NEW INSIGHTS ON THE DENSE MOLECULAR GAS IN NGC 253 AS TRACED BY HCN AND HCO$^+$

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Received 2007 February 9; accepted 2007 May 7

ABSTRACT

We have imaged the central $\sim$1 kpc of the circumnuclear starburst disk in the galaxy NGC 253 in the HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$), HCO$^+$(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), and CO($1 \rightarrow 0$) transitions at 60 pc resolution using the Owens Valley Radio Observatory Millimeter-Wavelength Array (OVRO). We have also obtained Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX) observations of the HCN(4 $\rightarrow$ 3) and the HCO$^+$(4 $\rightarrow$ 3) lines of the starburst disk. We find that the emission from the HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) and HCO$^+$(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) transitions, both indicators of dense molecular gas, trace regions which are nondistinguishable within the uncertainties of our observations. Even though the continuum flux varies by more than a factor 10 across the starburst disk, the HCN/HCO$^+$ ratio is constant throughout the disk, and we derive an average ratio of 1.1 $\pm$ 0.2. From an excitation analysis we find that all lines from both molecules are subthermally excited and that they are optically thick. This subthermal excitation implies that the observed HCN/HCO$^+$ line ratio is sensitive to the underlying chemistry. The constant line ratio thus implies that there are no strong abundance gradients across the starburst disk of NGC 253. This finding may also explain the variations in $L_{\text{HCN}}/L_{\text{HCO}^+}$ between different star-forming galaxies both nearby and at high redshifts.

Subject headings: galaxies: individual (NGC 253) — galaxies: ISM — galaxies: starburst — ISM: molecules

Online material: color figure

1. INTRODUCTION

Constraining the physical properties of the dense molecular gas phase is important for understanding the relation between the gas properties and the star formation process in nearby and high-$z$ galaxies. HCO$^+$ has successfully been used as a tracer of dense gas ($n_{\text{H}_2} > 10^4$ cm$^{-3}$) both in star-forming regions of the Milky Way (e.g., Christopher et al. 2005) and in nearby galaxies (e.g., Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. 1992; Brouillet et al. 2005). Recently, it has also been detected at high redshifts toward the Cloverleaf quasar (Riechers et al. 2006) and toward APM 08279+5255 (García-Burillo et al. 2006). HCN is another good tracer of dense gas and has also been observed both locally (e.g., Gao & Solomon 2004) and toward high-redshift sources (e.g., Solomon et al. 2003; Vandenberg et al. 2004; Carilli et al. 2005; Wagg et al. 2005; Gao et al. 2007). Gao & Solomon (2004) found that the HCN luminosity is correlated with the far-infrared luminosity for star-forming galaxies over several decades. Wu et al. (2005) found that this correlation holds all the way to the smaller scales of the local star-forming regions, i.e., over 7–8 orders of magnitude.

The number of nearby galaxies in which molecular gas observations allow the resolving of the emission across the dense gas starburst regions is limited to only a few. At a distance of only about 3.5 Mpc (Rekola et al. 2005), NGC 253, a member of the Sculptor group of galaxies, is one of the closest starbursting galaxies. This makes it one of the best-suited laboratories for studies of a circumnuclear starburst and its effect on the ambient interstellar medium (ISM). Some early detections of HCN and HCO$^+$ toward the center of NGC 253 came from Rickard et al. (1977) and Rickard & Palmer (1981), both using single-dish telescopes. Paglione et al. (1995) presented the first interferometry maps of HCN toward NGC 253 using the Nobeyama Millimeter Array.

We here present Owens Valley Radio Observatory (OVRO) interferometry maps and Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX)$^4$ single-dish mapping of both HCN and HCO$^+$, which we use for studying the spatial distribution and excitation of the two molecules in the circumnuclear starburst of NGC 253. The paper is structured as follows: section 2 presents the observations and data reduction, the results are given in §3, and in §4 we discuss the implications both in the context of other nearby galaxies and for high-redshift sources. At a distance of 3.5 Mpc, 1$''$ on the sky corresponds to 17.0 pc.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND REDUCTION

2.1. OVRO Observations

We observed NGC 253 in the HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) ($\nu_{\text{rest}} = 88.63185$ GHz), HCO$^+$(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) ($\nu_{\text{rest}} = 89.18852$ GHz), and CO($1 \rightarrow 0$) ($\nu_{\text{rest}} = 115.2712$ GHz) transitions with the OVRO Millimeter-Wavelength Array in its C and E configurations. The HCN and HCO$^+$ observations were obtained simultaneously during four tracks taken between 1999 November and 2000 February (60 channels, with a channel width of 4 MHz, corresponding to $\sim$13.5 km s$^{-1}$); the CO observations were taken during six tracks from 2001 October to 2002 March (120 channels with a width of 2 MHz; $\sim$5.2 km s$^{-1}$); the duration of one track was typically 5 hr. The observations for each array were edited and calibrated separately with the MMA and the MIRIAD packages. The $w$-data were inspected, and bad data points due to either poor atmospheric conditions or shadowing were removed, after which the data were calibrated. Flux calibration was determined by observing Neptune during most observing runs. For observing runs without planet observations, the flux calibration has been bootstrapped using the gain calibrator 3C 454.3 ($\sim$9 Jy). These calibrators and an additional noise source were used to derive the complex bandpass corrections. The nearby calibrators

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$^4$ This publication is based on data acquired with the Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX). APEX is a collaboration between the Max-Planck-Institut für Radioastronomie, the European Southern Observatory, and the Onsala Space Observatory.
B0135−247 (∼0.37 Jy), B0048−097 (∼0.72 Jy), and B0003−066 (∼1.25 Jy) were used as secondary amplitude and phase calibrators. We estimate our flux calibration to be accurate to within 15%.

For each transition, we produced a data cube using “robust” weighting, which was cleaned down to a level of twice the rms noise. This resulted in beam sizes (and position angles) of 3.79″ × 2.56″ (13.7°) and 3.84″ × 2.64″ (8.9°) for the HCN and the HCO+ observations, respectively. As one of the main aims of this study is to compare the properties of the HCN and the HCO+ emission, we convolved both cubes to a common resolution of 3.9″ × 2.7″ (10.0°), which resulted in an rms noise of ∼22 mJy beam$^{-1}$ in one 4 MHz channel. The resulting beam size for the CO(1 − 0) observations is 4.9″ × 2.7″ (∼1.9°) with an rms of ∼65 mJy beam$^{-1}$ per 2 MHz channel. The channels not containing HCN and HCO+ line emission were combined to create a continuum map at 3 mm; the resulting rms in this image is 5 mJy beam$^{-1}$. We note that the resolution of the CO and HCN maps is comparable to that of the interferometric maps from Paglione et al. (1995, 2004), while the HCO+ has a higher resolution than the Hat Creek Array map from Carlstrom (1990). Furthermore, the resolution of our 3 mm continuum map is a bit better than those of Peng et al. (1996) and García-Burillo et al. (2000).

As the channel width of the CO(1 − 0) observations is different from the HCN(1 − 0) and HCO+(1 − 0) observations, we regidded the CO(1 − 0) data cube to match the channel width of the other transitions. Subsequently, we used the high signal-to-noise ratio CO(1 − 0) data cube to define, in each channel map, the regions that contain emission (this is called the “master” cube). We used this master cube to blank both the HCN and HCO+ cubes. All integrated maps shown here are based on these blanked cubes and contain the same areas of emission for all three transitions.

2.2. APEX Observations

We also obtained observations of the HCN(4 − 3) ($\nu_{\text{rest}} = 354.50547$ GHz) and HCO+(4 − 3) ($\nu_{\text{rest}} = 356.73413$ GHz)
transition using the APEX 12 m telescope on Chajnantor. For these frequencies the half-power beamwidth of the antenna is 18″. The observations were carried out during two runs in 2006 September in good weather conditions (typical water columns 0.7–1 mm) using the dual-side-band receiver APEX-2A. Calibration was achieved using the standard hot–cold-sky observing scheme roughly every 10 minutes. For both runs typical system temperatures were ~200 K ($T_A^*_{\text{sys}}$). Spectra were recorded using the Fast Fourier Transform Spectrometer on APEX (Klein et al. 2006) providing a bandwidth of 1 GHz with an effective resolution of 120 kHz (0.12 km s$^{-1}$). The telescope pointing was checked on the nearby carbon star R Scl and found to be accurate to ~3″. The observations were performed in the standard raster-mapping mode covering the full region where emission has been detected in the OVRO maps in both transitions. Data processing was done using the CLASS software package. In the data processing, we dropped all scans with distorted baselines, subtracted linear baselines from the remaining spectra, and then rebinned to a velocity resolution of 20 km s$^{-1}$. Finally, temperatures were converted to $T_{\text{mb}}$ using a forward efficiency and a main beam efficiency of 0.97 and 0.73, respectively (Güsten et al. 2006). The conversion from $T_{\text{mb}}$ to flux is 32 Jy K$^{-1}$ at 350 GHz. We estimate our flux calibration to be accurate to within 15%.

3. RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the OVRO channel maps for the HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) and HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0) data. It is striking that their spatial distributions are essentially identical. Both molecules are tracing dense molecular gas in the circumnuclear starburst region of NGC 253.

Figure 2 shows the integrated maps of HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) and HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0) line emission, respectively. The slightly different morphology toward the southwest in the HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0) map compared to HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) is likely due to the slightly lower signal-to-noise ratio in the map. The HCN(4 $\rightarrow$ 3) and HCO$^+$ (4 $\rightarrow$ 3) spectra from APEX are shown in Figure 3. The line profiles are very similar at all observed positions, and the rotation of the circumnuclear gas is nicely visible in both transitions. The integrated fluxes for all transitions are given in Table 1 along with the line luminosities, which we derive using the equations given in Solomon et al. (1997). The values for HCN and HCO$^+$ ground transitions are consistent with previous results from Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. (1989, 1992) for both molecules andPaglione et al. (1995) for HCN.

The fluxes and luminosities given in Table 1 imply a HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0)/CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) flux ratio of 0.084 or a luminosity ratio of 0.14, and a HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0)/CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) flux ratio of 0.077 or a luminosity ratio of 0.13, which is similar to other starbursts (e.g., Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. 1994; Jackson et al. 1995; Sorai et al. 2002; Gao & Solomon 2004; Nakanishi et al. 2005). If only measuring the CO flux in those pixels where there is HCN emission, the CO flux decreases by 12%, indicating that there is relatively little diffuse CO emission present around the bright nucleus.

For all three molecules we measure the peak surface brightness at the central position: CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), 2.4 Jy beam$^{-1}$; HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), 0.49 Jy beam$^{-1}$; HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0), 0.38 Jy beam$^{-1}$. From this we determine the peak brightness temperature using the conversions 6.95 Jy K$^{-1}$ at 115.27 GHz and 14.9 Jy K$^{-1}$ at 89 GHz for our observations and derive the following temperatures: 17 K for CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), 7.3 K for HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), and 5.7 K for HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0). Thus, our CO data set a lower limit to the kinetic temperature $>$20 K (Planck temperature). The CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) brightness temperature is in agreement with Paglione et al. (2004), although it is somewhat lower than the 36 K derived by Sakamoto et al. (2006) at comparable angular resolution.

For several high-redshift sources it has been found that lines from HCN appear to be narrower than the CO lines. This is the case for the Cloverleaf quasar (Weiβ et al. 2003; Solomon et al. 2003; Riechers et al. 2006), APM 08279+5255 (Wagg et al. 2005; Weiss et al. 2007), and IRAS F10214+4724 (Downes et al. 1995; Vandenburg et al. 2004). It has been argued that this indicates that the dense gas is more concentrated around the nucleus. Even though NGC 253 does not match these high-redshift galaxies in far-infrared luminosity, we extract the spectra for CO(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0), and HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0) (shown in Fig. 4). Here we find that the line widths are the same for all three lines. This agrees with the interferometric channel maps (Fig. 1), in that the emission emerges from the same cloud or system of clouds.

For illustration purposes we also compare the distribution of dense gas to H$\alpha$ emission and 20 cm radio continuum in Figure 5. Strong H$\alpha$ emission is seen in the dense gas regions traced by HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) and HCO$^+$ (1 $\rightarrow$ 0). In the H$\alpha$ image (from Lehnert & Heckman 1995) the outflow from the central region is very pronounced. In the radio 20 cm map (from Ulvestad 2000), we see that the radio emission traces the starburst region as well as the outflow. The 20 cm map compared to high-frequency radio maps is particularly useful for comparison with the HCN and HCO$^+$ maps as the resolution is similar. The region toward the southwest is not seen in the H$\alpha$ image, although radio continuum is detected at 20 cm, indicating that this likely is a highly obscured star-forming region.
From the line-free channels of the OVRO observations, we derive a 3 mm continuum image. The 20 cm emission peaks at the center at a flux level of 0.1 Jy beam\(^{-1}\), while the flux level in surrounding regions has dropped to about 0.01 Jy beam\(^{-1}\). In the 3 mm continuum map, the same is seen, where the flux level also peaks around 0.1 Jy beam\(^{-1}\) and also falls off by about an order of magnitude. The continuum emission as seen at 20 cm is dominated by synchrotron emission and the 3 mm emission is likely a combination of free-free emission and dust continuum. A similar behavior is seen in the Submillimetre Common-User Bolometer Array (SCUBA) maps from Alton et al. (1999), where the submillimeter observations trace the thermal dust emission.

Figure 6 shows the HCN/HCO\(^+\) ratio map. Some of the pixels along the edges suffer from low signal-to-noise ratio, resulting in large uncertainties in the ratio in those pixels. We construct a histogram of the HCN(1 – 0)/HCO\(^+\)(1 – 0) ratio map, shown in Figure 7 (solid line), where the tails of the distribution are dominated by the low-signal pixels. We perform a Gaussian fit to the histogram and find an average ratio \(\text{HCN}(1 \rightarrow 0)/\text{HCO}^+(1 \rightarrow 0) = 1.1 \pm 0.3\). To check for spatial variations of this value, we also show the histogram for the central region only (Fig. 7, dashed line), where the continuum level is the highest. The ratio is \(1.1 \pm 0.2\), while in the surrounding regions, where the continuum level

![Fig. 3.—Global CO(1 – 0), HCN(1 – 0), and HCO\(^+\)(1 – 0) spectra of NGC 253 derived from the OVRO data cubes. The CO spectrum has been arbitrarily scaled down (by a factor 9.5). Each channel is 13.5 km s\(^{-1}\) wide. The same spectral region is shown as in Fig. 3. [See the electronic edition of the Journal for a color version of this figure.]](image)

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| Transition | Aperture (arcsec) | \(I\) (Jy km s\(^{-1}\)) | \(L'\) (K km s\(^{-1}\) pc\(^2\)) |
|------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| HCN(1–0)......| 20               | 186             | \(9.4 \times 10^6\) |
| HCN(1–0)......| 27               | 208             | \(1.1 \times 10^7\) |
| HCN(1–0)......| Full map         | 370             | \(1.8 \times 10^7\) |
| HCN(4–3)......| 20               | 1338            | \(4.5 \times 10^6\) |
| HCN(4–3)......| 27               | 1634            | \(5.5 \times 10^6\) |
| HCN(4–3)......| Full map         | 2310            | \(7.7 \times 10^6\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(1–0).......| 20               | 178             | \(8.9 \times 10^6\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(1–0).......| 27               | 203             | \(1.0 \times 10^7\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(1–0).......| Full map         | 340             | \(1.7 \times 10^7\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(4–3)......| 20               | 1302            | \(4.1 \times 10^6\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(4–3)......| 27               | 1723            | \(5.4 \times 10^6\) |
| HCO\(^+\)(4–3)......| Full map         | 2860            | \(8.9 \times 10^6\) |
| CO(1–0)......| Full map         | 4400            | \(1.3 \times 10^8\) |

Notes.—The lines are detected at 20–30 \(\sigma\). This is well within the 15% uncertainty of the flux calibration.
has dropped by almost a factor 10, it is 1.1 ± 0.4. We find no evidence for a change in the HCN/HCO⁺ ratio across the regions with large variation in the continuum level (i.e., radiation field).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. HCN and HCO⁺ Excitation

A comparison of the 4 \rightarrow 3 to the 1 \rightarrow 0 line luminosities of both molecules shows that the 4 \rightarrow 3 transitions are both subthermally excited independent of the aperture chosen (\frac{L_{\text{HCN}(4 \rightarrow 3)}}{L_{\text{HCN}(1 \rightarrow 0)}} = 0.45, \frac{L_{\text{HCO}^+(4 \rightarrow 3)}}{L_{\text{HCO}^+(1 \rightarrow 0)}} = 0.45). At a spatial resolution of 20", the APEX data is directly comparable to previous HCN(4 \rightarrow 3) measurements from the CSO (Jackson et al. 1995). Although the peak brightness temperatures of both measurements are roughly comparable, our integrated intensity is a factor of 2 lower than the measurements by Jackson et al. (35 vs. 71.4 K km s⁻¹). A similar difference is apparent in the HCO⁺(4 \rightarrow 3) data (31 vs. 50.8 K km s⁻¹). The APEX data in comparison to the Caltech Submillimeter Observatory (CSO) data have a much broader bandwidth and thus result in a much more reliable baseline subtraction and total fluxes. Given the quality of our new APEX data we adopt our values for the following excitation analysis.

As the HCN(4 \rightarrow 3) and HCO⁺(4 \rightarrow 3) intensities are critical to constrain the excitation, we have reinvestigated the gas excitation by applying a series of spherical, single-component, large velocity gradient (LVG) models. We use the collision rates from Scho"ier et al. (2005) and relative abundance ratios of HCN/H₂ ½/C₁₃8 = 5 \times 10⁻³ and HCO⁺/H₂ ½/C₁₃8 = 1.6 \times 10⁻⁹ determined for NGC 253 by Martin et al. (2006) and a velocity gradient of 8 km s⁻¹ pc⁻¹. The latter is motivated from CO studies which indicate that a large velocity spread is required in order to model the high ¹²CO/¹³CO line ratios observed toward NGC 253 and other starburst galaxies (e.g., Aalto et al. 1991; Paglione et al. 2001; Weiß et al. 2005). To compare the LVG predicted line brightness temperatures to the observations we convert the LVG line temperatures to integrated flux densities. Note that for fixed abundance ratios and a fixed velocity gradient the column density per velocity bin scales linearly with the density, \frac{N_{\text{mol}}}{dV} \sim \chi [\text{mol}/n(H₂)]/(dv/dr).

Figure 8 shows line spectral energy distributions (SEDs), i.e., rotational quantum number versus flux density, for HCN and HCO⁺ for the central 27" beam, which allows us to also include the HCN(3 \rightarrow 2) and HCO⁺(3 \rightarrow 2) from Paglione (1997) and Paglione et al. (1997) to this plot. Both SEDs limit the possible
range in H$_2$ density to about $10^{4.9}_3 - 10^{5.5}_3$ cm$^{-3}$. Models with lower density fail to reproduce the observed 4 $\rightarrow$ 3 flux densities for both molecules. Similarly, higher densities overpredict the 3 $\rightarrow$ 2 and 4 $\rightarrow$ 3 lines even for very cold temperatures of 15 K. The kinetic temperature is poorly constrained from the models (see also the LVG models in Jackson et al. 1995; our Fig. 8, dotted and dashed lines); however, a kinetic temperature of 50 K is the most plausible solution as it is consistent with the dust temperature (Melo et al. 2002) and also in agreement with models of the CO SED (Güsten et al. 2006). We note that a temperature of $\sim$100 K, as derived by Bradford et al. (2003) cannot be ruled out by the model. With this, a good match to both line SEDs in our fixed chemistry framework is provided by an H$_2$ density of $10^{5.2}_3$ cm$^{-3}$, a kinetic gas temperature of $T_{\text{kin}}$ = 50 K, and an area filling factor of about 1% (Fig. 8, solid line). All solutions which match the data predict that HCN and HCO$^+$ lines are optically thick and subthermally excited, even in the ground transition of HCN and HCO$^+$. For the 50 K model we get an excitation temperature $T_{\text{ex}}$ of 26 K for HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) and of 42 K for HCO$^+$(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) and all higher transitions have lower $T_{\text{ex}}$. For a very cold solution of 20 K ($n_{\text{H}_2} = 10^{5.5}_3$ cm$^{-3}$) the HCO$^+$(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) emission would be close to being thermalized. Although the area filling factors for HCN and HCO$^+$ differ slightly for a given $n_{\text{H}_2}$--$T_{\text{kin}}$ LVG input, the good agreement of the model-predicted SEDs for HCN and HCO$^+$ with the observations suggests that the emission from HCN and HCO$^+$ arise from a common volume.

We repeat the analysis for the central position of NGC 253 after convolving the data to a resolution of 20$''$. For our LVG model with $n(H_2) = 10^{5.2}_3$ cm$^{-3}$ and $T_{\text{kin}}$ = 50 K, the results are consistent with those derived from 27$''$ resolution. The only difference is the area filling factor which increases for higher resolution. If we apply the same LVG model to the total flux within the maps covered by the OVRO and APEX observations, the LVG-predicted HCN and HCO$^+$(4 $\rightarrow$ 3) fluxes are slightly higher than the observed values which suggests that the HCN and the HCO$^+$ excitation is somewhat lower in the outermost regions of the data cubes. At a fixed temperature of $T_{\text{kin}} = 50$ K, however, a small decrease of the H$_2$ density to $n(H_2) = 10^{5.1}_3$ cm$^{-3}$ is sufficient to bring the model prediction and the observations into agreement.

In summary, the constant HCN/HCO$^+$ flux ratio across the starburst disk would require a highly unlikely combination between varying abundances and excitation conditions. Hence, it is safe to conclude that there is no significant abundance gradient across the disk.

### 4.2. Comparison to Excitation Conditions in Other Galaxies

We have used our new HCN observations as well as data from the literature to compare the excitation of the dense gas via the HCN SEDs in NGC 253, M82, NGC 4945, NGC 6240, Mrk 231, and Arp 220 (references are given in Fig. 9, legend). We restrict ourselves here to HCN, because it provides the most complete data set

![Fig. 8.— HCO$^+$ (right) and HCN (left) line SEDs toward the nucleus of NGC 253 in a 27$'$ beam. The data points are from Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. (1992; triangles), Paglione et al. (1997) and Paglione (1997) (HCN and HCO$^+$, respectively, open squares), and this work (Table 1; solid squares and circle). The lines in both diagrams are selected single-component LVG model fluxes for [n(H$_2$), $T_{\text{kin}}$] combinations; solid line: $10^{5.2}_3$ cm$^{-3}$, 50 K; dashed line: $10^{5.5}_3$ cm$^{-3}$, 150 K; dotted line: $10^{5.5}_3$ cm$^{-3}$, 20 K. The implied area filling factors are 1.4%, 2.0%, and 1.6% for HCN and 0.9%, 1.6%, and 1.1% for HCO$^+$.](image)

![Fig. 9.— Comparison of the HCN line SEDs of selected local galaxies. The SEDs are shown for NGC 253 (this paper; no data points plotted; Fig. 8), M82 (solid squares; Seaquist & Frayer 2000), Arp 220 (open squares; Greve et al. 2006 and references therein), NGC 6240 (open triangles; Greve et al. 2006 and references therein [For the SED fit to NGC 6240 we have used the HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) flux measurement of Solomon et al. (1992), as the more recent value by Greve et al. (2006) does not provide a good fit in conjunction with the HCN(3 $\rightarrow$ 2) and HCN(4 $\rightarrow$ 3) measurements]), Mrk 231 (solid triangles; Papadopoulos 2007), and NGC 4945 (open circles; Wang et al. 2004). The HCN line SEDs are normalized by their HCN(1 $\rightarrow$ 0) flux density.](image)
among tracers of the dense gas for these active galaxies. All galaxies except Mrk 231 have been measured in HCN(1 → 0), HCN(3 → 2), and HCN(4 → 3). For Mrk 231, only the HCN(1 → 0) and HCN(4 → 3) have been published in the literature. Figure 9 shows a comparison of the HCN SEDs of the six galaxies normalized by their HCN(1 → 0) flux density. This comparison shows that among these sources NGC 253 exhibits one of the highest HCN excitations. Given that the HCN emission in NGC 253 is subthermally excited, this comparison shows that subthermal HCN is a common property of star-forming galaxies. The only source where the HCN excitation exceeds that of NGC 253 is Arp 220 (see also Greve et al. 2006; Papadopoulos 2007). We note, however, that the HCN line intensities of Arp 220 in Greve et al. (2006) (which have been used to fit the HCN SED of Arp 220 in Fig. 9) are higher by a factor of 1.5–3 compared to other studies (Solomon et al. 1992; Wiedner et al. 2002; Cernicharo et al. 2006). Therefore, the available data is not conclusive and does not allow one to rule out that HCN is subthermally excited also in Arp 220. Interestingly, NGC 6240 and Mrk 231 show a lower excitation of the dense gas phase compared to NGC 253 (Fig. 9) despite their much higher FIR luminosities (Fig. 11).

4.3. Possible Interpretation of $L'_{\text{HCN}}/L'_{\text{HCO}^+}$ Variations between Galaxies

While our results show that the HCN/HCO$^+$ ratio is statistically constant across the starburst disk, we do inspect the details. In Figure 10 we plot the HCN/HCO$^+$ flux ratios as a function of the 20 cm fluxes for each pixel. Toward higher 20 cm flux, there are three data points which hint at a higher HCN/HCO$^+$ ratio (this increase is due to a relative decrease of the HCO$^+$ emission). They correspond to the peak in the 20 cm flux. This is also toward the peak of the hard X-ray emission as measured with Chandra (Strickland et al. 2000), where it is possible that there is an absorbed active galactic nucleus (AGN) present in the very center of NGC 253 (Weaver et al. 2002). While these data points are within the scatter, we speculate that the small increase in the HCN/HCO$^+$ ratio could be a consequence of the presence of an AGN based on the relations suggested by Kuno et al. (2001). This, however, can only be resolved when future instruments with larger resolving power and higher sensitivity will become available.

The line ratio between HCN and HCO$^+$ has been studied for several classes of star-forming galaxies, mostly through single-dish observations (Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. 1992; Imanishi et al. 2004, 2006; Gracía-Carpio et al. 2006), where ratios have been found in the range 0.5–2.7. Gracía-Carpio et al. (2006) presented a data set of HCN/HCO$^+$ for luminous IR galaxies (LIRGs; $L_{\text{IR}} > 10^{11} L_{\odot}$) and ultraluminous IR galaxies (ULIRGs; $L_{\text{IR}} > 10^{12} L_{\odot}$). They present a possible correlation between the HCN/HCO$^+$ ratio and the IR luminosity. If, however, other measurements from the literature, including those of less luminous star-forming galaxies and a recent high-redshift measurement (Nguyen-Q-Rieu et al. 1992; Imanishi et al. 2004, 2006; Nakaniishi et al. 2005) are included in such a plot, there remains little evidence for such a correlation with $L_{\text{IR}}$ (Fig. 11; see also Riechers et al. 2006).

The large number of galaxies with $L'_{\text{HCN}}/L'_{\text{HCO}^+}$ > 1 seems surprising at the first glance since the emission in both lines is likely optically thick in all galaxies (see also Greve et al. 2006), and the critical densities of HCO$^+$ are lower than those for HCN. From this one would expect that the HCO$^+$(1 → 0) line is brighter than the HCN(1 → 0) line if both molecules trace the same gas. However, as both molecules are subthermally excited, their line intensity depends on the underlying chemistry despite their high optical depth. This is exemplified in Figure 12, where we show the LYG-predicted $L'_{\text{HCN}}/L'_{\text{HCO}^+}$ ratio as a function of reasonable HCN and HCO$^+$ abundance for different H$_2$ densities. From the plot it can be seen that a decrease of the HCO$^+$ abundance can
indeed explain even the highest observed line ratios independent of the underlying density of the gas. Alternatively, an increase of the HCN abundance will also increase the $L_{\text{HCN}}/L_{\text{HCO}^+}$ ratio. The latter process, however, is only effective for H$_2$ gas densities below a few times $10^{-5} \text{ cm}^{-3}$, as for higher densities HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) will become thermalized and, therefore, insensitive to abundance variations. Given the gas density derived by us for NGC 253 ($10^5 \text{ cm}^{-3}$), both processes can effectively modify the observed line ratio.

A decrease of the HCO$^+$ abundance due to the ionizing field produced by cosmic rays has been proposed by Seaquist & Frayer (2000). Cosmic rays ionize H$_2$, leading to the production of HCO$^+$, which reacts with CO to form HCO$^+$. The abundance of HCO$^+$ is thus affected by the ratio of cosmic-ray ionization rate and gas density. While a higher ionizing flux favors the production of HCO$^+$, it also increases the number of free electrons, which leads to a higher probability for recombination. At a gas density of $3 \times 10^4 \text{ cm}^{-3}$, an ionizing field comparable to that of the Galaxy may already be strong enough to significantly decrease the abundance of HCO$^+$ due to dissociative recombination of H$_3^+$ (e.g., Phillips & Lazio 1995).

Theoretical modeling by Meijerink & Spaans (2005) and Meijerink et al. (2007) suggest that for modest column densities $N_H < 10^{22.5} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ the presence of an embedded X-ray source, such as an AGN, can enhance the HCN/HCO$^+$ and HCN/CO abundance ratios relative to a pure UV source, such as young massive stars in a starburst. Note, however, that for larger column densities the reverse would be true. There are hints of enhanced HCN/HCO$^+$ ratios in nearby Seyfert galaxies (e.g., Kohno et al. 2001). Nonetheless, similar enhancements are not found for the far-infrared bright Cloverleaf QSO (Riechers et al. 2006).

An alternative explanation for the observed variations of the $L_{\text{HCN}}/L_{\text{HCO}^+}$ ratio could be that HCO$^+$ and HCN are not arising from the same volume. From an analysis of the dense gas properties in Arp 220 and NGC 6240, Greve et al. (2006) recently concluded that the HCO$^+$ emission is dominantly emitted from regions with 10 times lower density than HCN. In this picture the $L_{\text{HCN}}/L_{\text{HCO}^+}$ ratio would then be explained by the relative area filling factors of the denser cores and the less dense surrounding medium in combination with the excitation conditions in both gas phases. This picture, however, is not supported by our observation of NGC 253, where the excitation of both molecules can be explained by a single density-temperature combination.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We have presented maps of HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) and HCO$^+$($1 \rightarrow 0$) obtained with OVRO and observations of HCN($4 \rightarrow 3$) and HCO$^+$($4 \rightarrow 3$) obtained with APEX of the starburst disk of NGC 253. We find that the spatial distribution of the two molecules is very similar, even when compared on a channel-by-channel basis. We find the ratio between HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) and HCO$^+$($1 \rightarrow 0$) is $1.1 \pm 0.2$ across the whole circumnuclear starburst region independent of the strength of the central radiation field. The emission from the HCN($1 \rightarrow 0$) and HCO$^+$($1 \rightarrow 0$) transitions, both indicators of the dense molecular gas, trace regions that are nondistinguishable within the uncertainties of our observations.

From an excitation analysis we find that both molecules are subthermally excited and that their emission lines are optically thick. The constant line ratio implies that there are no strong abundance gradients across the starburst disk. A consequence of both molecules being subthermally excited is that the line intensity is sensitive to the underlying chemistry despite their high optical depth. This finding may also explain the variations in $L_{\text{HCN}}/L_{\text{HCO}^+}$ between different star-forming galaxies.

The advent of the Atacama Large Millimeter/Submillimeter Array (ALMA), Expanded Very Large Array (EVLA), and Square Kilometer Array (SKA) will open up improved prospects for observations of dense molecular gas phase in galaxies through molecular line transitions such as HCN and HCO$^+$ at low and high redshifts. As both HCN and HCO$^+$ appear to trace the same dense gas regions where the formation of the stars are taking place, observations of these two molecules will be important probes in future projects aimed at studying galaxies during phases of the buildup of their stellar mass.
