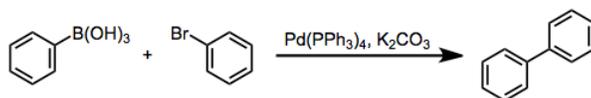


1.2: What is Organometallic Chemistry?

Let's begin with a few simple questions: what is organometallic chemistry? What, after studying organometallic chemistry, will we know about the world that we didn't know before? Why is the subject worth studying? And what kinds of problems is the subject meant to address? The purpose of this post is to give the best answers I currently know of to these questions. The goal of this otherwise content-free post is twofold: (1) to help motivate us as we move forward (that is, to constantly remind us that there is a point to all this!); and (2) to illustrate the kinds of problems we'll be able to address using concepts from the field. You might be surprised by the spine-chilling power you feel after learning about the behavior of organometallic compounds and reactions!

Put most bluntly, organometallic (OM) chemistry is the study of compounds containing, and reactions involving, metal-carbon bonds. The metal-carbon bond may be transient or temporary, but if one exists during a reaction or in a compound of interest, we're squarely in the domain of organometallic chemistry. Despite the denotational importance of the M-C bond, bonds between metals and the other common elements of organic chemistry also appear in OM chemistry: metal-nitrogen, metal-oxygen, metal-halogen, and even metal-hydrogen bonds all play a role. Metals cover a vast swath of the periodic table and include the alkali metals (group 1), alkali earth metals (group 2), transition metals (groups 3-12), the main group metals (groups 13-15, "under the stairs"), and the lanthanides and actinides. We will focus most prominently on the behavior of the transition metals, so called because they cover the transition between the electropositive group 2 elements and the more electron-rich main group elements.

Why is the subject worth studying? Well, for me, it mostly comes down to synthetic flexibility. There's a reason the "organo" comes first in "organometallic chemistry"—our goal is usually the creation of new bonds in organic compounds. The metals tend to just be along for the ride (although their influence, obviously, is essential). And the fact is that you can do things with organometallic chemistry that you cannot do using straight-up organic chemistry. Case in point:



The venerable Suzuki reaction...unthinkable without palladium!

The establishment of the bond between the phenyl rings through a means other than dumb luck seems unthinkable to the organic chemist, but it's natural for the palladium-equipped metal-organicker. Bromobenzene looks like a potential electrophile at the bromine-bearing carbon, and if you're familiar with hydroboration you might see phenylboronic acid as a potential nucleophile at the boron-bearing carbon. Catalytic palladium makes it all happen! Organometallic chemistry is full of these mind-bending transformations, and can expand the synthetic toolbox of the organic chemist considerably.

To throw another motive into the mix for the non-specialist (or the synthesis-spurning chemist), organometallic chemistry is full of intriguing stories of scientific inquiry and discovery. Exploring how researchers take a new organometallic reaction from "ooh pretty" to strong predictive power is instructive for anyone interested in "how science works," in a practical sense. We'll examine a number of classical experiments in organometallic chemistry, both for their value to the field and their contributions to the general nature of scientific inquiry.

What kinds of problems should we be able to address as we move forward? Here's a bulleted list of the most commonly encountered types of problems in an organometallic chemistry course:

- Describe the structure of an organometallic complex...
- Predict the product of the given reaction conditions...
- Draw a reasonable mechanism based on evidence...
- Devise a synthetic route to synthesize a target organometallic compound...
- Explain the observation(s)...
- Predict the results of a series of experiments...

The first four are pretty standard organic-esque problems, but it's the last two, more general classes that really make organometallic chemistry compelling. Just imagine putting yourself in the shoes of the pioneers and making the same predictions they did!

There you have it, a short introduction to organometallic chemistry and why it's worth studying. Of course, we'll use the remainder of space in the blog to fully describe what organometallic chemistry really is...but it's helpful to keep these motives in mind as you study. Keep a thirst for predictive power, and it's hard to go wrong with organometallic chemistry!

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