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2-Cyano-2-phenylpropanoic Acid Triggers the Back and Forth Motions of an Acid–Base-Operated Paramagnetic Molecular Switch

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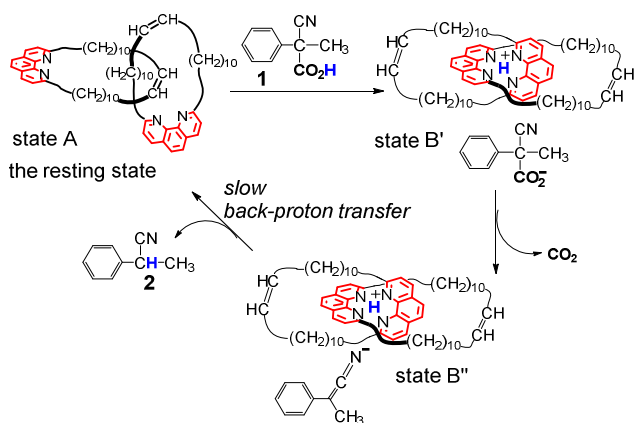
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ABSTRACT

The back and forth motions of a crown-ether based wheel along the axis of a bistable rotaxane are triggered by the decarboxylation of 2-cyano-2-phenylpropanoic acid and detected by the oscillation of the EPR nitrogen splitting of a dialkyl nitroxide function mounted within the macrocyclic ring. When the *para*-Cl derivative of the acid is used, back and forth motions are accelerated. Conversely, with *p*-CH₃ and *p*-OCH₃ derivatives, the back motion is strongly inhibited by the insurgence of collateral radical reactions.

In the course of the last decades, supramolecular chemists have designed and realized a large variety of molecular machines (switches and motors), which undergo large amplitude motions under the influence of external stimuli.¹ Mechanically interlocked molecules (MIMs), namely catenanes and rotaxanes,^{2,3} which shift among two or more states due to the action of chemical or radiative stimuli are well established examples. Most of them require subsequent additions of chemical reagents or irradiations with light at different wavelength, to complete a whole cycle of motions (from the initial state to another state or a sequence of other states, and back again to the initial state).^{1a} Instead, only in a handful of cases the molecular machines based on MIMs are able to exploit just one radiative⁴ or chemical⁵ stimulus to pass from an initial state to one or more intermediate states, and return to the initial state without necessity of a counter-stimulus.

One impressive example is a [2]-catenane described by Leigh and coworkers.^{5b} Here, one of the macrocycle composing the catenane carries out unidirectional and autonomous cycles of motion around the other macrocycle, being fed on just one only stimulus.

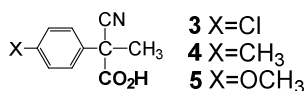


Scheme 1. A→B→A cycle of motion coupled to the decarboxylation of acid **1**. Fast and quantitative proton transfer (step A→B') causes the two phenanthroline subunits to approach one another in order to share the proton. Decarboxylation (B'→B''), and following, slow back-proton transfer restore the resting state of the catenane (B''→A).

Another example, developed in our lab, is based on a Sauvage-type catenane,^{5a,d,f} which can move back and forth among a state A and two subsequent states B (B' and B''), when 1 mol eq of acid **1** (2-phenyl-2-cyanopropanoic acid) is added (see Scheme 1).

This was the first case in which a molecular machine, namely a switch, performs a whole cycle of motion ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$) with no need of any counter-stimulus. Coupling of the $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$ transitions to the step-by-step decarboxylation of reactant **1** to product **2** (2-phenyl-2-cyanopropane) is the key-point of the system (Scheme 1).

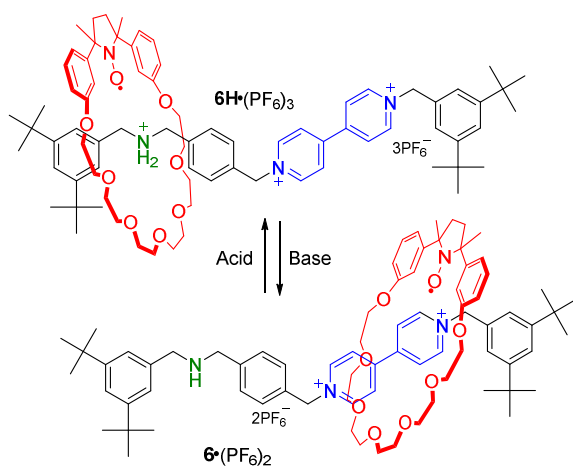
Also Schmittle and co-workers exploited acid **1** to promote the back and forth motions of an acid-base operated [2]-rotaxane switch,^{5e} while Leigh and co-workers, taking inspiration from this acid, took advantage of the decarboxylation of trichloroacetic acid to supply energy to a [2]-catenane based motor where one of the macrocycles performs oriented 360° circumrotations around the other.^{5c}



Scheme 2.

Here we report on the use of compound **1** and derivatives **3**, **4** and **5** (Scheme 2) to trigger for the back and forth motions of a recently proposed bistable nitroxide-containing [2]-rotaxane, **6H•**(PF₆)₃, which is able to change co-conformation under an acid-base stimulus.⁶ The [2]-rotaxane architecture comprises a dialkyl nitroxide functionality inserted in a crown ether-like ring interlocked with a dumbbell component that possesses two different recognition sites, namely, a dialkylammonium (NH₂⁺) and a 4,4'-bipyridinium (BPY²⁺) unit (Scheme 3). In **6H•**(PF₆)₃, the macrocycle is not significantly interacting with the BPY²⁺ unit, consistent with it being localized predominantly over the ammonium site of the thread.⁷

Shuttling of the paramagnetic macrocycle towards the secondary BPY²⁺ station (Scheme 3) is triggered by treating rotaxane **6H**•(PF₆)₃ with the non-nucleophilic Hünig's base, diisopropylethylamine (iPr₂EtN), which is strong enough to deprotonate the NH₂⁺ center.^{7a} Addition of trifluoroacetic acid causes the return back movement of the ring onto the preferred ammonium site. Owing to the paramagnetic nature of the rotaxane the back and forth motion could be well detected by EPR spectroscopy.



Scheme 3. Switching process between **6H**•(PF₆)₃ and **6**•(PF₆)₂

In particular, we demonstrated that when the macrocycle predominantly encircles the ammonium station the nitrogen splitting value a_N is 14.39 G, and noticeably increases to 14.82 G after addition of one equivalent of iPr₂EtN ($\Delta a_N = +0.43$ G, see Figure 1).

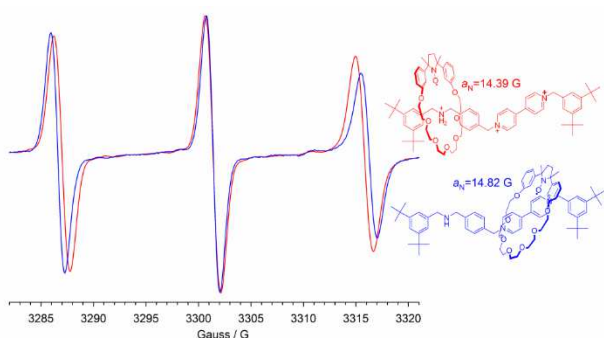
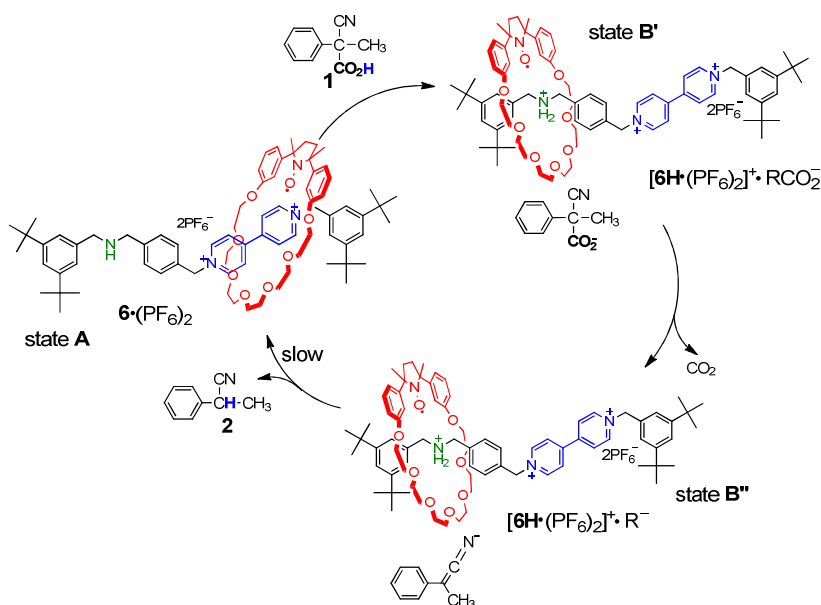


Figure 1. EPR spectra of tri-charged (**6H**) and di-charged (**6**) rotaxanes in CH₂Cl₂

With the aim of realizing one-only-stimulus supplied back and forth motions of the paramagnetic wheel in rotaxane **6H•**(PF₆)₃, we decided to employ acid **1** to drive the switchable molecular shuttle in **6H•**(PF₆)₃.

To investigate the acid **1**-driven reversible cycle, we started from deprotonated rotaxane **6•**(PF₆)₂, in which the preferred co-conformation is that of ring-complexed viologen unit. This was accomplished by adding 1 mol eq of *i*Pr₂EtN to **6H•**(PF₆)₃. Treatment of the resulting rotaxane **6•**(PF₆)₂ with 1 mol eq of acid **1** in CH₂Cl₂ causes a drastic change in the EPR spectrum within a few seconds with concomitant formation of [**6H•**(PF₆)₂]⁺•RCO₂[−]. Spectra were measured at constant time intervals after addition of **1** (see Figure 2). Over the course of ca. 60 min, the nitrogen splitting constant increases constantly, and full back transformation to **6•**(PF₆)₂ is clearly proved by the appearance of nitrogen splitting original value corresponding to the location of the macrocycle on the BPY²⁺ unit (see Figure 2).⁶



Scheme 4. Switching motions of rotaxane **6•**(PF₆)₂ triggered by acid **1**. Fast and quantitative proton transfer (step **A**→**B'**) causes the movement of the wheel onto the ammonium site of the dumbbell. Loss of CO₂ (step **B'**→**B''**), followed by slow back proton transfer from [**6H•**(PF₆)₂]⁺ to its counteranion (R[−]), restores the position of the ring to the bipyridinium station (step **B''**→**A**).

In the course of several fueled cycles (as an example see Figure 2, Inset), each ignited by addition of 1 mol eq of acid, the nitrogen splitting drops rapidly after each addition and recuperates, slightly lower to the original level over ca. the same time, as defined by state A.

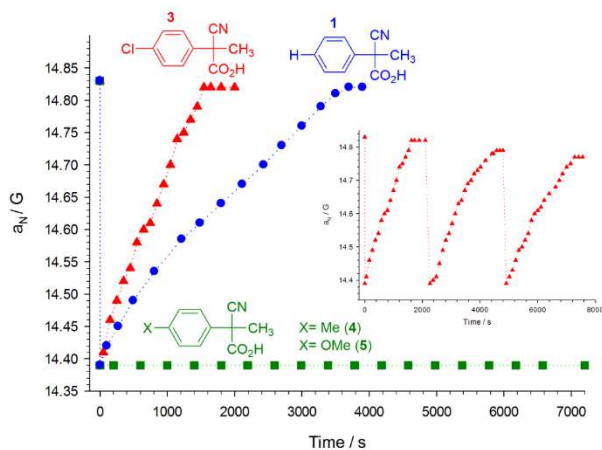


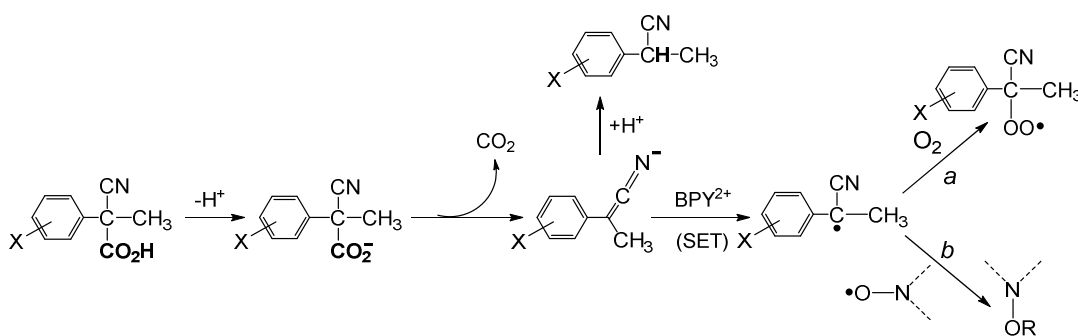
Figure 2. Time variation of a_N after the addition of 1 mol eq of different acids (**1**, **3-5**) to $6\bullet(\text{PF}_6)_2$ in CH_2Cl_2 . Inset: a_N variation in rotaxane **6** as function of sequential fuel **3** additions.

It has already been shown that the rate of back proton transfer, which in the absence of competitive processes determines the rate of the overall process, is markedly affected by the nature of the *para*-substituent in the aromatic ring of **1**.^{5d} Thus, we decided to monitor by EPR the back and forth motions of the paramagnetic wheel in the presence of some representative acid **1** derivatives containing electron withdrawing (Cl) and electron donating (Me, OMe) *para*-substituents. As expected, with the chlorinated derivative **3** the time required to complete a full cycle was significant faster compared to that of the unsubstituted derivative (see Figure 2). Unexpected result were instead observed in the presence of acids containing an electron donating group (**4** and **5**). While addition of 1 mol eq of **4** or **5** to rotaxane $6\bullet(\text{PF}_6)_2$ in CH_2Cl_2 causes a decrease in the EPR a_N value (14.39 G) within a few seconds as expected for the concomitant formation of the protonated tri-charged form of the rotaxane, no recovery of the initial value of nitrogen splitting (14.82 G) was observed with both fuels even after several hours upon mixing of the reagents (see Figure 2).

Slow return to initial state A (Scheme 1) in the presence of **4** and **5** has been already demonstrated for a Sauvage-type catenane.^{5d} Thus, failure in the retrieval of state A observed in the present case

suggests that some alternative processes should compete with the final back proton transfer within ion-pair $[6\mathbf{H}^{\bullet}(\text{PF}_6)_2]^+\bullet\text{R}^-$ from $6\mathbf{H}$ to benzyl anion R^- (see Scheme 4).

Benzyl anions can lose one electron to afford neutral benzyl radicals and this process is much more feasible when they contain an electron donating substituent in the *para*-position as revealed by the corresponding half-wave potentials ($E_{1/2}$) for the electrochemical reduction of 4-substituted benzyl radicals.⁸ Since the rotaxane thread contains the 1,1'-dialkyl-4,4'-bipyridinium unit which is known to undergo monoelectronic reduction at relatively low reduction potential (-0.42 vs SCE in ACN), it seems reasonable to hypothesize an electron transfer from the benzyl anion to BPY^{2+} unit as an alternative process to deprotonation of the rotaxane (see Scheme 5). The single electron transfer (SET) process leads to the BPY radical cation and a benzyl radical which in turn is trapped by oxygen to afford the corresponding peroxy radical (Scheme 1, path *a*).



Scheme 5. Competitive SET mechanism (only active when $\text{X} = \text{CH}_3$ or OCH_3)

Since this process is expected to consume molecular oxygen, we checked the feasibility of this path by repeating the stimulus-driven transformation in a closed tube by following the oxygen consumption during an entire cycle. The change of oxygen concentration after the addition of **4** or **5** within the closed tube was determined by following the evolution of the three lines EPR spectrum of the nitroxidic rotaxane. Actually the width of these lines is related to the concentration of oxygen which produce a strong broadening of the EPR spectral lines of radicals due to Heisenberg spin exchange.^{9,10}

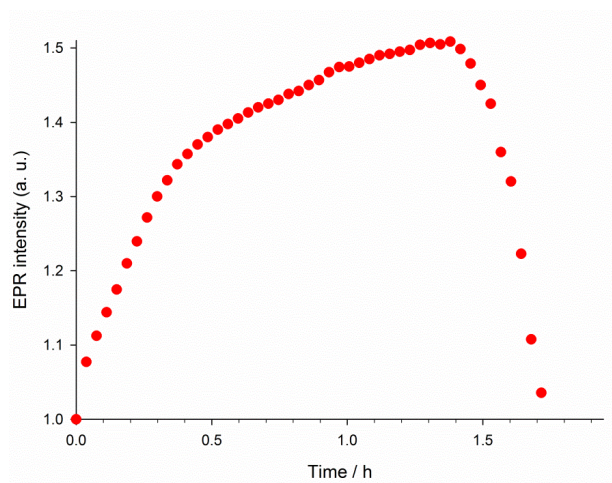


Figure 3. The circles show the experimental time dependence of the height of the central line (I) of the EPR spectrum of the tri-charged rotaxane **6H** after addition of 1 mol eq of **4** at room temperature.

Another spectral parameter, sensitive to the oxygen concentration, but much easier to measure than the width, is the peak to peak height of the EPR line, I . This is proportional to both the radical concentration and the reciprocal of line width. In Figure 3 the dependence of the intensity of the central line of protonated tri-charged form of the rotaxane on time after addition of acid **4** is shown. At the beginning of the reaction the intensity of the EPR lines increases since the benzyl radicals produced in the SET step react with O_2 (path *a*).¹¹ Molecular oxygen is therefore consumed in the reaction vessel, the width of the EPR lines due to the nitroxide decreases and their height increases. Only when most of the oxygen has been consumed, the benzyl radicals begin to react with the protonated rotaxane **6H** (Scheme 5, path *b*) leading to the degradation of the paramagnetic nitroxidic probe and the concomitant decrease of the EPR signal intensities. It should be remarked that no evidence of oxygen consumption during a complete cycle were observed with fuels **1** and **3** (data not shown).

In conclusion, the reported paramagnetic rotaxane turns to be able to perform back and forth switching motions in the presence of activated carboxylic acids. Differently from all the cases previously reported for which the back and forth motions of switches or motors were monitored by common spectroscopic tools (NMR, spectrophotometry or spectrofluorimetry), in this case EPR

spectroscopy was employed for the first time to demonstrate the movement. This report shows that, apart from limitations dictated by the peculiar red-ox features of this specific system (electron donating substituents at the *para* position of the aromatic ring of the fuel are not tolerated), 2-cyano-2-phenylpropanoic acid and its derivatives can be used to trigger the back and forth motions of a complex molecular machine incorporating a radical center and to modulate its magnetic properties.

Experimental section.

Rotaxane **6H**•(PF₆)₃ was prepared as previously reported.⁶ Fuels **1-4** were available from previous investigation.^{7a,d}

EPR measurements. EPR spectra has been recorded on Bruker-ELEXYS spectrometer by using the following instrument settings: microwave power 0.79 mW, modulation amplitude 0.04 mT, modulation frequency 100 kHz, scan time 180 s, 2K data points. The hyperfine splittings were determined by computer simulation using a Monte Carlo minimisation procedure.¹²

EPR Kinetic studies for the fuel-driven reversible cycle. A solution of **6H**•(PF₆)₃ (0.1 mM) and diisopropylethylamine amine (0.1 mM) is introduced (ca. 50 µL) into a capillary tube with the internal diameter of ca. 1.85 mm. The sample is then introduced in the EPR cavity and an EPR spectrum is recorded to verify the complete deprotonation of **6H**•(PF₆)₃. Subsequently, 1 mol eq of the proper fuel is added and EPR spectra are measured at constant time intervals. Oxygen consumption studies were performed by a similar procedure. In this case the sample was closed by introducing into the sample tube a second capillary tube (external diameter of 1.60 mm) sealed at one end and leaving very little dead volume space. The decrease of the nitroxide concentration and the oxygen uptake was followed by EPR spectroscopy as described in the paper.

Acknowledgements

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