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Sivan, V., Holland, A., Bui, L., Priest, T., & Mitchell, A. (2007). Wafer scale texturing of LiNbO₃. Conference on Lasers and Electro-Optics/Quantum Electronics and Laser Science Conference and Photonic Applications Systems Technologies 2007 Technical Digest, 1–2.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/CLEO.2007.4452887>

Published Version: <https://doi.org/10.1109/CLEO.2007.4452887>

Wafer Scale Texturing of LiNbO₃

Vijay Sivan¹, Anthony Holland¹, Lam Bui¹, Timothy Priest² and Arnan Mitchell¹

¹Centre for Ultra-broadband Devices and Optical Systems (CUDOS)

School of Electrical and Computer Engineering, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia

²Defence Science and Technology Organisation, PO Box 1500 Edinburgh, Adelaide, SA 5111, Australia

Author email address: vijaysivan@ieee.org

We report a novel technique for micro texturing of LiNbO₃. Well-defined raised ridges and etched trenches are demonstrated. This technique is suitable for the realization of surface relief gratings and photonic crystals.

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OCIS codes: (130.3730) LiNbO₃; (310.1860) deposition and fabrication

Lithium Niobate (LiNbO₃), is an industry standard for guided wave optical devices. This is due to its excellent electro-, acousto- and nonlinear optical properties, coupled with well established techniques for fabrication of low-loss optical waveguides. Recently, surface machining of LiNbO₃ has become an important technology for the realization of efficient modulators [1], gratings [2] and even photonic crystals[3].

Several surface machining techniques have been demonstrated. These include including Focused Ion Beam etching[4], Reactive Ion etching[5], wet chemical etching[6] and Laser ablation[7]. These techniques often only produce very shallow etch depths, can produce significant surface roughness and can be difficult to control due to the appearance of crystal facets. Each of these techniques also requires either a photolithographic masking process (limiting resolution) or must be achieved using direct writing (limiting scaling to wafer scale manufacture).

In this work, we demonstrate a novel technique for micro-texturing LiNbO₃. We present the first demonstration of wafer scale etching of LiNbO₃ using a novel electro-chemical process that occurs simultaneously with Ti indiffusion. This has potential for the realization of etched trenches and waveguide facets and should be equally applicable to nano-scale features such as gratings and photonic crystals.

Our technique is based on the well established Ti diffusion process for optical waveguide fabrication in LiNbO₃. The Ti diffusion process is quite complex and has been studied by many authors. D. P. Birnie[8] presents an theoretical model for the diffusion process, describing the migration pathway for ions on either the lithium or niobium sub-lattices. An important conclusion of this theory is that during diffusion, the swapping of ions results in increasing positive charge on the Ti rib as it diffuses into the LiNbO₃ crystal. Our hypothesis is that the charging of the Ti strip will create a significant electric field. We propose that this field will be strong enough to dissociate high-temperature (1050°C) gases into their constituent ions. These energetic ions will drift under the influence of the fields, and will enhance both etching and deposition of material at various locations during diffusion. The fields will be localized to the Ti strips and thus any enhanced etching or deposition should be localized to these regions also.

FIG 1: Method: a) Deposit 1000Å Ti film on X-cut LiNbO₃, b) Pattern Ti c) 2nd LiNbO₃, wafer is placed on top d) diffusion at 1050C for 10 hrs in wet oxygen, samples separated into e) Top wafer with etched features (2300Å), f) Bottom wafer with raised features (2500Å).

Citation:

Sivan, V, Holland, A, Bui, L, Priest, T and Mitchell, A 2007, 'Wafer scale texturing of LiNbO₃', in Conference on Lasers and Electro-Optics/Quantum Electronics and Laser Science Conference (CLEO/QELS 2007), USA, 6-11 May 2007.

FIG 2: Atomic Force Microscope images of textured profiles in LiNbO₃ a) Raised strip feature on bottom wafer, b) etched strip feature on Top wafer, c) raised array of discs on bottom substrate, d) etched discs on top substrate, e) etch depth vs diffusion time for various conditions.

Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of our experimental procedure. A layer of Ti (either 1000 Å or 5000 Å) was deposited on an X-cut LiNbO₃ substrate using e-beam evaporation (Fig 1a). Contact photolithography and chemical etching was used to pattern the Ti layer into strips of width ranging from 12μm to 25μm. (Fig 1b). In a departure from the traditional diffusion procedure, a bare LiNbO₃ wafer was placed on top of the strips (Fig 1c). The small air gap between the charged Ti strips on the bottom substrate and the uncharged top wafer will enable a strong, well localized field to form. The two wafers were then heated to 1050°C in a wet oxygen atmosphere for periods of 5, 10, 15 and 30 hours (Fig 1d). The two wafers were then easily separated (Figs 1e & 1f).

Figure 2 presents Atomic Force Microscope images of the two wafers. On the bottom wafer, Ti patterned regions were raised (Figs 2a & 2c). The bare top wafer exhibited significant etching in the regions where it had been in contact with the Ti strips (Figs 2b & 2d). The etched profiles were relatively smooth and well defined. The experiment was repeated for strip thicknesses of 1000 Å and 5000 Å, widths of 12μm and 25μm and diffusion times of 5, 10, 15 & 30 hrs. The resulting etch depths are presented in Fig. 2 e). The results show that the etch depth increases with diffusion time eventually saturating. Etching in excess of 1μm is possible.

The observed etching and deposition only in the regions of Ti patterning support our hypothesis of ion enhanced material interactions. Rigorous materials analysis is currently underway to isolate the electro-chemical processes that are responsible for forming these textures. The saturation of etching suggests that etching ceases once the Ti has been exhausted. This is supported by the fact that longer diffusion times are required to saturate the effect for thicker strips. These observations support the hypothesis that the etching is electrochemical.

Since this texturing is uniform across the wafer, it is anticipated that it will scale well to a full wafer manufacturing process. Further, we believe that the resolution will be limited by the texturing that can be achieved on the Ti film. Techniques to realize nanometer features such as gratings are currently being explored.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Defence Science and Technology Organisation, Australia for this work.

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