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Spectroscopic identification of fragment ions of DNA/RNA building blocks: the case of pyrimidine†

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Pyrimidine (Pym, 1,3-diazine, 1,3-diazabenzene) is an important N-heterocyclic building block of nucleobases. Understanding the structures of its fragment and precursor ions provides insight into its prebiotic and abiotic synthetic route. The long-standing controversial debate about the structures of the primary fragment ions of the Pym⁺ cation (C₄H₄N₂⁺, *m/z* 80) resulting from loss of HCN, C₃H₃N⁺ (*m/z* 53), is closed herein with the aid of a combined approach utilizing infrared photodissociation (IRPD) spectroscopy in the CH and NH stretch ranges ($\nu_{\text{CH/NH}}$) and density functional theory (DFT) calculations. IRPD spectra of cold Ar/N₂-tagged fragment ions reveal that the C₃H₃N⁺ population is dominated by *cis-trans*-HCCHNCH⁺ ions (~90%) along with a minor contribution of the most stable H₂CCCNH⁺ and *cis-trans*-HCCHCNH⁺ isomers (~10%). We also spectroscopically confirm that the secondary fragment resulting from further loss of HCN, C₂H₂⁺ (*m/z* 26), is the acetylene cation (HCCH⁺). The spectroscopic characterization of the identified C₃H₃N⁺ isomers and their hydrogen-bonded dimers with Ar and N₂ provides insight into the acidity of their CH and NH groups. Finally, the vibrational properties of Pym⁺ in the 3 μm range are probed by IRPD of Pym⁺-(N₂)₁₋₂ clusters, which shows a high π -binding affinity of Pym⁺ toward a nonpolar hydrophobic ligand. Its ν_{CH} spectrum confirms the different acidity of the three nonequivalent CH groups.

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1. Introduction

Nucleobases, the molecular building blocks of the fundamental genetic materials DNA and RNA, are primarily composed of two different aromatic nitrogen heterocycles (N-heterocycles), namely pyrimidine (1,3-diazine, 1,3-diazabenzene, Pym, C₄H₄N₂) and purine. The pyrimidine nucleobases are uracil, thymine, and cytosine, whereas adenine and guanine are purine bases. The ubiquity of these few selected nucleobases involved in the evolution of life on Earth shows a clear example of restricted natural selectivity upon which life as we know it developed.¹⁻⁴ Apart from nucleobases, Pym is also a building block of other natural and artificial bioactive molecules (*e.g.*, vitamin B₁ or thiamine, barbituric acid).^{5,6}

The early Earth was exposed to strong solar irradiation (particularly UV), because of the absence of the protecting ozone layer. Therefore, only photochemically stable molecules survived during that time. Interestingly, pyridine and diazine molecules with their short first excited state ($n\pi^*$) lifetimes fall in such a photochemically robust category.^{3,7-12} The canonical DNA/RNA bases comprised of these N-heterocycles also exhibit such short-lived excited states because of ultrafast internal

conversion to the ground electronic state, and their high photostability may explain their abundance in genetic materials.^{3,4,13-19}

Because of their abundance on Earth, these nucleobases and their building blocks such as Pym have been intensively searched for in extraterrestrial media to understand their possible delivery to Earth.²⁰⁻²³ Although such investigations have failed so far, the presence of these aromatic N-heterocycles in the interstellar medium has received widespread acceptance.²⁴⁻³² For example, the 6.2 μm feature in the unidentified infrared emission spectrum was suggested to originate from polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons with at least one N atom in the aromatic skeleton.²³ The detection of Pym- and purine-based compounds in carbonaceous meteorites further strengthens the possibility of the extraterrestrial presence of N-heterocycles.³³⁻³⁶ Because of their biological importance, prebiotic synthetic routes for these nucleobases have been well explored.^{37,38} It has been proposed that such N-containing macromolecules may be synthesized through complex reactions between abundant N-bearing species such as NH₃ or HCN and carbonaceous precursors in interstellar ice grains under the influence of UV photons and cosmic ray analogs (*e.g.*, protons and electrons).³⁹⁻⁴³ Recent laboratory experiments under interstellar-like conditions demonstrate the formation of uracil and cytosine upon UV irradiation of H₂O:Pym and H₂O:NH₃:Pym ices, respectively.^{44,45} These experiments triggered theoretical investigations to gain further insight into the involved chemical conversion scheme.⁴⁶ Similar studies of

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CH₃OH:Pym, H₂O:CH₃OH:Pym, and CH₄:Pym ices reveal the generation of thymine, along with numerous amino pyrimidines and their hydroxyl derivatives.⁴⁰ Related photon processing of H₂O:NH₃:purine ices results in the formation of adenine, guanine, and other substituted purine derivatives.^{41,47} Interestingly, apart from photon irradiation of simple H₂O:Pym ices leading to thymine formation, all other photon processing results in the production of RNA nucleobases and thus supports the hypothesis of RNA being the first type of genetic material used by early life.⁴⁸

The Pym nucleobases inherit certain properties like their geometry and core and valence electronic structure from the parent Pym moiety,^{49,50} which renders this N-heterocycle a subject of demanding attention. Understanding the abiotic origin of such genetic material is of fundamental interest for prebiotic chemistry and astrobiology. Several prudent experimental techniques, such as gas-phase photon or electron ionization (EI) and mass spectrometry, have been employed along with computations to explore abiotic routes of both Pym formation and fragmentation.^{51–66} These studies have established two main fragment ions of the Pym⁺ cation, C₃H₃N⁺ (*m/z* 53) and C₂H₂⁺ (*m/z* 26), through the elimination of one and two HCN molecules, respectively.^{55–57,61,64,65} Interestingly, there is a long-standing debate about the molecular structure of the C₃H₃N⁺ fragment. An early mass-spectrometric study using isotope labeling suggested the kinetically favoured HCCHNCH⁺ structure (4/5) because this fragmentation channel can eliminate HCN containing C4 (*e.g.*, H4C4N3), without further structural arrangement.⁶⁰ Subsequently, the acrylonitrile cation (H₂CCHCN⁺, 6) was considered,^{56,66} which however was later discarded because of the dissimilarity of its collision-induced dissociation (CID) spectrum and enthalpy of formation ($\Delta_f H$) from those of the C₃H₃N⁺ ion originating from Pym⁺.^{56,58,64} Instead, the most stable H₂CCCNH⁺ isomer of C₃H₃N⁺ (1) with a CCCN backbone was suggested as the major contributing structure of this daughter ion, because it is more stable than 6 and other C₃H₃N⁺ isomers, such as HCCCHNH⁺ (11/12) and HCCHCNH⁺ (2/3).⁶⁴ However, the generation of 1 from Pym⁺ demands a large activation barrier, as revealed from a detailed computational study of all feasible C₃H₃N⁺ isomers.⁶⁷ A photoionization-fragmentation study suggested either 6 or H₂CNCCH⁺ (7).⁶³ On the other hand, a theoretical study showed effective radical site formation on the N atom upon ionization of Pym that disintegrates into 6 or H₂CCNCH⁺ (8) by eliminating HCN.⁶⁵ An electron-ionization mass spectrometric study concluded the kinetically favorable HCCHNCH⁺ isomer (4/5) to be the most probable C₃H₃N⁺ structure.⁵¹ A recent mass-spectrometric and computational investigation reported the formation of Pym⁺ by the sequential barrierless addition of two HCN molecules to the acetylene cation (HCCH⁺, HC≡CH⁺), and the suggested intermediate C₃H₃N⁺ ions have again been 4/5.⁶⁸ In the reverse direction, the C₃H₃N⁺ ion dissociates *via* HCN elimination into C₂H₂⁺ (*m/z* 26), which was identified as the acetylene cation (HCCH⁺) by comparing their $\Delta_f H$ values.^{51,57,59,69} Quantum chemical investigations demonstrate an efficient production scheme of the HCCH⁺ cation from 4/5 by HCN elimination.^{54,58,61,62,67}

So far, the identification of the *m/z* 53 and 26 fragment ions of Pym⁺ has been solely based on mass spectrometry, thermochemistry, and quantum chemistry. Unambiguous spectroscopic confirmation of the structures suggested for these two important fragment ions of Pym⁺ are lacking. To this end, this work aims at the infrared (IR) spectroscopic identification of these two major Pym⁺ fragments. For this purpose, we employ an EI technique to produce Pym⁺ which dissociates in the source mainly into C₃H₃N⁺ and C₂H₂⁺. We generate the Ar/N₂-tagged clusters of both Pym⁺ and its fragment ions, whose structures are then probed by IR photodissociation (IRPD) spectroscopy. These fingerprint spectra are analyzed with the aid of dispersion-corrected density functional theory (DFT) calculations to unambiguously identify the contributing structural isomers and competing ligand binding sites. This combined spectroscopic/computational approach has previously been applied to various aromatic and nonaromatic cluster ions in our laboratory to unravel their structure and bonding.^{30–32,70–77}

2. Experimental methods

IRPD spectra of mass-selected Pym⁺-(N₂)_{*n*} clusters (*n* = 1–2) and the Ar/N₂-tagged clusters of Pym⁺ fragments, *i.e.* C₃H₃N⁺-L_{*n*} (*n* = 0, *n* = 1 for Ar, *n* = 1–3 for N₂) and C₂H₂⁺-L (L = Ar/N₂), are acquired between 2900 and 3600 cm⁻¹ in a tandem quadrupole mass spectrometer coupled to an EI source and an octupole ion guide.^{78,79} Briefly, the investigated ions and their clusters are produced in a pulsed supersonic plasma expansion utilizing electron and chemical ionization close to the nozzle orifice. Electrons are emitted from two tungsten filaments close to the nozzle orifice. The expanding gas mixture is produced by seeding the vapor of Pym (Sigma-Aldrich, >98%, used without further purification) heated to 333 K in N₂ or Ar carrier gas (10 bar). The desired parent cluster ions are mass-selected in the first quadrupole and irradiated in the adjacent octupole ion guide with a tunable IR laser pulse (ν_{IR}) emitted from an optical parametric oscillator laser pumped by a nanosecond Q-switched Nd:YAG laser operating at 10 Hz. The IR laser pulses are characterized by a bandwidth of 1 cm⁻¹ and energies of 1–5 mJ. Resonant vibrational excitation leads to the elimination of all weakly bound ligands. The C₃H₃N⁺ monomer spectrum is recorded in the HCN loss channel. The resulting daughter ions are mass-selected by the second quadrupole and monitored with a Daly detector as a function of ν_{IR} to derive the IRPD spectrum of the parent cluster. The photofragmentation spectra are linearly normalized for energy fluctuations of the laser pulses recorded with a pyroelectric detector. To obtain the IRPD yield, the background contribution arising from metastable decay (laser-off signal) is subtracted from the laser-on signal by triggering the ion source at twice the laser repetition rate. The observed widths of the vibrational transitions are mainly due to the unresolved rotational structure, lifetime broadening, sequence hot bands involving low-frequency inter- and intramolecular modes ($\nu_{\text{CH/NH}} + \nu_x \leftarrow \nu_x$), and possible overlapping contributions from various structural isomers.



Low-energy collision-induced dissociation (CID) spectra at ~ 10 eV collision energy in the laboratory frame are recorded by introducing 10^{-5} mbar N_2 into the octopole to confirm the composition of the ions and their clusters. IRPD spectra of Pym^+-Ar_n clusters can not be recorded with this setup because of the mass overlap of Pym^+ with the much more abundant isobaric Ar_2 ion (m/z 80). A typical mass spectrum of the EI ion supersonic expansion source using N_2 carrier gas is quite similar to the published standard EI spectrum of isolated Pym (apart from signals arising from N_2 and H_2O impurity),⁸⁰ with dominant peaks at m/z 80 (Pym^+), 53 ($C_3H_3N^+$), and 28 ($C_2H_2^+$), strongly suggesting that the ionization and fragmentation processes are rather similar under both conditions (Fig. S1 in the ESI[†]). This scenario is supported by a previous energy-resolved ionization study of Pym ,⁵⁶ which concludes that Pym^+ cations generated in higher electronic states undergo rapid internal conversion into the lowest electronic state before statistical dissociation occurs on the ground state potential. The CID spectra of mass-selected Pym^+ and $C_3H_3N^+$ ions show the exclusive loss of HCN (Fig. S2, ESI[†]).

3. Computational methods

Various structural isomers of the $C_3H_3N^+$ ion and conceivable ligand binding sites of Ar and N_2 to Pym^+ , $C_3H_3N^+$, and $C_2H_2^+$ are explored at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level of DFT theory to analyze their experimental IR spectra.⁸¹ This dispersion-corrected functional accounts well for the electrostatic, induction, and dispersion forces of the investigated clusters.^{30–32,74–77} Fully relaxed potential energy surface calculations are performed during the search for stationary points, and their nature as minima or transition states are verified by harmonic frequency analysis. Harmonic intramolecular vibrational frequencies are scaled with 0.96221, obtained by fitting the $\nu_{CH/OH}$ frequencies of Pym and H_2O to their experimental values in a parallel study of $H^+Pym-(H_2O)_n$. Computed scaled IR stick spectra are convoluted with Gaussian line profiles with FWHM = 10 cm^{-1} to facilitate convenient comparison with the experimental spectra. All relative energies (E_e) and equilibrium dissociation energies (D_e) are corrected for harmonic zero-point vibrational energy to derive E_0 and D_0 values. Gibbs free energies (G) are reported for $T = 298.15$ K. Cartesian coordinates and energies of all relevant structures are listed in the ESI[†]. The atomic charge distribution and second-order perturbation energies ($E^{(2)}$) of the donor-acceptor orbitals involved in the hydrogen bond (H-bond) interaction are calculated using natural bond orbital (NBO) analysis.⁸² Only doublet electronic states are considered.⁶⁷

4. Results and discussion

The IRPD spectra of $Pym^+-(N_2)_{n=1-2}$, $C_3H_3N^+$, $C_3H_3N^+-L$, and $C_2H_2^+-L$ ($L = Ar/N_2$) recorded between 2900 and 3550 cm^{-1} are summarized in Fig. 1. The positions, widths, and vibrational and isomer assignments of the experimental transitions (labeled A–F) are listed in Tables 1–3. The investigated spectral

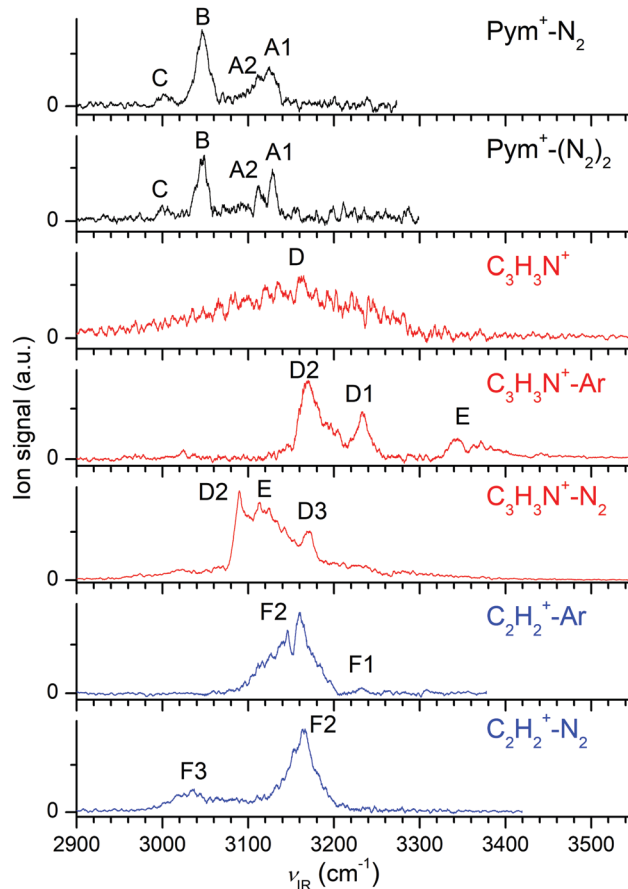


Fig. 1 IRPD spectra of $Pym^+-(N_2)_n$ with $n = 1-2$, $C_3H_3N^+-L_n$ ($n = 0-1$), and $C_2H_2^+-L$ clusters ($L = Ar/N_2$) recorded between 2900 and 3550 cm^{-1} covering the CH and NH stretch range. The positions, widths, and vibrational and isomer assignments of the transitions observed (A–F) are listed in Tables 1–3. The IRPD spectra of the clusters are monitored in the monomer ion fragment channel, while the spectrum of bare $C_3H_3N^+$ is recorded in the HCN loss channel.

range covering the NH and CH stretch fundamentals ($\nu_{NH/CH}$) is diagnostic for identifying the contributing isomers along with their competing ligand binding sites. The free and bound XH stretch modes ($X = N/C$) are classified as ν_{XH}^f and ν_{XH}^b , respectively. The IRPD spectra of $Pym^+-(N_2)_{n=1-2}$ reveal the vibrational properties of Pym^+ in the $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ range, yielding all ν_{CH} frequencies of Pym^+ . The broad IR spectrum of the $C_3H_3N^+$ monomer becomes narrower after tagging with an inert gas (Ar/N_2) through the substantial reduction of both the internal energy of the ions and the lowest dissociation threshold. At first, we discuss the structural, vibrational, and electronic parameters of Pym , Pym^+ , and $Pym^+-(N_2)_n$ and compare the effects of ionization and cluster formation. Subsequently, similar analyses are performed for $C_3H_3N^+$ and $C_2H_2^+$ and their Ar and N_2 clusters.

4.1 Pym , Pym^+ , and $Pym^+-(N_2)_{n=1-2}$ clusters

Pym has a planar equilibrium structure with C_{2v} symmetry in its 1A_1 ground electronic state (Fig. 2), as revealed from electron diffraction and microwave, IR, and Raman spectroscopy.^{9,83–88}



Table 1 Positions, widths (fwhm in parentheses), and suggested vibrational and isomer assignments of the transitions observed in the IRPD spectra of Pym⁺-(N₂)₁₋₂ clusters (Fig. 2) compared to frequencies calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level. All values are given in cm⁻¹. For comparison, spectral data of Pym⁽⁺⁾ are provided

	Exp. (cm ⁻¹)	Calc. ^a (cm ⁻¹)	Vibration	Isomer
Pym	3074 ^b	3076 (9, a ₁)	ν_{C5H} (ν_{13})	Pym
	3050 ^b	3043 (13, a ₁)	ν_{C2H} (ν_{20a})	Pym
	3039 ^b	3032 (18, b ₂)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(AS)}}$ (ν_{7b})	Pym
	3002 ^b	3029 (14, a ₁)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(S)}}$ (ν_2)	Pym
Pym ⁺	3124 ± 2 ^c	3117 (20, a ₁)	ν_{C2H} (ν_{13})	Pym ⁺
	3112 ± 2 ^c	3103 (15, a ₁)	ν_{C5H} (ν_{20a})	Pym ⁺
	3045 ± 2 ^c	3031 (49, b ₂)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(AS)}}$ (ν_{7b})	Pym ⁺
	3045 ± 2 ^c	3031 (13, a ₁)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(S)}}$ (ν_2)	Pym ⁺
Pym ⁺ -N ₂	A1 3125 (20)	3119 (18, a'), 3117 (18, a')	ν_{C2H}^f	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (π), Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4)
	A2 3111 (16)	3103 (14, a'), 3103 (15, a')	ν_{C5H}^f	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (π), Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4)
	B 3046 (15)	3032 (45, a''), 3032 (29, a')	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(AS)}}$, ν_{C6H}^f	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (π), Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4)
		3032 (12, a')	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(S)}}^f$	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (π)
	C 3001 (20)	3008 (200, a')	ν_{C4H}^b	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4)
Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂	A1 3128 (8)	3120 (17, a ₁), 3119 (17)	ν_{C2H}^f	Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (π/π), Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (C4/ π)
	A2 3112 (10)	3103 (13, a ₁), 3103 (14)	ν_{C5H}^f	Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (π/π), Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (C4/ π)
	B 3048 (16)	3033 (41, b ₂), 3033 (27)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(AS)}}$, ν_{C6H}^f	Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (π/π), Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (C4/ π)
		3033 (11, a ₁)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(S)}}^f$	Pym ⁺ -(N ₂) ₂ (π/π)
		3011 (187)	ν_{C4H}^b	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4/ π)
		3011 (79, a ₁), 3010 (301, b ₂)	$\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(S/a)}}^b$	Pym ⁺ -N ₂ (C4/C6)

^a Vibrational symmetry species and IR intensities (in km mol⁻¹) are listed in parentheses. ^b Ref. 9, 88 and 91. ^c Extrapolated from the Pym⁺-(N₂)_n data.

Our calculated geometric and vibrational parameters agree well with available experimental data,⁸³⁻⁸⁷ demonstrating the reliability of our chosen computational approach (Table 1 and Table S1, ESI[†]). Information about the electronic and vibrational properties of the ground electronic state of the Pym⁺ cation comes from photoelectron and photoionisation spectroscopy, and calculations.^{49,59,89-93} Ionization of Pym into its ²B₂ cation ground electronic state (C_{2v}) occurs by removal of an electron from the highest occupied in-plane b₂ orbital of Pym, which is a linear combination of the nonbonding lone pair orbitals of the N atoms and the bonding σ orbitals of the aromatic skeleton (Fig. S3, ESI[†]). In line with the shape of this HOMO, the N1-C2 (N3-C2) and N1-C6 (N3-C4) bonds elongate (by 11 and 18 mÅ), while the C4-C5 (C5-C6) bonds contract (by 6 mÅ). As expected, in contrast to the significant deformation of the heavy atom skeleton, the C-H bonds are much less effected by ionization, with changes of -1, +2, and -4 mÅ for C5-H, C4/6-H, and C2-H, respectively. As a result of these modest geometry changes, the previous photoionization spectra do not reveal any experimental information about the ν_{CH} frequencies of Pym⁺ due to vanishing Franck-Condon factors.⁹¹⁻⁹³ Our computations predict that ionization slightly contracts the C-H bonds leading to an increase in average ν_{CH} frequency ($\Delta\nu_{\text{CH}} = +74, +27, -1, +2$ cm⁻¹ for ν_{C2H} , ν_{C5H} , $\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(a)}}$, $\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H(s)}}$) and a slight increase in IR intensity (Fig. 3). The predicted adiabatic ionization energy is comparable to the previously measured value (IE = 73 568 vs. 75 261 cm⁻¹), and also our computed frequencies agree well with available measured ones (Table S2, ESI[†]).⁹¹⁻⁹³ The positive charge resides mainly on the peripheral hydrogens (Fig. S4, ESI[†]). All efforts to

record an IRPD spectrum of bare Pym⁺ in the HCN loss channel failed because of (i) high metastable decay background, which exceeds by far the achieved IRPD yield and/or (ii) the high energy required for dissociation (~ 200 - 300 kJ mol⁻¹).^{51,57-59,68}

Cluster formation of Pym⁺ with N₂ occurs mainly through two different ligand binding motifs, namely π -bonding to the aromatic ring and linear CH \cdots N₂ ionic H-bonding (Fig. 2). The latter class leads to three different planar isomers (C_s or C_{2v}) because of the three nonequivalent CH groups. The highest D₀ value of the Pym⁺-N₂(π) dimer (D₀ = 868 cm⁻¹, C_s) results mostly from the strong charge-quadrupole and charge-induced dipole interaction between Pym⁺ and N₂, along with minor dispersion forces involving the highly polarizable aromatic π electrons. The π -attachment negligibly affects the ring structure, and thus the ν_{CH} frequencies probed in this work remain nearly unchanged from those of bare Pym⁺ ($\Delta\nu_{\text{CH}} \leq 2$ cm⁻¹, Table 1 and Fig. 3). The slight frequency increase arises from the small noncooperative effect induced by π -bonded N₂ and agrees with the minor computed reduction in the C-H bond lengths ($\Delta r_{\text{CH}} \leq 0.2$ mÅ). Among the three nonequivalent H-bonded isomers, the CH \cdots N₂ H-bond is the strongest in the Pym⁺-N₂(C4) dimer (D₀ = 784 cm⁻¹), which is rationalized by the highest acidity of the corresponding CH group, as is evidenced from its longest C-H bond and highest atomic charge (0.275 *e*) in bare Pym⁺ (Fig. 2 and Fig. S4, ESI[†]). This relatively strong CH \cdots N₂ H-bond lowers the bound ν_{C4H}^b stretch frequency of the C4H donor (by 23 cm⁻¹) and enhances its IR intensity by a factor 7 to 200 km mol⁻¹ (Fig. 3), while the properties of the three remaining free CH groups remain nearly unaffected ($\Delta\nu_{\text{CH}}^f \leq 1$ cm⁻¹). Similar results are also predicted



Table 2 Positions, widths (fwhm in parentheses), and suggested vibrational and isomer assignments of the transitions observed in the IRPD spectra of $C_3H_3N^+$ and $C_3H_3N^+-L$ ($L = Ar/N_2$) compared to frequencies calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Fig. 4–6). All values are given in cm^{-1}

	Exp. (cm^{-1})	Calc. ^a (cm^{-1})	Vibration	Isomer		
$C_3H_3N^+$	D 3160 (200)	3229 (334, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5		
		3155 (46, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5		
		3040 (39, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5		
		3231 (333, a')	ν_{CH}^f	4		
		3149 (62, a')	ν_{CH}^f	4		
		3000 (30, a')	ν_{CH}^f	4		
$C_3H_3N^+-Ar$	E 3356 (61)	3362 (2370, a ₁)	ν_{NH}^b	1-Ar		
		3347 (2119, a')	ν_{NH}^b	3-Ar		
		3347 (2131, a')	ν_{NH}^b	2-Ar		
	D1 3232 (16)	3235 (313, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5-Ar(π)		
		D2 3170 (26)	3151 (785, a')	ν_{CH}^f	4-Ar	
			3148 (768, a')	ν_{CH}^b	5-Ar(H)	
			3150 (53, a')	ν_{CH}^f	4-Ar	
			3156 (47, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5-Ar(H)	
			3157 (43, a')	ν_{CH}^f	5-Ar(π)	
			$C_3H_3N^+-N_2$	D3 3170 (40)	3150 (61, a')	ν_{CH}^f
3156 (43, a')					ν_{CH}^f	5-N ₂
E 3118 (60)	3144 (3357, a ₁)	ν_{NH}^b		1-N ₂		
	3133 (652, a')	$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(s)$		3-N ₂		
	3131 (2348, a')	$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(a)$		3-N ₂		
	3132 (2415, a')	ν_{NH}^b		2-N ₂		
	3128 (626, a')	ν_{CH}^f		2-N ₂		
	D2 3090 (55)	3055 (1076, a')		ν_{CH}^b	4-N ₂	
		3053 (959, a')		ν_{CH}^b	5-N ₂	
		$C_3H_3N^+-(N_2)_2$		D3 3171 (13)	ν_{CH}^f	4-(N ₂) ₂
ν_{CH}^f	5-(N ₂) ₂					
E 3132 (30)	ν_{NH}^b		1-(N ₂) ₂			
	$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(s)$		3-(N ₂) ₂			
	$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(a)$		3-(N ₂) ₂			
	ν_{NH}^b		2-(N ₂) ₂			
	ν_{CH}^f	2-(N ₂) ₂				
	D2 3110 (25)	ν_{CH}^b	4-(N ₂) ₂			
		ν_{CH}^b	5-(N ₂) ₂			
$C_3H_3N^+-(N_2)_3$	D3 3172 (14)	ν_{CH}^f	4-(N ₂) ₃			
		ν_{CH}^f	5-(N ₂) ₃			
	E 3141 (16)	ν_{NH}^b	1-(N ₂) ₃			
		$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(s)$	3-(N ₂) ₃			
		$\nu_{NH}^b/\nu_{CH}^f(a)$	3-(N ₂) ₃			
			ν_{NH}^b	2-(N ₂) ₃		
			ν_{CH}^f	2-(N ₂) ₃		
			ν_{CH}^b	4-(N ₂) ₃		
			ν_{CH}^b	5-(N ₂) ₃		

^a Vibrational symmetry species and IR intensities (in $km\ mol^{-1}$) are listed in parentheses.

for the other two less stable H-bonded isomers, $Pym^+-N_2(C2)$ and $Pym^+-N_2(C5)$, with $D_0 = 775$ and $690\ cm^{-1}$ (Fig. 2 and 3). For each of the two isomers, the frequency of the intense ν_{CH}^b mode is calculated near $3100\ cm^{-1}$ ($\nu_{C2H/C5H}^b = 3100/3097\ cm^{-1}$, $-\Delta\nu_{C2H/C5H}^b = 17/6\ cm^{-1}$) because of its higher intrinsic frequency, resulting from its inherently weaker acidic nature ($\nu_{C2H/C5H}^b = 3117/3103\ cm^{-1}$ for Pym^+).

The experimental Pym^+-N_2 spectrum in Fig. 3 features a clear doublet A1 and A2 at 3125 and $3111\ cm^{-1}$, along with an intense

Table 3 Positions, widths (fwhm in parentheses), and suggested vibrational and isomer assignments of the transitions observed in the IRPD spectra of $C_2H_2^+-L$ ($L = Ar/N_2$) compared to frequencies calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Fig. 7). All values are given in cm^{-1} . For comparison, spectral data of $HCCH^+$ are provided

	Exp. (cm^{-1})	Calc. ^a (cm^{-1})	Vibration	Isomer
$C_2H_2^+$	$\sim 3234^b$	3225 (0, σ_g)	ν_1	$HCCH^+$
	3136 ^b	3123 (443, σ_u)	ν_3	$HCCH^+$
$C_2H_2^+-Ar$	F1 3234 (15) ^b	3258 (2, a')	ν_1	$HCCH^+-Ar(\pi)$
	F2 3153 (77)	3160 (373, a')	ν_3	$HCCH^+-Ar(\pi)$
$C_2H_2^+-N_2$	F2 3165 (30)	3166 (358, a')	ν_3	$HCCH^+-N_2(\pi)$
	F3 3035 (68)	2962 (1063, σ)	ν_{CH}^b	$HCCH^+-N_2(H)$

^a Vibrational symmetry species and IR intensities (in $km\ mol^{-1}$) are listed in parentheses. ^b Ref. 80 and 98.

band B at $3046\ cm^{-1}$ and a weak transition C at $3001\ cm^{-1}$. The relative intensities and positions of the first three bands show good correspondence with the spectrum computed for the most stable $Pym^+-N_2(\pi)$ isomer ($3119, 3103, 3032\ cm^{-1}$), with deviations of less than $15\ cm^{-1}$ (which is of the order of the widths of the bands). The relative intensities of the bands A1, A2, and B bands quantitatively match the predicted pattern, indicating a dominant contribution of the most stable π -bonded isomer. Similar agreement is not observed for the two H-bound $Pym^+-N_2(C5)$ and $Pym^+-N_2(C2)$ local minima. Particularly, their predicted intense $\nu_{C2H/C5H}^b$ modes near $3100\ cm^{-1}$ are not consistent with the intensity observed for band A2, suggesting no (or at most very low) population of these two isomers. This is further corroborated by their smaller binding energies ($D_0 = 775$ and $690\ cm^{-1}$). Therefore, we will not consider these two structures for further cluster growth. The remaining small band C at $3001\ cm^{-1}$ agrees well with the ν_{C4H}^b mode of $Pym^+-N_2(C4)$ calculated at $3008\ cm^{-1}$, the unique spectroscopic signature of this most stable H-bonded isomer. Its other predicted modes overlap with the CH stretch bands A1, A2, and B predominantly assigned to the π -bonded global minimum. The substantial discrepancy between the experimental and calculated intensity ratios of the CH stretch bands demonstrates the significantly smaller population of $Pym^+-N_2(C4)$ compared to $Pym^+-N_2(\pi)$, which is in line with their thermochemical data ($D_0 = 784$ vs. $868\ cm^{-1}$). Taking the relative intensity of bands C and B (1:6) along with the computed IR oscillator strengths (4:1) yields a crude estimate for the abundance ratio of 1:24 (or 4%) for the C4 and π isomers.

Attachment of a second N_2 ligand to $Pym^+-N_2(\pi)$ on the opposite side of the aromatic ring leads to the most stable $Pym^+-(N_2)_2(\pi/\pi)$ trimer (C_{2v}) with $D_0 = 1724\ cm^{-1}$ (Fig. 2). The two N_2 ligands are equivalent and their bonding is only slightly weaker than in the dimer, because effective shielding of the aromatic ring causes only small nonadditive noncooperative effects. Similar to the $n = 1$ case, the second π -addition has a negligible influence on the C–H bond properties of Pym^+ . The ν_{CH} modes and their IR intensity remain almost unchanged ($\Delta\nu_{CH} \leq 3\ cm^{-1}$). We consider in Fig. 2 two further isomers resulting from attachment of the second N_2 ligand to the much less abundant $Pym^+-N_2(C4)$ dimer, namely $Pym^+-(N_2)_2(C4/\pi)$ and $Pym^+-(N_2)_2(C4/C6)$. The π -bonded N_2 in the first isomer



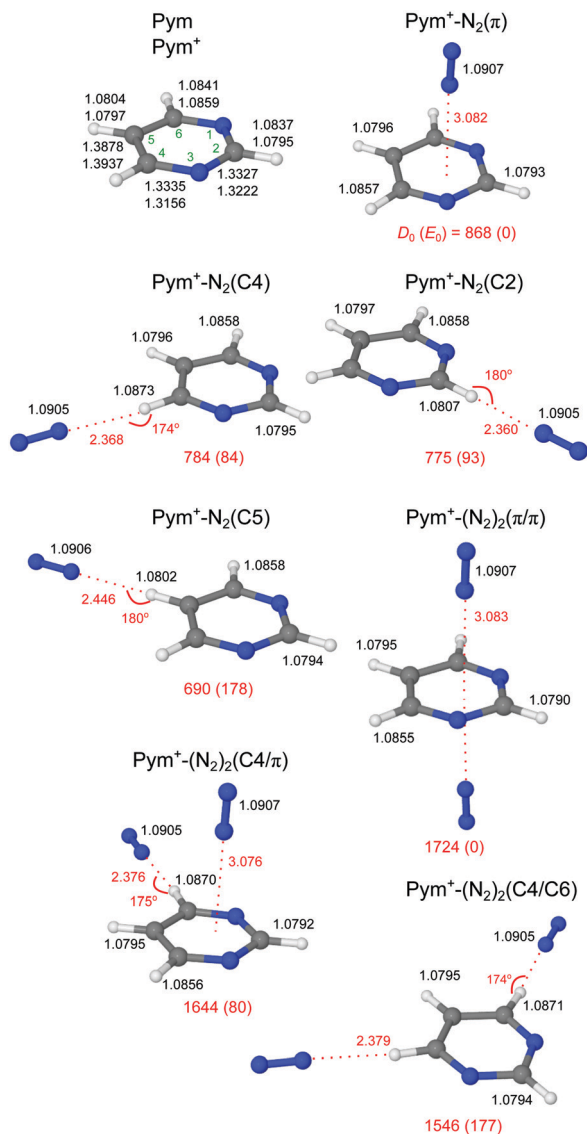


Fig. 2 Optimized structures of Pym, Pym⁺, and most stable isomers of Pym⁺-(N₂)₁₋₂ calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level. Binding energies (D_0) and bond lengths are given in cm⁻¹ and Å, respectively. Numbers in parentheses correspond to relative energies in cm⁻¹ (E_0). For Pym, the atomic numbering according to IUPAC is given as well.

does not perturb the Pym⁺-N₂(C4) dimer ($\Delta\nu_{\text{CH}} \leq 3$ cm⁻¹). On the other hand, in Pym⁺-(N₂)₂(C4/C6) the C6-H bond slightly elongates upon H-bonding ($\Delta r_{\text{CH}} = 1.3$ mÅ). The corresponding symmetric and antisymmetric $\nu_{\text{C4H/C6H}}^{\text{b}}$ modes are calculated at 3011 and 3010 cm⁻¹, respectively, with the latter being more intense ($I_{\text{CH}} = 79$ vs. 301 km mol⁻¹). This trimer with two CH \cdots N₂ H-bonds is slightly less stable than Pym⁺-(N₂)₂(C4/ π) by $\Delta D_0 = 98$ cm⁻¹, resulting from the higher π -affinity of the N₂ ligand (as compared to H-bonding).

The appearance of the $n = 2$ spectrum is very similar to the dimer spectrum with respect to both frequency and relative intensity of the four bands A-C, with frequency shifts of less than 3 cm⁻¹ upon attachment of the second N₂ ligand (Fig. 3). However, the doublet structure now appears as two clearly

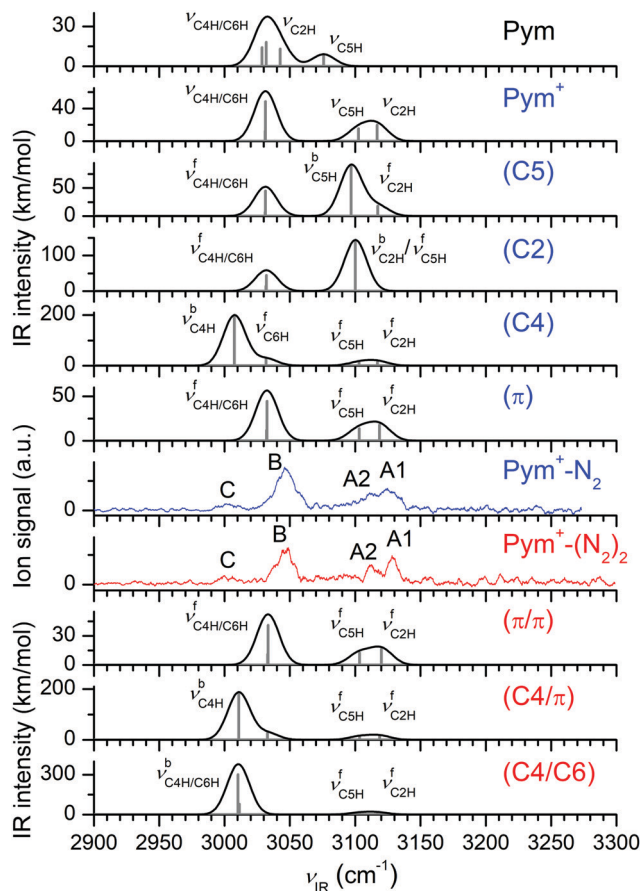


Fig. 3 Comparison of experimental IRPD spectra of Pym⁺-(N₂)₁₋₂ with linear IR absorption spectra of Pym, Pym⁺, and most stable Pym⁺-(N₂)₁₋₂ isomers calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Fig. 2 and Table 1).

separated peaks at 3128 (A1) and 3112 (A2) cm⁻¹, due to colder clusters and smaller rotational constants leading to narrower transitions for the larger cluster. The intense band B at 3048 cm⁻¹ and the weak transition C at 3003 cm⁻¹ remain almost unshifted. Similar to the dimer case, the predicted ν_{CH} modes of the Pym⁺-(N₂)₂(π/π) trimer at 3120, 3103, and 3033 cm⁻¹ nicely agree with the three dominant bands A1, A2, and B, respectively. The calculation satisfactorily reproduces the slight experimental blue shifts of 1–3 cm⁻¹ (Table 1), which originate from the noncooperativity induced by the π -bound N₂ ligand. Thus, the most stable Pym⁺-(N₂)₂(π/π) isomer dominates the experimental spectrum. In analogy to the dimer spectrum, band C (3003 cm⁻¹) in the trimer spectrum is explained by the $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$ mode(s) of both the (C4/ π) and (C4/C6) isomers. From the relative intensities of bands B and C, the contribution of these two local minima is estimated to be below 5% of the abundance of the most stable calculated Pym⁺-(N₂)₂(π/π) global minimum. From the π -bonded isomers of Pym⁺-(N₂)_m, we can reliably and accurately estimate the four CH stretch frequencies of bare Pym⁺ as 3124 ± 2 (ν_{C2H}), 3112 ± 2 (ν_{C5H}), 3045 ± 2 ($\nu_{\text{C4H/6H(s)}}$), and 3045 ± 2 cm⁻¹ ($\nu_{\text{C4H/6H(a)}}$) by taking into account the predicted small complexation shifts.



The IRPD signal of $\text{Pym}^+(\text{N}_2)_2$ is observed exclusively in the Pym^+ fragment channel. This result is consistent with the total binding energy of $D_0 = 1724 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, which is much smaller than the energy of a single photon absorbed in the CH stretch range ($\nu_{\text{IR}} > 3000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$).

4.2 $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ monomer ($m/z = 53$)

In our EI source, Pym^+ mainly disintegrates into the $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragment (m/z 53), which further dissociates into the smaller C_2H_2^+ fragment (m/z 26). This is demonstrated by the mass spectrum of the EI source, as well as CID spectra of the mass-selected Pym^+ and $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ radical cations, both of which show exclusive loss of HCN (Fig. S1 and S2, ESI[†]). Mass spectrometric studies on isotopically-labelled Pym indicate that $\text{H}_4\text{C}_4\text{N}_3$ is the by far dominant neutral fragment.⁶⁰ We consider all conceivable isomers and IR spectra of the $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ ion in Fig. 4 and Fig. S5 (1–13) (ESI[†]), which were suggested as the most probable isomers by previous computational and thermochemical studies.^{58,61,62,64,67,94} These show a considerable structural variety and spread in energy. For example, a systematic global optimization search yielded 17 isomers within 200 kJ mol^{-1} .⁶⁷ Consistent with the previous reports,^{58,61,62,64,67,94} the H_2CCCNH^+ isomer (**1**, $\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}=\text{C}=\text{N}^+\text{H}$, C_{2v} , $^2\text{B}_2$) with a linear CCCN backbone is calculated to be by far the most stable $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ structure, with an energy gap of $\sim 50 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ to the other isomers. This ion features a free NH group and its

characteristic ν_{NH}^f mode calculated at 3545 cm^{-1} dominates its IR spectrum in the CH and NH stretch ranges ($I_{\text{NH}} = 1022 \text{ km mol}^{-1}$). The next stable $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ monomers are the *cis/trans* isomers of HCCHCNH^+ (**3/2**, $\text{HC}=\text{C}(\text{H})-\text{C}^+=\text{NH}$, C_s , $^2\text{A}'$) at $E_0 = 53/49 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$, which also have a CCCN backbone and a terminal NH group with similar NH stretch properties ($\nu_{\text{NH}}^f = 3538 \text{ cm}^{-1}$). Further isomers with a CCCN backbone and terminal NH group are rather unstable (**11/12**, *cis/trans*- HCCCHNH^+ , $\text{H}-\text{C}\equiv\text{C}-\text{C}^+(\text{H})=\text{NH}$, $E_0 > 130 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$, C_s , $^2\text{A}'$, Fig. S5, ESI[†]), and were not considered in all previous systematic calculations,^{58,61,62,67,94} with one exception.⁶⁴ Acrylonitrile (**6**, H_2CCHCN^+ , $\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}^+(\text{H})-\text{C}\equiv\text{N}$, C_s , $^2\text{A}''$, $E_0 = 74 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$), the initially proposed candidate of the elusive $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ structure,⁵⁶ also exhibits a bent CCCN backbone but lacks a NH group. Its characteristic CH stretch bands appear as three weak transitions between 3000 and 3140 cm^{-1} ($I_{\text{CH}} \sim 30 \text{ km mol}^{-1}$). Two further high-energy nonplanar structures with a cyclic CCC ring and a NH group are also computed, namely $\text{HCCHCNH}^+(\text{r})$ (**9**, C_1 , ^2A) and $\text{HCCCHNH}^+(\text{b})$ (**13**, C_s , $^2\text{A}'$) at 83 and 299 kJ mol^{-1} . The IR spectrum of a cyclic CCC structure with a NH_2 group (**10**, CCHCHNH_2^+ , C_s , $^2\text{A}'$) at 103 kJ mol^{-1} is characterized by two NH stretch modes at 3335 and 3395 cm^{-1} , respectively. Two isomers with a (nearly) linear CCNC backbone, H_2CNCCH^+ (**7**, $\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{N}^+-\text{C}\equiv\text{CH}$, C_{2v} , $^2\text{B}_2$) and H_2CCNCH^+ (**8**, $\text{H}_2\text{C}=\text{C}^+-\text{N}=\text{CH}$, C_s , $^2\text{A}'$), are calculated at relatively low energy ($E_0 = 61$ and 67 kJ mol^{-1}). Each of them exhibits a characteristic intense ν_{CH}^f mode at 3246 ($I_{\text{CH}} = 187 \text{ km mol}^{-1}$) and 3138 cm^{-1} ($I_{\text{CH}} = 269 \text{ km mol}^{-1}$), respectively. We further calculate the *cis* and *trans* forms of the kinetically favored HCCHNCH^+ isomer (**5** and **4**, $\text{HC}=\text{C}(\text{H})-\text{N}=\text{C}^+\text{H}$, $E_0 = 107$ and 102 kJ mol^{-1} , C_s , $^2\text{A}''$).^{58,60,67,68} Unlike all other isomers, which demand a significant activation barrier for their formation, **4** and **5** exhibit a suitable CCNC backbone that facilitates fragmentation of the Pym^+ ring *via* simple neutral HCN elimination.^{58,60,67,68} Their intense ν_{CH}^f modes are predicted around 3230 cm^{-1} ($I_{\text{CH}} \sim 330 \text{ km mol}^{-1}$).

The IRPD spectrum of bare $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ recorded in the C_2H_2^+ fragment ion channel (HCN loss, Fig. 4) is dominated by a broad transition (D) ranging from 2950 to 3290 cm^{-1} and peaking near 3160 cm^{-1} (FWHM $\sim 200 \text{ cm}^{-1}$). The signal to noise ratio is limited because of the large background arising from metastable decay of hot ions, which keep high internal energy after $\text{Pym}^+ \rightarrow \text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragmentation due to insufficient cooling in the supersonic expansion after HCN elimination. The broad and unstructured spectrum results from the substantial internal energy of the bare $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ ion, which becomes much narrower upon tagging with an inert Ar/N_2 ligand (Fig. 1) leading to the observation of much colder ions. The unfocused IR laser beam allows only for single-photon absorption processes, so that only ions with energy around 3000 cm^{-1} below the dissociation threshold can be detected upon IRPD. Because HCN loss requires typically much higher energies for all $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ ions considered,^{58,61,62,67,94} only ions with very high internal energy are probed in the recorded IRPD spectrum, leading to the observation of hot bands and sequence transitions giving rise to the broad band contour. The calculated free

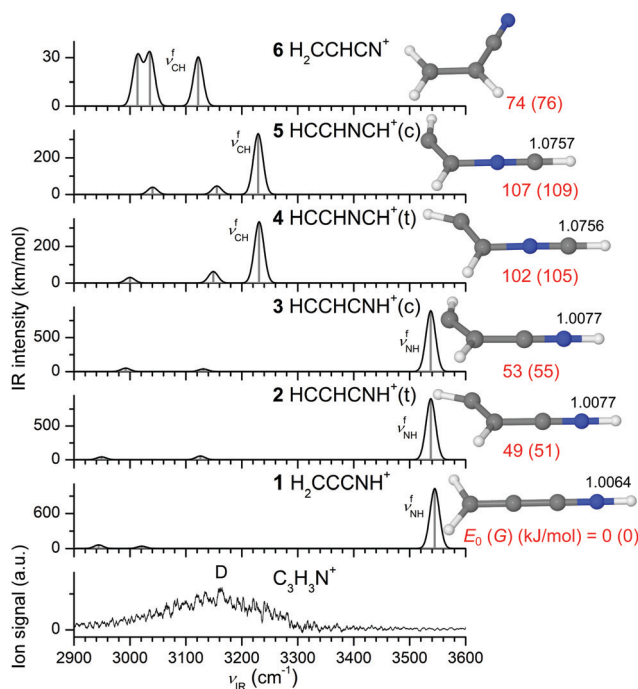


Fig. 4 Comparison of experimental IRPD spectrum of $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ recorded in the HCN loss channel with linear IR absorption spectra of various $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ isomers along with the corresponding optimized structures calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level. The relative energies (E_0), free energies (G) in parentheses and bond lengths are given in kJ mol^{-1} and Å, respectively. A comparison with spectra computed for other $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ isomers is available in Fig. S5 (ESI[†]).



$\nu_{\text{NH}}^{\text{f}}$ frequencies of all isomers with a NH group ($> 3300 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ for 1–3 and 9–13) appear to be too high to explain the observed hot band transitions contributing to band D, suggesting their absence and/or inefficient photofragmentation resulting from high dissociation thresholds. However, the intense $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{f}}$ modes predicted at 3230 cm^{-1} for the isomers 4 and 5 are within the experimental absorption range of band D centered around 3160 cm^{-1} . The difference in frequency ($\sim 70 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) can readily be rationalized by anharmonic coupling typical for hot band transitions, which arises from the elevated internal energy of the $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragments populating vibrational excited states with high quantum numbers. Such anharmonic coupling (diagonal and off-diagonal) results in red shifts of the transitions compared to the fundamentals predicted by the calculations. Thus, isomers 4 and 5 are plausible candidates to explain the experimental $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ spectrum despite their relatively high E_0 values ($> 100 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$). Similarly, the intense $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{f}}$ modes of 7 and 8 predicted at 3246 and 3138 cm^{-1} match the measured IRPD spectrum. The computed $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{f}}$ modes of 6 also lie within the observed spectral range, which suggests that acrylonitrile⁺ could also contribute to the monomer spectrum, although their fundamentals are calculated close to the red edge of transition D and their IR oscillator strengths are weaker by one order of magnitude than those of the other potential candidates. Thus, from the warm $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ spectrum it is rather difficult to unambiguously determine the dominant contribution of the observed isomers that do not have a NH group. The approach of inert gas tagging discussed in the next section reduces the temperature of the probed ions, and thus increases the spectral resolution of the IRPD spectrum and reduces the effective dissociation threshold, which is required for a more reliable and more definitive identification of the contributing isomers.

4.3 $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+\text{-L}$ (L = Ar/ N_2) dimers

Various Ar and N_2 ligand binding motifs of the $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ monomers identified as potential candidates in Section 4.2 are displayed in Fig. 5 and 6 (along with their IR spectra), while others are presented in Fig. S6 and S7 (ESI[†]). The isomers with a NH group (1–3, 9–13) strongly prefer the formation of a $\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}$ H-bond of L to the acidic NH group because of the high partial charge on the NH proton (e.g., $q = 0.498 e$ for 1, Fig. S4, ESI[†]). In contrast, in the 4-L and 5-L dimers, the ligand forms a $\text{CH}\cdots\text{L}$ ionic H-bond to the strongly positively charged proton of the terminal CH group adjacent to N (e.g., $q = 0.718 e$ for 4). For 5-Ar, a π -bound structure is also calculated, in which the Ar ligand interacts weakly with both the $\text{C}\equiv\text{N}$ π -cloud and the adjacent CH group (as evidenced from the NBO calculations, Fig. S8, ESI[†]). At this binding site, the Ar ligand has no significant influence on the monomer geometry. Thus, its predicted intense ν_{CH} frequency at 3235 cm^{-1} remains comparable to that of bare 5. A similar π -bonding motif is also obtained for 6-Ar. However, attempts to optimize such a π -bound structure with N_2 fail because of the strong preference of N_2 for H-bonding to acidic CH/NH protons over π -bonding. The $\text{XH}\cdots\text{L}$ ionic H-bonds (X = N/C, L = Ar/ N_2) significantly perturb the XH proton donor groups and leads to an elongation

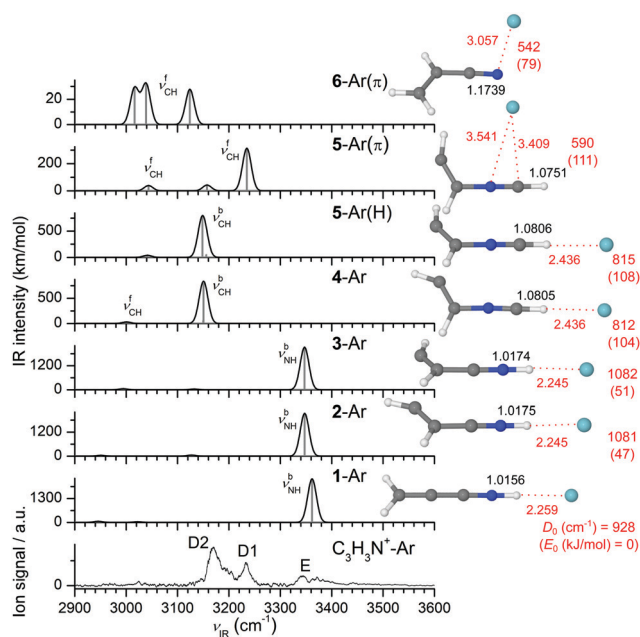


Fig. 5 Comparison of experimental IRPD spectrum of $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+\text{-Ar}$ with linear IR absorption spectra of various $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+\text{-Ar}$ isomers along with the corresponding optimized structures calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Table 2). Binding energies (D_0) and bond lengths are given in cm^{-1} and \AA , respectively. Numbers in parentheses correspond to relative energies in kJ mol^{-1} (E_0). A comparison with spectra computed for other $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+\text{-Ar}$ isomers is available in Fig. S6 (ESI[†]).

of the X–H bond along with a reduction of the corresponding $\nu_{\text{XH}}^{\text{b}}$ frequency. For the most stable H-bonded 1-Ar/ N_2 clusters with a linear $\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}$ H-bond (C_{2v}), the red shift is predicted as $-\Delta\nu_{\text{NH}} = 183/401 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. The higher proton affinity of N_2 as compared to Ar (PA = 494 vs. 369 kJ mol^{-1})⁹⁵ causes a larger red shift resulting from the stronger and shorter $\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}$ H-bond ($D_0 = 1950$ vs. 928 cm^{-1} , $R_{\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}} = 1.849$ vs. 2.259 \AA for L = N_2 and Ar). This view is further corroborated by the higher $E^{(2)}$ energy of the $\text{NH}\cdots\text{N}_2$ H-bond as compared to the $\text{NH}\cdots\text{Ar}$ bond ($E^{(2)} = 88.2$ vs. 35.1 kJ mol^{-1} , Fig. S8, ESI[†]). The $\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}$ bonds in 2/3-L are similar to those in 1-L, because of their similar N–H bond properties. Similar results are also obtained for the $\text{CH}\cdots\text{L}$ H-bonds in 4/5-L(H) with L = Ar/ N_2 . For these $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ isomers, the Ar ligand again perturbs the H-bonded CH group less strongly than N_2 , which results in a smaller D_0 value for Ar as compared to N_2 (e.g., $D_0 = 815$ vs. 1500 cm^{-1} for 5) and a longer H-bond ($R_{\text{CH}\cdots\text{L}} = 2.436$ vs. 2.047 \AA). As a result, the red shift of the Ar-bound $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$ mode is smaller than for N_2 ($-\Delta\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}} = 81$ vs. 176 cm^{-1}). The $E^{(2)}$ values also support this trend ($E^{(2)} = 26.2$ vs. 52.0 kJ mol^{-1}). Analogous results are obtained for the H-bonded 4-L dimers with L = Ar/ N_2 . However, in both cases, 4/5-L, the CH proton donor group is less strongly perturbed by H-bonding than the more acidic NH groups in isomers with $\text{NH}\cdots\text{L}$ H-bonds. The relatively low-energy isomers 7/8-Ar ($E_0 \sim 70 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$) have their intense $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$ modes at 3211 and 3081 cm^{-1} , respectively, and these frequencies are further red shifted down to 3157 and 3015 cm^{-1} for the more strongly bonded N_2 clusters. As usual, the N_2 -bound CH stretch



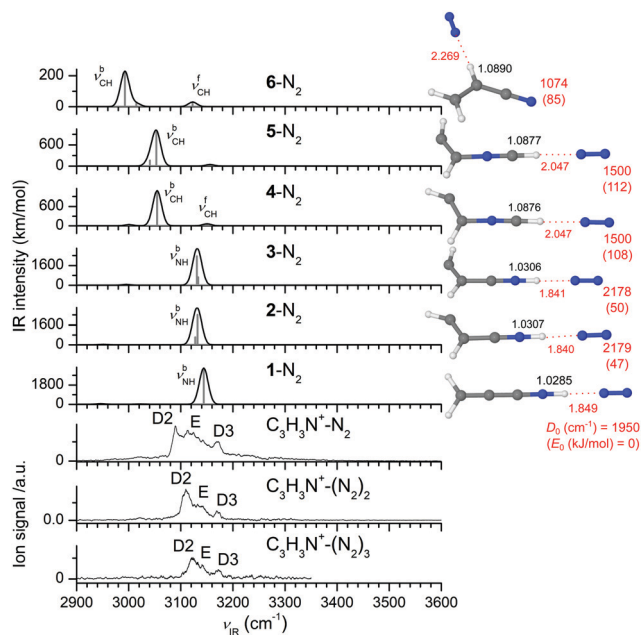


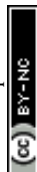
Fig. 6 Comparison of experimental IRPD spectra of $C_3H_3N^+(N_2)_{1-3}$ recorded in the $C_3H_3N^+$ channel with linear IR absorption spectra of various $C_3H_3N^+-N_2$ isomers along with the corresponding optimized structures calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Table 2). Binding energies (D_0) and bond lengths are given in cm^{-1} and Å, respectively. Numbers in parentheses correspond to relative energies in $kJ mol^{-1}$ (E_0). A comparison with spectra computed for other $C_3H_3N^+-N_2$ isomers is available in Fig. S7 (ESI †).

modes show higher IR intensity because of its larger H-bond affinity than the Ar-bound ν_{CH}^b modes reflecting their higher D_0 value. In general, charge transfer from $C_3H_3N^+$ to the ligands L is small, as expected for the weak intermolecular H-bonds (e.g., $\Delta q \leq 0.06 e$ for 1/2/4- N_2 , Fig. S4, ESI †).

Unlike the broad and unresolved $C_3H_3N^+$ monomer spectrum, the $C_3H_3N^+-L$ dimer spectra with both L = Ar and N_2 exhibit several discernible narrow features because of colder ions. The $C_3H_3N^+-Ar$ spectrum displays three main bands E, D1, and D2 at 3344, 3232, and 3170 cm^{-1} and is compared in Fig. 5 and Fig. S6 (ESI †) to spectra computed for potential cluster structures. The satellite bands to the blue of the transitions E and D2 are characteristic of proton donor stretch vibrations involved in H-bonding,^{30,79,96,97} while the rather symmetric band D1 is indicative of a free XH stretch oscillator. Although band E agrees with the ν_{NH}^b mode predicted for the most stable 1-3-Ar(H) dimers (3362 and 3347 cm^{-1}), their strong calculated IR intensities ($> 2000 km mol^{-1}$) are not reproduced by the measured spectrum. This discrepancy indicates at most a minor contribution of these $C_3H_3N^+$ isomers to the measured spectrum despite their superior stability. The appearance of this band in the spectrum of the Ar-tagged ion reinforces the above hypothesis of inefficient photofragmentation of the bare 1-3 ions that leads to the absence of their ν_{NH}^b bands in the monomer spectrum (Section 4.2). This observation illustrates the importance of tagging in order to reduce the fragmentation threshold and to detect all present $C_3H_3N^+$

isomers (independent of their dissociation threshold). Band D2 is assigned to the intense ν_{CH}^b modes of the 4/5-Ar(H) dimers calculated near 3150 cm^{-1} and band D1 matches the free intense ν_{CH}^f mode predicted for the 5-Ar(π) dimer (3235 cm^{-1}). The sequence hot band transitions of band D2 contribute to the intensity of band D1. The remaining free ν_{CH}^f modes of 5-Ar(π) are not visible in the experimental spectrum due to their weak IR activity. Also, the spectra predicted for the cyclic isomers (9/10-Ar) and 8-Ar agree poorly with the experimental spectrum indicating their absence (or negligible population, Fig. S6, ESI †). Similarly, the intense ν_{CH}^b mode of H_2CCNCH^+-Ar at 3081 cm^{-1} disagrees with the measured spectrum. Although the characteristic bound ν_{CH}^b mode of 7-Ar at 3211 cm^{-1} occurs close to transition D1 at 3232 cm^{-1} , its symmetric band contour typical for a free XH stretch band argues against this interpretation. Furthermore, the predicted ν_{NH}^b modes of 11/12-Ar agree to some extent with the band D2. However, because the predicted 11/12- N_2 spectra fail to explain the measured $C_3H_3N^+-N_2$ spectrum, we also exclude these isomers from the observed $C_3H_3N^+$ ion population (Fig. S7, ESI †). There is no indication for the presence of 6-Ar, possibly due to its low Ar binding energy and the low computed IR cross sections. Thus, from the IRPD spectrum of $C_3H_3N^+-Ar$, we infer a predominant population of 4/5, along with a minor contribution of 1-3. Using the observed intensity ratios of D2 and E (4 : 1) and the calculated IR cross sections (2 : 5), we can extract a crude estimate of 10 : 1 for the isomer population of 4/5 and 1-3 (assuming similar efficiencies for Ar tagging because of their similar Ar binding energies).

The IRPD spectrum of the N_2 -tagged dimers shown in Fig. 6 confirms the conclusions drawn from the spectrum of the Ar-tagged $C_3H_3N^+$ ions, namely the predominant population of 4/5 and the minor abundance of 1-3. The $C_3H_3N^+-N_2$ spectrum also exhibits three main transitions at 3170 (D3), 3118 (E), and 3090 (D2) cm^{-1} , which differ substantially from the $C_3H_3N^+-Ar$ spectrum, because of the stronger H-bonds of N_2 causing larger red shifts in the proton-donor stretch modes (Fig. 1). Band E with its satellite bands to the blue is assigned to the ν_{NH}^b mode of the most stable 1-3- N_2 dimer predicted at 3131-3144 cm^{-1} . Its somewhat enhanced IR intensity compared to the Ar spectrum originates from its increased oscillator strength (e.g., $I_{NH} = 3354$ vs. 2370 $km mol^{-1}$ for 1- N_2) resulting from the stronger $NH \cdots N_2$ H-bond, and the additional contribution of the sequence hot band transitions from the adjacent D2 band. The measured difference of the bands E (238 cm^{-1} for 1-L) agrees well with the difference in the predicted ν_{NH}^b bands for the Ar and N_2 clusters (218 cm^{-1}) supporting this assignment. The blueshaded transition D2 is attributed to the ν_{CH}^b mode of the 4/5- N_2 isomers calculated near 3055 cm^{-1} , whereas the symmetric D3 transition is attributed to their free ν_{CH}^f mode predicted near 3155 cm^{-1} . Again, good agreement between the difference of the bands D (80 cm^{-1}) and the predicted ν_{NH}^b bands for the Ar and N_2 clusters (96 cm^{-1} for 1- N_2) strengthens this assignment. Although the $C_3H_3N^+-N_2$ spectra computed for the two cyclic (9/13- N_2) and 7- N_2 isomers fit the experimental spectrum,



we exclude them because the spectra of their Ar-tagged clusters do not match with the experiment (Fig. S6 and S7, ESI[†]). Similarly, we can exclude 8/10/11/12-N₂ because of their mismatch with the recorded N₂ spectrum. In 6-N₂, the N₂ ligand prefers H-bonding to the acidic CH group (while a π -bonded structure to the CN group like in 6-Ar(π) does not converge to a local minimum), leading to a strong enhancement of the corresponding $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$ mode, which is however still absent in the IRPD spectrum of C₃H₃N⁺-N₂. From this observation, we estimate an upper limit for the abundance of 6 as 30% from the signal-to-noise ratio (~ 45) and the IR cross section ratio (~ 15). To this end, the broad spectrum of the C₃H₃N⁺ monomer is disentangled by tagging with Ar and N₂, and both cold IRPD spectra can simultaneously be explained only by the presence of the 4/5 (major) and 1-3 (minor) isomers.

4.4 C₃H₃N⁺-(N₂)_{n>1} clusters

The IRPD spectra recorded for C₃H₃N⁺-(N₂)₂₋₃ in Fig. 6 further confirm the assignment of the C₃H₃N⁺ core ions. Efforts to record similar spectra for C₃H₃N⁺-Ar_{n≥2} failed due to inefficient cluster production, probably due to their low binding energy and insufficient cooling of the C₃H₃N⁺ ions produced by fragmentation of Pym⁺. No calculations are performed for the N₂ clusters with $n \geq 2$. With increasing number of N₂ ligands the internal energy of the clusters decreases, which produces higher-resolution spectra with narrower bands. As a result, the shading of the proton-donor bands D2 and E becomes less pronounced and band D3 becomes better resolved. All three transitions D3, E, and D2 observed for $n = 1$ show small monotonic blue shifts as n increases to 3, which is typical for interior ion solvation.^{30,79,96} This noncooperative threebody effect is more pronounced for proton-donor stretch modes involved in H-bonds and relatively small for free XH stretch oscillators. In addition, the monotonic incremental blueshifts become smaller as the number of ligands increase. As a result, bands D2 and E assigned to bound $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$ of 4/5-(N₂)_n and bound $\nu_{\text{NH}}^{\text{b}}$ of 1-3-(N₂)_n show larger incremental shifts (+20/+11 and +14/+9 cm⁻¹ for $n = 2/3$) than D3 assigned to free $\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{f}}$ of 4/5-(N₂)_n (+1/+1 cm⁻¹). Because the appearance of the C₃H₃N⁺-(N₂)_n spectra is similar for $n = 1-3$, the vibrational and isomer assignments are the same. The fact that the IRPD spectrum of C₃H₃N⁺-(N₂)₃ is detected in the C₃H₃N⁺ channel implies that the total binding energy of the three N₂ ligands is below the IR photon energy ($D_0 < \nu_{\text{IR}} = 2900-3600$ cm⁻¹) for all isomers, in line with the computed binding energies for the most strongly bound first N₂ ligands.

4.5 C₂H₂⁺-L dimers (L = Ar/N₂)

The C₃H₃N⁺ ion (m/z 53) further dissociates into the lighter C₂H₂⁺ ion (m/z 26) by HCN elimination (Fig. S2, ESI[†]). We probe the structure of the C₂H₂⁺ product ion by IRPD of its Ar/N₂-tagged dimer (Fig. 7), which confirms it as the acetylene cation HCCH⁺ (H-C≡C-H⁺). Out of the two possible ν_{CH} normal modes of linear HCCH⁺ ($D_{\infty h}$) in its ² Π_u ground electronic state, the symmetric one computed at $\nu_1 = 3225$ cm⁻¹ is IR forbidden, while the lower-frequency antisymmetric mode at

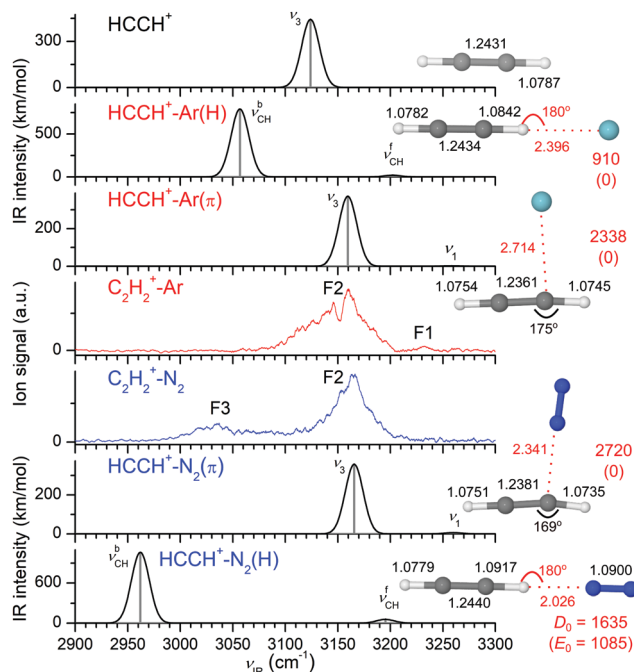


Fig. 7 Comparison of experimental IRPD spectra of C₂H₂⁺-Ar/N₂ with linear IR absorption spectra of various HCCH⁺-Ar/N₂ isomers along with the corresponding optimized structures calculated at the B3LYP-D3/aug-cc-pVTZ level (Table 3). Binding energies (D_0), bond lengths and bond angles are provided in cm⁻¹, Å and degrees, respectively. Numbers in parentheses correspond to relative energies in cm⁻¹ (E_0).

$\nu_3 = 3124$ cm⁻¹ has high IR activity ($I_{\text{CH}} = 443$ km mol⁻¹). Tagging with the inert gas ligand reduces the symmetry which makes the dark ν_1 mode weakly IR allowed. The ligand may either form a π -bond to the C≡C group, HCCH⁺-L(π), or a linear CH \cdots L ionic H-bond to one of available CH groups, HCCH⁺-L(H).

In the more stable HCCH⁺-L(π) global minima, the ligand is slightly displaced toward one of the CH groups, which becomes weakly distorted (Fig. 7 and Table 3). The structure computed for HCCH⁺-Ar(π) agrees with previous high level CCSD(T) calculations.^{98,99} The magnitude of this distortion is stronger for N₂ than for Ar because of its higher binding energy ($D_0 = 2720$ vs. 2338 cm⁻¹).^{72,100} The predicted $\nu_{1/3}$ modes shift slightly to the blue by +30/+41 (N₂) and +28/+36 cm⁻¹ (Ar) due to modest charge transfer from HCCH⁺ to L leading to C-H bond contractions ($\Delta r_{\text{CH}} \leq -5.2$ mÅ). IR activation of ν_1 upon π -bonding is rather minor ($I_{\text{CH}} = 2/6$ km mol⁻¹ for Ar/N₂). In the less stable linear HCCH⁺-L(H) local minima ($D_0 = 910$ vs. 1635 cm⁻¹ and $R_{\text{CH}\cdots\text{L}} = 2.341$ vs. 2.026 Å for Ar and N₂) with $C_{\infty v}$ symmetry, the CH proton donor group experiences a substantial elongation by H-bonding. As a result, unlike the π -bound minima, the CH stretch local modes become largely decoupled. While the free ν_1 ($\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{f}}$) modes at 3202 and 3195 cm⁻¹ for Ar and N₂ become weakly IR active ($I_1 = 19$ and 57 km mol⁻¹), the strongly allowed H-bonded ν_3 ($\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$) modes at 3057 and 2962 cm⁻¹ are substantially redshifted and further enhanced in IR intensity ($I_3 = 791$ vs. 1063 km mol⁻¹).

The measured C₂H₂⁺-Ar spectrum reported in Fig. 7 features a strong transition F2 centered at 3153 cm⁻¹ and a very weak



band F1 at 3234 cm^{-1} . Although recorded at lower resolution, this spectrum perfectly reproduces the previously published high-resolution spectrum of $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-Ar}$ assigned to π -bound $\text{HCCH}^+\text{-Ar}(\pi)$,⁹⁸ as illustrated in Fig. S9 (ESI[†]). In the previous studies,^{98,99} $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-Ar}$ was prepared in a supersonic expansion of acetylene so that it is unambiguous that the C_2H_2^+ ion in the Ar cluster is indeed HCCH^+ . This is further confirmed by the analysis of the fully rotationally resolved IR spectrum of the ν_3 band.⁹⁸ In agreement with the past result, band F2 is assigned to ν_3 of $\text{HCCH}^+\text{-Ar}(\pi)$ predicted at 3160 cm^{-1} (and it displays the weakly-resolved Q-branches associated with this vibrational transition, Fig. S9, ESI[†]), while the weak band F1 corresponds to ν_1 computed at 3258 cm^{-1} . The $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-Ar}$ spectrum lacks any feature near 3050 cm^{-1} , which indicates the absence of the less stable $\text{HCCH}^+\text{-Ar}(\text{H})$ isomer ($\nu_1 = 3057 \text{ cm}^{-1}$). The $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-N}_2$ spectrum is reported herein for the first time. Its strong transition F2 at 3165 cm^{-1} matches the ν_3 mode of $\text{HCCH}^+\text{-N}_2(\pi)$ calculated at 3166 cm^{-1} . Unlike the Ar case, the two orders of magnitude weaker ν_1 mode calculated at 3260 cm^{-1} is not observed and below the detection limit. Instead, the $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-N}_2$ spectrum exhibits a relatively broad transition F3 peaking near 3035 cm^{-1} , which is assigned to the ν_3 mode ($\nu_{\text{CH}}^{\text{b}}$) of the less stable H-bonded $\text{HCCH}^+\text{-N}_2$ dimer predicted at 2962 cm^{-1} . Apparently, the B3LYP-D3 calculations somewhat overestimate the shift for this transition. Our anharmonic calculations reveal that the difference does not result from anharmonicity but from an overestimated force constant. A similar effect is also observed in our unpublished spectra of larger $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2^+\text{-Ar}_n$ clusters, in which Ar ligands start to form H-bonds to HCCH^+ for cluster sizes $n \geq 3$. Analysis of the observed band intensities along with computed IR cross sections yields a population of $\sim 10\%$ for the H-bonded local minimum, in line with its smaller binding energy ($D_0 = 1635$ vs. 2720 cm^{-1}). We can safely exclude the H_2CC^+ ion both from energetics^{101,102} and its IR spectrum (Fig. S10, ESI[†]).

4.6 Further discussion

The 3 μm spectra of $\text{Pym}^+(\text{N}_2)_{n=1-2}$ provide the first experimental information about the properties of the C–H bonds of the radical cation of the fundamental Pym molecule, a basic heterocyclic building block of nucleobases. The N_2 ligands prefer π -bonding at the aromatic ring to H-bonding with the weakly acidic CH protons. This binding motif hardly influences the C–H bond parameters, with very minor changes due to noncooperative effects. Thus, the ν_{CH} frequencies of $\text{Pym}^+\text{-N}_2(\pi)$ and $\text{Pym}^+(\text{N}_2)_2(\pi/\pi)$ provide an accurate estimate of the four IR active ν_{CH} frequencies of bare Pym^+ as 3124 ± 2 , 3112 ± 2 , 3045 ± 2 , and $3045 \pm 2 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. These are substantially higher than those measured for neutral Pym (3074, 3050, 3039, and 3002 cm^{-1}),^{9,88,91} indicating that the C–H bonds become on average stronger and less acidic upon ionization. Among the CH groups in Pym^+ , the acidity increases in the order $\text{C2H} < \text{C5H} < \text{C4H}$, in line with the C–H bond lengths and the H-bond energy with N_2 (and also HCN).⁶⁸ This is the reason, why a minor population of the observed $\text{Pym}^+(\text{N}_2)_2$ cluster cations have a $\text{C4H} \cdots \text{N}_2$ ionic H-bond.

Previous information about the interaction of Pym^+ with nonpolar and polar ligands comes from photoelectron and photoionization spectra of $\text{Pym-Ar}_{1/2}$ and Pym-N_2 clusters^{91,103} and mass spectrometric studies of $\text{Pym}^+(\text{H}_2\text{O})_n$ clusters.¹⁰⁴ It was found that $\text{Pym}^+\text{-Ar}_{1/2}$ clusters have a (π) and ($\pi\pi$) configurations, similar to the structures found here for the most stable structures of $\text{Pym}^+(\text{N}_2)_{1/2}$. No conclusion was presented for the structure of $\text{Pym}^+\text{-N}_2$.⁹¹ The most stable structures computed for $\text{Pym}^+(\text{H}_2\text{O})_{1-3}$ clusters have linear or bifurcated $\text{CH} \cdots \text{O}$ ionic H-bonds with computed and measured binding energies of $\sim 10 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ ($\sim 3500 \text{ cm}^{-1}$),¹⁰⁴ indicating that the interaction of Pym^+ with dipolar ligands is not only much stronger than with N_2 (because of the additional charge-dipole forces) but also *via* a different binding motif. Results for the related imidazole⁺- N_2 or pyrrole⁺- N_2 cations show that N_2 strongly prefers H-bonding to an acidic NH group of heterocyclic cations (if available) over π or CH bonding.^{105,106}

All previous studies about the primary $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragment of Pym^+ have been based on mass spectrometry, thermochemistry, and quantum chemistry, and no definitive conclusion has been derived about its structure. All probable isomers of the primary $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragment of Pym^+ produced through elimination of HCN are considered herein to decipher its so far controversial structure by spectroscopy. By comparing the IRPD spectra of the bare hot monomer and its much colder Ar/ N_2 -tagged clusters, the major contributions of $\text{HCCHNCH}^+(c/t)$ (4/5) and the minor population of H_2CCCNH^+ and $\text{HCCHCNH}^+(c/t)$ (1–3) are clearly established. In contrast, all other conceivable isomers do not agree with the measured IR spectra and are thus concluded to be below the detection limit. The minor fragment ions, 1–3, are in fact the most stable $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ isomers ($E_0 = 0, 49, 53 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$), and thus their production may be expected for thermodynamic reasons. On the other hand, the predominant fragment ions, 4/5, are much higher in relative energy ($E_0 = 102$ and 107 kJ mol^{-1}) but their production is strongly favored for kinetic reasons. They can be formed by simple HCN elimination without any other structural rearrangement. The production of the other isomers at lower energies is strongly hindered by high activation barriers en route from the parent Pym^+ monomer to the product ions. Although some of the conclusions drawn here have previously been put forward based on mass spectrometry and quantum chemistry, the approach of IR spectroscopy used herein provides for the first time an unequivocal determination of the structures of the detected $\text{C}_3\text{H}_3\text{N}^+$ fragment ions, along with a crude estimate of the branching ratios. Of particular importance has been the tagging approach with weakly bonded inert ligands. First, tagging reduces the temperature leading to higher resolution IR spectra with resolved vibrational structure, which is sufficient to identify all present isomers by their fingerprints. A further effect of tagging is the reduction of the effective dissociation energy, which guarantees that all isomers can be detected by single-photon IRPD, independent of their monomer dissociation energy. This has been vital in the detection of the most stable but minor 1–3 ions. Second, recording IRPD spectra of fragment ions with different tags (here Ar and N_2) further increases the selectivity of this spectroscopic



approach because H-bonding of the tag modifies the IR spectrum depending on its binding affinity, and the identification of the fragment ion should be independent of the tag leading to a multiple test for cases with similar spectra for a single tag. In this way, we can exclude here the isomers 7, 9, and 11–13, because their IRPD spectra fit the IR spectra computed for either the Ar-tagged or N₂-tagged clusters but not both of them. Finally, the IR spectra reported for the 4/5 and 1–3 isomers correspond to the first (IR) spectroscopic detection of these radical cations and thus provide a useful probe of the acidity of their CH and NH groups and ability to form H-bonds with (nonpolar) ligands.

The C₃H₃N⁺ ion further disintegrates by elimination of a second HCN molecule into C₂H₂⁺ (*m/z* 26), which was previously established as the acetylene cation (HCCH⁺) from thermochemical analysis. We successfully tag this product ion with Ar and N₂, and the resulting IRPD spectra indeed confirm this fragment as HCCH⁺ for the first time by spectroscopic means. The IR spectrum of the alternative high-energy H₂CC⁺ ion does not match. The C₂H₂⁺-Ar spectrum reproduces the HCCH⁺-Ar spectrum recorded previously, in which the cluster was prepared in an EI plasma expansion of HCCH. The Ar ligand binds to HCCH⁺ solely through π-bonding. In contrast, the HCCH⁺-N₂ spectrum is presented for the first time and reveals also a H-bound local minimum in addition to the π-bound structure, thus directly probing the acidity of the acetylenic CH groups. The higher H-bond affinity of N₂ is explained by its higher proton affinity compared to Ar (PA = 494 vs. 369 kJ mol⁻¹)⁹⁵ leading to a stronger CH···L ionic H-bond (*D*₀ = 1635 vs. 910 cm⁻¹). However, the population of HCCH⁺-N₂(H) is only ~10% of the HCCH⁺-N₂(π) global minimum, in line with the computed binding energies.

5. Conclusions

We apply herein a combined IR spectroscopic and quantum chemical approach to characterize the structures and bonding of tagged clusters of Pym⁺ and its two most prominent fragment ions, C₃H₃N⁺ and C₂H₂⁺. The most salient results may be summarized as follows.

The 3 μm spectra of Pym⁺-(N₂)_{*n*} yield the first experimental information about the frequency and thus acidity of the CH groups of this fundamental building block for nucleobases in its radical cation ground electronic state. In general, removal of the b₂ electron of Pym results in an overall contraction of the C–H bonds, as illustrated by the increase in CH stretch frequencies upon ionization used as a sensitive probe of the C–H bond strength. The C4H group is the most acidic one and serves as preferred proton donor in CH···N₂ ionic H-bonding. As a result of the reduced acidity of the CH groups, the inert N₂ ligands strongly prefer π-bonding to the aromatic ring over H-bonding to the CH groups.

The controversial structures and branching ratios of the primary elusive C₃H₃N⁺ fragments (*m/z* 53) of Pym⁺ produced by elimination of HCN upon EI are unambiguously identified

by spectroscopic means as HCCHNCH⁺(*c/t*) (4/5, major, kinetically favoured) and H₂CCCNH⁺/HCCHCNH⁺ (1–3, minor, thermodynamically favoured) by the tagging approach. All other conceivable isomers are below the detection limit. It is demonstrated that the IRPD approach of clusters with different tags is a generally applicable approach for fragment identification, providing high resolution IR spectra with high sensitivity and selectivity. The minor 1–3 fragment ions are the most stable C₃H₃N⁺ isomers and thus expected from thermochemical arguments. The predominant 4/5 fragment ions are high in energy (*E*₀ ~ 100 kJ mol⁻¹) but strongly favored by kinetic arguments because they can be formed by simple HCN elimination involving no or low barriers. Clearly, the spectroscopic approach used herein is superior compared to all previous efforts using mass spectrometry, quantum chemistry, and thermochemistry, and provides for the first time an unequivocal determination of the structures of the detected C₃H₃N⁺ fragment ions, along with a crude estimate of their branching ratio. As a further result, the first IR spectra reported for the 4/5 and 1–3 radical cations provide a direct probe of the acidity of their C–H and N–H bonds and their ability to form H-bonds with neutral ligands. Finally, the secondary C₂H₂⁺ fragment ion (*m/z* 26) resulting from further HCN loss of C₃H₃N⁺ is clearly identified as HCCH⁺ ion by spectroscopic means, confirming previous less certain mass spectrometric and thermochemical analysis. While Ar exclusively binds to the C≡C triple bond, N₂ shows some weaker tendency to form a CH···N₂ ionic H-bond, thereby probing the acidity of the CH groups of the HCCH⁺ radical in its cation ground electronic state. In conclusion, this spectroscopic study provides fundamental characterization of the Pym⁺ precursor and fragment ions of this important biomolecular building block and thus, in the reverse direction, paves the way for understanding the formation of large biomolecules from their smaller building blocks. In general, our spectroscopic results represent a qualitative step forward in the understanding of fragmentation of Pym⁺ and thus provide valuable input into astronomical models simulating the generation of precursor molecules of nucleobases in the interstellar medium. In that sense, it will be further intriguing to spectroscopically investigate similar backbone structures of other biomolecules that play a pivotal role to understand their prebiotic synthesis.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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