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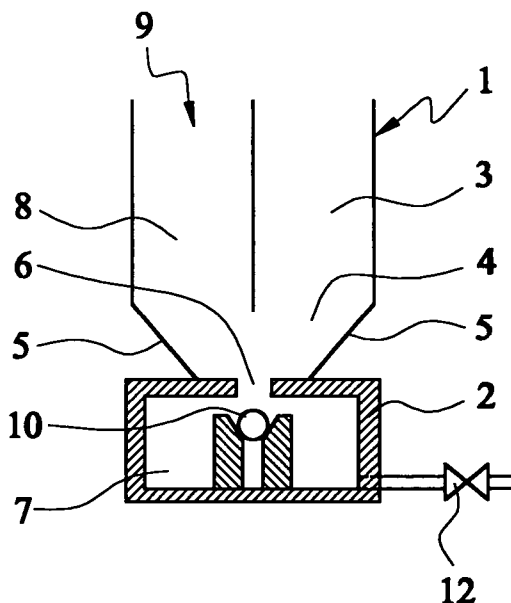
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(54) Title: APPARATUS FOR HUMIDIFYING A GAS FLOW



(57) Abstract: A device for humidifying a gas flow, including means for supplying an atomised liquid and combining this with a gas flow in a spray chamber, passing the combined atomised liquid and gas through a gas flow passage (3, 4, 8) which comprises a generally U-shaped passage having a first generally vertical part 3 through which the atomised liquid and gas passes to a lower part (4), from where the gas passes generally vertically upwardly to an outlet (9). The lower part of the passage incorporates an opening (6) to a water Separator (7), the opening 6 being closable by float means (10) or including a flow restricting control valve (13).

Apparatus for Humidifying a Gas Flow

The present invention relates to apparatus for humidifying a gas flow and including means for separating excess water from the gas flow. The present invention is particularly but not exclusively applicable for humidifying fuel gas and oxidant gas used in a fuel cell for automotive purposes.

A known type of fuel cell has a polymer electrolyte membrane in which hydrogen forming a fuel gas is passed over one side of the membrane, the anode, where, in response to an applied electrical load an electrochemical reaction takes place in which hydrogen ions migrate through the membrane to combine with oxidant, usually derived from air, on the other side, or cathode, of the membrane. It is necessary for both the hydrogen gas and the air, which are kept in separate streams, to be humidified to ensure that a necessary quantity of water passes through both sides of the fuel cell where it serves to enhance the electrochemical action and also to prevent the drying out of the membrane, which would lead to poor efficiency in the electrochemical reaction and damage, or at least a reduced service life, for the fuel cell.

German patent application DE 10028133.8 discloses apparatus which is particularly suitable for humidifying a gas flow to be used in a fuel cell system to humidify process gases. In the specifications, the humidified device described comprises three sections, a spray chamber, a heat exchanger region, and a water separator. Water is injected in an atomised form into the spray chamber where the atomised water is mixed with the flow of the gas. In the heat exchange region, heat exchange means are provided which utilises the heat in the gas to at least partially evaporate water to humidify the gas and to enable the excess water to be at least partially condensed. In order to ensure that satisfactory humidification takes place, a greater amount of water is atomised than that which is theoretically required to achieve a relative humidity of the gas of 100 percent. The excess water is collected in a water collector or separator located below the heat exchanger region.

The humidified device and water separator described have disadvantages when used in an automotive application, in particular, in coping with the g-forces which occur during cornering and changes in angular position of the vehicle when the vehicle is on a sloping surface, which can lead to inefficient drainage and reduced water separation. Thus, excess water can lie on the bottom of the separator where it can be re-entrained by the gas flow and, in extreme conditions, an excess of water can enter the fuel cell, reducing its efficiency.

The present invention seeks to provide a humidifying apparatus incorporating a water separator, which is much less sensitive to g-forces than the known device.

According to the present invention there is provided a device for humidifying a gas flow, including means for supplying an atomised liquid and combining this with a gas flow in a spray chamber to humidify the gas, passing the combined atomised liquid and gas through a gas flow passage which comprises a generally U-shaped passage having a first generally vertical part through which the atomised liquid and gas stream passes to a lower part, from where the gas stream passes generally vertically upwardly to an outlet, characterised in that the lower part of the passage incorporates an opening through which excess water separated out from the gas stream can pass to a water separator, the opening being closable by float means, or includes a water flow control valve which permits water to flow into the chamber but substantially impedes water flow from the chamber back into the gas flow passage.

Preferably, the float means controls a drain valve which controls the flow of liquid out of the water separator. In a preferred embodiment, the opening is at the lowermost part of the gas flow passage and it is relatively small compared to the cross-section of the passage and the cross-section of the water separator chamber (reservoir). In this way, water readily drains through into the water separator and reduces the amount of water exposed to the gas flow for possible re-entrainment. The water in the water separator is preferably

transferred for use elsewhere in the fuel cell operating system for, for example, humidifying the incoming gas.

In another embodiment, the water separator chamber is substantially square or rectangular in plan view having a planar top wall which, in the installed condition on a vehicle is substantially horizontal, four openings being located adjacent that the four corners of the top wall, the top wall defining the lower wall of the lowermost part of the gas flow passage. Preferably, each of the four openings includes a flow control valve incorporating a baffle to restrict the flow of water in a direction from the chamber to the gas passage.

A preferred embodiment of the present invention will now be described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 shows in a cross-sectional view in schematic form of a gas flow passage in a humidifier, together with a water separator,

Figure 2 shows a side view of Figure 1,

Figures 3a 3b, and 3c show schematically in plan view, three alternative layouts of single, double, and multi-outlet designs of water separator,

Figure 4 shows a sectional side view of the embodiment of Figure 3c, and

Figure 5 shows a detail view of a water flow control valve used in the embodiment of Figures 3c and 4.

Figure 1 shows a gas flow passage 1 of a fuel gas humidifier, together with a water separator 2. For further

details of a fuel gas humidifier, attention is directed to the aforementioned German Patent application DE 10028133.8. This specification discloses a spray chamber in which fuel gas for a fuel cell, typically hydrogen, is mixed with atomised water. The combined fuel gas and atomised water, which consists of a large number of water droplets passes through a heat exchanger, where the water droplets are partially evaporated to humidify the gas and partially condensed into water and larger water droplets.

In the present embodiment, the combined gas and atomised water and the water droplets then pass through a generally U-shaped flow passage, first passing downwardly through a first generally vertically disposed gas flow passage section 3 to reach the lowermost part 4 of the passage 1 which lowermost part is formed in a shaped section having inclined sides 5 to reduce the cross-sectional area of the passage in the downwardly vertical sense, the lowermost part terminating in an opening 6 leading into the water separator chamber 7. In the lowermost part 4 of the passage, the gas flow is forced through a 180 degree turn to rise up an outlet part 8 of the gas flow passage to an outlet 9 leading to the input of a fuel cell. Thus, the opening 6 into the water separator chamber 7 is relatively small compared to the cross-section of the gas flow passage so that the possibility of water droplets being re-entrained by the gas flow is very much reduced. The opening 6 is generally on the centreline of the water separator chamber 7 and is also very much smaller than the cross-sectional area of the water separator chamber to reduce the possibility of water in the separator chamber re-entering the gas flow passage when the

vehicle's motion generates g-forces which disturb the water in the chamber. The chamber may incorporate baffles to reduce the tendency of the liquid in the chamber to surge excessively.

Additionally, the efficiency of separating out the water droplets from the humidified gas stream is increased because the effect of gravitational forces tending to draw the water droplets downwardly is increased by the reversal of the gas flow, since the greater mass of the water droplets compared to the gas increases the rate at which they drop out of the gas, in the manner of a centrifugal separator.

The opening 6 from the gas flow passage into the water separator 7 is controlled by a float 10 in the shape of a ball which is adapted to close off the opening 6 if the water level in the water separator rises above a predetermined level. Should this occur, the float 10 also may serve to operate a valve (not shown) which opens to allow water to drain out of the separator. In normal operation, the condensed water is drawn out of the water separator by a pump and recirculated to humidify the incoming fuel gas or oxidant supplied to be fuel cell.

The present design having the U-shaped gas flow passage with the narrow opening to the water separator placed immediately beneath enables the overall size and height of the humidifier/water separator assembly to be much reduced compared with the prior art referred to earlier. The design also facilitates the draining of all water out of the system so that the system is far less likely to be damaged by ice

formation when the vehicle is not in use under freezing conditions. The use of floats to close the opening into the water separator chamber has further advantages when water from both sides of the fuel cell, that is the fuel gas side and the airflow side can be vented into a common water separator chamber. The use of the floats to close the openings to the gas flow passages serves to prevent the two different gases from entering the wrong passage from the water separator chamber.

Referring now to Figure 2, in this arrangement two water separator chambers 7a and 7b are provided spaced across the lowermost part of the gas flow passage 4. In an alternative form, as indicated by the dotted line 11, two flow passages are provided side-by-side in a common housing, one of being for the humidification of the fuel gas, the other for the humidification of the air supply providing the oxidant for the fuel cell. In this case, excess water in the process gases on both sides of the membrane are vented into a common water separator chamber.

Referring now to Figure 3, figure 3a shows the opening of a single chamber water separator, figure 3b shows two openings which lead into a common water separator chamber 7 although they may lead into separate chambers, whilst figure 3c shows an arrangement having four openings all opening into a common water separator chamber 7.

Referring now to Figure 4, there is shown a sectional side view of the embodiment shown in Figure 3 C. in which four openings 6 all opening into a common water separator chamber

7, are provided. The four openings are spaced apart towards the four corners of the chamber 7 which is substantially square or rectangular in plan. Instead of the closable float valve 10 described in the embodiment of Figures 1 and 2, the openings in this embodiment each incorporate a water flow control valve 13, further details of which are shown in Figure 5. The control valves 13 have a venturi-shaped bore having a centre section 14 of reduced diameter with tapered inlet and outlet sections 15 and 16. The lower end of the centre section adjacent to the chamber 7 has a flow-restricting baffle 17 which has one or more bores of a relatively small diameter. In this way, water impinging on the top wall 18 of the chamber 7, which forms the lower wall of the gas flow passage 3, can flow down through the control valves but the baffle 17 serves to effectively prevent water rising up back into the gas flow passage.

When the apparatus is installed in a vehicle, the wall 18 is located substantially in a horizontal position. The use of four flow control valves spaced apart ensures that whether the vehicle is tilted laterally from one side to the other or fore and aft, or is subjected to g-forces laterally or fore and aft, any water separating out from the gas stream will flow on to an area of the wall 18 containing an open control valve so that the water can drain down into the chamber 7. With this arrangement, it has been found that although a degree of gas can pass into the chamber 7, this does not affect the efficient functioning of the separator.

Claims

1. A device for humidifying a gas flow, including means for supplying an atomised liquid and combining this with a gas flow in a spray chamber to humidify the gas, passing the combined atomised liquid and gas through a gas flow passage which comprises a generally U-shaped passage (3, 4, 8) having a first generally vertical part (3) through which the atomised liquid and gas stream passes to a lower part (4), from where the gas stream passes generally vertically upwardly to an outlet (9), characterised in that the lower part (4) of the passage incorporates an opening (6) through which excess water separated out from the gas stream is able to pass to a water separator chamber (7), the opening (6) being closable by float means (10) or includes a water flow control valve (13) which permits water to flow into the chamber (7) but substantially impedes water flow from the chamber (7) back into the gas flow passage (3, 4, 8).
2. A device according to claim 1, wherein valve means (12) is provided to control the flow of liquid draining out of the water separator (7).
3. A device according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the float means (10) controls a drain valve which controls the flow of liquid out of the water separator chamber (7).

4. A device according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the opening (6) is at the lowermost part (4) of the gas flow passage and is relatively small compared to the cross-section of the passage (4) and the cross-section of the water separator chamber (7).

5. A device according to any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein a plurality of openings (6) lead from the gas flow passage (4) into the water separator chamber (7).

6. A device according to claim 5, wherein the water separator chamber (7) is substantially square or rectangular in plan view having a planar top wall (18) which, in the installed condition on a vehicle is substantially horizontal, four openings (6) being located adjacent that the four corners of the top wall (18), the top wall defining the lower wall of the lowermost part (4) of the gas flow passage.

7. A device according to claim 6, wherein each of the four openings includes a flow control valve (13) incorporating a baffle to restrict the flow of water in a direction from the chamber (7) to the gas passage.

8. A device according to any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein openings from a plurality of separate gas flow passages lead into a common water separator chamber (7).

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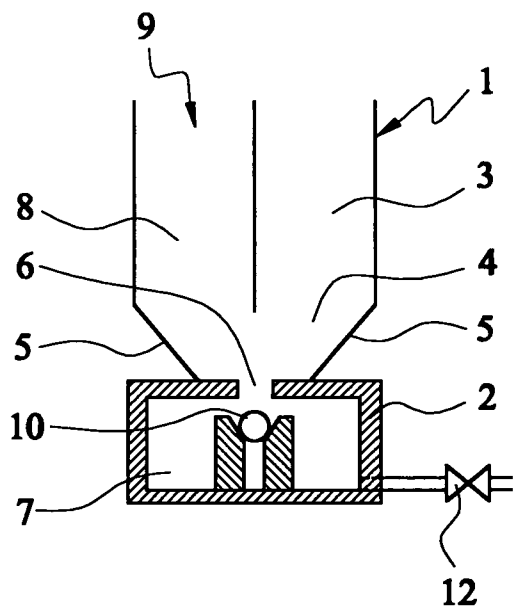


FIG. 1

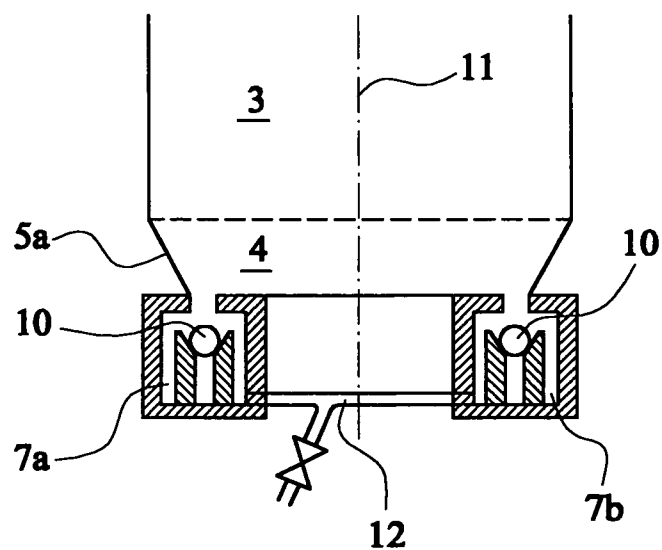


FIG. 2

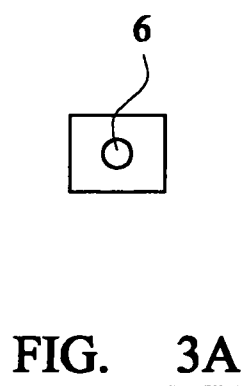


FIG. 3A

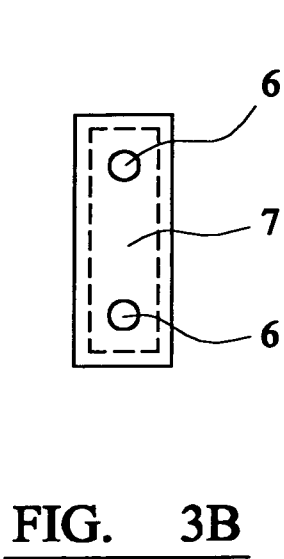


FIG. 3B

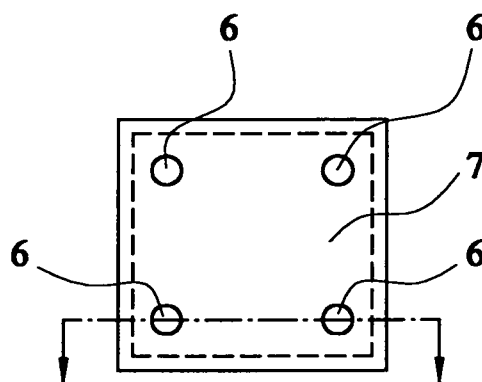


FIG. 3C

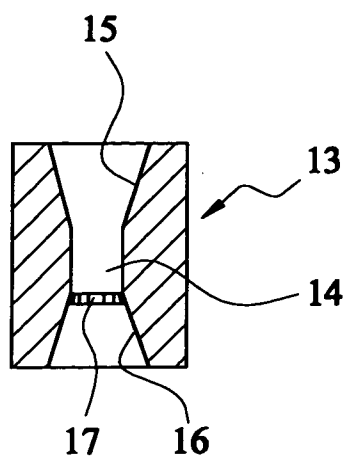


FIG. 5

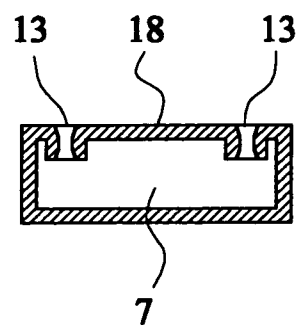


FIG. 4

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/EP2006/008904

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

INV. H01M8/04
ADD. B01D45/06

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
H01M B01D F24F

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

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Y	page 3, line 4 - line 31; figure 1 -----	2, 3, 5-7
X	US 2 178 389 A (STEPHEN BENTLEY) 31 October 1939 (1939-10-31) the whole document -----	1-4
Y	US 6 579 637 B1 (SAVAGE DAVID R [US] ET AL) 17 June 2003 (2003-06-17) column 6, line 46 - line 65; figure 2 -----	2, 3
Y	JP 2006 142252 A (HONDA MOTOR CO LTD) 8 June 2006 (2006-06-08) abstract; figure 1 -----	5-7
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☒ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

☒ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

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24/05/2007

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No

PCT/EP2006/008904

C(Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No

PCT/EP2006/008904

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