

ESO Vacancy "Head of Administration" **104, 39**
 Personnel Movements **104, 39**
 Scientific Preprints (April–June 2001) **104, 39**
 ESO-CERN-ESA Symposium "Astronomy, Cosmology and Fundamental Physics" **105, 49**

Vacancy Note: "A Challenge for Astronomers, Engineers in the field of Software, Electronics and/or Mechanics..." **105, 50**
 Personnel Movements **105, 51**
 Scientific Preprints **105, 51**
 ESO Publications Still Available **105, 51**
 International Max-Planck Research School on Astrophysics **106, 49**

L. Noethe: Book Review: Reflecting Telescope Optics II, by Ray Wilson **106, 49**
 Personnel Movements **106, 50**
 Eurowinter School. Observing with the Very Large Telescope Interferometer **106, 51**
 List of Scientific Preprints (October–December 2001) **106, 52**

AUTHOR INDEX

A

D. Alloin: ESO: Research Facilities in Santiago **105, 42**
 J. Alves, C. Lada and E. Lada: Seeing the Light Through the Dark **103, 1**
 P. Amram and G. Östlin: Building Luminous Blue Compact Galaxies by Merging **103, 31**

B

S. Bagnulo, T. Szeifert, G.A. Wade, J.D. Landstreet and G. Mathys: Detecting Magnetic Fields of Upper-Main-Sequence Stars With FORS1 at ANTU **104, 32**
 P. Ballester, P. Kervella, L.P. Rasmussen, A. Richichi, C. Sabet, M. Schöller, R. Wilhelm, B. Wiseman, M. Wittkowski: The VLT Data Flow System: From Observation Preparation to Data Processing **106, 2**
 R. Bender, G. Monnet and A. Renzini: Workshop on Scientific Drivers for Future VLT/VLTI Instrumentation – Summary and First Orientations **105, 8**
 H. Böhringer, P. Schuecker, P. Lynam, Th. Reiprich, C.A. Collins, L. Guzzo, Y. Ikebe, E. Molinari, L. Barone, C. Ambros: Harvesting the Results from the REFLEX Cluster Survey: Following-up on an ESO Key Programme **106, 24**
 D. Bonaccini, W. Hackenberg, M. Cullum, E. Brunetto, M. Quattri, E. Allaert, M. Dimmler, M. Tarenghi, A. Van Kersteren, C. di Chirico, M. Sarazin, B. Buzzoni, P. Gray, R. Tamai, M. Tapia, R. Davies, S. Rabien, T. Ott, S. Hippler: ESO VLT Laser Guide Star Facility **105, 9**
 F. Bouchy and F. Carrier: Catching the Sounds of Stars. Asteroseismology, the Right Tool to Understand Stellar Interiors **106, 32**

C

C. Cesarsky: Successful First Light for the VLT Interferometer **104, 1**
 F. Comerón and M. Fernández: Strong Accretion and Mass Loss Near the Substellar Limit **103, 21**

E

S. Ellison and M. Sterzik: News from Santiago. Summaries of 2 Topical Meetings **106, 45**

F

R. Fosbury, J. Bergeron, C. Cesarsky, S. Cristiani, R. Hook, A. Renzini and P. Rosati: The Great Observatories Origins Deep Survey (GOODS) **105, 40**

J.U. Fynbo, P. Møller, B. Thomsen: Star Formation at $z = 2-4$: Going Below the Spectroscopic Limit with FORS1 **103, 24**

G

W. Gieren, D. Geisler, T. Richtler, G. Pietrzynski, B. Dirsch: Research in Concepción on Globular Cluster Systems and Galaxy Formation, and the Extragalactic Distance Scale **106, 15**

A. Gilliotte: La Silla Telescope Status, a Great Achievement on Image Quality Performances **103, 2**

A. Gilliotte: Image Quality Improvement of the 2.2-m **103, 4**

A. Glindemann, B. Bauvir, F. Delplancke, F. Derie, E. Di Folco, A. Gennai, P. Gitton, N. Housen, A. Huxley, P. Kervella, B. Koehler, S. Lévêque, A. Longinotti, S. Ménardi, S. Morel, F. Paresce, T. Phan Duc, A. Richichi, M. Schöller, M. Tarenghi, A. Wallander, M. Wittkowski, R. Wilhelm: Light at the End of the Tunnel – First Fringes with the VLT **104, 2**

A. Glindemann, P. Ballester, B. Bauvir, E. Bugueño, M. Cantzler, S. Correia, F. Delplancke, F. Derie, P. Duhoux, E. Di Folco, A. Gennai, B. Gilli, P. Giordano, P. Gitton, S. Guisard, N. Housen, A. Huxley, P. Kervella, M. Kiebusch, B. Koehler, S. Lévêque, A. Longinotti, A. Lopez, S. Ménardi, S. Morel, F. Paresce, T. Phan Duc, A. Ramirez, A. Richichi, M. Schöller, J. Spyromilio, M. Tarenghi, A. Wallander, R. Wilhelm, M. Wittkowski: First Fringes with ANTU and MELIPAL **106, 1**

U. Grothkopf, A. Treumann, M.E. Gómez: The ESO Libraries: State of the Art 2001 **105, 45**

H

S. Habraken, P.-A. Blanche, P. Lemaire, N. Legros, H. Dekker and G. Monnet: Volume Phase Holographic Gratings Made in Europe **106, 6**

O. Hainaut and the NTT Team: NEWS from the NTT **103, 7**

R. Hook: Scisoft – a Collection of Astronomical Software for ESO Users **104, 20**

J

H. Jones: 2p2 Team News **132, 9**

H. Jones, A. Renzini, P. Rosati and W. Seifert: Tunable Filters and Large Telescopes **103, 10**

H. Jones, E. Pompei and the 2p2 Team: 2p2 Team News **104, 7**

H. Jones, B. Stappers, B. Gaensler: Discovery of a Bow-Shock Nebula Around the Pulsar B0740-28 **103, 27**

M

C. Madsen: Latest News: ESO High-Level Presentation in Porto **104, 21**

C. Madsen: ESO Presentation in Brussels **106, 48**

J. Manfroid, F. Selman and H. Jones: Achieving 1% Photometric Accuracy with the ESO Wide Field Imager **104, 16**

J.-L. Monin, F. Ménard and N. Peretto: Disk Orientations in PMS Binary Systems Determined Through Polarimetric Imaging With UT1/FORS **104, 29**

N

L. Noethe: Book Review: Reflecting Telescope Optics II, by Ray Wilson **106, 49**

L.-Å. Nyman, M. Lerner, M. Nielbock, M. Anciaux, K. Brooks, R. Chini, M. Albrecht, R. Lemke, E. Kreysa, R. Zylka, L.E.B. Johansson, L. Bronfman, S. Kontinen, H. Linz and B. Stecklum: Simba Explores the Southern Sky **106, 40**

P

F. Paresce: Scientific Objectives of the VLT Interferometer **104, 5**

M. Pierre, D. Alloin, B. Altieri, M. Birkinshaw, M. Bremer, H. Böhringer, J. Hjorth, L. Jones, O. Le Fèvre, D. Maccagni, B. McBreen, Y. Mellier, E. Molinari, H. Quintana, H. Rottgering, J. Surdej, L. Vigroux, S. White, C. Lonsdale: The XMM Large Scale Survey and its Multi- λ Follow-up **105, 32**

Q

D. Queloz, M. Mayor et al.: From CORALIE to HARPS. The Way Towards 1 m s⁻¹ Precision Doppler Measurements **105, 1**

S

D. Silva: Service Mode Scheduling: A Primer for Users **105, 18**

J.W. Sulentic, M. Calvani and P. Marziani: Eigenvector 1: An H-R Diagram for AGN? **104, 25**

T

L. Testi, L. Vanzì, F. Massi: Young Stellar Clusters in the Vela D Molecular Cloud **103, 28**

U

C. Urrutia, T. Paz, E. Robledo, F. Gutierrez, D. Baade, F. Selman, F. Sanchez, J. Brewer and M. Scodreggio: VLT Style Observing with the Wide Field Imager at the MPG/ESO 2.2-m Telescope at La Silla **104, 14**

ESO, the European Southern Observatory, was created in 1962 to "... establish and operate an astronomical observatory in the southern hemisphere, equipped with powerful instruments, with the aim of furthering and organising collaboration in astronomy ...". It is supported by nine countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland. ESO operates at two sites. It operates the La Silla observatory in the Atacama desert, 600 km north of Santiago de Chile, at 2,400 m altitude, where several optical telescopes with diameters up to 3.6 m and a 15-m submillimetre radio telescope (SEST) are now in operation. In addition, ESO is in the process of building the Very Large Telescope (VLT) on Paranal, a 2,600 m high mountain approximately 130 km south of Antofagasta, in the driest part of the Atacama desert. The VLT consists of four 8.2-metre telescopes. These telescopes can also be used in combination as a giant interferometer (VLTI). The first two 8.2-metre telescopes (called ANTU and KUEYEN) are in regular operation, and the other two will follow soon. Over 1200 proposals are made each year for the use of the ESO telescopes. The ESO Headquarters are located in Garching, near Munich, Germany. This is the scientific, technical and administrative centre of ESO where technical development programmes are carried out to provide the La Silla and Paranal observatories with the most advanced instruments. There are also extensive astronomical data facilities. In Europe ESO employs about 200 international staff members, Fellows and Associates; in Chile about 70 and, in addition, about 130 local staff members.

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V

- S. Van Eck, S. Goriely, A. Jorissen and B. Plez: Discovery of Lead Stars with the ESO 3.6-m Telescope and CES **106**, 37
L. VANZI, L. Hunt and T. Thuan: SOFI and ISAAC Pierce the Obscured Core of SBS 0335-052 **104**, 22

W

- J.R. Walsh, L. Pasquini, S. Zaggia: Report on the FLAMES Users Workshop (FUW) **105**, 37
A. Wicencec et al.: ESO's Next Generation Archive System **106**, 11

- L. Wisotzki, F. Selman and A. Gilliotte: Commissioning the Spectroscopic Mode of the WFI at the MPG/ESO 2.2-m Telescope at La Silla **104**, 8
L. Wisotzki: The ESO Users Committee **106**, 46

Z

- S. Zaggia, Y. Momany, B. Vandame, R. P. Mignani, L. Da Costa, S. Arnouts, M.A.T. Groenewegen, E. Hatziminaoglou, R. Ma-dejsky, C. Rité, M. Schirmer, and R. Slijkhuis: The EIS Pre-FLAMES Survey: Observations of Selected Stellar Fields **105**, 25

Contents

TELESCOPES AND INSTRUMENTATION

- W. Brandner et al.: NAOS+CONICA at YEPUN: First VLT Optics System Sees First Light 1
R. Kurz, S. Guilloteau, P. Shaver: The Atacama Large Millimetre Array 7
L. Germany: News from the 2p2 Team 13

CHILEAN ASTRONOMY

- L. Bronfman: A Panorama of Chilean Astronomy 14
A. Reisenegger, H. Quintana, D. Proust, E. Slezak: Dynamics and Mass of the Shapley Supercluster, the Largest Bound Structure in the Local Universe 18

REPORTS FROM OBSERVERS

- D. Baade, T. Rivinius, S. Štefl: To Be or Not to Be and a 50-cm Post-Mortem Eulogy 24
F. Courbin, G. Letawe, P. Magain, L. Wisotzki, P. Jablonka, D. Alloin, K. Jahnke, B. Kuhlbrodt, G. Meylan, D. Minniti: Spectroscopy of Quasar Host Galaxies at the VLT: Stellar Populations and Dynamics Down to the Central Kiloparsec 28
J. Sollerman and V. Flyckt: The Crab Pulsar and its Environment 32
L. Vanzi, F. Mannucci, R. Maiolino, M. Della Valle: SOFI Discovers a Dust Enshrouded Supernova 35
G. Rupprecht: A Deep Look at an Active Galaxy 38
Coming Home at Paranal. Unique "Residencia" Opens at the VLT Observatory 39

OTHER ASTRONOMICAL NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

- F. Paresce: Release of Scientific Data from VLTI Commissioning 41
A. Renzini: VLT Science Verification Policy and Procedures 41
D. Alloin: News from Santiago 42
ESO Studentship Programme 42
M. Dennefeld: The Third NEON Observing School 43
A. Bacher: "Life in the Universe" Winners on La Silla and Paranal 43
A. Bacher and L. Lindberg Christensen: In the Footsteps of Scientists – ESA/ESO Astronomy Exercise Series 44
Personnel Movements 45
List of Scientific Preprints 45

- MESSENGER INDEX 2001 (Nos. 103–106) 46