

A METHOD FOR STABILIZING A PLASMA AND AN IMPROVED IONIZATION CHAMBER.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

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The present invention relates to a method for stabilizing a high-voltage induced plasma.

In addition, the invention relates to the use of such method in generating X-rays.

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Further, the present invention relates to an ionization chamber for forming a high-voltage induced plasma.

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Additionally, the invention relates to an X-ray generator comprising such ionization chamber, and further to a laser apparatus comprising such X-ray generator.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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It is known that the discharge stability of pulsed gas lasers is greatly enhanced by supplying a pre-ionizing radiation to the gaseous medium. One of the possibilities for obtaining pre-ionization is using an X-ray generator. An example thereof is described in WO8910003.

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In general, the performance of an X-ray generator is based on the following principle:

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- a plasma is created as a positive ion source
- the positive ions are accelerated towards a negatively polarized electrode and create secondary electrons upon collision with this electrode
- the resulting electron beam is accelerated away from the same electrode and send to collide with a metallic plate
- upon collision of the electron beam on the metallic plate, X-rays are generated.

In a particle type of X-ray generator, one or multiple wires are positioned inside an ionization chamber filled with low pressure gas such as helium. As a high voltage

pulse is applied to the wire(s), plasma will form in the ionization chamber creating a high density of positive ions. This type of positive ion source can be operated at very high repetition rate.

- 5 However, a general and commonly known performance limitation is that, when the plasma has not been ignited for a certain period of time (typically more than one 1 minute), its stability can be erratic, - so called jitter-effect -, or it may generate a lower ion density than usual. This is probably linked to insufficient amount of electrical charges necessary to maintain the plasma upon ignition.

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Since it is further commonly recognized that the timing of the X-ray pre-ionizing beam generated by an X-ray generator with respect to the main laser discharge has a great influence on laser output energy and stability, unstable plasma may seriously compromise optimum performance of the main laser discharge.

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In an attempt to solve the above problem, the amount of electrical charges for maintaining the plasma upon ignition can be increased by increasing the high voltage applied to the wire(s), or by applying a number of pulses with lower voltage subsequently to a first high voltage pulse. However, a disadvantage thereof is that
20 the stress on the high voltage wires is increased and that a higher failure risk is present due to arcing in the ionization chamber.

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It is therefore an object of the present invention to provide a method enabling improved stability of the plasma upon ignition, in particular after not been ignited for a certain period of time.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a method generating a stable and even improved ion density.

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In addition, it is an object of the present invention to provide an ionization chamber improved stability of the plasma upon ignition, in particular after not been ignited for a certain period of time.

A further object of the present invention is to provide an improved X-ray generator.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide an improved laser apparatus.

- 5 The present invention meets the above objects by subjecting the plasma upon ignition to an amount of light.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

- 10 The present invention is directed to a method for stabilizing a plasma comprising:
- a. providing in an ionization chamber a number of high voltage wires and a gas suitable for forming a plasma
 - b. exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,
- 15 characterized in that upon ignition the plasma is subjected to an amount of light.

In addition, the present invention is directed to the use of such method in generating X-rays.

- 20 Further, the present invention is directed to an ionization chamber comprising:
- a. a gas suitable for forming a plasma, and
 - b. a number of high voltage wires for exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,
- characterized in that the ionization chamber comprises means for subjecting the
- 25 plasma upon ignition to an amount of light.

Additionally, the present invention relates to an X-ray generator comprising such ionization chamber, and to a laser apparatus comprising such X-ray generator.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG 1 illustrated an embodiment in accordance with the present invention.

FIG 2 illustrated another embodiment in accordance with the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

5 In a first embodiment in accordance with the present invention a method for stabilizing a plasma comprising:

a. providing in an ionization chamber a number of high voltage wires and a gas suitable for forming a plasma

b. exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,

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characterized in that upon ignition the plasma is subjected to an amount of light.

Applicant surprisingly found and confirmed experimentally that providing optical radiation (light) into the ionization chamber upon ignition of the plasma has the effect
15 of suppressing the instability, - the so-called jitter -, in particular after not been ignited for a relatively long period of time.

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Without being bound by any theory, subjecting the plasma to light may help creating sufficient electrical charges on the surface or in the volume of the ionization chamber
20 necessary to maintain the plasma upon ignition. It is believed that subjection to light enforces excitation of ions in the plasma thereby improving the stability of the plasma.

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The plasma may be ignited from any kind of ionizable gas, preferably selected from
25 the group of noble gases such as helium (He), neon (Ne), argon (Ar), or mixtures thereof.

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In accordance with the present invention, within the ionization chamber the ionizable gas is under a pressure in the range of a medium vacuum, preferably in a range from
30 1 to 100 Pa.

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The light may have any wavelength suitable for suppressing the instability of a plasma. More specifically, the wavelength may be between 10 and 1100 nanometer,

between 100 and 800 nanometer, between 400 and 800 nanometer (visible light range), or between 100 and 400 nanometer (UV range).

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The light may be pulsed or continuous. Continuous light may have the advantage over pulsed light that precise synchronization between light pulse and ionization discharge is not required.

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The light may be focused on one or more of the high voltage wires in the ionization chamber, or on the ignited plasma "center". Preferably, the light is substantially directed into the ionization chamber as a whole. It may be advantageous to expose substantially the whole ionization chamber to light instead of only part of it (or part of
15 the plasma), as this may result in more efficient stabilization of the plasma upon ignition.

In an embodiment in accordance with the present invention, the present invention provided an ionization chamber (1) comprising:

- 20 a. a gas suitable for forming a plasma, and
b. a number of high voltage wires (2) for exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,

characterized in that the ionization chamber comprises means for subjecting (3, 3', 4,
25 4') the plasma upon ignition to an amount of light..

In the ionization chamber, a gas suitable for forming a plasma, - also called an ionizable gas - , is present in medium vacuum conditions. One or a number of high voltage wires are positioned preferably centrally in the ionization chamber and
30 connected to a high voltage source.

Upon ignition of the ionizable gas by applying a high voltage, the formed plasma is exposed to an amount of light for stabilizing the plasma.

In accordance with the present invention, the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may comprise any light source and/or optical system suitable for providing light with a wavelength between 10 and 1100 nanometer, between 100 and 800 nanometer, between 400 and 800 nanometer (visible light range), or between 100 and 400 (UV spectral range), the latter possibly resulting in better efficiency due to the higher photon energy

The light source may have radiation energy from 1 mW to 5000 mW, from 1mW to 3000mW, preferably from 100 mW to 1500 mW and may be continuous or pulsed. In the latter case the optical source can be synchronized to the high voltage pulse applied to the wires in order to provide a pulse of light upon ignition of the plasma.

The means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may be adapted for focusing the light onto the one or more high voltage wires, or on the ignited plasma "center". Preferably, it may be adapted for directing light substantially into the ionization chamber as a whole, i.e. not focused on part of the ionization chamber or not focused at all.

In an embodiment in accordance with the present invention, the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may comprise one or a plurality of internal light sources, i.e. light sources installed within the ionization chamber, or one or a plurality of external light sources (3, 3'), i.e. light sources installed outside the ionization chamber.

In the latter case, the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may additionally comprise one or multiple transparent windows (4') incorporated in the walls of the ionization chamber (1), or may alternatively comprise dedicated optics for guiding the light (4) from the external source(s) (3, 3') into the ionization chamber.

The light source may be any light source suitable for generating light with wavelength and radiation energy in the ranges as indicated above, such as a continuous or flash lamp, a laser, a light emitting diode (LED), etc.

Such optics for guiding the light from the external source(s) into the ionization chamber may comprise any kind of optical instrument suitable for guiding light such as for example mirrors, lenses, beam splitters, prisms, optical waveguides such as optical fibers, etc.

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In a particular embodiment of the present invention as illustrated in FIG 1, the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may comprise several Light Emitting Diodes (LED) (3) emitting in the visible spectral range (400-800 nm), wherein each LED output is coupled to an optical fiber (4). Each optical fiber output is inserted into the ionization chamber with sealed feedthrough. The optical fibers may be inserted at one or more sides, or at opposite sides of the ionization chamber.

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Alternatively and as illustrated in FIG 2, the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light may comprise a flash lamp (3') emitting in the UV spectral range, and one or more windows (4') incorporated into the walls of the ionization chamber.

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In addition, in an embodiment according to the present invention, a method for stabilizing a plasma as described above may be used for generating X-rays. Generating X-rays is based then on the following principle:

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1. a low pressure wire plasma which is stabilized upon ignition by subjecting it to an amount of light creates positive ions
2. The positive ions are accelerated towards a negatively polarized electrode and create secondary electrons upon collision with this electrode
3. The resulting electron beam is accelerated away from the same electrode and send to collide with a metallic plate
4. Upon collision of the electron beam on the metallic plate, X-ray are generated

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Further, in another embodiment according to the present invention, an ionization chamber as described above may be used in an X-ray generator, and an X-ray generator having such ionization chamber incorporated may be used in a laser apparatus.

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CLAIMS:

1. A method for stabilizing a plasma comprising:
 - a. providing in an ionization chamber a number of high voltage wires and a gas suitable for forming a plasma
 - b. exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,

characterized in that upon ignition the plasma is subjected to an amount of light.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein the light has a wavelength between 10 and 1100 nanometer.
3. A method according to claims 1 to 2, wherein the light has a radiation energy from 100 mW to 1500 mW.
4. A method according to claims 1 to 3, wherein the light is continuous.
5. A method according to any of the above claims, wherein the light is substantially directed into the ionization chamber as a whole.
6. Use of a method according to any of the above claims in generating X-rays.
7. An ionization chamber (1) comprising:
 - a. a gas suitable for forming a plasma, and
 - b. a number of high voltage wires (2) for exposing the gas to a high voltage thereby igniting the gas to form the plasma,

characterized in that the ionization chamber comprises means for subjecting (3, 3', 4, 4') the plasma upon ignition to an amount of light.

8. An ionization chamber according to claim 7, wherein the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light comprise a light source with a wavelength between 10 and 1100 nanometer.
9. An ionization chamber according to claim 7 or 8, wherein the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light comprise a continuous light source.
10. An ionization chamber according to claims 7 or 9, wherein the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light comprise a light source having a radiation energy from 100 mW to 1500 mW.
11. An ionization chamber according to claim 7 to 10, wherein the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light are adapted for directing light substantially into the ionization chamber as a whole.
12. An ionization chamber according to claims 7 to 11, wherein the means for subjecting the plasma to an amount of light comprise one or a plurality of external light sources and optical waveguides for guiding the light into the ionization chamber.
13. An ionization chamber according to claim 12, wherein the optical waveguides comprise optical fibers.
14. A laser apparatus comprising an ionization chamber according to claims 7 to 13.
15. A laser apparatus comprising an X-ray generator according to claim 14.