys 134
- Hard particle in melting
- Heat dissipation 35
- Heat treatment 185
- HF plasma spraying 128, 129
- High stiffness 290
- High strength 277, 280
- High velocity oxyfuel spraying
- HIP 261
- Honing 222, 227, 228, 232, 236
 - comparison with 232
 - processing technologies 232
 - thin coatings 144, 220, 236
 - thin coatings 236
- Honing tests 234, 236, 238
- Hot gas corrosion 113
- Hot isostatic pressing (HIP) 260
- Hot strength 280
- Hot-pressing 260
- Hybrid preforms 85, 91
- Hydride preforms

I

- Importance, material scientific
- In situ* composite material 258
- Indirect squeeze casting 11
- Infiltration 216

- composites 302
- process 32
- Injectors 128, 288, 289, 291, 292
- Inner interfaces
- Interface 26, 197
 - improvement 197
 - influence 26
 - optimization
- Interfaces and layers 120
- Interlayers 197, 198
 - improvement 197
 - microstructural characterisation 198
- Intermetallic precipitations 280
- Inverse mixture rule: Reuss-model (IMR) 23
- Iron-based MMCs 269, 270

L

- Laser alloying 100, 103, 218, 220
- Layer adhesion 100
- Layer composite materials 295
 - contact- and thermo-bimetals 296
 - wear-protection layers 298
- Layer composites 296, 298
- Light metal composites 42, 215, 229
- Linear mixture rule 13
 - – – Voigt-model (ROM) 22
- Lokasil® 90, 91, 95, 96, 101, 103, 104, 106–108, 153, 155
 - -cylinder crankcases 107
- Long fiber reinforcement 13
- Lubrication concept 158

M

- Machinability 154
- Machining 221
 - problems 147
 - technology 147
- Magnesium-based MMCs 263
- Manufacture of MMCs 249
- Manufacturing techniques, alternative 73, 75
- Materials
 - for light metal composites 42, 215, 229
 - metallic
- Matrix alloy systems 6
- MCrAlY 113, 128
- Mechanical alloying 130, 245, 248, 249, 253, 254, 255, 257, 258, 259, 264, 266, 271
- Mechanical behavior 173, 176
 - stress-strain curve 176
- Mechanical tests, fatigue behavior 177, 186
- Melt stirring 8

Melting concept 283
 Melting metallurgical processes 7
 Melting metallurgy 8
 Metal composites 42, 48, 215, 229, 241
 Metal injection molding 260
 Metal matrix composite 103, 152, 198, 243
 Metal melt, atomization
 Metal-ceramic-coatings 281
 Metallographic testing method 131
 Metallic powder 247, 300
 Metallic powders 246
 Metallurgical reactions 126
 Micromechanical model (shear lay model)
 16, 20
 Microstructure 292
 – of alloy 281
 Microtomography 177
 Milling 166, 221
 Minimum pressure 32
 Minimum quantity lubrication 157
 Mixing 45, 132, 135, 137 ff., 249, 253, 254,
 258, 259, 260, 262, 263, 264, 267, 268, 270,
 292, 300
 – parameters 259
 – process 259
 MMC 198, 263
 – aluminum alloys 277
 – aluminum-based 264
 – atomic dimension 198
 – copper-based 267
 – iron-based 269
 – magnesium-based 263
 – materials 290
 – materials, spray forming
 – nickel-based 271
 – titanium-based 266
 Monofilament 4, 61, 62
 – chemical vapor deposition (CVD) 62
 Moulded paddings 130
 Multifilament 61
 – fibers 61, 65, 70, 71, 72

N

Nanostructured materials 130
 Nickel-based MMCs 271
 NiCrBSi 113, 121, 135
 Noble metal matrix composite 295, 301
 Nonferrous metal matrix composite 295
 Nozzle unit 284, 286

O

ODS alloys 244
 Osprey Metals Ltd. 286
 Over eutectic alloys 215, 220

Over spray powder, re-injection
 Over-eutectic AlSi alloy 149
 Overspray powder 287–289
 Oxide ceramic fibers 68, 70
 Oxide dispersion strengthened 244

P

Particles 4, 56, 57
 – Al_2O_3 57
 – AlN 57
 – application 301
 – B_4C 57
 – BN 57
 – ceramic 237, 239, 241
 – composites
 – dispersion-hardening 299
 – injectors 289, 291
 – inner oxidation 301
 – processing 300
 – reinforced composites 299
 – reinforced extruded profiles 166
 – reinforced extrusion profiles 152, 166,
 171
 – reinforcement 8, 22, 56, 86, 148, 184,
 194, 236, 302
 – SiC 57
 – TiB₂ 57
 – TiC 57
 Peak Werkstoff GmbH 277, 282–284, 286,
 287, 289, 291
 Peripheral zone 159
 Permeability 34
 Pickling 116
 Plant safety 287
 Plasma coatings 218, 220, 230, 232, 234,
 238, 239, 241
 – adhesion
 – metallic
 Plasma spraying 100, 112, 118, 127, 128,
 129, 130, 132, 230, 231, 232, 303
 Plastic flame spraying 121
 PM-MMC 244, 249
 – manufacture 249
 Pneumatic transport 288
 Polycrystalline diamond (PCD) 154, 156
 Powder flame spraying 120, 121, 122
 – metallurgical processes 8
 Powder metallurgical techniques 277
 – metallurgically 243
 – metallurgy 1, 6, 8, 51, 220, 244, 245, 249,
 255, 263, 264, 266, 271, 277, 280
 – transport pumps 291
 Pre-boring operation 161, 162
 Preform 77, 78, 104

- infiltration 107
- manufacture 103
- manufacture 78, 102, 103
- Pressure casting 11
- Primary gas nozzle 284, 285
- Primary silicon 280, 289, 290
- Process engineering 7
- Process parameters 153
- Processing 221
- Processing technologies, comparison with honing 236
- Products for automotive applications 289

Q

- Quality assurance 131
- Quasi-MMC 289
- Quasi-monolithic concepts 100, 108
- Quench rate 280

R

- Rapid solidification (RS) technique 280, 281
- Re-injection 288
- Re-injection of over spray powders 288
- Reactive components in melts 218
- Recirculation 52
- Recycling 52, 102, 277
- Reinforcement 4, 248
 - continuous 248
 - discontinuous 248
 - of light metals 77
 - particle 248
- Reinforcement components, ceramic 77, 248, 266
- Reinforcement of cylinder surfaces 43, 152, 153, 163, 165, 171
- Reinforcements
 - by light metals 5, 20, 58
 - by long fibers
 - by particle
 - by short fibers
- Remelting 113, 121
- Residual stress, thermal
- Resistance heating 143
- Reuss model 23
- Rod flame spraying 121, 122
- Rolling 260
- Rota plasma system 130
- Rough honing 236

S

- Schapery 24
- Secondary gas nozzle 284, 285
- Selection criteria 219

- Service life behavior
- Short fiber performs 78, 94, 244
- Short fiber reinforcement 16, 185, 193, 194
- Short fibers 73
- SiC 292
 - multifilament fibers 70, 71
 - particle reinforced brake drums 152, 153, 154, 160, 171
- Silicon carbide (SiC) 290
- Silicon dioxide (SiO₂) 290
- Sintering 8, 69, 103, 105, 114, 133, 136, 216, 220, 249, 254, 260, 261, 266, 267, 301, 303, 304
- Sintering 216, 260
- SiO₂ 68
- Solidification 280
- Spark erosion 246
- Spray coatings 116, 299
- Spraying 111ff.
 - , arc- 126
 - , cold gas- 125
 - , cold gas flame- 130
 - , DC plasma- 127
 - , detonation- 122ff.
 - , flame- 120
 - , HF plasma- 128
 - , high velocity flame- (HVOF) 123ff., 130
 - , plastic flame- 121
 - , powder flame- 120
 - , single wire arc- 127
 - , suspension plasma- 129
 - , vacuum plasma- 128ff.
 - , wire/rod flame- 121f.
- Spray forming 218, 220, 246, 247, 249, 262, 264, 267, 277, 278, 280, 282, 283, 284, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 292, 293, 300
- Spray forming 218, 246, 262, 277, 280, 282, 283, 284, 286, 288, 289, 290, 293
- Spraying techniques, thermal 103, 111, 132, 133, 144, 249, 252
- Squeeze casting 7, 11
- Stiffness 177, 192
- Stress–strain curve 15
- Stress–strain hysteresis loops 194
- Structure 40
- Substrate materials 115, 137, 259
- Surface layer influence 47, 115, 120, 124, 147, 149, 151, 152
- Surface processing 234

T

- Tailored materials 279
- Thermal coating processes 111
- Thermal coefficient of expansion 277