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(54) **ULTRASONIC TRANSDUCER AND METHOD
OF MANUFACTURING THE SAME**

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(57) ABSTRACT

Materials having different compositions are arranged to prepare a molded form in which the sound velocity characteristic is varied from high frequency to low frequency from the center toward the periphery. An ultrasonic wave-radiating face of the molded form and the back face of the ultrasonic wave-radiating face are arranged in parallel to each other to prepare a transducer in which the center region can transmit/receive high-frequency ultrasonic waves and the periphery region can transmit/receive low-frequency ultrasonic waves.

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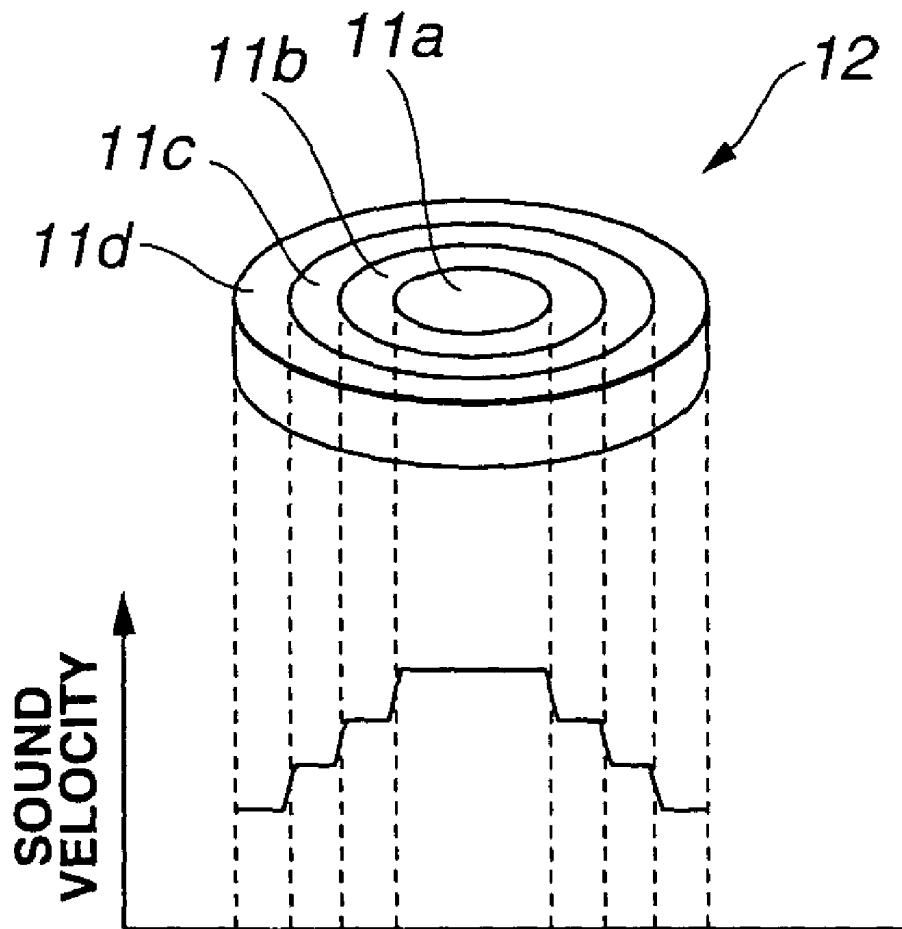


FIG.1

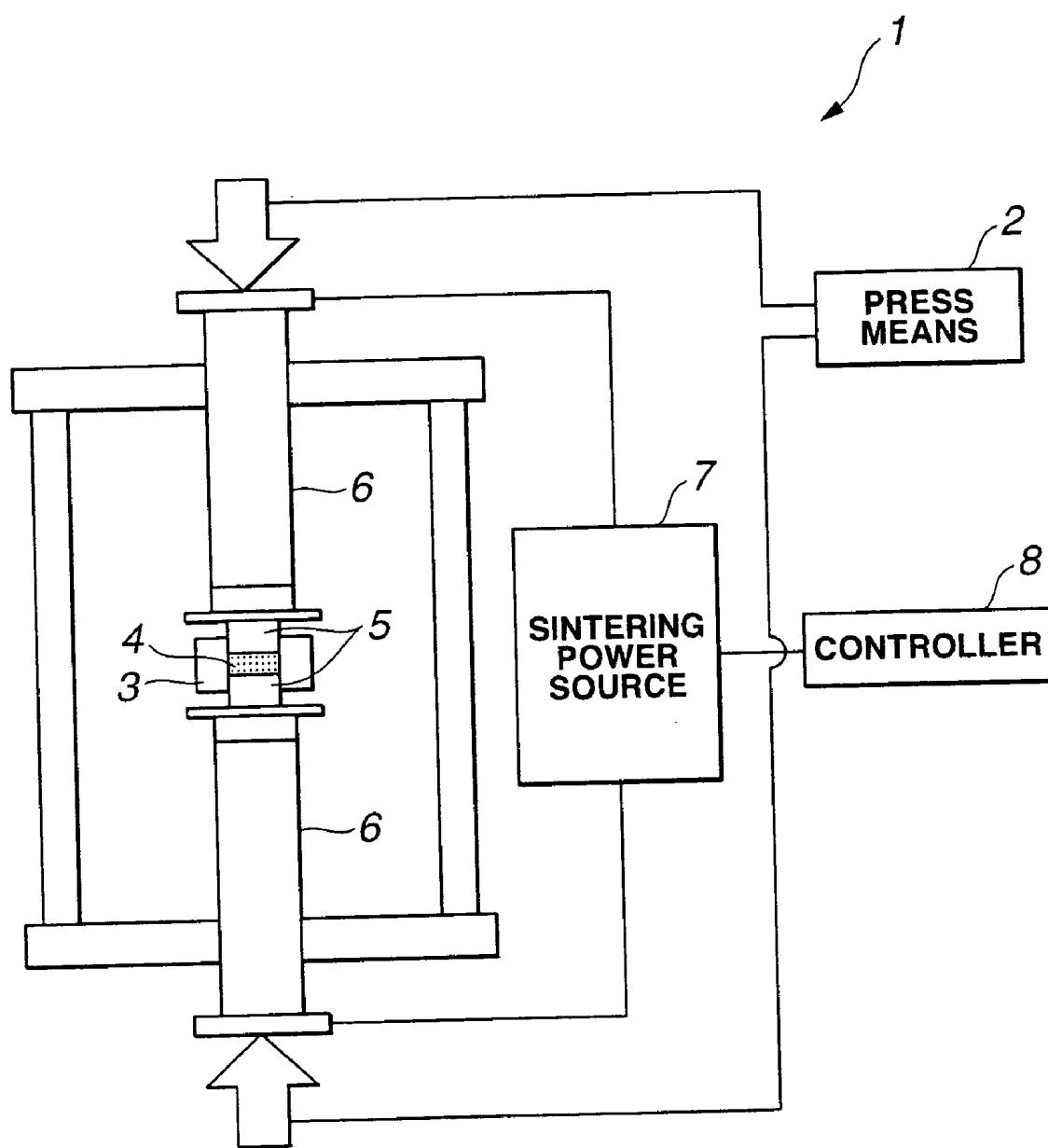


FIG.2

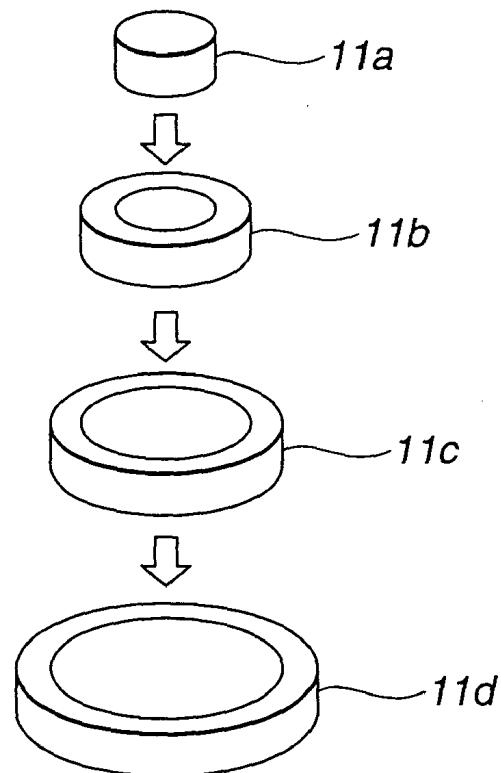


FIG.3

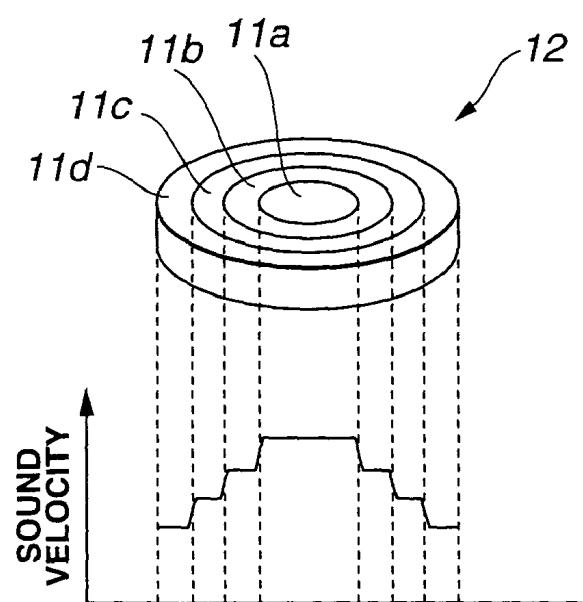


FIG.4

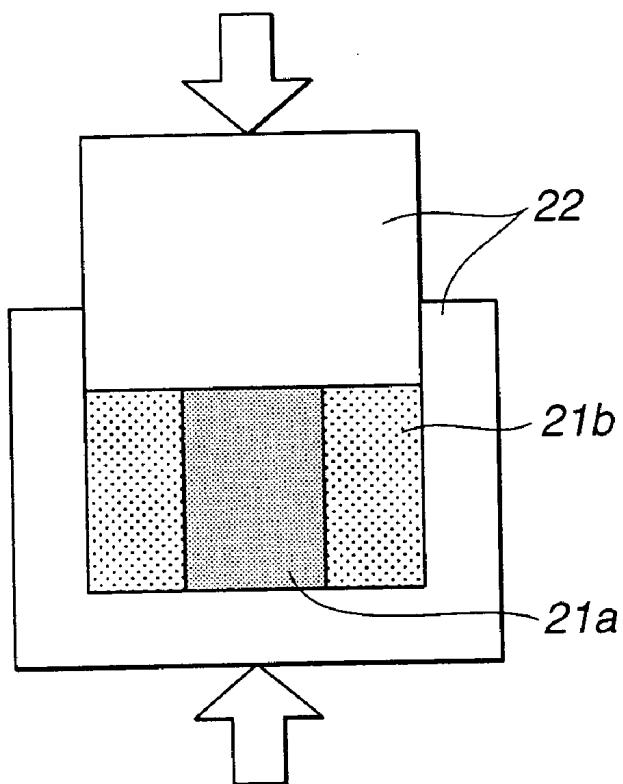


FIG.5

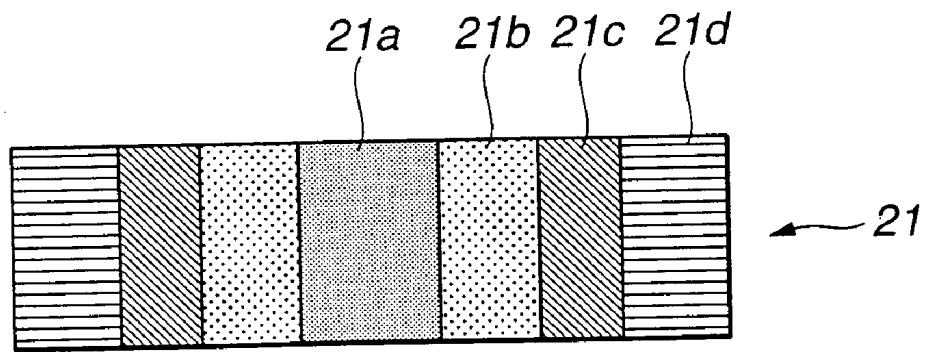


FIG.6

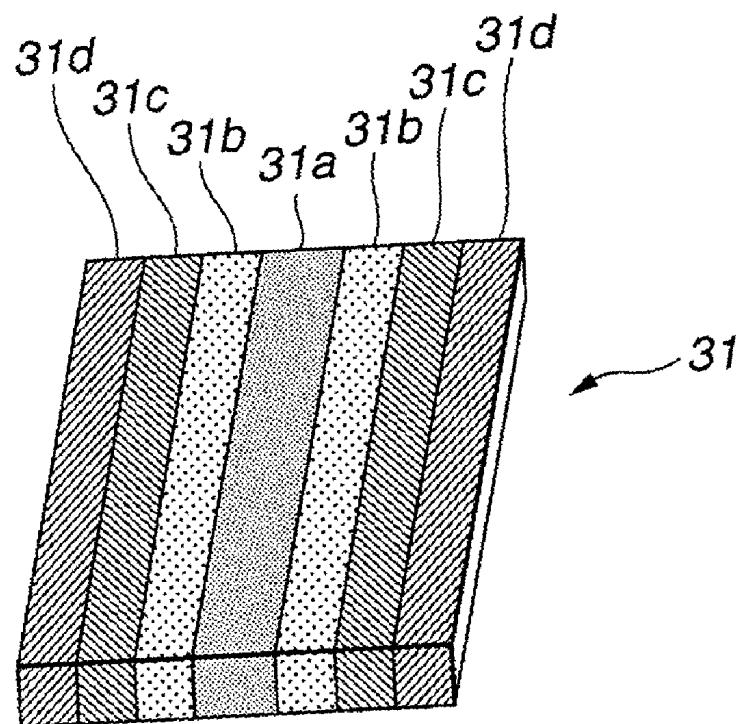


FIG.7

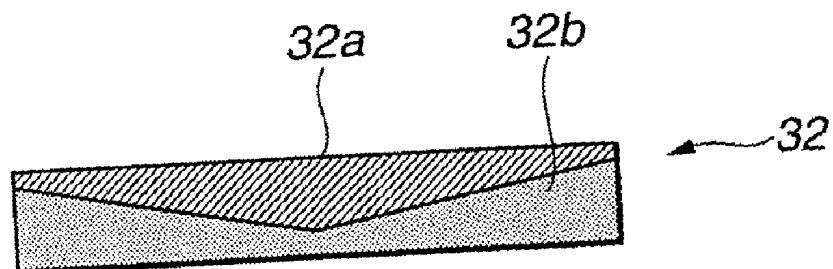


FIG.8

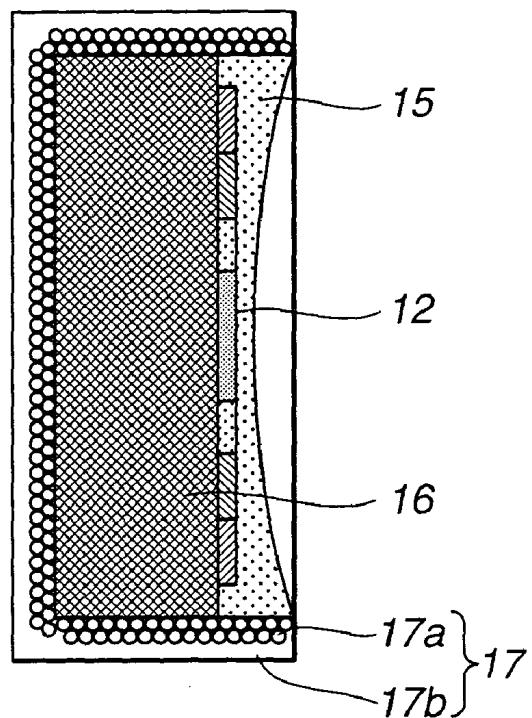


FIG.9

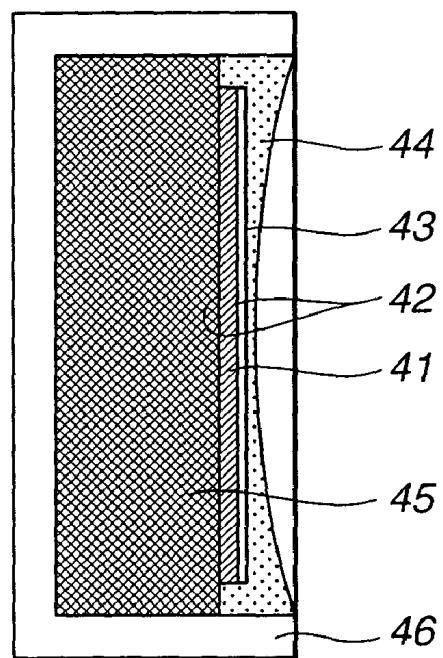


FIG.10

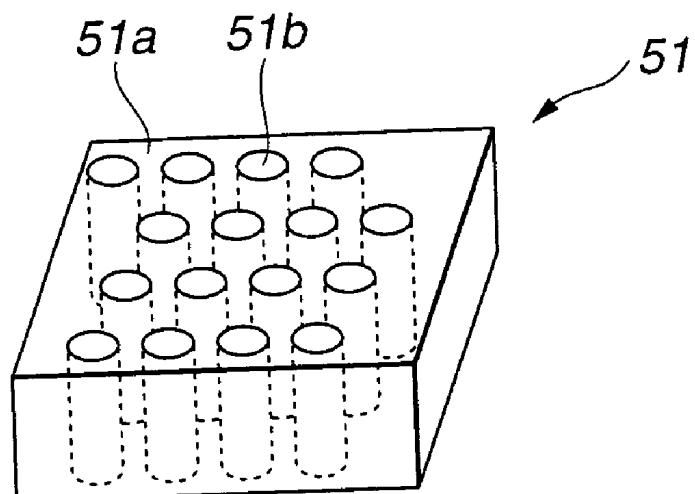
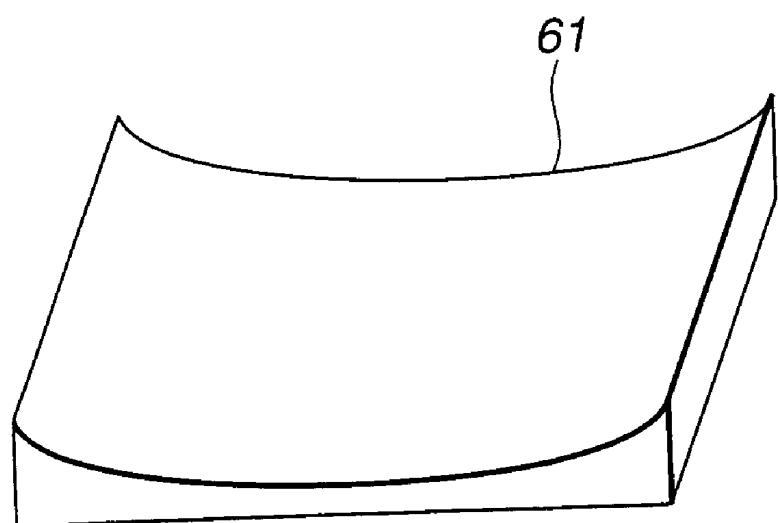


FIG.11



ULTRASONIC TRANSDUCER AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURING THE SAME

[0001] This application claims benefit of Japanese Application No. 2002-142093 filed on May 16, 2002, the contents of which are incorporated by this reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to an ultrasonic transducer that includes a single transducer and can be used to transmit/receive broadband ultrasonic waves.

[0004] 2. Related Art Statement

[0005] In the field of medical care, ultrasonic diagnostic equipment having the following function has been developed: ultrasonic pulses transmitted by an ultrasonic transducer are repeatedly applied to tissues, the echoes of the ultrasonic pulses reflected by the tissues are received with the ultrasonic transducer or another ultrasonic transducer, the direction that the ultrasonic pulses are transmitted or received is gradually varied, and information obtained in a plurality of directions of the tissues is converted into visible images to display ultrasonic images.

[0006] Among ultrasonic transducers used for ultrasonic probes for the ultrasonic diagnostic equipment, an ultrasonic transducer having the structure shown in **FIG. 9** is conventionally known. Electrodes **42** are each disposed on both faces of a piezoelectric transducer **41** that has been polished so as to have a uniform thickness and has uniform composition, a matching layer **43** and an acoustic lens **44** are disposed on an ultrasonic wave transmitting/receiving face which is one of the above faces of the piezoelectric transducer **41** in that order, a backing layer **45** is disposed on the other face, and these components are housed in a housing **46**. The electrodes **42** disposed on both faces of the piezoelectric transducer **41** are electrically connected to an observation unit via wiring lines and connectors which are not shown.

[0007] In general, in the observation of ultrasonic images obtained using such ultrasonic probes, high-frequency ultrasonic waves are used in many cases depending on the need that high-resolution is required even if penetration is sacrificed when shallow areas are observed, and low-frequency ultrasonic waves are used in many cases when high penetration is necessary. There is a request to observe ultrasonic images using a single probe while the ultrasonic wave frequency is varied. Therefore, in order to transmit/receive more broadband ultrasonic waves, the following elements have been proposed: a composite piezoelectric element **51**, equipped with a resin layer **51a** and minute piezoelectric sub-elements **51b** arranged therein, having broadband characteristics, as shown in **FIG. 10**; and a so-called plano-concave transducer **61** including a piezoelectric material having a thickness gradient, as shown in **FIG. 11**.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] An ultrasonic transducer of the present invention has such a configuration that material compositions are arranged from the periphery toward the center in ascending order of sound velocity such that the frequency of ultrasonic waves is varied depending on regions, and includes an ultrasonic wave-radiating face that is in parallel to the back face thereof.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] **FIG. 1** is an illustration showing a configuration of a spark plasma sintering system.

[0010] **FIG. 2** is an illustration showing a pressed compact.

[0011] **FIG. 3** is an illustration showing the distribution of sound velocity in a sintered compact.

[0012] **FIG. 4** is an illustration showing press molding.

[0013] **FIG. 5** is an illustration showing the composition distribution of a pressed compact.

[0014] **FIG. 6** is an illustration showing a composition gradient varied in one direction.

[0015] **FIG. 7** is an illustration showing a composition gradient varied in the thickness direction.

[0016] **FIG. 8** is an illustration showing a configuration of a transducer.

[0017] **FIG. 9** is an illustration showing a configuration of a conventional ultrasonic transducer.

[0018] **FIG. 10** is an illustration showing a conventional ultrasonic transducer comprising a composite piezoelectric material.

[0019] **FIG. 11** is an illustration showing a conventional ultrasonic transducer comprising a piezoelectric material having a thickness gradient.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0020] An ultrasonic transducer according to the present invention is formed in such a manner that piezoelectric materials or electrostrictive materials are mixed and then processed by a rapid heating sintering method. A transducer-forming method using a spark plasma sintering method, which is one of rapid heating sintering methods, is described below. The spark plasma sintering method has the following satisfactory advantages as compared with conventional heat sintering methods using heaters: the sintering time is short, the sintering temperature is low, materials having sintering resistance can be sintered without using sintering additives, porous sintered bodies having high strength can be readily prepared (the neck formability is high), and sintered bodies in which the internal composition and microstructure are gradually varied can be readily prepared (desired functional materials, such as metal-ceramic materials, having a functional gradient can be readily obtained).

[0021] As shown in **FIG. 1**, a spark plasma sintering system **1** includes a press means **2** similar to a hot press machine, press punches **5** for pressing powder **4** placed in a sintering die **3**, punch electrodes **6** each connected to the corresponding press punches **5**, a sintering power supply **7** for supplying electricity to the punch electrodes **6**, and a controller **8** for controlling the press means **2** and the sintering power supply **7**. The powder **4** placed in the sintering die **3** is a composite containing different compositions. This composite is pressed and rapidly heated, thereby obtaining a sintered compact having a functional gradient for the sound propagation velocity.

[0022] Next, a method for preparing such a sintered compact having the functional gradient using the following materials, shown in the following table, having different sound velocity characteristics and compositions will now be described: lead niobate A and lead titanate B.

	Sound velocity	Density
Lead niobate A	4500	7.4
Lead titanate B	3260	5.7

[0023] First, the following four powder materials having different compositions are prepared in order to form the sintered compact: a lead niobate A powder material, a lead titanate B powder material, a powder mixture in which the ratio of the lead niobate A powder material to the lead titanate B powder material is two to one, and another powder mixture in which the ratio of the lead niobate A powder material to the lead titanate B powder material is one to two. The lead niobate A powder material, which has relatively satisfactory high-frequency characteristics, is placed at the center, the other powder materials are arranged from the vicinity of the center toward the periphery in ascending order of the content of the lead titanate B powder material, and thereby a composite structure having the following compositions is formed: a composition, disposed at the center, having a large sound propagation velocity and the other compositions, disposed at the periphery, having a small sound propagation velocity.

[0024] In particular, as shown in **FIG. 2**, for example, the lead niobate A powder material is pressed to form a cylindrical pressed compact **11a** having a diameter of 2 mm, and the powder mixture containing the lead niobate A powder material and the lead titanate B powder material in the ratio of two to one is pressed to form a ring-shaped pressed compact **11b** having an outside diameter of 4 mm and an inside diameter of 2 mm. Furthermore, the powder mixture containing the lead niobate A powder material and the lead titanate B powder material in the ratio of one to two is pressed to form a ring-shaped pressed compact **11c** having an outside diameter of 6 mm and an inside diameter of 4 mm, and the lead titanate B powder material is pressed to form a ring-shaped pressed compact **11d** having an outside diameter of 8 mm and an inside diameter of 6 mm.

[0025] These ring-shaped pressed compacts **11a** to **11d** are fitted into each other to form a disk composite structure, and this composite structure is then placed in the sintering die **3** of the spark plasma sintering system **1** shown in **FIG. 1**. A pulsed electric current is applied between the press punches **5** to perform rapid heating while the composite structure is pressed with the press means **2**, thereby obtaining a sintered compact **12** having the sound velocity distribution shown in **FIG. 3**.

[0026] In conventional sintering methods, since the sintering reaction time is long, components are diffused during the reaction time to cause a change in characteristic and the composite structure containing materials having different compositions cannot be co-sintered. However, when a rapid heating sinter forging method such as a spark plasma sintering method is used, the diffusion of components can be prevented to readily join different materials together, thereby

readily obtaining such a sintered compact having a composition gradient and desired functions.

[0027] In this case, a method for manufacturing the sintered compact having the composition gradient is not limited to the above procedure in which, after the pressed compacts **11a** to **11d** are individually prepared, these pressed compacts are mechanically joined together and then subjected to co-sintering. For example, as shown in **FIGS. 4 and 5**, the following procedure may be employed: press molding is repeatedly performed to prepare pressed compacts having desired shapes and the obtained pressed compacts are subjected to sintering.

[0028] That is, as shown in **FIG. 4**, a pressed compact **21a** having a cylindrical shape and a diameter of 2 mm is formed using the lead niobate A powder material, the pressed compact **21a** is placed at the center of a press mold **22** having a diameter of 4 mm, the powder mixture containing the lead niobate A powder material and the lead titanate B powder material in the ratio of two to one is placed around the pressed compact **21a** to press them, thereby obtaining another pressed compact **21b** in which the powder mixture containing the lead niobate A powder material and the lead titanate B powder material in the ratio of two to one is disposed around the pressed compact **21a**. In the same manner as the above, another pressed compact **21c** is formed using the powder mixture containing the lead niobate A powder material and the lead titanate B powder material in the ratio of one to two, and another pressed compact **21d** is formed using the lead titanate B powder material, thereby obtaining another pressed compact **21** having a desired shape, as shown in **FIG. 5**. The pressed compact **21** is placed in the sintering die **3** of the spark plasma sintering system **1** and then subjected to sintering by rapid heating in an oxygen atmosphere.

[0029] For a sintered compact having such a composition gradient, the size and composition are not limited to the above instances, and piezoelectric materials and electrostrictive materials that have different sound velocity characteristics and can be sintered by rapid heating, for example, by a spark plasma sintering method, may be used. The pattern of the composition gradient is not limited to a concentric shape. The composition may be varied in one direction in the same manner as in a square sintered compact **31** shown in **FIG. 6**. Two or more materials, in which the sound propagation velocity is different from each other, may be joined together to form a functional gradient in the same manner as in a sintered compact **32** shown in **FIG. 7**.

[0030] The square sintered compact **31** shown in **FIG. 6** is formed by co-sintering a plurality of narrow materials having different sound velocity characteristics and a square cross section. In the sintered compact **31**, a material **31a** having a large sound propagation velocity is disposed at the center and materials **31b**, **31c**, and **31d** having a small sound propagation velocity are arranged at both sides of the material **31a** in that order, thereby forming a functional gradient varied in one direction along the material arrangement.

[0031] The sintered compact **32** shown in **FIG. 7** is formed by joining a material **32a** having a large sound velocity and another material **32b** having a small sound velocity together in the thickness direction. The layer of material **32a** having a large sound velocity has a larger

thickness at the center and the layer of material **32b** having a small sound velocity has a smaller thickness at the center. That is, from the center toward the periphery, the layer of material **32a** having a large sound velocity is rendered thinner and the layer of material **32b** having a small sound velocity is rendered thinner, thereby obtaining a desired functional gradient.

[0032] Next, the sintered compact **12** obtained according to the above procedure is cut into pieces having a predetermined thickness (for example, 100 μm), and each piece is surface-ground (polished) such that an ultrasonic radiating face is in parallel to the back face of the ultrasonic radiating face, thereby preparing a transducer. First electrode layers containing chromium or nickel are each provided on both corresponding faces of the polished transducer and second electrode layers containing gold are each provided on the corresponding first electrode layers with a sputtering system (not shown). The first electrode layers containing chromium or nickel function as a binder for enhancing the bonding strength between the sintered compact and gold, and the second electrode layers formed by sputtering gold are used for readily performing wire-bonding.

[0033] As shown in FIG. 8, an acoustic lens **15** in which the thickness of the center is smaller than that of the periphery is formed at the side of the acoustic radiating face (ultrasonic radiating face) of the transducer. In the acoustic lens **15**, the curvature of the front face is designed such that the thickness of each portion is equal to substantially one fourth of the fundamental frequency λ of the transducer comprising the sintered compact. The acoustic lens **15** also functions as an acoustic matching layer. In this configuration, a single layer functioning as both an acoustic lens and an acoustic matching layer is used. However, two or more layers function as such an acoustic lens and acoustic matching layer may be formed. In this case, after the matching layer designed based on the fundamental frequency of each portion is formed, the acoustic lens may be placed such that the focus is formed at a desired position. Thus, the focus position can be readily designed.

[0034] A backing layer **16** is provided on the back face of the transducer and this structure is placed in a housing **17** having a large number of cavities disposed on the inside faces thereof. The housing **17** includes spherical porous sintered compacts **17a** disposed on the inside faces thereof and a dense stainless sintered compact **17b** disposed on the outside, wherein the spherical porous sintered compacts **17a** are formed by a spark plasma sintering method using minute metal beads. The spherical porous sintered compacts **17a** disposed on the inside faces of the housing **17** have a function of diffusing echoes reflected in the housing **17**.

[0035] That is, in conventional ultrasonic transducers, in order to reduce ultrasonic echoes, reflected from a housing through a backing layer, to a negligible level, the backing layer must have a large thickness and this prevents the miniaturization of such ultrasonic transducers. However, when the housing **17** having a large number of cavities disposed on the inside faces thereof is used, reflected ultrasonic echoes can be diffused. Thus, the reflected echoes can be reduced to a sufficiently small level even if the backing layer **16** has a small thickness, thereby allowing the miniaturization.

[0036] As described above, in this embodiment, a material having a large sound propagation velocity arranged at the

center, materials having a smaller sound propagation velocity are arranged toward the periphery in descending order, these materials are formed into a monolithic structure by a rapid heating sintering method, and an ultrasonic radiating face and the back face of the ultrasonic radiating face are surface-ground (polished), thereby obtaining an ultrasonic transducer in which the resonant frequency varies depending on portions thereof.

[0037] That is, the ultrasonic transducer is finished by a simple process in which the content and materials are varied to vary the composition gradient to vary the sound velocity characteristics and the ultrasonic radiating face is surface-ground (polished). Therefore, a special processing procedure such as the formation of a thickness gradient is not necessary, wherein such a procedure is necessary for manufacturing conventional plano-concave transducers. Thus, a transducer having the following structure can be readily manufactured at low cost: the center portion transmits or/and receives high-frequency ultrasonic waves and the periphery portion transmits or/and receives low-frequency ultrasonic waves, the frequency of the ultrasonic waves being gradually lowered from the center toward the periphery.

[0038] When ultrasonic probes for ultrasonic diagnostic equipment include such a transducer, high-frequency ultrasonic waves are transmitted/received at the center region having a small aperture and low-frequency ultrasonic waves are transmitted/received at other regions having a large aperture in a single transducer. Thus, tissues in shallow areas can be observed with high resolution using high-frequency ultrasonic waves, and ultrasonic images of sufficiently deep areas can be obtained using low-frequency ultrasonic waves without deteriorating the (directional) resolution in deep areas.

[0039] In the above embodiment, the transducer including a single disk is illustrated. However, the present invention is not limited to the embodiment. The same advantages as in the above can be obtained using a transducer including a single square plate and an array transducer.

[0040] In the present invention, it is clear that various embodiments based on the present invention may be made in various applications within the spirit and scope of the present invention. The present invention is not limited to particular embodiments except for the accompanying claims.

What is claimed is:

1. An ultrasonic transducer comprising:
material compositions arranged from the periphery toward the center in ascending order of sound velocity such that the frequency of ultrasonic waves radiated from regions is varied depending on the regions; and
an ultrasonic wave-radiating face that is in parallel to the back face thereof.
2. An ultrasonic transducer comprising:
an ultrasonic wave-radiating face including materials that have different compositions and are arranged from the periphery toward the center of the ultrasonic wave-radiating face in ascending order of sound propagation velocity,

wherein the ultrasonic wave-radiating face and the back face facing the ultrasonic wave-radiating face are polished so as to be in parallel to each other.

3. A method for manufacturing an ultrasonic transducer comprising the steps of:

subjecting powder materials to molding such that the materials are arranged from the periphery toward the center in ascending order of sound velocity; and

unifying a molded compact by a rapid heating sintering method.

4. A method for manufacturing an ultrasonic transducer comprising:

a material-arranging step of arranging materials having different compositions, in order to form an ultrasonic

wave-radiating face, such that the sound propagation velocity increases from the periphery toward the center of the ultrasonic wave-radiating face;

a press step of pressing the materials arranged in the material-arranging step;

a sintering step of co-sintering the pressed compact obtained in the press step; and

a polishing step of polishing an ultrasonic wave-radiating face of the sintered compact obtained in the sintering step and the back face facing the ultrasonic wave-radiating face so as to be in parallel to each other.

* * * * *

专利名称(译)	超声换能器及其制造方法		
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申请号	US10/437635	申请日	2003-05-14
[标]申请(专利权)人(译)	奥林巴斯株式会社		
申请(专利权)人(译)	奥林巴斯光学有限公司.		
当前申请(专利权)人(译)	OLYMPUS CORPORATION		
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发明人	FUKUDA, HIROSHI OMURA, MASAYOSHI MIZUGUCHI, TOHRU		
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优先权	2002142093 2002-05-16 JP		
其他公开文献	US6995501		
外部链接	Espacenet USPTO		

摘要(译)

布置具有不同组成的材料以制备模制形式，其中声速特性从中心向周边从高频到低频变化。模制形式的超声波辐射面和超声波辐射面的背面彼此平行布置，以准备其中心区域可以发送/接收高频超声波的换能器和周边区域。可以发送/接收低频超声波。

