

Optical line shapes of color centers in solids from classical autocorrelation functions

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Color centers play key roles in applications, including, e.g., solid state lighting and quantum information technology, for which the coupling between their optical and vibrational properties is crucial. Established methodologies for predicting the optical lineshapes of such emitters rely on the generating function (GF) approach and impose tight constraints on the shape of and relationship between the ground and excited state landscapes, which limits their application range. Here, we describe an approach based on direct sampling of the underlying auto-correlation functions through molecular dynamics simulations (MD-ACF) that overcomes these restrictions. The energy landscapes are represented by a machine-learned potential, which provides an accurate yet efficient description of both the ground and excited state landscapes through a *single* model, guaranteeing size-consistent predictions. We apply this methodology to the $(V_{Si}V_C)_{kk}^0$ divacancy defect in 4H-SiC, a prototypical color center, which has been studied both experimentally and theoretically. We demonstrate that at low temperatures the present MD-ACF approach yields predictions in agreement with earlier GF calculations. Unlike the latter it is, however, also applicable at high temperatures as it is not subject to the same limitations, especially with respect to handling of anharmonicity, and can be applied to study non-crystalline materials. While we discuss remaining challenges and possible extensions, the methodology presented here already holds the potential to substantially widen the range of computational predictions of the optical properties of color centers and related defects, especially for cases with pronounced anharmonicity and/or large differences between the initial and final states.

I. INTRODUCTION

Color centers in solids are not only the source of the luminous appearance of many gem stones but have also found numerous and widespread technological applications as a platform for harnessing the quantum nature of light. This includes for example certain types of lasers [1, 2], phosphors for solid state lighting [3, 4], and scintillators for radiation detection [5, 6]. Furthermore, color centers are emerging as one of the most promising platforms for realizing quantum technologies [7–9], enabling optical initialization and read-out [10] as well as single photon emission [11–13]. Finally, the sensitivity of the optical properties of color centers to changes in external parameters such as temperature, strain, and electromagnetic fields enables applications in sensing [14]. Consequently, the optical line shapes of color centers have become a crucial characteristic, prompting both extensive experimental [15–18] and theoretical efforts [19–22].

The by far most common methodology for predicting line shapes is based on the generating function (GF) approach [23, 24] in combination with density functional theory (DFT) calculations. This method has been shown to yield optical line shapes in good agreement with experiment at low temperatures for various color centers [19, 20, 22, 25–30]. Additional developments to account (partially) for temperature [22], the Jahn-Teller effect [28], and the restriction to a one-dimensional configuration coordinate [31] have further increased the value of

this method, and currently it can be considered the reference approach for assessing optical line shapes of color centers in solids. The GF approach, however, involves a number of critical approximations, which can be understood as restrictions on the shapes of and the relation between the ground and excited state potential energy surfaces (PESs) as well as the treatment of anharmonicity. As discussed below (Sect. II A), these approximations limit the reliability of GF predictions at higher temperatures, for anharmonic and/or ionic materials, and in the case of symmetry breaking electronic excitations.

Here, we describe a methodology that overcomes several of the most crucial limitations of the GF approach, allows one to properly handle the aforementioned cases, and is also applicable to non-crystalline materials. To this end, we combine autocorrelation function (ACF) analysis based on molecular dynamics (MD) simulations with a machine-learning potential (MLP) that can handle both the ground and excited state landscapes (Fig. 1). We demonstrate the utility of this MD-ACF scheme by its application to the $(V_{Si}V_C)_{kk}^0$ divacancy in 4H-SiC (Fig. 2). This prototypical color center has been extensively studied both experimentally [22, 32, 33] and computationally [21, 22], thanks to its potential for applications in quantum technology [33–36]. This defect serves as an ideal benchmark for the present approach, enabling a careful comparison with the GF method while providing a challenging test case.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review the GF framework (Sect. II A) and the ACF approach (Sect. II B) before introducing a scheme for the construction of a MLP that can handle both ground and excited states (Sect. III). These elements are

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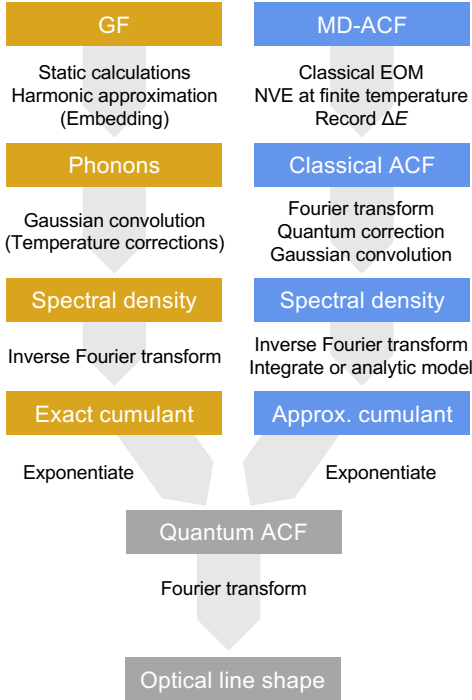


FIG. 1. **Workflows.** Illustration of the various steps involved in obtaining the optical line shape from the generating function (GF) method and the method based on molecular dynamics and autocorrelation function analysis (MD-ACF).

then combined to analyze the optical fine structure of the aforementioned divacancy defect in 4H-SiC (Sect. IV). We provide a detailed discussion of the approximations that are employed and their impact on the predicted line shapes (Sect. V) before closing with an outlook into possible future developments (Sect. VI).

II. LINE SHAPE THEORY

First we recap the GF approach before describing the ACF methodology. The workflows of the two methods are schematically summarized in Fig. 1.

The starting point for either approach for modeling optical line shapes is Fermi's golden rule, from which the following expression for the optical line shape during emission can be derived [38]

$$I(\omega) \propto \omega^3 A(\omega), \quad (1)$$

where

$$A(\omega) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} dt \langle \boldsymbol{\mu}(0) \boldsymbol{\mu}(t) \rangle \exp(i\omega t) \quad (2)$$

is the line shape function and

$$\langle \boldsymbol{\mu}(0) \boldsymbol{\mu}(t) \rangle = C(t) \quad (3)$$

is the dipole-dipole autocorrelation function (ACF).

A. Generating function approach

The GF approach is based on the (i) parallel-mode, (ii) Franck-Condon, and (iii) harmonic approximations, where we note that the Franck-Condon approximation includes the constant dipole approximation as discussed at the end of this section. Most of these approximations can be understood as restrictions on the PESs (Fig. 2d-e). The harmonic approximation means that both PESs are perfectly quadratic. The parallel-mode approximation further assumes that there is a one-to-one correspondence between modes in the ground and excited state and that one of the PESs is simply displaced. Furthermore, the curvature of the PESs is assumed to be exactly the same. This has to be true for each of the $3N$ vibrational modes. Now, these are in general rather strict requirements that can cause qualitative disparity between calculations and experiments.

In the GF approach the dipole-dipole ACF then takes the form [19]

$$C(t) = \exp(S(t) - S(0)), \quad (4)$$

where $S(t)$ is the inverse Fourier transform of the electron-phonon spectral function

$$S(\omega) = \sum_k s_k \delta(\omega - \omega_k). \quad (5)$$

Here, s_k is the partial Huang-Rhys factor defined as

$$s_k = \frac{1}{2} \omega_k \Delta q_k^2, \quad (6)$$

where Δq_k is the projection of the ionic configurational difference $\Delta \mathbf{R}$ on phonon mode k given by

$$\Delta q_k = \sum_a \sqrt{m_a} \langle \mathbf{n}_k^a | \Delta \mathbf{R}_a \rangle. \quad (7)$$

Here, a runs over all the atoms in the system and $|\mathbf{n}_k\rangle$ is the normalized ionic displacement vector corresponding to phonon mode k .

The expression for the ACF in Eq. (4) is obtained under the assumptions that the ground and excited state phonon modes are parallel as well as harmonic, that emission occurs from the vibrational ground state (i.e., low temperature), and that the Franck-Condon approximation holds. While the low-temperature assumption can to some extent be relaxed by including Bose-Einstein statistics in the correlation function [22], the other approximations remain difficult to avoid and even control *a priori*. For example, the evaluation of the partial Huang-Rhys factors according to Eq. (6) strictly requires the phonon modes k in the ground and excited states to have the same frequency and to be linearly related.

In general, the phonon modes of the ground and excited states are related by a rotation and displacement

$$\mathbf{q}^{\text{ex}} = \mathbf{D} \mathbf{q}^{\text{gs}} + \Delta \mathbf{q}, \quad (8)$$

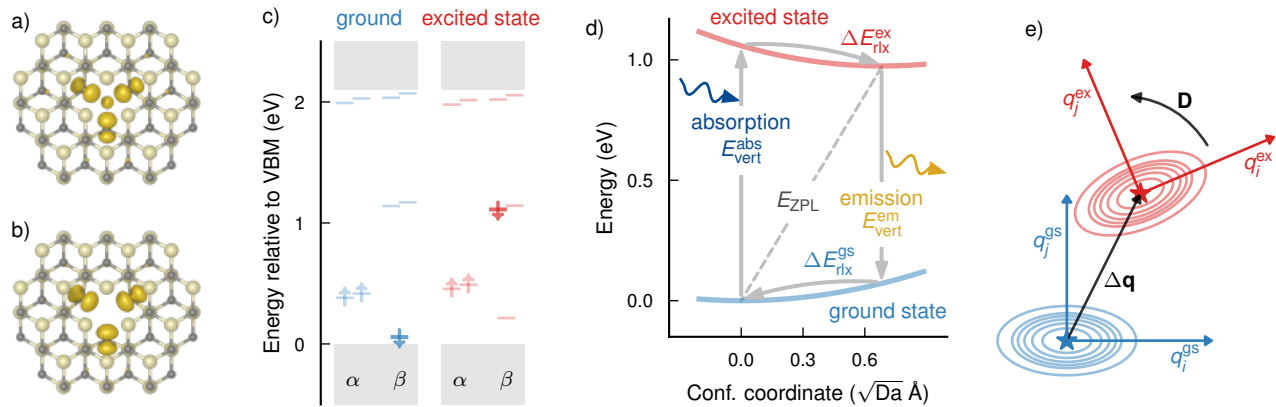


FIG. 2. **Ground and excited landscapes of the $(\text{V}_{\text{Si}}\text{V}_{\text{C}})_{kk}^0$ defect.** Defect configuration in the (a) ground and (b) excited state. The charge density of the localized electronic states that are occupied in the respective configurations and highlighted in (c) are shown by isosurfaces (also see Figs. S1 and S2 [37]). (c) Level structure according to the Kohn-Sham eigenstates. The localized levels shown in (a,b) are highlighted by bold bars in the β spin channel. (d) Illustration of the simplified treatment of configuration coordinate in the parallel-mode approximation commonly used in the GF approach, which reduces the $3N$ -dimensional configuration coordinate to one dimension. The minima on the ground and excited state landscapes correspond to the atomic configurations shown in (a) and (b), respectively, and their distance equals Δq . The figure also indicates the vertical excitation energies E_{vert} , the ZPL energy E_{ZPL} as well as the Stokes shifts ΔE_{rx} . (e) Illustration of the more general relationship between the ground and excited state normal modes. In this case the normal modes corresponding to ground (gs) and excited state (ex) are translated by a vector $\Delta \mathbf{q}$ and rotated by the Duschinsky matrix \mathbf{D} .

where \mathbf{D} is the Duschinsky matrix, which introduces a rotation (or mixing) between the phonon modes in the different electronic states and $\Delta \mathbf{q}$ is the displacement between the minima of the ground and excited state PESs (Fig. 2e). In the GF approach, the phonon modes are required to be linearly related i.e., $q_k^{\text{ex}} = q_k^{\text{gs}} + \Delta q_k$ for some constant Δq_k . This approximation can be particularly severe for symmetry breaking excitations/deexcitations and/or in systems with pronounced anharmonicity.

Next, the Franck-Condon approximation is based on the zeroth-order term in a series expansion of the dipole moment and it has been outlined how to include linear terms (Herzberg-Teller factors) [38]. Including the linear terms and using different vibrational modes in the initial and final states adds considerable complexity to the task of evaluating the optical line shapes, and has to the best of our knowledge not been implemented and tested for solid state systems.

B. MD-ACF approach

In the physical chemistry community modeling line shapes from ACFs sampled via classical MD simulations is an established approach, and commonly applied to molecular systems. While this applies predominantly to vibrational spectra related to infrared and Raman measurements [39, 40], optical spectra can be obtained as well via mixed quantum-classical approaches [41–43]. At the same time, the possibilities to model materials at relevant length and time scales have significantly improved in recent years due to the advent of MLPs that are not

only accurate and efficient but able to describe systems with increasing chemical, structural, and dynamical complexity.

1. Line shape function

The starting point is again Eq. (1) and in the Franck-Condon approximation the (quantum) ACF can be cast in the form of a time-ordered exponential [41]

$$C(t) = \left\langle \exp \left(i \int_0^t dt' U(t') \right) \right\rangle_{\text{ens}},$$

where U is the *gap* operator, i.e., the energy difference between the initial and final state and the angular brackets indicate an ensemble average. This exponential can be expanded in cumulants as

$$C(t) = \exp \left(\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} g_n(t) \right).$$

We define the m -th cumulant as

$$g_m(t) = \sum_{n=1}^m g_n(t).$$

For a fully harmonic system $g_m = g_2$ for $m > 2$, i.e., g_2 describes a harmonic system *exactly* [44]. The second-order cumulant contains the information present in the two-time classical ACF of the potential energy difference.

It is given by

$$g_2(t) = - \int_0^t dt' \int_0^{t'} dt'' \langle \Delta U(0) \Delta U(t'') \rangle. \quad (9)$$

The cumulant is then related to the optical line shape function as

$$A(\omega) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} dt \exp[i(\omega - \underbrace{(E_{\text{vert}} \mp \Delta E_{\text{rlx}})}_{E_{\text{ZPL}}})t] \exp[-g_2(t)], \quad (10)$$

which is centered at the ZPL E_{ZPL} , i.e., the energy obtained from the vertical transition energy $E_{\text{vert}} > 0$ and the relaxation energy (or one-sided Stokes shift) $\Delta E_{\text{rlx}} > 0$ where $-/+$ are applicable for absorption and emission, respectively (Fig. 2d).

In order to obtain the cumulant, we start from the energy difference of the adiabatic PESs corresponding to the initial and final electronic states. The energy difference function can be computed from a classical trajectory propagated with the Hamiltonian corresponding to the initial state. By propagating on the ground or excited state PES we can thus model absorption or emission spectra, respectively.

The classical energy gap operator is

$$\Delta U_{\text{cl}}(t) = U_{\text{cl}}^{\text{ex}}(\mathbf{R}(t)) - U_{\text{cl}}^{\text{gs}}(\mathbf{R}(t)) - \langle U_{\text{cl}}^{\text{ex}}(\mathbf{R}(t)) - U_{\text{cl}}^{\text{gs}}(\mathbf{R}(t)) \rangle,$$

where $\mathbf{R}(t)$ is the atomic configuration of the system at time t , $\langle \cdot \rangle$ is the average vertical transition energy $\langle E_{\text{vert}} \rangle$, and U is the potential energy of the system. In this case the energy ΔU_{cl} corresponds to the difference in vibrational energy between the initial and final states.

2. Classical ACF

The classical ACF of ΔU_{cl} is the projection of $\Delta U_{\text{cl}}(t)$ on $\Delta U_{\text{cl}}(0)$, i.e.,

$$C_{\text{cl}}(t) = \langle \langle \Delta U_{\text{cl}}(t) \Delta U_{\text{cl}}(0) \rangle_{\tau} \rangle_{\text{ens}}, \quad (11)$$

where the inner and outer angular brackets indicate an average over time origins and an ensemble average, respectively.

Since $C_{\text{cl}}(t)$ is symmetric in time, the imaginary part of the classical ACF is zero, in contrast to the quantum ACF. This is related to the phonons in the quantum case carrying a phase as well as the time-energy uncertainty. The imaginary part of the quantum ACF can, however, be reconstructed to some extent *a posteriori* from the classical ACF (see the prefactor in Eq. (13) below) [43].

Similar to the GF approach we apply a broadening to the ACF to mimic the effect of the instrumental resolution function by convolution with a Gaussian function,

$$\tilde{C}_{\text{cl}}(t) = C_{\text{cl}}(t) \exp(-\gamma t^2). \quad (12)$$

Accordingly we work out the second-order cumulant from \tilde{C}_{cl} instead of the bare C_{cl} , which smoothens the Fourier transform of the latter, i.e., the spectral density Eq. (13). This has a similar effect on the spectral density as the approximation of the δ -functions in Eq. (5) with normalized Gaussians.

3. Spectral density function

The spectral density function $\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega)$ is given by [43]

$$\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega) = \theta(\omega) \frac{1}{\pi} f(\beta\omega) \tilde{C}_{\text{cl}}(\omega), \quad (13)$$

where $\theta(\omega)$ is the Heaviside function. Note that there are several possibilities for choosing the prefactor $f(\beta\omega)$ to include approximate quantum effects [43, 45] (Supp. Note S4 [37]). In this work we use the harmonic prefactor $\beta\omega/2$, which yields results that are consistent with GF calculations [22] and has also been found to be a suitable choice in calculations for the Fenna–Matthews–Olson complex [43]. We emphasize that using the harmonic prefactor does *not* imply that we assume the system to behave fully harmonic but rather that the treatment of quantum effects is limited to the harmonic approximation.

The Stokes shift, i.e., the relaxation energy on the final state PES (also see Fig. 2d) is [46]

$$\Delta E_{\text{rlx}} = \int_0^{\infty} d\omega \frac{\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega)}{\omega}. \quad (14)$$

Furthermore in the mode-decomposed case the following relation holds [43]

$$\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega) = \sum_j \omega_j \Delta E_{\text{rlx},j} \delta(\omega - \omega_j). \quad (15)$$

In a fully harmonic system the mode-decomposed Stokes shift can be written in terms of the partial Huang-Rhys factors as $\Delta E_{\text{rlx},j} = \omega_j s_j$. This yields

$$\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega) = \frac{1}{2} \sum_j \omega_j^2 s_j \delta(\omega - \omega_j),$$

which shows that

$$F(\omega) = \hat{j}_{\text{cl}}/\omega^2 \quad (16)$$

plays a similar role as the electron-phonon spectral function $S(\omega)$ in the GF approach, see Eq. (5). provides a natural relation between the electron-phonon spectral function in Eq. (5) and the spectral density computed at finite temperatures. The relation between the spectral density $F(\omega)$ (or equivalently $\hat{j}_{\text{cl}}(\omega)$) and the second-order cumulant $g_2(t)$, see Eq. (9), is [47]

$$g_2(t) = - \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} d\omega F(\omega) \left\{ \coth\left(\frac{\beta\omega}{2}\right) [\cos(\omega t) - 1] - i [\sin(\omega t) - \omega t] \right\}. \quad (17)$$

The MD-ACF approach expressed through Eqs. (11) to (17) relies on the following approximations: (i) the truncation of the cumulant expansion at second order, (ii) the reconstruction of the quantum time ACF from the classical ACF, and (iii) the Franck-Condon approximation as discussed in Ref. 47.

III. MODELING ENERGY LANDSCAPES

A. The $(V_{\text{Si}}V_{\text{C}})_{kk}^0$ divacancy

In 4H-SiC Si and C occupy two symmetry inequivalent sites, commonly referred to as h and k . There are thus four different divacancy configurations, corresponding to the combinations (h, h) , (h, k) , (k, h) , and (k, k) . In this study we consider the $(V_{\text{Si}}V_{\text{C}})_{kk}^0$ divacancy in 4H-SiC (Fig. 2), which hosts a bright transition and has been extensively studied both experimentally and computationally [33, 48, 49]. This defect features four localized levels in the α -spin channel and five localized levels in the β -spin channel that are occupied by two and one electrons, respectively (Fig. 2c; also see Figs. S1 and S2). In the ground state the lone electron in the β -channel occupies the lowermost level while in the first excited state it is promoted to the next higher orbital, which is very nearly degenerate with the next-next higher orbital.

Using DFT calculations and a 286-atom supercell we obtain a vertical excitation energy for absorption of $E_{\text{vert}}^{\text{abs}} = 1.06$ eV (Fig. 2d) and a ZPL energy of $E_{\text{ZPL}} = 0.97$ eV (see Supp. Note S1 for computational details). This is in line with previous theoretical results predicting the ZPL at 1.0 to 1.1 eV using a comparable level of theory and computational settings [22, 50].

B. MLP for ground and excited states

The MD-ACF approach outlined in Sect. IIB relies on a very thorough sampling of both ground and excited PESs to ensure convergence of the results. To this end, one requires simulations on the order of nanoseconds and systems on the order of hundred thousand or more atoms. As this is far beyond the domain of ab-initio MD simulations we require an effective yet accurate representation of the PESs, which is in principle available via MLPs.

While there are a few examples of excited state models for molecular systems [51, 52], in condensed matter MLPs have been so far primarily employed for the description of ground state PESs. Since we are dealing with an extended system represented by periodic boundary conditions, additional considerations are required. In particular one must ensure that the formation and excitation energies converge to constant values in the limit of an infinite system. This prohibits the naive approach of constructing separate MLPs for ground and excited PESs. To address this issue, we exploit that the electronic impact of the defect considered here (as well as

numerous other defects) is largely limited to its immediate vicinity, as the electronic states of the defect are practically completely localized at the nearest neighbor atoms of the vacancy (Fig. 2a,b). This allows us to construct a *single* model that can handle *both* the ground and the excited state by treating the nearest-neighbor atoms of the divacancy as separate species. Specifically, we set up a MLP that distinguishes bulk Si and C representing atoms not directly involved with the defect as well as Si_{gs} , C_{gs} , Si_{ex} , and C_{ex} , which represent the nearest neighbors of the divacancy in the ground (gs) and excited state (ex), respectively.

We adopt the NEP framework [53–55] to construct the MLP using the GPUMD [55] and CALORINE packages [56] (see Supp. Note S2 for details [57–60]). NEP models have proven to be not only accurate but also computationally very efficient, which is an important consideration for the present application. The reference data includes both pristine (defect-free) and defective structures with varying sizes, with energies and forces from DFT calculations performed using the Vienna ab-initio simulation package (see Supp. Note S1 for details [61–66]). The model as well as the DFT reference data used for its construction are available on zenodo [67].

The final MLP accurately reproduces the reference DFT data for ideal (defect-free) structures as well as defect structures in both the ground and excited state as evident from parity plots as well as the root mean square errors (RMSEs) and coefficients of determination R^2 (Figs. 3a and S3). The model also predicts a phonon dispersion in good with DFT calculations (Fig. 3b) and the PESs along the configuration coordinate closely matches the reference data for both ground and excited states (Fig. 3c). For the 286-atom cell used for this comparison, we obtain vertical excitation energies of 1.01 eV and 1.06 eV from NEP and DFT calculations, respectively, as well as ZPL energies of 0.94 eV and 0.97 eV, with $\Delta q = 0.68 \sqrt{\text{Da}\text{\AA}}$ in both cases. This implies that also the Stokes shifts on the ground and excited state landscape are in good agreement (Fig. 3c).

The vertical excitation energy for absorption $E_{\text{vert}}^{\text{abs}}$, ZPL energy E_{ZPL} , and formation energy E_f from the NEP calculations vary smoothly with system size and converge to constant values as the number of atoms goes to infinity, $N \rightarrow \infty$ (Fig. 4a). For system sizes above about 2000 atoms the energies deviate by less than 1 meV from their converged values. The Stokes shifts converge to 71 meV and 80 meV for the ground and excited states, respectively. We also note that the converged ZPL energy of 0.91 eV is in good agreement with DFT calculations using the PBE exchange-correlation functionals for a 2400 atom supercell, which yielded a value of 0.94 eV [50].

Compared to the energetics the displacement Δq exhibits a more pronounced system size dependence, as it increases from $0.68 \sqrt{\text{Da}\text{\AA}}$ for an 286-atom cell to $0.81 \sqrt{\text{Da}\text{\AA}}$ in the limit $N \rightarrow \infty$. This increase can be understood by recalling that even small displacements far

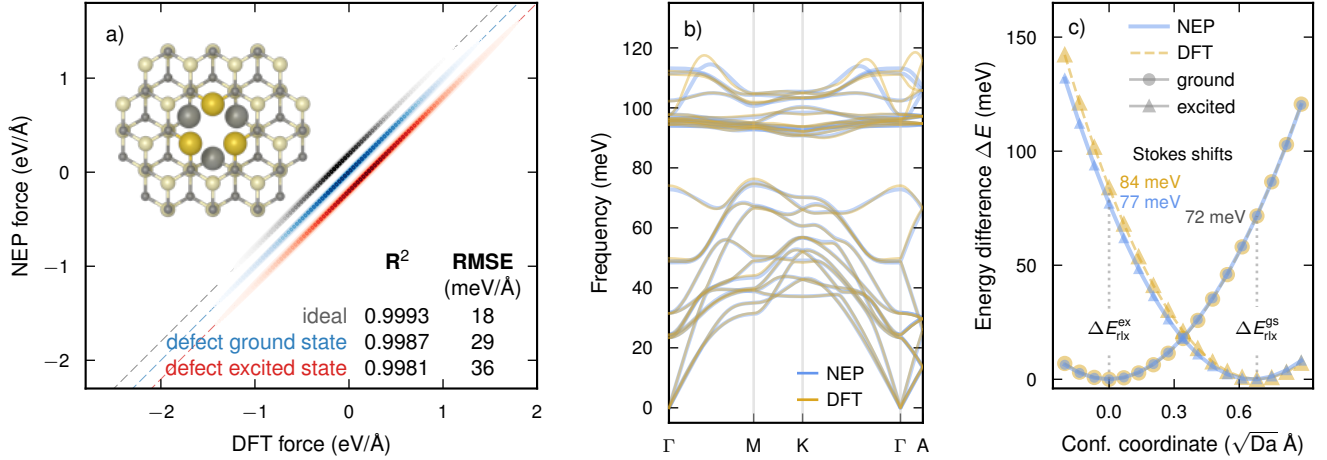


FIG. 3. **Machine learning potential model for ground and excited state defect energetics.** (a) Parity plots in the form of kernel density estimates for the force components comparing results from the NEP model with DFT reference data (also see Fig. S3). Coefficients of determination (R^2) and root mean square errors (RMSEs) for subsets of the data are shown in the table. The inset illustrates the defect decoration approach with Si and C atoms associated with the defect shown as large yellow and dark gray atoms. (b) Phonon dispersion for the pristine primitive cell from the NEP model and DFT calculations ($6 \times 6 \times 2$ supercell, 576 atoms). (c) 1D configurational coordinate diagram computed for the ground and excited state of the divacancy (286-atom supercells relaxed with DFT). For ease of comparison the energy difference ΔE is shown with respect to the minimum of each curve. The Stokes shifts ΔE_{rix} on the excited (ex) and ground state (gs) landscape from NEP and DFT calculations are indicated.

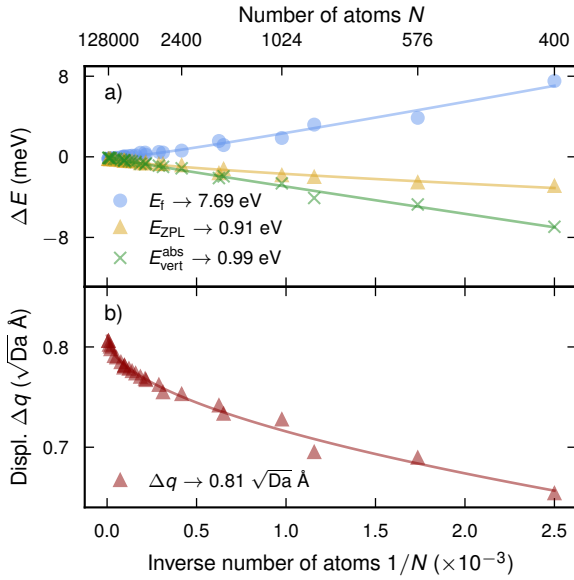


FIG. 4. **Size convergence of various defect related properties.** (a) Variation of the formation energy E_f , ZPL energy E_{ZPL} , vertical excitation energy for absorption $E_{\text{vert}}^{\text{abs}}$, and (b) the displacement Δq with the number of atoms N in the supercell; see Fig. 2d for the definition of these quantities. Since the leading interaction between defects is due to strain, which scales with the distance L between defects approximately as $1/L^3 \sim 1/V^3$, the scaling is shown as a function of the inverse number of atom $1/N$.

from the defect contribute to Δq and is testament to the long-ranged (albeit small) elastic strains induced by the defect.

IV. RESULTS

A. Sampling of the ACF via MD simulations

Having demonstrated the ability of the MLP to describe both the ground and excited state PESs on a common footing, we can deploy it in the context of the MD-ACF framework. To this end, we first carried out MD simulations on both the ground and excited state PESs at temperatures of 70, 150, and 300 K using supercells with more than 1 000 000 atoms (further computational details are provided in Supp. Note S3). These computational parameters were obtained through careful testing. We note that large system sizes are needed to ensure a dense sampling of the phonon dispersion relative to the Brillouin zone, and also help in reducing the noise in the ACF. Thanks to the thin architecture of the NEP methodology and its efficient implementation on GPUs, the computer time requirements are still modest.

B. Spectral density

Using Eq. (11) we computed the classical ACF from these trajectories, from which the spectral density $F(\omega)$

was obtained via Eqs. (13) and (16). The overall features of the spectral density $F(\omega)$ are consistent for the different temperatures exhibiting a main peak at around 30 meV and a smaller peak at 70 meV (Fig. 5; also see Fig. S4a,b). There are also very minor contributions at higher energies around 110 meV. It is also apparent that the broadening of the spectra with increasing temperature is readily captured without having to resort to empirical parameters.

The features and the overall shape of the spectral density are consistent with the electron-phonon spectral function $S(\omega)$ in the GF approach given by Eq. (5) [21, 22]. We note that a direct comparison of $S(\omega)$ and $F(\omega)$ would be misleading as the latter is computed at finite temperatures and thus the treatment of phonon occupation factors is relevant (classical vs quantum statistics).

There are few differences between the ground state and excited state spectral density functions. When propagating on the excited state PES the integral over the spectral density $F(\omega)$ at 70 K, as a proxy for the total Huang-Rhys factor, is significantly smaller at 1.93, compared with 2.57 for the ground state case (Fig. 5). These numbers decrease with temperature, with values of 1.89/2.47 at 150 K and 1.85/2.33 at 300 K for the excited/ground state. Furthermore, the main peak and the peak at around 70 meV are slightly red-shifted in comparison with propagation on the ground state PES.

Finally we note that the feature at 70 meV (i.e., before application of Gaussian broadening) is fundamentally actually very narrow ($\lesssim 1$ meV; Fig. S4a,b) whereas the feature at 30 meV has an intrinsic full width-half maximum of about 14 meV. This suggests that the latter is the result of the coupling of many modes whereas the former originates from only one or at most few modes. The dif-

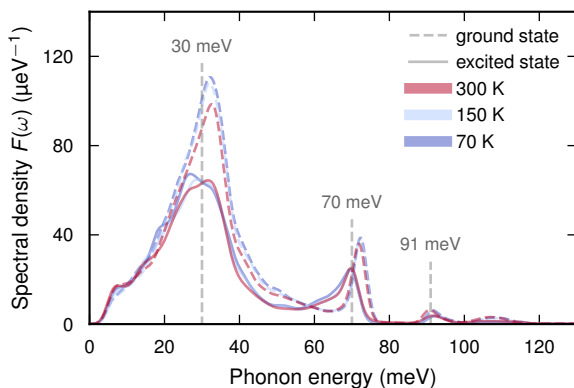


FIG. 5. **Spectral density.** Spectral densities obtained by propagation on the ground and excited state PESs at different temperatures using Gaussian broadening with a width of $\gamma = 1.5$ meV, see Eq. (12). The vertical dashed gray lines indicate the center of the main bands in the spectral density for the excited state. See Fig. S4a,b for an illustration of the effect of broadening.

ference is, however, obscured by the Gaussian smearing, which is applied here to mimic instrumental broadening present in experimental measurements.

C. Emission line shape

The emission line shapes $A(\omega)$, see Eq. (10), exhibit a series of sharp features that broaden with increasing temperature (Fig. 6a). The spacing between these features can be understood as resulting from the combination of the bands observable in the spectral density with lower order combinations giving stronger features (Fig. 5). This becomes even more apparent when considering the emission intensity $I(\omega)$, see Eq. (1) (Fig. 6c). The two most prominent side bands at $\tilde{\omega}_1 = 30$ meV and $\tilde{\omega}_2 = 70$ meV can thus be identified as first order excitations of the respective bands, while second order excitations give rise to the shoulders at 60 meV ($2 \times \tilde{\omega}_1$) and 140 meV ($2 \times \tilde{\omega}_2$) as well as the peak at 100 meV ($\tilde{\omega}_1 + \tilde{\omega}_2$).

The features are most pronounced in the spectrum at 70 K, in accordance with published line shapes at 0 K [21] and especially the 70 K spectrum computed using a temperature-extended GF approach with force constants embedding [22]. Overall, the line shape is rather similar, both the intensity of the peaks and the low energy tail. The small remaining deviations can likely be attributed to differences in the computational parameters, in particular the exchange-correlation functionals as the present work used PBEsol while the DDE functional [68] was employed in Ref. 22. Notably the MD-ACF results capture the significant broadening of the spectrum at 300 K as well as the reduction in the intensity of the ZPL.

One of the main approximations of the MD-ACF method is the assumption that the cumulant expansion can be truncated at second order. The reliability of this approximation can be checked by investigating the distribution of the emission energies observed during an MD simulation. While one does notice that the distribution becomes slightly asymmetric at 300 K (Fig. 6d), the distributions are still very well represented by Gaussians and hence the truncation at second order is justified in the present case. Our simulations also allow us to obtain the temperature dependence of the average emission energy $\langle E_{\text{vert}}^{\text{em}} \rangle$ (i.e., the mean of the distributions in Fig. 6d), which we find to red-shift by 19 meV between 0 and 300 K (Fig. 6d, inset).

Here, we do not report absorption spectra due to the degeneracy of the excited states. The latter causes electronic and vibrational states to mix (which is not included in the current model), which in turn prevents a meaningful with experiment. For reference we do, however, include a comparison of the spectral densities from propagation on the ground and excited states (Fig. 6a,b).

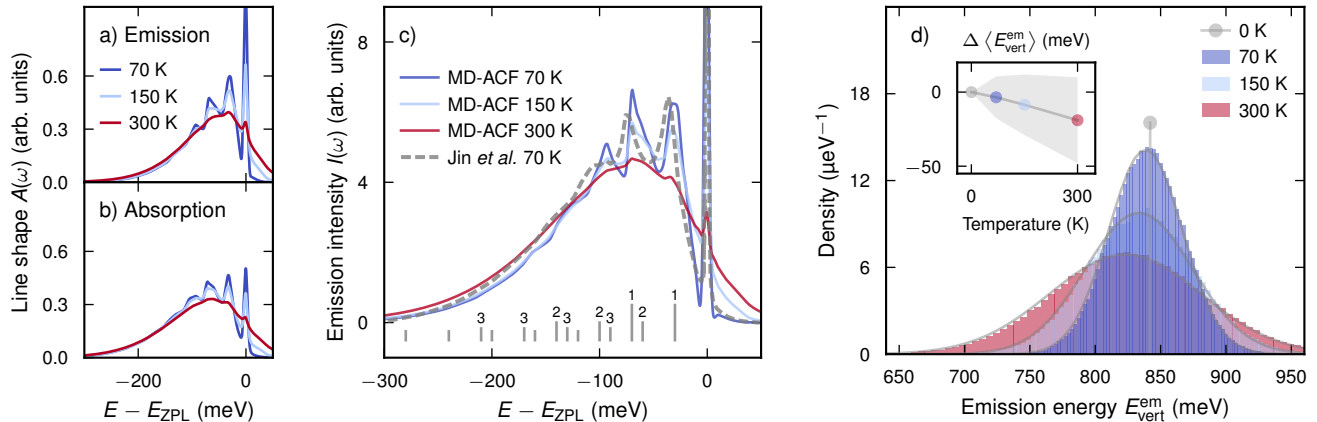


FIG. 6. **Line shape functions and emission spectra.** (a,b) Line shape functions $A(\omega)$ from Eq. (10) obtained by propagation on (a) the excited and (b) ground state PES to describe emission and absorption, respectively. (c) Emission spectra from the MD-ACF approach described in this work in comparison with calculations using the GF approach by Jin *et al.* [22]. The vertical gray lines indicate the frequencies that are obtained by combining the bands at 30 meV and 70 meV observable in the spectral density (Fig. 5). The order of the combination is given by the numbers and indicated by the length of the lines. (d) Distribution of vertical transition energies for propagation on the excited state PES. The distributions are rather well described by Gaussians (solid gray lines), indicating that truncating the cumulant expansion at second order is a good approximation in this case. The inset shows the shift of the average emission energy $\langle E_{\text{vert}}^{\text{em}} \rangle$ with respect to the emission energy at 0 K.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Anharmonicity and beyond the parallel-mode approximation

A crucial parameter for any color center is the (total) Huang-Rhys factor. It can be obtained from the displacement Δq via

$$S = \omega_{\text{eff}} \Delta q^2 / 2. \quad (18)$$

where ω_{eff} is an effective frequency representing the curvature at the minimum of the PES, or equivalently by integrating over the spectral function $S(\omega)$, see Eq. (5). The Huang-Rhys factor has a profound effect on the optical line shape. Smaller values ($S \lesssim 2$) commonly give rise to structured line shapes with distinct peaks whereas large values give rise to wide Gaussian side bands [24].

For applications in lighting, color centers are used to red-shift the energy of absorbed light [69], which requires moderate to large Huang-Rhys factors. By contrast for applications in quantum information theory, one typically aims for a small to moderate Huang-Rhys factors in order to maintain coherent emission. As the displacement between the ground and excited PESs increases (and thus the Huang-Rhys factor), vertical transitions are increasingly likely to terminate in the anharmonic region of the receiving PES. Simultaneously the parallel-mode approximation and the restriction to a one-dimensional configuration coordinate (Sect. II A and Fig. 2d) become increasingly questionable. As the MD-ACF approach (Sect. II B) in combination with a model for the

ground and excited state landscapes (Sect. III) can sample the configuration space over a very wide region it is not bound by these approximations and particularly well suited for such cases. Here, we have chosen a defect with an intermediate Huang-Rhys factor of 2.5 to 2.8 at 0 K [22] as it provides a good reference point to demonstrate and benchmark the MD-ACF approach. We emphasize, however, that the latter should be even more powerful when applied to systems with larger Huang-Rhys factors, stronger anharmonicity and/or large differences in the vibrational structure of ground and excited state.

In the limit of exactly parallel modes the line shape function $A(\omega)$ is symmetric around $\omega = 0$. For the $(\text{V}_{\text{Si}}\text{V}_{\text{C}})_{kk}^0$ defect considered here, the differences in the line shape functions $A(\omega)$ obtained by propagation on the ground and excited state PESs (Fig. 6) reveal, however, an asymmetry and thus the limitation of the parallel-mode approximation even in this relatively simple case. The asymmetry is also apparent in the Huang-Rhys factor, which can be approximately measured by the integral of $F(\omega)$, which equals 1.93 for emission and 2.57 for absorption at 70 K. While these numbers cannot be compared *directly* with the GF approach (see comment following Eq. (16)), we note that they are comparable to the 0 K Huang-Rhys factor of 2.5 to 2.8 obtained in Ref. 22. The latter reference also analyzed the limitations of the parallel-mode approximation using a one-dimensional model with different effective frequencies for ground and excited states. It was concluded that the difference of around 5 meV resulted in minor errors at lower temperatures but in non-negligible errors at high temperatures. While this points into a similar direction as

the present analysis, our results suggest that differences might already be noticeable at lower temperatures.

The spectral densities obtained by propagation on the ground and excited landscapes exhibit some notable differences (Fig. 6a,b), which implies that the optical line shapes are also different. In terms of the efficiency of the sampling we note that it is still unclear which PES should be chosen for propagating the system *in general* [41]. In this context, the expressions for the cumulant for propagating the system on the final or even an average of the initial and final PES for the emission process has been provided in the literature [41]. The choice of PES to propagate on may ultimately be system dependent and a matter of sampling. For this system, however, propagation on the initial state PES provides a very good agreement with other theoretical work and measurements on the emission line shape [22].

B. Modeling ground and excited state landscapes

We have introduced a simple yet effective procedure for constructing MLPs that can accurately handle ground and excited states in a computationally efficient manner (Sect. III). It can be straightforwardly extended to include further excited states by adding corresponding “marker” species. The approach is generally applicable to defects and related excitations such as self-trapped excitons and polarons, as long as they do not diffuse over the relevant time scales at the temperatures of interest. This category includes a huge number of cases, opening the possibility to quantitatively study the opto-vibrational coupling in these systems at elevated temperatures, a challenge that dates back to the early work by Born and Huang [70].

Finally, we note that thanks to the general form of the MLP it allows to also readily investigate not only the effect of temperature but also strain.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

In this work we have described an approach for predicting the optical spectra of defects that overcomes the restrictions on the ground and excited landscapes common in calculations based on the GF approach (Sect. II A) and is also applicable to non-crystalline materials. In this approach the ACF of the gap operator is sampled through MD simulations (Sect. II B) using a MLP based on the NEP framework to model the ground and excited state landscapes (Sect. III). We demonstrated a simple yet effective approach for constructing MLPs that can accurately yet efficiently describe both the ground and excited state landscapes through a *single* model, guaranteeing size-consistent predictions. In this context the efficiency of the NEP framework and its implementation in the GPUMD package have been beneficial as they allowed us to sample the ACF at a moderate computational

cost.

To demonstrate this methodology we considered the $(V_{\text{Si}V_{\text{C}}})_{kk}^0$ divacancy in 4H-SiC, which has been previously investigated both experimentally and theoretically (Fig. 2). This defect provides a suitable challenge since it features a moderate Huang-Rhys factor, such that the approximations commonly required in the GF approach are warranted at low temperature but become more severe with increasing temperature [22]. The MD-ACF approach predicts low-temperature spectra that are in good agreement with earlier GF calculations (Fig. 6c). At the same time the broadening of the spectra with increasing temperature is readily captured without having to resort to empirical parameters. These results demonstrate the reliability and potential of the MD-ACF approach. As the latter is not limited by constraints on the relation between the initial and final state landscapes commonly required in the GF approach, it should be particularly suitable for studying systems at higher temperatures, with pronounced anharmonicity, and/or large differences between the initial and final landscapes (Sect. V A).

The MD-ACF method applied to color centers in solids is thus an important step towards a more comprehensive description of the coupling between radiative transitions and vibrational degrees of freedom in condensed matter systems. We envision that this method can be extended to capture additional elusive effects. This includes, e.g., the commonly used assumption of a constant transition dipole moment, as the latter can be represented through a machine learning model using for example the tensorial NEP formalism [40]. This would allow one to sample the dipole-dipole ACF, see Eq. (3), directly as commonly done when predicting infrared spectra of molecules and liquids. Moreover the dissipative dynamics that leads to ZPL broadening may be possible to address by including higher order cumulants [44]. This would require additional algorithmic development since already three-time correlation functions are prohibitively expensive to calculate directly for long time series. In this context, we note that it might also be possible to approximate the quantum ACF and bypass the phenomenological prefactor via path integral molecular dynamics in the form of, e.g., ring polymer or Matsubara dynamics [71]. Finally, we recall that the current approach for constructing models for ground and excited PESs is limited to (the large class of) immobile (non-diffusing) defects, although it does indicate a potential pathway for generalizing the construction of MLP models that are not subject to this constraint (Sect. V B).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The NEP model as well as the database of DFT calculations used to train this model are available on zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13284738>.

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Optical line shapes of color centers in solids from classical autocorrelation functions

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Supplementary Notes

Supplementary Note S1: Density functional theory calculations

Collinear spin-polarized density functional theory (DFT) calculations were performed using the projector augmented wave method [1, 2] as implemented in the Vienna ab-initio simulation package [3–5] with a plane wave energy cutoff of 520 eV and the PBEsol exchange-correlation functional [6]. The Brillouin zone was sampled with automatically generated Γ -centered \mathbf{k} -point grids with a maximum spacing of 0.25 \AA^{-1} . The excited state was obtained by enforcing the occupation of the first defect level in the β -spin channel to zero (β , $n = 1$ in Figure S2) and the occupation of the second level to one (β , $n = 2$ in Figure S2) as in Ref. 7.

Supplementary Note S2: Construction of the machine-learned potential

We constructed a machine-learning potential (MLP) model using the neuroevolution potential (NEP) framework [8–10] and the iterative strategy outlined in Ref. 11 utilizing the GPUMD [10] and CALORINE packages [12]. Training structures included configurations along the configuration coordinate (Figure 2d) as well as snapshots from molecular dynamics (MD) simulations (see below) of ideal and defective structures at a range of system sizes. The MD structures were generated via an active learning strategy and randomly selected from MD trajectories run at temperatures between 70 and 400 K and at pressures ranging from -2.5 to 10 GPa. In total the training set consisted of 1341 structures, corresponding to a total of 448 388 atoms, including 59 defect-free as well as 641 structures each of defect structures on the ground and excited state potential energy surfaces (PESs). Structure generation and manipulation were carried out using the ASE [13] and HIPHIVE packages [14].

The final NEP model was obtained after 3 iterations and trained using all available reference data. In addition we trained an ensemble model using five folds to estimate the model error via k -fold cross validation. The resulting root mean square errors (RMSEs) are $(0.170 \pm 0.004) \text{ meV atom}^{-1}$ for the energies and $(32.1 \pm$

0.8) meV \AA^{-1} for the forces. The corresponding average coefficients of determination on the same folds are $R^2 = 0.999\,980 \pm 0.000\,006$ and $R^2 = 0.998\,00 \pm 0.000\,03$ for energies and forces, respectively (Figure S3).

Phonon dispersions for the ideal structure (Figure 3b) were obtained using forces from DFT calculations and NEP model using a $6 \times 6 \times 2$ supercell and the PHONOPY package [15].

The reference data obtained through DFT calculations is available in the form of ASE sqlite databases on zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13284738>. The record also includes the NEP model in a format suitable for the GPUMD package.

Supplementary Note S3: Molecular dynamics and auto-correlation functions

To sample the autocorrelation function (ACF) in Eq. (11) of the main paper, we employed supercells comprising $74 \times 74 \times 23$ primitive unit cell, corresponding to 1 007 582 atoms in the defect configurations. For each temperature we carried out simulations using 50 different initial configurations that were obtained by NVT simulations at the 0 K lattice parameters as predicted by the NEP model, i.e., $a = 3.080 \text{\AA}$ and $c = 10.082 \text{\AA}$. For each of these a MD simulation in the NVE ensemble was conducted for 40 ps. The ACF was evaluated up to a time lag of 12 ps. Furthermore, in computing the average of Eq. (11), the time was reset to zero every 0.5 ps. In total, the average of the ACF was computed over 1500 trajectories. The damping was effectively zero for the very large systems due to natural decay of the ACF. The lower frequency cutoff for evaluation of $F(\omega)$ was 5 meV to avoid amplifying low energy noise by dividing with very small numbers.

Supplementary Note S4: Effect of choice of prefactor

Since the sampling here is done using classical MD simulations the phonon mode occupations follow classical statistics, yielding the classical ACF, Eq. (11). The transition from the classical to the quantum ACF is approximated via Eq. (13), which involves the choice of the prefactor $f(\beta\omega)$. Here, in line with earlier work [16] we chose the harmonic prefactor $f(\beta\omega) = \beta\omega/2$, rather than the so-called standard prefactor $\tanh(\beta\omega/2)$ [17].

When using the harmonic prefactor the main peak of the spectral density function at around 30 meV exhibits a weak temperature dependence while at higher energies (≥ 60 meV) the spectral density is almost temperature independent (Figs. 5 and S4c). By contrast when using the standard prefactor, the temperature dependence is significant for all energies (Figure S4d). This prefactor saturates at unity for $\beta\omega/2 \gtrsim 2$, and thus has little effect for phonon with energies above 50 meV for the 70 K and 150 K spectral densities.

The good agreement with reference optical emission spectra as well as the consistency between the Stokes shifts computed using static configurations and the spectral distribution function, show, however, the harmonic prefactor ($f(\beta\omega) = \beta\omega/2$) to be the suitable choice for the present system. The latter balances the classical ACF to make it almost fully temperature independent. This implies that the temperature dependence of the spectral density (Figure S4c) and emission line shape (Figure 6a) originate from other parts of the cumulant rather than from the spectral density.

Supplementary Figures

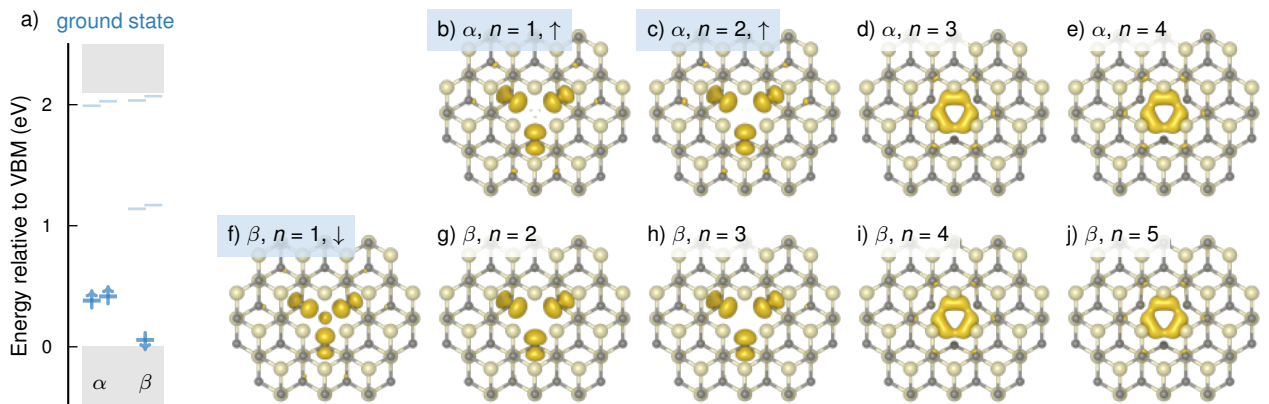


Fig. S1: Orbitals of the $(V_{\text{Si}}V_{\text{C}})_{kk}^0$ defect in the ground state. (a) Defect level structure and (b–j) corresponding orbitals superimposed on the defect configuration. The orbitals are indexed from lowest to highest energy starting at $n = 1$ for each spin channel. Occupied orbitals are highlighted in blue in (b–j).

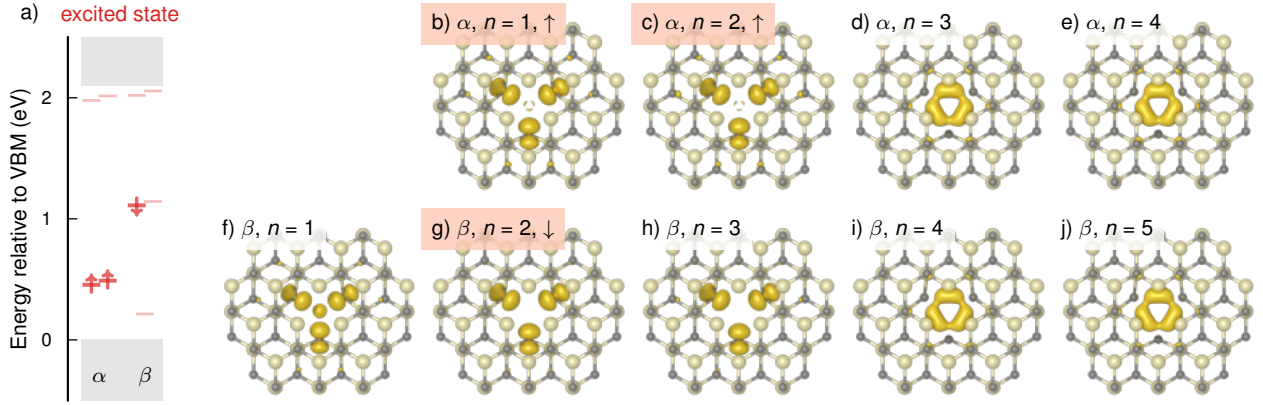


Fig. S2: Orbitals of the $(V_{Si}V_C)_{kk}^0$ defect in the excited state. (a) Defect level structure and (b–j) corresponding orbitals superimposed on the defect configuration. The orbitals are indexed from lowest to highest energy starting at $n = 1$ for each spin channel. Occupied orbitals are highlighted in red in (b–j).

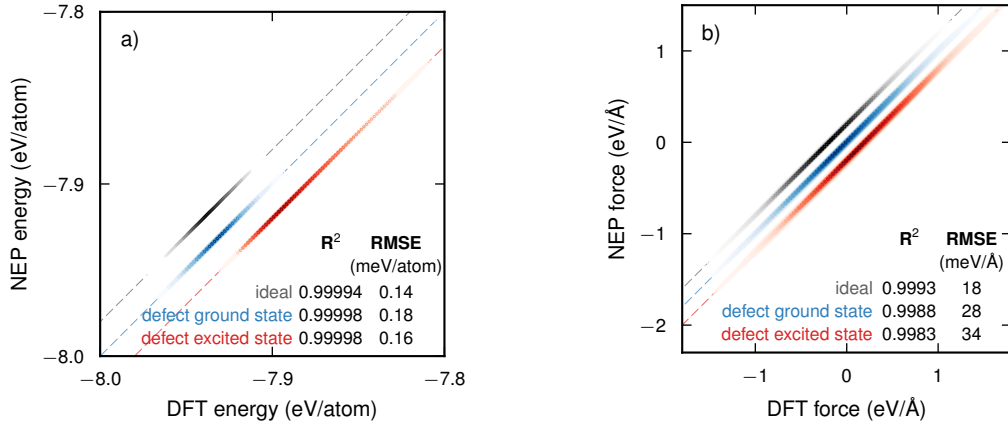


Fig. S3: Parity plots for the machine-learned potential. The data for (a) energy and (b) forces are presented in the form of kernel density estimates comparing results from the NEP model with DFT reference data. Coefficients of determination (R^2) and root mean square error (RMSE) for subsets of the data are shown in the tables.

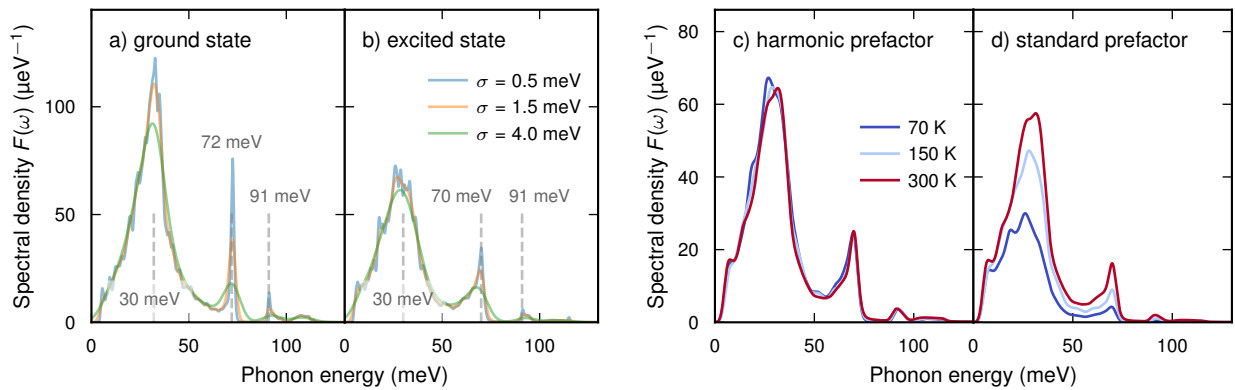


Fig. S4: Effect of broadening and prefactor on the spectral density. (a, b) Spectral densities at 70 K using different levels of broadening. (c, d) Effect of the prefactor $f(\beta\omega)$, see Eq. (13) in the main paper, included for treating quantum effects on the spectral density.

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