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Weak ferromagnetism and short range polar order in NaMnF$_3$ thin films

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The orthorhombically distorted perovskite NaMnF$_3$ has been predicted to become ferroelectric if an $a = c$ distortion of the bulk $Pnma$ structure is imposed. In order to test this prediction, NaMnF$_3$ thin films were grown on SrTiO$_3$ (001) single crystal substrates via molecular beam epitaxy. The best films were smooth and single phase with four different twin domains. In-plane magnetization measurements revealed the presence of antiferromagnetic ordering with weak ferromagnetism below the Néel temperature $T_N = 66$ K. For the dielectric studies, NaMnF$_3$ films were grown on a 30 nm SrRuO$_3$ (001) layer used as a bottom electrode grown via pulsed laser deposition. The complex permittivity as a function of frequency indicated a strong Debye-like relaxation contribution characterized by a distribution of relaxation times. A power-law divergence of the characteristic relaxation time revealed an order-disorder phase transition at 8 K. The slow relaxation dynamics indicated the formation of super-dipoles (superparaelectric moments) that extend over several unit cells, similar to polar nanoregions of relaxor ferroelectrics.

There is much interest in multiferroic (MF) materials that show coexistence of two or more long-range orders such as ferroelectricity, (anti-)ferromagnetism and/or ferroelasticity. Magnetoelectric (ME) coupling can allow for the control of magnetization $M$ (electric polarization $P$) using an electric field $E$ (a magnetic field $H$), which can be used for potential applications in data storage, sensors and spintronic devices. As a result, there has been much effort expended towards synthesizing MF insulating materials with strong ME coupling at room temperature.

Many MF materials are oxides, but multiferroicity can also be found in fluorides. For example, in the orthorhombic BaMF$_4$ family the $M = $ Co and Ni compounds in bulk form are ferroelectric (FE) and antiferromagnetic. While in oxide perovskites ABO$_3$ the simultaneous presence of FE and magnetic orderings is limited by conflicting requirements for the $d^9$ electronic configuration of the transition metal in the B-site, ferroelectricity in BaMnF$_3$ is mainly due to geometric (topological) reasons. Recent experiments showed that BaCoF$_3$ thin films are weakly ferromagnetic at low temperatures due to strain.

NaMnF$_3$ (NMF) is another fluoride compound that is possibly MF with ME coupling. The NMF crystal structure is described by the orthorhombic space group $Pnma$. At room temperature, the lattice constants are $a_0 = 5.751$ Å, $b_0 = 8.008$ Å, and $c_0 = 5.548$ Å (Fig. 1a). In the pseudocubic unit cell, the corresponding lattice parameters are $a_{pc} = c_{pc} = \sqrt{a_0^2 + b_0^2 + c_0^2}/2 = 3.995$ Å and $b_{pc} = b_0/2 = 4.004$ Å. NMF exhibits $G$-type antiferromagnetism of the Mn magnetic moments centered within tilted MnF$_6$ octahedra, with additional weak ferromagnetic canting. The Néel temperature has been reported to be $T_N = 66$ K. Recent computational work predicted a ferroelectric instability in NMF originating from Na displacements (the A-site perovskite cation in the ABF$_3$ structure). Calculations assuming that a cubic substrate forces the $a$ and $c$ lattice parameters to be equal to each other have shown that the soft polar mode $B_{2u}$ freezes, resulting in a transformation to the polar $Pnma_1$ space group which causes a polarization of $P = 6 \mu$C/cm$^2$ along the long axis $b$. Calculations also indicate that $P$ can be enhanced by negative or positive strains (12 $\mu$C/cm$^2$ at $-5\%$ strain $9 \mu$C/cm$^2$ at $+5\%$ strain). A weak ferromagnetic phase and an amplification of ME coupling are also expected in the strained films, with a ME response comparable to Cr$_2$O$_3$. Therefore, NMF is an attractive ME material because its ferroelectricity can be modulated by strain and is not subject to the $d^0$ rule because there is no displacement of the Mn ion from the center of the MnF$_6$ octahedra.

Here we report on the growth of NMF thin films on cubic SrTiO$_3$ (STO) substrates and on SrRuO$_3$ (SRO) layers, their weak ferromagnetism (FM) below the $T_N$, and their short range dipolar order. NMF thin films approximately 50 nm thick were grown on pre-polished single crystal (001) STO substrates ($a = 3.905$ Å) by molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) by co-depositing NaF and MnF$_2$ in an ultra-high vacuum chamber with growth pressure $P \approx 5.0 \times 10^{-9}$ Torr. Atomically flat surface and single termination of STO substrates was achieved by the combination of two thermal annealing steps and a de-ionized (DI) water treatment. For additional details of the growth process, see supplementary material. The crystallography of the substrate and film surfaces was monitored in-situ using reflection high energy electron diffraction (RHEED). Further crystallographic characterization was carried out ex-situ using x-ray diffraction (XRD) and x-ray reflectivity (XRR) techniques using a rotating anode source with a graphite bent crystal monochromator optimized for Cu $K_{\alpha}$ radiation. The surface morphology was studied by atomic force microscopy (AFM). Magnetic measurements were performed using a superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) magnetometer with the substrate signal subtracted by performing identical measurements on a blank substrate.

Dielectric measurements of NMF films were performed by first depositing a 30 nm SRO film on the STO substrate as a bottom electrical contact via pulsed laser deposition (PLD) in a separate vacuum chamber. The SRO was grown at a substrate temperature of 600 °C in 100 mTorr O$_2$ partial pressure. A 150 nm NMF thin film was then deposited on the SRO us-
The best film quality was achieved at \( T = 250 \) and \( 300 \) °C as determined from XRD and RHEED. Figure 1a shows the \( \theta - 2 \theta \) XRD scan for a film grown at \( T = 300 \) °C. The out-of-plane lattice parameters were \( 3.989 \) Å and \( 3.982 \) Å, and the rocking curve full width at half maximum (FWHM) values were \( 1.32^\circ \) and \( 2.23^\circ \) for NMF/STO and NMF/SRO films, respectively (see supplementary material). The positions of the SRO peaks were consistent with data in the literature.\(^{24}\) XRR data (supplementary material) were fitted using GenX software for the NMF/STO film\(^{25}\) to obtain a NMF thickness of \( 51.76 \) nm and a NMF surface roughness of \( 0.4 \) nm. Streaky RHEED patterns (Fig. 1a inset i) confirmed that the NMF/STO film was smooth and crystalline while the NMF/SRO sample also had streaky patterns with a somewhat fuzzy streaky background (Fig. 1a inset ii).

Using the \( Pnma \) NMF structure, reflections associated with \( b_O \)-axis pointing out-of-plane \([\text{NMF}(010)/\text{STO}(001)]\) as well as in-plane \([\text{NMF}(101)/\text{STO}(001)]\) domains were identified via XRD \( \phi \)-scans and reciprocal space maps (RSMs) (the corresponding \((010)\) and \((101)\) lattice parameters are virtually identical; see supplementary material Fig. S4 for RSM data). These results indicate the absence of \( a_o = c_o \) distortion in the NMF/STO film for both of these domains. The measured lattice parameters for NMF/(010)/STO(001) and NMF/(101)/STO(001) domains were \( a_o = 5.76 \) Å, \( b_o = 7.98 \) Å, \( c_o = 5.86 \) Å, and \( a_o = 5.45 \) Å respectively (see Table S1 in the supplementary material). Figure 1b shows the \( \phi \)-scans of the \((222)\) reflection of the NMF/(101) and NMF/(010) domains along with (012) reflections of the substrate. In both NMF domains, four peaks separated by \( 90^\circ \) were observed, meaning that two NMF phases with orthogonal \( b_o \) axes were present. For NMF/(010) domains, the orthorhombic \( a_o \) and \( c_o \) axes align \( \parallel \) STO [110]. For NMF/(101) domains, the \( b_o \) axis commensurately aligns \( \parallel \) STO [010] and [100] (labeled D1 and D2 in Fig. 1d). For the NMF/(010) domains, each \((222)\) reflection was additionally comprised of two peaks separated by \( 1.4^\circ \) (Fig. 1b, inset). Therefore, each NMF/(010) domain was actually comprised of two in-plane twin domains rotated by \( 1.4^\circ \) with respect to each other (labeled D3 and D4 in Fig. 1b inset and 1d top view). Similar epitaxies of orthorhombically distorted perovskite oxide films on STO have been reported elsewhere.\(^{24-28}\)

For the NMF/SRO sample, epitaxy could not be confirmed by \( \phi \)-scans or RSM, despite the streaky RHEED pattern in Fig. 1a. This indicates that the bulk of NMF was highly disordered, with small domains. Because of the similarity between STO and SRO, however, it is reasonable to assume that the strain in the NMF/SRO sample was not too different from the NMF/STO sample.

The temperature-dependent magnetization measurements on NMF/STO were carried out by first cooling the samples from room temperature to \( 5 \) K in \( H = 0 \), and then measuring the magnetic moment \( m \) as a function of \( T \) in \( H = 1 \) kOe applied in-plane along the STO [001] direction while warming up to \( 320 \) K (zero-field cooled, ZFC). Then the measurements were continued while warming in the same \( H = 0 \) (field cooled, FC). Subsequently, the thermoremanent magnetization (TRM) was measured while warming in \( H = 0 \). ZFC and FC data in Fig. 2a show a Curie-Weiss-like increase with decreasing temperature until the ZFC data peak at \( T_N \approx 66 \) K (see supplementary material). On the other hand, the FC \( m \) decreases sharply below \( T_N \approx 66 \) K, in good agreement with theory\(^{21}\) and previous experimental work.\(^{15-19}\) This split between ZFC and FC magnetizations below \( 66 \) K is consistent with weak FM below \( T_N \), in agreement with previous studies of NMF nanoparticles and nanofilms.\(^{19,20}\) The
TRM data have a Brillouin-like increase below $T_N$, confirming the weak ferromagnetic nature of the transition. Fig. 2b shows the in-plane magnetization hysteresis loop $M(H)$ measured at 5 K with the diamagnetic response from the substrate subtracted. The $M(H)$ behavior is consistent with weak FM, including an S-shaped loop with a lack of saturation in magnetic fields of up to 7 T and a remanent magnetization $M(H = 0) \approx 0.003 \mu_B/f.u.$ in the low-field region (Fig. 2b, inset).

Figure 3c and d shows the dielectric permittivity $\varepsilon$ as a function of $T$ for the 150 nm thick NMF/SRO film at frequencies from 1 to 78 kHz. The response at 0.1 kHz almost overlaps with that at 1 kHz so it is not shown. At large frequencies, the increase of the real part of the dielectric permittivity $\varepsilon'(T)$ at low $T$ is superimposed with a broad maximum whose position shifts to lower $T$ with decreasing frequency $f$. The imaginary part of dielectric permittivity, $\varepsilon''(T)$, also shows a peak that shifts to lower $T$ and becomes narrower with decreasing $f$. This behavior implies a strong relaxation of the dielectric permittivity and resembles properties of relaxor ferroelectrics, but the frequency dependence of the position of the maximum of $\varepsilon'(T)$, $T_m$, is much stronger than is typically observed in relaxors. In our case, $T_m$ shifts more than 200 K in only two frequency decades.

To gain more insight in relaxation dynamics, we analyzed $f$ dependence of $\varepsilon$ at low $f$, $\varepsilon''(f)$ follows a $1/f$ dependence which is due to a non-zero dc conductivity (Fig. 3b). Also, a typical relaxation maximum is observed for $f > 3$ kHz, whose position shifts to lower $f$ as $T$ decreases. The $\varepsilon'(f)$ behavior shows a step-like increase at frequencies where $\varepsilon''(f)$ is a maximum. As $T$ decreases below 52 K, another relaxation peak seems to appear at a higher frequency. However, this peak was not within our experimental window down to the lowest $T$, and only the low-$f$ wing is visible.

Assuming a Debye-like dielectric relaxation, the broad peaks (steps) in the $\varepsilon''(f)$ ($\varepsilon'(f)$) data indicate the existence of a distribution of relaxation times. Using the Cole-Cole dispersion law,$^{31}$

$$\varepsilon(f) = \varepsilon_\infty + \frac{\Delta\varepsilon}{1 + (i2\pi f \tau_{\text{eff}})^\beta},$$

where $\tau_{\text{eff}}$ is an effective characteristic relaxation time, $\varepsilon_\infty$ is the dielectric permittivity at very high frequencies, $\Delta\varepsilon$ is the relaxation strength, and $\beta$ ($0 < \beta < 1$) indicates the width of the relaxation time distribution ($\beta = 1$ corresponds to a Debye relaxation with a single relaxation time). The values of $\tau_{\text{eff}}(T)$, extracted from the position of the maximum of $\varepsilon''(f)$, $\tau_{\text{eff}} = (2\pi f_m)^{-1}$, are shown in Figs. 3e-f. $\tau_{\text{eff}}(T)$ cannot be fitted well either by an Arrhenius law,

$$\tau_{\text{eff}}(T) = \tau_0 \exp(-E_a/kT),$$

or by a Vogel-Fulcher law applicable to typical relaxor FE,

$$\tau_{\text{eff}}(T) = \tau_0 \exp[-E_a/k(T - T_f)],$$

where $k$ is Boltzmann’s constant and $E_a$ is an activation energy, as seen in Fig. 3e. In the case of Eq. 2, the quality of the fit is low, while the fit to Eq. 3 results in an unphysical negative value of the freezing temperature, $T_f$. On the other hand, $\tau_{\text{eff}}(T)$ is described well by the power law equation

$$\tau_{\text{eff}}(T) = \tau_0(T/T_0 - 1)\nu.'
Large dielectric dipolar regions could form because of the diffusion of a FE soft mode\textsuperscript{21,22} as a result of the disorder in the NMF/SRO film. Although the NMF/STO film has only a small strain, local measurements like piezoelectric force microscopy (PFM) need to be performed to verify ferroelectricity because of the lack of an electrically conductive bottom layer. In addition, further research is required to obtain a tetragonal $a_o = c_o$ lattice distortion in NaMnF\textsubscript{3} thin films to verify the large ferroelectric polarization predicted by theory\textsuperscript{21,22}.

See supplementary material for details of the growth procedure and structural characteristics of the films, as well as magnetic susceptibility data.

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STO (001)  

SRO (101)  

NMF (101)/(020)  

SRO (202)  

NMF (202)/(040)  

Intensity (arb. u.)

q (Å⁻¹)

1.5  2.0  2.5  3.0  3.5

(a)

NMF(101) domain  

NMF(010) domain  

STO (012)  

Intensity (arb. u.)

10^5  10^4  10^3  10^2  10^1

-180  -90  0  90  180

(b)

D₃ & D₄  

(c)

D₁ & D₂  

D₃ & D₄  

Top view  

STO [001]  

STO [100]  

STO [010]  

(d)