

# The 2010 nova outburst of the symbiotic Mira V407 Cyg<sup>\*</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The nova outburst experienced in 2010 by the symbiotic binary Mira V407 Cyg has been extensively studied at optical and infrared wavelengths with both photometric and spectroscopic observations. This outburst, reminiscent of similar events displayed by RS Oph, can be described as a very fast He/N nova erupting while being deeply embedded in the dense wind of its cool giant companion. The hard radiation from the initial thermonuclear flash ionizes and excites the wind of the Mira over great distances (recombination is observed on a time scale of 4 days). The novae ejecta is found to progressively decelerate with time as it expands into the Mira wind. This is deduced from line widths which change from a FWHM of 2760 km s<sup>-1</sup> on day +2.3 to 200 km s<sup>-1</sup> on day +196. The wind of the Mira is massive and extended enough for an outer neutral and unperturbed region to survive at all outburst phases.

**Key words:** Stars: novae – Stars: symbiotic stars – Miras

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The symbiotic binary V407 Cyg consists of an accreting white dwarf and an O-rich Mira companion pulsating with a 745 day period. Miras with such a long pulsation period are generally OH/IR sources with a very thick dust envelope which prevents direct observation of the central star at optical wavelengths. The much thinner dust envelope in V407 Cyg is probably due to the presence of the WD companion whose orbital motion, hard radiation field in quiescence and violent mass ejection during outbursts inhibits dust formation in a large fraction of the Mira wind (Munari et al. 1990, hereafter M90).

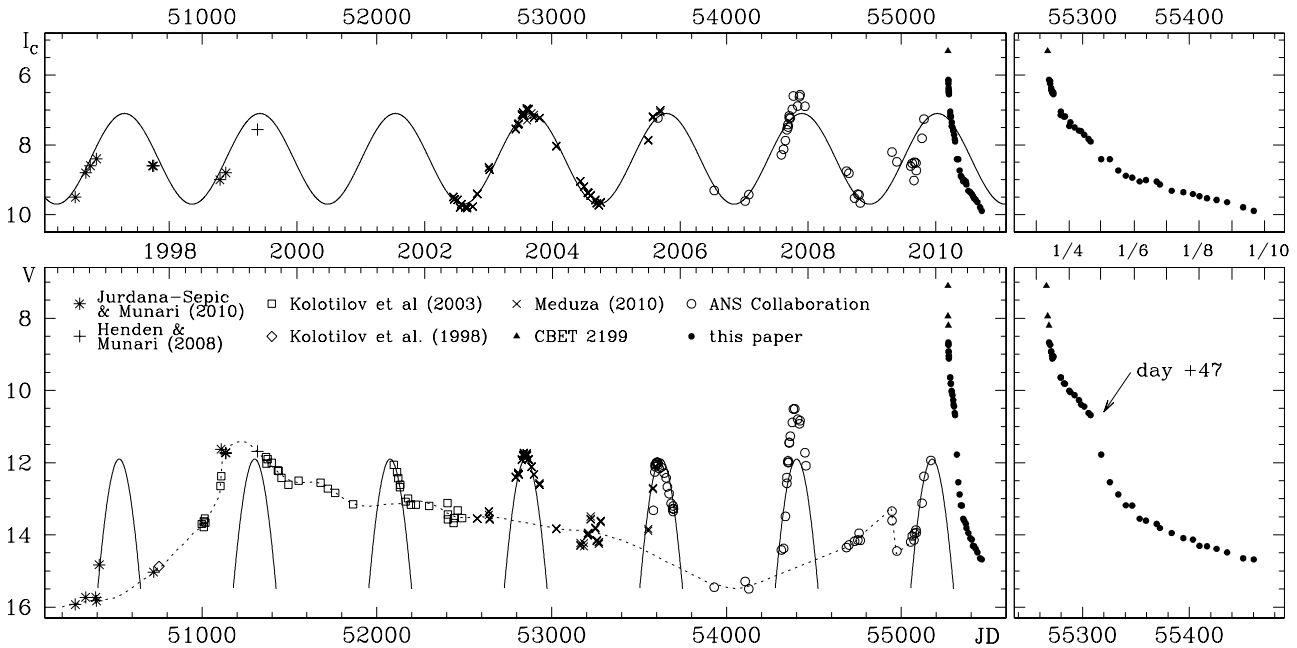
V407 Cyg was discovered by Hoffmeister (1949) as Nova Cyg 1936, just at the time when its Mira was passing through maximum brightness. No spectroscopic observations confirming it as a genuine nova outburst were however available. What actually occurred is unclear because (i) the object was discovered and remained at  $B \approx 14.5$  mag for an entire Mira pulsation cycle, without declining to an expected  $B \geq 19$  minimum (cf Figure 1 in M90), but at the same time (ii) the peak brightness was much smaller than  $B \sim 8$  reached by V407 Cyg during its present 2010 outburst which resembles a true nova eruption. The 1936-1938 event could have been one of the usual low amplitude, long-lasting outbursts that symbiotic binaries frequently display. Two such

active phases during the 1990's were reported and discussed by Munari et al. (1994), Kolotilov et al. (1998, 2003, hereafter K98 and K03), and some earlier ones can be spotted in the historical light-curves of V407 Cyg by Munari and Jurdana-Šepić (2002) and M90.

The 2010 outburst of V407 Cyg was discovered on March 10.813 UT by Nishiyama and Kabashima (2010) at  $V = 7.6$  mag. This was at an unsurpassed brightness level in the star's recorded photometric history thereby underscoring the peculiarity and importance of the event. The first spectroscopic confirmation and analysis of the outburst was given by Munari et al. (2010a) who described the event as a He/N nova expanding within the wind of the Mira companion. The similarity with RS Oph was also pointed out. In the following weeks and months the outburst was intensively monitored over several wavelength regimes viz. in  $\gamma$ -rays (Abdo et al. 2010, Cheung et al. 2010), radio (Krauss et al. 2010, Giroletti et al. 2010, Bower et al. 2010, Nestoras et al. 2010, Gawronski et al. 2010, Pooley 2010), SiO maser (Deguchi et al. 2010), and infrared (Joshi et al. 2010).

So far, apart from brief circulars, no comprehensive report on the photometric and spectroscopic evolution of V407 Cyg at optical and IR wavelengths is available. The aim of this Letter is thus to provide a first report; follow-up papers will present a more detailed analysis and modeling of the huge amount of data we have and are still collecting.

\* Tables 1-4 available in electronic form only



**Figure 1.** Photometric evolution of V407 Cyg over the last 16 years, or 7 Mira’s pulsation cycles. The dashed line is hand-drawn to provide a guide through the long-lasting active phase that peaked in 1998. The right panels provide a zoom over the 2010 outburst.

## 2 OBSERVATIONS

Optical photometry was recorded with several small telescopes operated by the ANS Collaboration in northern Italy, all equipped with CCDs and photometric  $UBVR_CI_C$  filters. Corrections for bias, dark, and flat fields were applied in the usual manner. Photometric calibration and correction for color equations was performed for all instruments against the same  $UBVR_CI_C$  sequence calibrated by Henden and Munari (2000) around V407 Cyg. Our photometry of V407 Cyg covering the 2010 outburst is presented in Table 1 and plotted in Figure 1 and 2.

Optical spectroscopy was obtained with different telescopes: Asiago 1.82m + Echelle spectrograph (20000 resolving power), Asiago 1.22m + B&C spectrograph (low resolution mode), Varese 0.6m + multi mode spectrograph. A journal of the observations is given in Table 2. With the Varese 0.6m telescope we obtained both low resolution and Echelle spectra. The latter were recorded both in unbinned (resolving power 17000, marked *ech* in Table 2) and binned mode (resolving power 10000, marked *echB* in Table 2). All spectra (including Echelle ones) were calibrated in absolute fluxes by observations of several spectrophotometric standards during the night. Their zero-points were then checked against simultaneous BVRI photometry by integrating the band transmission profiles on the fluxed spectra.

Near-IR observations were carried out in the  $J, H, K$  bands at the Mt. Abu 1.2m telescope during the early outburst phase. The spectra were obtained at a resolution of  $\sim 1000$  using a NICMOS3 Imager/Spectrometer. Spectra and photometry of the comparison star HR 7984 were also obtained for the spectro-photometric data reduction. Wavelength calibration was done using OH sky lines and telluric features that register with the stellar spectra. The detailed reduction of the spectral and photometric data, using IRAF tasks, follow a standard procedure that is described for e.g.

in Naik et al. (2009). The journal of infrared spectroscopic observations is given in Table 3, and the results of infrared photometry in Table 4 and Figure 2.

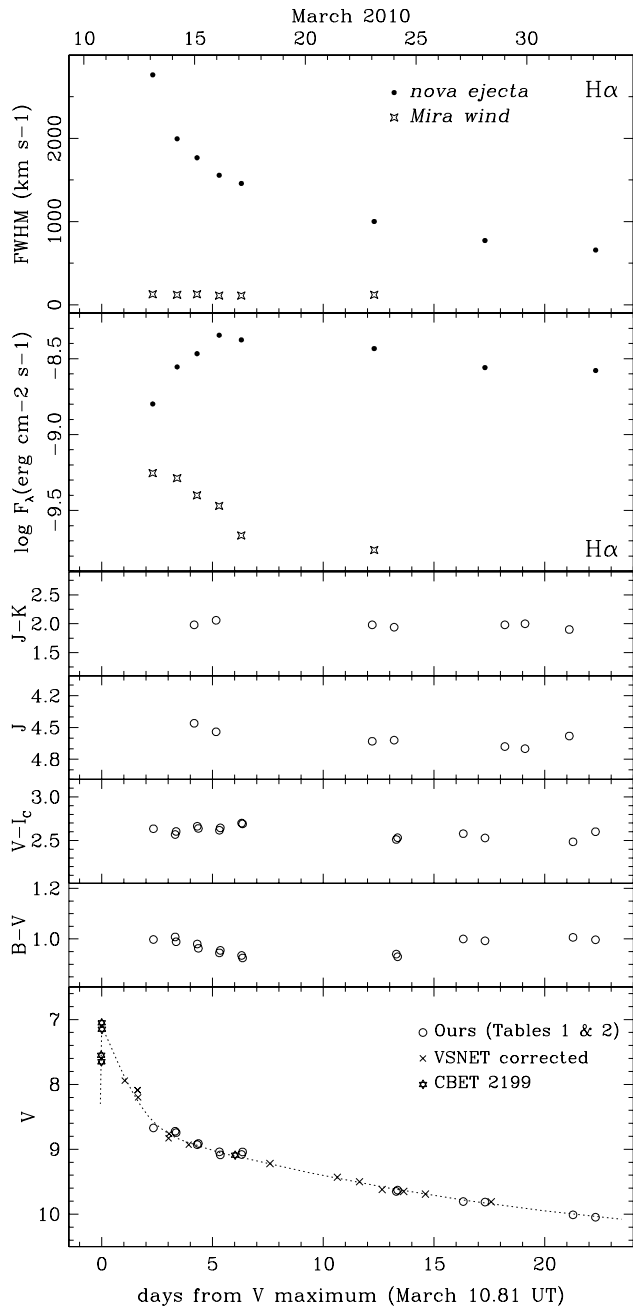
## 3 RESULTS

The observations presented in this paper show that the violent outburst experienced by V407 Cyg in March 2010 was a thermonuclear runaway (TNR), the same event that powers a normal nova eruption. In normal novae, the ejected material essentially expands freely into a void circumstellar medium. However, in V407 Cyg, the fast ejecta have to expand into the dense and slow wind of the Mira companion, and are thus progressively slowed down as the pre-existing circumstellar material is swept up in an expanding shell. Noteworthy, the pre-existing circumstellar material offers an ideal ionization target for the hard radiation from the initial TNR flash.

The similarity with the outburst displayed by the celebrated RS Oph is evident (Bode 1987, Evans et al. 2008, and references therein). The latter is a symbiotic binary, with an orbital period of 460 days and an M giant filling its Roche lobe (Schaefer 2009) which transfers material to a massive WD (Hachisu et al. 2007). Similar nova eruptions have been seen also in the symbiotic binaries and recurrent novae T CrB, V745 Oph and V3890 Sgr (Schaefer 2010).

What occurred in V407 Cyg is well illustrated by the evolution of the  $H\alpha$  profile (Figure 5) and its width and integrated flux (top panels of Figure 2). At the earliest stages, the  $H\alpha$  profile is dominated by a sharp component superposed on a much broader one, as first noted by Munari et al. (2010a).

The sharp component, identical to that in quiescence but enormously brighter (cf profiles for 2008 and 2009 in Figure 5), is due to the sudden ionization of a large fraction



**Figure 2.** *Lower panels:* early optical and infrared photometric evolution of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst. The dashed line is hand-drawn for guidance. *Upper panels:* evolution in width and integrated flux of the H $\alpha$  emission line. ‘Nova ejecta’ refer to the broad component (cf. sect. 3), ‘Mira wind’ to the superimposed narrow one (see Figure 5).

of the Mira’s wind by the flash of energetic radiation produced by the TNR event. The wind of the Mira does not as yet get perturbed kinematically, as proven by the preserved sharpness of the H $\alpha$  profile that increased its emissivity by two orders of magnitude compared to quiescence. The flux of hard photons, however, is not large enough to ionize the whole Mira wind, as indicated by the persistence of the sharp absorption component which maintains the same heliocentric radial velocity as in quiescence ( $-50$  km/sec).

The intensity of the H $\alpha$  sharp component rapidly declines subsequently (cf Figure 2), with a recombination time scale of 4 days, which can be written as

$$t_{\text{rec}} = 0.66 \left( \frac{T_e}{10^4 \text{ K}} \right)^{0.8} \left( \frac{n_e}{10^9 \text{ cm}^{-3}} \right)^{-1} \approx 100 \text{ hours} \quad (1)$$

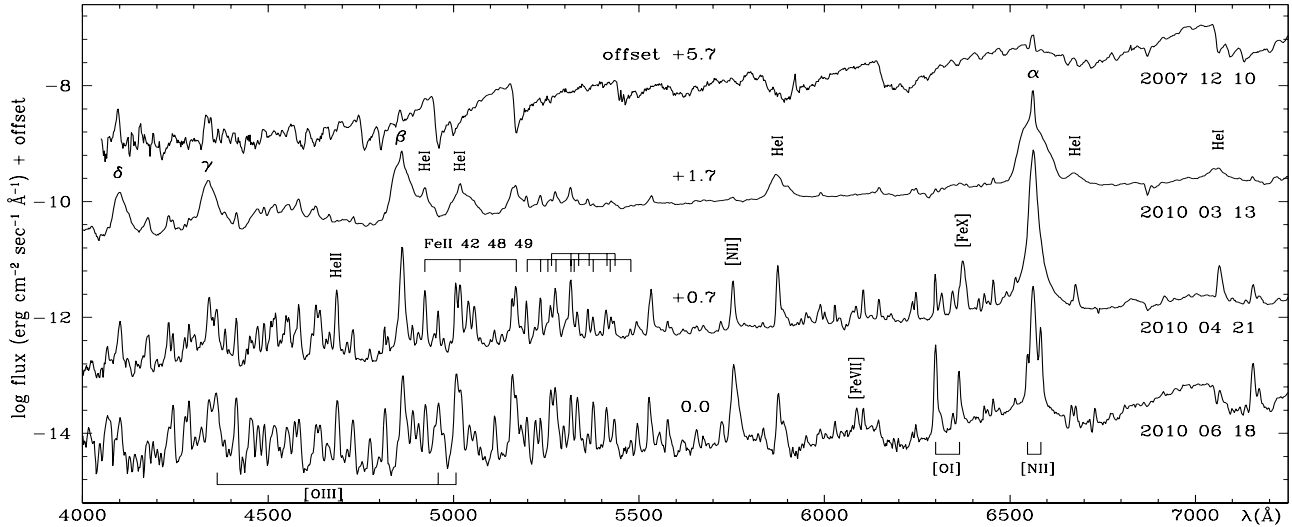
following Ferland (2003). It corresponds to a density of about  $5 \times 10^6 \text{ cm}^{-3}$  for the fraction of the Mira wind ionized by the TNR initial flash. The point at day +12.3 in Figure 2, e.g. the last epoch at which a narrow component could still be resolved in the H $\alpha$  profiles of Figure 5, deviates from the  $t_{\text{rec}}=4$  days of earlier points. By this time, the nova ejecta has begun to turn optically thin and the hard radiation field of the central star (presumably still burning hydrogen at its surface during the constant luminosity phase) is hot and intense enough to produce coronal emission lines, as reported by Munari et al. (2010b). The same radiation field, leaking through the optically thin ejecta, is also responsible for sustaining the ionization of the circumstellar gas not yet reached by the expanding shell.

The broad component of the V407 Cyg H $\alpha$  profiles in Figure 5, originates instead in the material ejected at high velocity, as in any normal nova. The broad spectrum nicely matches that of a normal ‘He/N’ nova (Williams 1992) as illustrated by the low resolution optical and infrared spectra for days +2.3 and +4.2 in Figure 3 and 4 respectively. A He/N spectrum is typical of fast novae and of RS Oph too. The nova ejecta is rapidly decelerated while trying to expand through the surrounding Mira wind and the distinction between a sharp and a broad component to the emission lines is then progressively attenuated, disappearing two weeks past optical maximum. As more material is swept by the expanding shell, the velocity continues to decrease. Figure 2 illustrates the temporal evolution of the FWHM (in km sec $^{-1}$ ) of the broad component of H $\alpha$ , which is accurately fitted by the expression

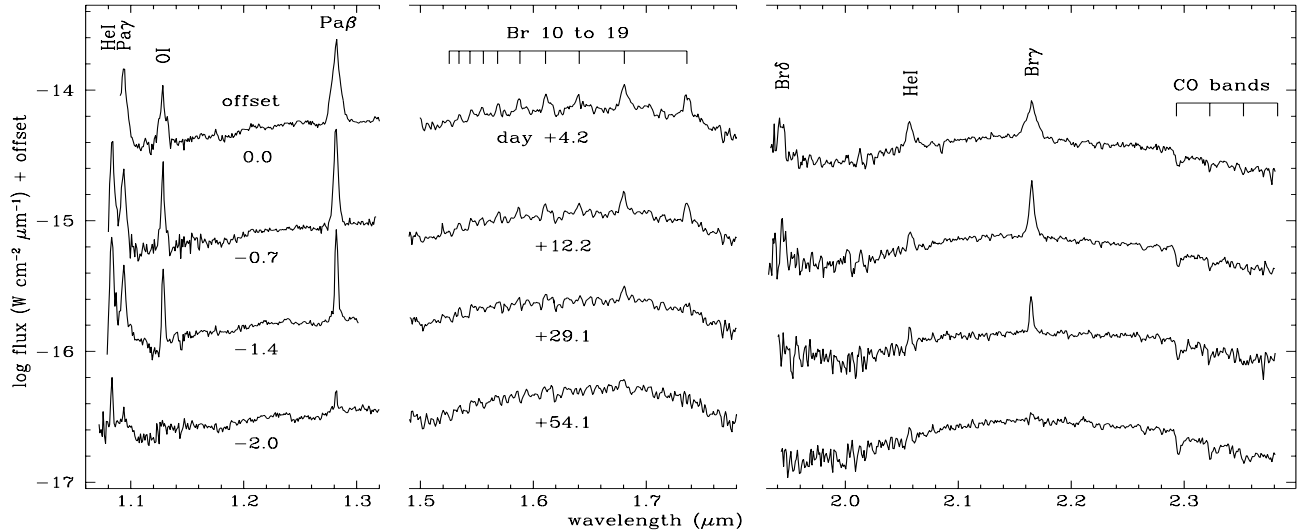
$$\text{FWHM} = 4320 - 5440 \log t + 2635(\log t)^2 - 460(\log t)^3 \quad (2)$$

including later phases characterized by 400, 280 and 200 km s $^{-1}$  on days +48.2, +105 and +196 respectively. The same trend is shared also by the hydrogen lines dominating the infrared spectra of Figure 4. For comparison the FWHM of H $\alpha$  in quiescence was stable at  $\sim 120$  km s $^{-1}$  (cf profiles for 2008 and 2009 in Figure 5). Figure 5 shows the emergence of [NII] 6548, 6584 Å doublet two months past optical maximum. It did not originate in the expanding material, but instead in the outer wind of the Mira, external to the expanding shell. This is proved since its profile FWHM of  $\sim 110$  km s $^{-1}$  is much sharper than that of the adjacent H $\alpha$  and identical to the width in quiescence. The existence of an outer region of the Mira wind not yet reached on day +196 by the already greatly slowed down ejecta (cf the sharp absorption component at  $-50$  km s $^{-1}$  in Figure 5), leads us to speculate that some part of the ejecta could remain bound to the binary system and could be re-accreted at later times by the WD.

The light-curve of V407 Cyg over the last 15 years is presented in Figure 1. It is characterized by three main components: (1) the 745 day pulsation of the Mira (sinusoid drawn as a solid line), which dominates the light-curve at reddest wavelengths; (2) the presence of a limited amplitude, slow evolution active phase (dashed line in the V band



**Figure 3.** A sample of the absolutely fluxed, optical spectra of V407 Cyg that we collected during the 2010 outburst. The 10 December 2007 spectrum shows the quiescence spectrum at the time of Mira brightness maximum. Only some of the emission lines are identified.

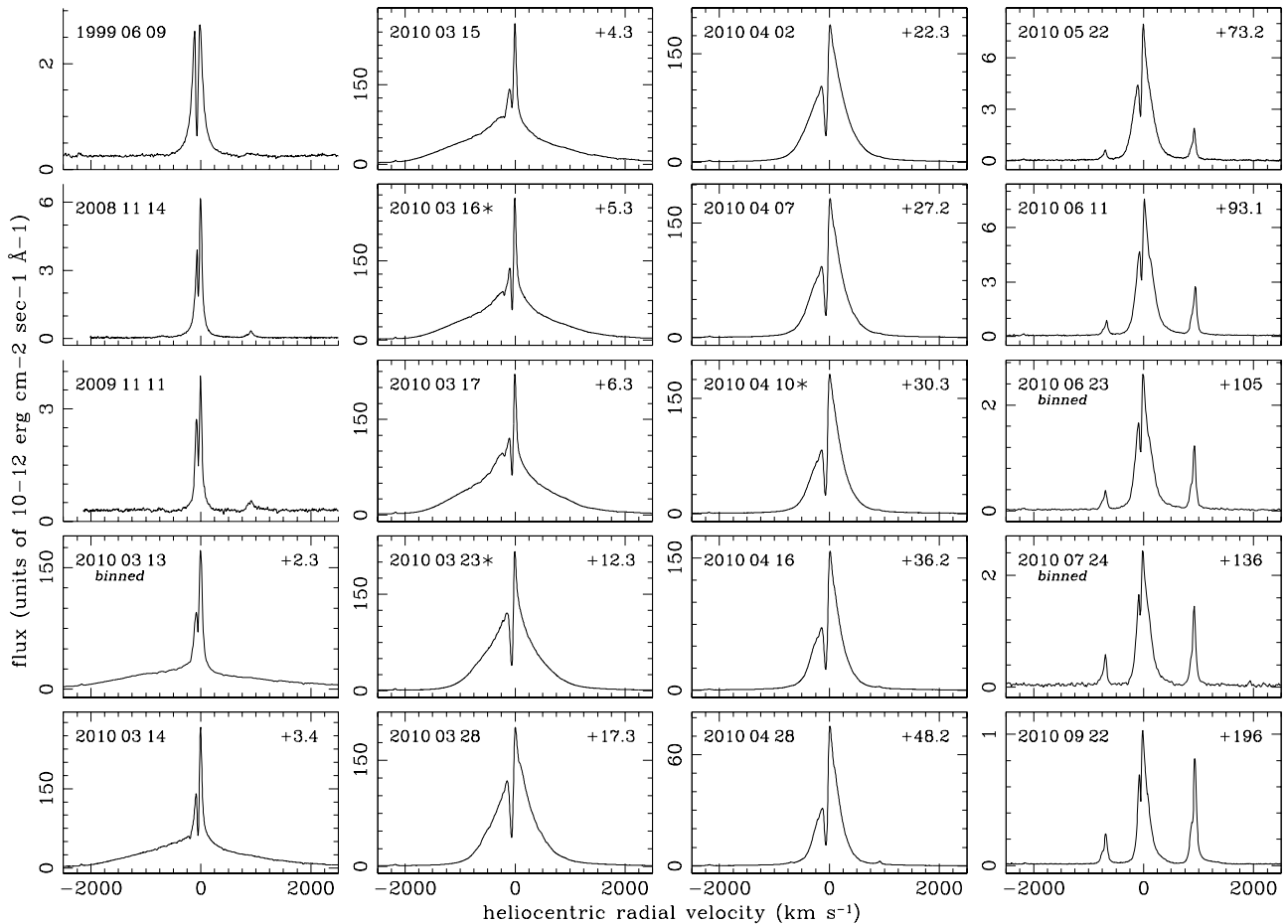


**Figure 4.** A sample of our absolutely fluxed, infrared spectra of V407 Cyg for the 2010 outburst. Major emission lines are identified.

panel) that peaked in intensity in 1998/99 (described in detail by K98 and K03) when it rivalled in  $V$  the brightness of the Mira but went unnoticeable in  $I_C$ . This corresponds to the typical, non-TNR outbursts that essentially all symbiotic stars have experienced several times in their recorded photometric history; and (3) the violent, rapid and bright TNR outburst of 2010. The latter overwhelmed the brightness of the Mira at optical wavelengths, but only equalled it in the  $K$  band (cf. data in Table 4 with the long term  $JHK$  light-curve of the Mira presented by K98 and K03). Figure 2 presents a zoomed view on the earliest evolution of the 2010 outburst in the  $BVR_CI_CJHK$  bands. The optical maximum was reached at  $V=7.1$  on March 10.8 UT, and the subsequent decline was very fast and characterized by  $t_2^V=5.9$  and  $t_3^V=24$  days. The decline was similarly fast in T CrB, V745 Sco, RS Oph and V3890 Sgr that showed  $t_2=4, 5, 7$  and  $9$  days, respectively. The  $V$ -band light-curve in Figure 1 shows a distinct knee at day +47. By analogy with

RS Oph (cf. Hachisu et al. 2006), it could mark the end of the stable H-burning on the WD.

The outburst evolution seen in the  $I_C$  panel in Figure 1 could appear in conflict with the expected underlying pulsation cycle of the Mira. Indeed, the pulsation of the latter is known to be highly variable from cycle to cycle (K98, Munari and Jurdana-Sepic 2002), with puzzling sharp minima occurring at various pulsation phases (Kiziloglu and Kiziloglu 2010; some of them are visible also in the light-curve of Figure 1 in 2007 and 2009), and that could be related to the unusual nature of the Mira in V407 Cyg. In fact, Miras of such a long pulsation period are usually the central stars of OH/IR sources and their thick dust cocoon prevent them from being visible in the optical. As remarked by M90, the presence of the hot and outbursting WD companion, could disturb the formation of the dust cocoon and thus make the Mira in V407 Cyg visible at optical wavelengths.



**Figure 5.** Evolution of the H $\alpha$  profile of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst. Older profiles are given for reference purposes, and pertain to the brightness peak during the 1997-2006 active phase (1999), and to quiescence at the time of a Mira minimum (2008) and maximum (2009). The three spectra marked with \* are courtesy of Christian Buil and fluxed by us against our low-resolution spectra.

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**Table 1.** Our optical photometry of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst.

JD <sub>⊙</sub>	2010	<i>V</i> ± <i>ε</i>	<i>B</i> − <i>V</i> ± <i>ε</i>	<i>V</i> − <i>R</i> <sub>C</sub> ± <i>ε</i>	<i>V</i> − <i>I</i> <sub>C</sub> ± <i>ε</i>
268.640	Mar 13.140	8.671 11	0.988 13	1.582 14	2.635 15
269.621	Mar 14.121	8.729 6	1.026 9	1.638 9	2.549 7
269.666	Mar 14.166	8.735 10	0.981 8	1.821 14	2.624 21
270.620	Mar 15.120	8.931 11	0.986 15	1.964 11	2.664 15
270.669	Mar 15.169	8.919 10	0.957 3	1.934 11	2.638 20
271.619	Mar 16.119	9.040 12	0.948 9	2.030 9	2.608 18
271.660	Mar 16.160	9.116 13	0.952 2	2.074 8	2.656 7
272.622	Mar 17.122	9.081 14	0.930 13	2.144 11	2.697 23
272.667	Mar 17.167	9.051 18	0.929 4	1.777 4	2.693 29
279.608	Mar 24.108	9.643 5	0.937 7	2.109 7	2.512 6
279.666	Mar 24.166	9.639 7	0.934 13	2.077 5	2.532 8
282.631	Mar 27.131	9.804 5	1.010 8	2.138 6	2.599 6
283.612	Mar 28.112	9.814 5	0.983 5	2.069 14	2.520 14
287.587	Apr 01.087	10.010 7	1.016 22	2.161 11	2.435 15
288.603	Apr 02.103	10.048 5	0.987 6	2.203 10	2.631 9
292.580	Apr 06.080	10.131 5	1.003 4	2.184 8	2.603 10
296.575	Apr 10.075	10.267 5	1.003 17	2.210 5	2.710 7
298.572	Apr 12.072	10.390 4	1.008 12	2.273 6	2.731 8
301.608	Apr 15.108	10.445 5	1.021 13	2.173 7	2.699 7
305.566	Apr 19.066	10.624 5	0.992 12	2.161 11	2.765 11
307.590	Apr 21.090	10.682 5	1.010 12	2.139 5	2.795 7
317.552	May 01.052	11.777 6	0.975 4	2.135 7	3.407 6
325.569	May 09.069	12.541 5	1.025 9	2.169 5	4.070 9
333.482	May 16.982	12.879 5	0.976 7	1.951 7	4.112 6
340.545	May 24.045	13.181 7	1.000 12	1.971 7	4.224 8
346.525	May 30.025	13.190 7	1.032 17	1.971 5	4.334 8
353.468	Jun 05.968	13.553 8	1.130 33	1.990 10	4.473 6
359.414	Jun 11.914	13.608 7	1.051 14	2.005 7	4.463 9
369.397	Jun 21.897	13.695 6	0.960 10	2.004 5	4.521 12
372.418	Jun 24.918	13.813 9	1.080 23	2.040 8	4.591 10
383.441	Jul 05.941	13.949 7	1.036 8	2.033 7	4.589 8
394.392	Jul 16.892	14.093 8	1.086 17	2.078 6	4.667 8
403.382	Jul 25.882	14.130 8		2.078 7	4.699 4
409.522	Aug 01.022	14.307 8	1.033 7	2.125 7	4.778 8
416.583	Aug 08.083	14.317 9	1.044 9	2.080 8	4.716 8
425.538	Aug 17.038	14.387 9	1.086 17	2.029 9	4.702 9
435.382	Aug 26.882	14.487 11	1.031 10	2.137 12	4.767 12
450.357	Sep 10.857	14.649 10	1.113 10	2.011 13	4.700 14
460.402	Sep 20.902	14.681 12	1.093 14	2.035 12	4.707 12

**Table 2.** Journal of our optical spectroscopic observations of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst and a few earlier epochs.

date	UT	Δ <i>t</i> (day)	expt (sec)	disp (Å/pix)	λ <sub>start</sub> (Å)	λ <sub>end</sub> (Å)	tel.
1999-06-09	02:19		600	<i>ech</i>	4700	9265	1.8m
2007-12-10	21:06		1200	2.30	3900	7815	1.2m
2008-11-14	19:13		7200	<i>ech</i>	4800	7300	1.8m
2009-08-06	22:57		2700	2.30	3750	7660	1.2m
2009-11-11	18:38		5400	<i>ech</i>	4800	7300	1.8m
2010-03-13	2:30	2.3	1200	<i>echB</i>	3950	8640	0.6m
2010-03-13	2:49	2.3	640	2.30	3350	7530	1.2m
2010-03-13	3:04	2.3	405	2.12	3760	8385	0.6m
2010-03-14	4:07	3.4	1800	<i>ech</i>	3955	8650	0.6m
2010-03-15	3:52	4.3	1800	<i>ech</i>	4025	8645	0.6m
2010-03-15	4:40	4.4	480	2.12	3750	8385	0.6m
2010-03-17	1:49	6.3	1200	2.30	3375	7720	1.2m
2010-03-17	3:01	6.3	4500	<i>ech</i>	3950	8640	0.6m
2010-03-17	4:31	6.4	360	2.12	3960	8605	0.6m
2010-03-24	2:38	13.3	1630	2.30	3350	7720	1.2m
2010-03-28	1:52	17.3	3600	<i>ech</i>	3950	8640	0.6m
2010-03-28	4:02	17.4	400	2.12	3955	8595	0.6m
2010-04-02	1:50	22.3	3600	<i>ech</i>	3955	8645	0.6m
2010-04-07	0:58	27.2	2700	<i>ech</i>	3950	8645	0.6m
2010-04-07	1:55	27.3	930	2.12	3975	8615	0.6m
2010-04-16	1:22	36.2	3600	<i>ech</i>	4180	8640	0.6m
2010-04-21	3:06	41.3	930	2.12	3975	8615	0.6m
2010-04-28	1:04	48.2	3600	<i>ech</i>	3945	8635	0.6m
2010-04-30	2:22	50.3	1310	2.30	3510	7640	1.2m
2010-05-17	21:47	68.1	3600	2.12	3970	8610	0.6m
2010-05-22	23:49	73.2	4500	<i>ech</i>	4345	8635	0.6m
2010-06-04	2:01	85.3	2700	2.12	3980	8620	0.6m
2010-06-11	21:28	93.1	2400	<i>ech</i>	6454	6757	1.8m
2010-06-18	22:10	100	3600	2.12	3975	8615	0.6m
2010-06-23	21:34	105	4500	<i>echB</i>	4625	8640	0.6m
2010-07-24	23:51	136	7200	<i>echB</i>	4625	8640	0.6m
2010-08-06	20:27	149	3600	2.12	3975	8615	0.6m
2010-08-06	22:15	149	2700	2.12	5520	10200	0.6m
2010-09-22	22:33	196	3600	<i>ech</i>	3925	9640	1.8m
2010-09-25	21:16	199	3600	2.12	3930	8670	0.6m

**Table 3.** Journal of our infrared spectroscopic observations of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst. The integration times in brackets are for the J, H and K bands respectively

date	UT	Δ <i>t</i> (day)	expt (sec)	disp (μm/pix)	λ <sub>start</sub> (μm)	λ <sub>end</sub> (μm)	tel.
2010 03 14	0:06	3.2	(15,5,10)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 15	0:29	4.2	(10,5,7)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 16	0:24	5.2	(10,5,20)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 16	23:55	6.2	(10,5,6)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 22	23:36	12.2	(15,10,20)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 23	23:35	13.2	(15,20,15)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 28	23:24	18.2	(10,10,15)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 29	23:35	19.2	(10,7,20)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 30	23:26	20.2	(40,30,20)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 03 31	23:35	21.2	(20,20,15)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 04 08	22:29	29.1	(30,10,40)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 04 10	0:00	30.2	(15,10,10)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 04 30	23:26	51.2	(25,10,30)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m
2010 05 03	22:08	54.1	(90,20,40)	0.00096	1.080	2.400	1.2m

**Table 4.** Our *JHK* photometry of V407 Cyg during the 2010 outburst.

JD	date	<i>J</i>	$\epsilon_J$	<i>H</i>	$\epsilon_H$	<i>K</i>	$\epsilon_K$
270.48	Mar 14.98	4.46	0.04	3.08	0.02	2.48	0.02
271.47	Mar 15.97	4.54	0.02	3.17	0.03	2.48	0.02
278.52	Mar 23.02	4.63	0.06	3.34	0.12	2.65	0.02
279.51	Mar 24.01	4.62	0.02	3.21	0.02	2.68	0.02
284.51	Mar 29.01	4.68	0.02	3.25	0.02	2.70	0.02
285.42	Mar 29.92	4.70	0.02	3.31	0.02	2.70	0.01
287.42	Mar 31.92	4.58	0.01	3.23	0.02	2.68	0.02
320.46	May 03.96	5.00	0.02	3.46	0.02	2.85	0.03