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New results on event-by-event fluctuations in A+A collisions at the CERN SPS

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The study of central collisions of heavy nuclei at CERN SPS energies revealed rapid changes in the energy dependence of hadron production properties in a narrow range around 30*A* GeV. The results indicate the onset of deconfinement in the early stage of the produced system and motivate the ongoing search for the predicted critical point. NA49 data on event-by-event fluctuations of transverse momentum, multiplicity, particle ratios as well as low mass pion pair number fluctuations are shown as a function of beam energy and system size. The plans for the continuation of this program by the NA61/SHINE experiment are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical investigations found that the phase transition between QGP and hadron gas is of first order for finite quark masses and large non-zero baryon density. The phase boundary is predicted to end in a critical point and turn into a rapid crossover as the net baryon density decreases. The SPS covers one of the most interesting regions of the QCD phase diagram. On the one hand it is expected that the energy threshold for deconfinement is reached already at low SPS energy. On the other hand QCD calculations locate the critical point in the SPS energy range.

2. Onset of deconfinement in the SPS energy range

NA49 results [1] on the energy dependence of hadron production in central Pb+Pb collisions at 20*A*, 30*A*, 40*A*, 80*A*, 158*A* GeV from the energy scan program at the CERN SPS allow to deduce when strongly interacting matter reaches deconfinement. The most dramatic effect can be seen in the energy dependence of the ratio of the mean multiplicities of K^+ and π^+ plotted in Fig. 1 (left). The horn structure shows that the relative strangeness content of produced matter passes through a sharp maximum at the SPS in nucleus-nucleus collisions. A phase transition is expected to also manifest itself in the momentum distributions and correlations of produced particles. A plot of the inverse slope parameter T of the transverse mass distribution of K^+ mesons at midrapidity is shown in Fig. 1 (center). One observes a steep rise at low energies turning into a plateau at SPS energies and a further increase at RHIC and LHC energies. The structure is interpreted as an effect of the softening of the Equation of State (EOS) due to a mixed phase which weakens transverse expansion. The softness of the EOS is also seen as a minimum in the ratio of widths of the rapidity distributions for negative pions and a massless hadron gas, Fig. 1 (right). These features are neither seen in p+p collisions nor in purely hadronic model calculations using microscopic transport models. The RHIC and ALICE points shown in Fig. 1 seem to confirm the general trend in hadron production properties seen at the SPS energies. The rapid changes are most naturally explained by the onset of deconfinement in the early stage of the produced fireball for beam energies of about 30*A* GeV.

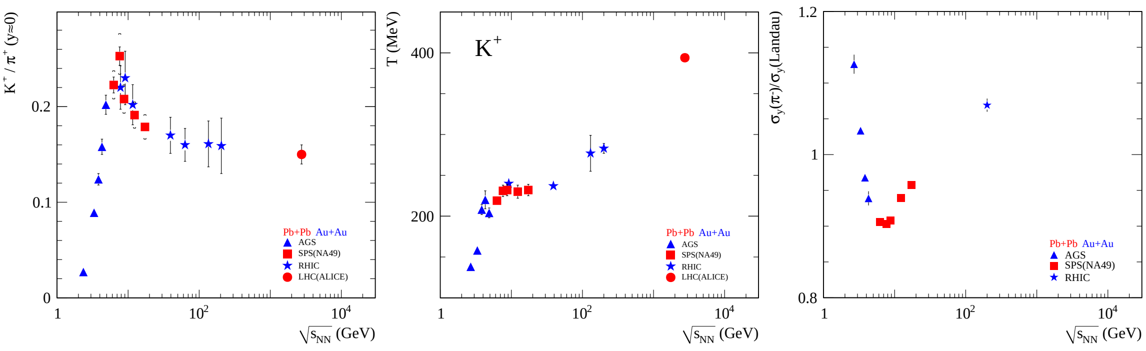

Figure 1: Left: energy dependence of the K^+/π^+ ratio at midrapidity ("horn"); Center: the inverse slope parameter of the transverse mass distribution for K^+ ("step"); Right: the ratio of widths of rapidity distributions for negative pions and a massless hadron gas ("dale"). NA49 and LHC data from central Pb+Pb and RHIC results from central Au+Au collisions are shown.

PoS(WPCF2011)012

3. Fluctuations of $\langle p_T \rangle$, multiplicity and the number of low mass pion pairs

The presence of the predicted critical point is expected to lead to an increase of event-by-event fluctuations of many observables provided that the freeze-out of the measured hadrons occurs close to its location in the phase diagram and that the evolution of the hadron phase does not erase the fluctuation signal. Particle multiplicity fluctuations are characterized by the scaled variance ω of the multiplicity distribution while $\langle p_T \rangle$ fluctuations can be quantified by the Φ_{p_T} measure. Example results on the dependence of these fluctuations on system size at 158*A* GeV and on energy in central Pb+Pb collisions are shown in Fig. 2. Indications of the critical point are visible in C+C and Si+Si collisions at 158*A* GeV [2] .

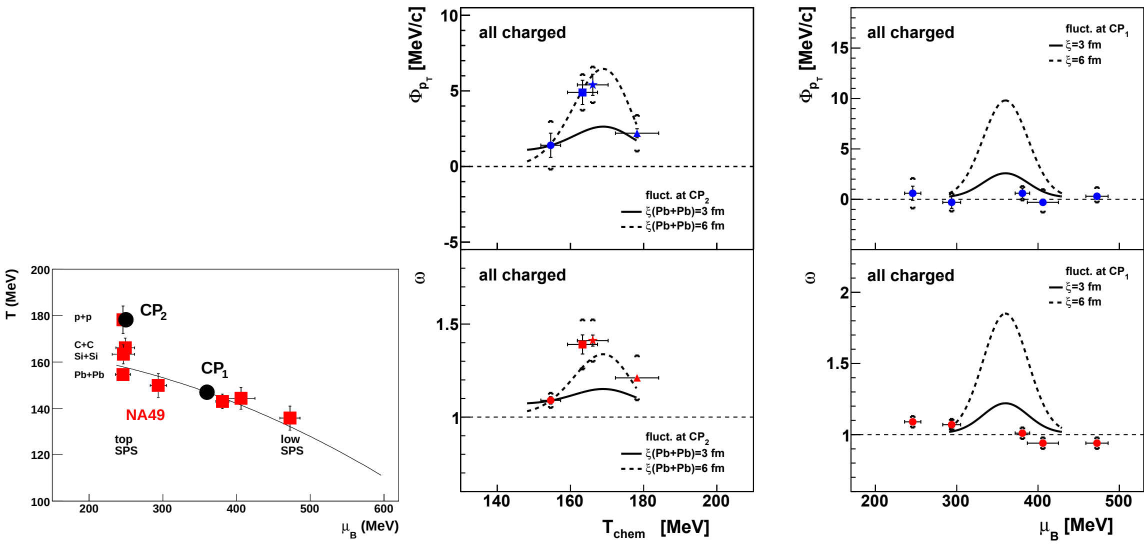

Figure 2: Left: Chemical freeze-out points in NA49 (squares) and two possible locations of the critical point (circles). Center: System size dependence of the Φ_{pT} measure of transverse momentum fluctuations (top) and scaled variance of multiplicity fluctuations (bottom) for charged hadrons in central collisions of two identical nuclei. Right: Results for central Pb+Pb collisions at 20*A*-158*A* GeV plotted as a function of baryonic chemical potential at chemical freeze-out.

Theoretical studies predict density fluctuations of zero mass σ particles produced abundantly in nuclear collisions at the critical point [3]. These fluctuations should obey a power law which reflects the critical nature of these density fluctuations. The sigma states can be identified with $\pi^+\pi^-$ pairs of invariant mass distributed near the two-pion threshold [3, 4]. The second factorial moment of the number of pion pairs (with invariant masses above the Coulomb correlation region) with increasing number of 2-dim cells M^2 in transverse momentum space was analysed for real data and mixed events [4]. The results in Fig. 3 (right) indicate the presence of power-law fluctuations in the freeze-out state of Si+Si approaching in size the prediction of critical QCD.

4. Event-by-event particle ratio fluctuations

In the vicinity of the phase transition, where the underlying degrees of freedom change, distinct

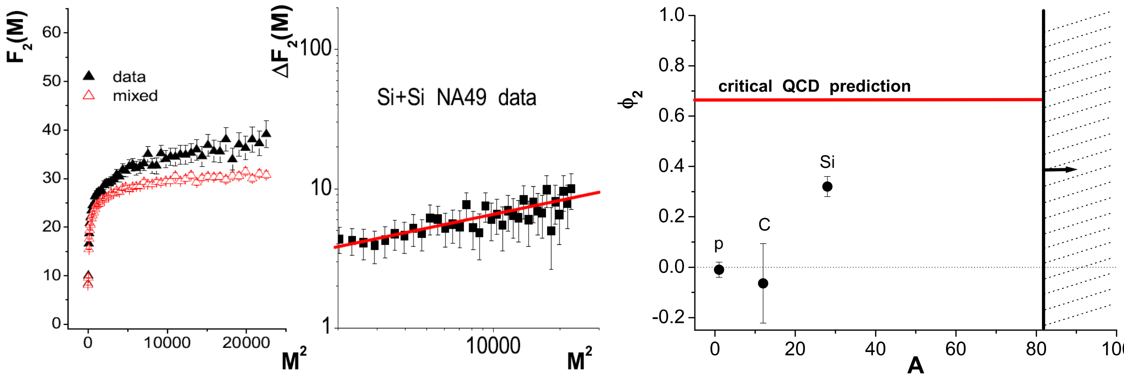

Figure 3: Left: The second factorial moment of the number of reconstructed dipions in transverse momentum space for central Si+Si collisions at 158*A* GeV. It is shown as a function of the number of cells in transverse momentum space (M^2). Center: The correlator ΔF_2 after subraction of the combinatorial background (mixed events). Right: The fitted values of the intermittency index (ϕ_2) for the A+A systems (A = p, C, Si) studied by NA49 as a function of the size A. The upper horizontal line presents the theoretically expected value (2/3) for a system freezing out at the QCD critical point. The shaded region indicates the A values for which the reconstruction algorithm is not conclusive [4].

fluctuations patterns of particle ratios are expected. Such fluctuations can be sensitive to the critical point of strongly interacting matter. Additional motivation for the study of particle ratio fluctuations comes from the predicted change of the baryon-strangeness correlation at the deconfinement phase transition. This change might be reflected in the kaon to proton ratio as they are major carriers of strangeness and baryon number, respectively.

The "dynamical" fluctuations, arising only from the physics correlations, were calculated as

$$\sigma_{\rm dyn} = {\rm sign}\left(\sigma^2_{\rm data} - \sigma^2_{\rm mix}\right)\sqrt{\left|\sigma^2_{\rm data} - \sigma^2_{\rm mix}\right|}. \tag{4.1}$$

The centrality dependence of the $(\mathrm{p}+\bar{\mathrm{p}})/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$, $(\mathrm{K}^+ + \mathrm{K}^-)/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ and $(\mathrm{K}^+ + \mathrm{K}^-)/(\mathrm{p}+\bar{\mathrm{p}})$ fluctuations in Pb+Pb collisions at the top SPS energy was studied [5] and is presented in Fig. 4. All three ratios studied by NA49 show a similar increase of the magnitude of $\sigma_{\rm dyn}$ when going to peripheral collisions. The hadronic transport model UrQMD predicts a similar behaviour here, and the scaling with multiplicity suggested in [6] is consistent with the data. This result is compatible with the hypothesis that at constant energy the underlying correlations are not significantly changed by a variation of the system size.

The fluctuation measure $\sigma_{\rm dyn}$ of particle ratios was also studied in central Pb+Pb collisions at five SPS energies [5, 7] and the results are shown in Fig. 5. For $(\mathrm{p}+\bar{\mathrm{p}})/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ negative values of $\sigma_{\rm dyn}$ are observed, indicating a correlated production. For $(\mathrm{K}^+ + \mathrm{K}^-)/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ fluctuations positive values of $\sigma_{\rm dyn}$ are observed with a rise towards low energies. The hadronic transport models UrQMD and HSD with the production and strong decay of nucleon resonances as the dominating process correlating proton and pion numbers closely match the energy dependence of $(\mathrm{p}+\bar{\mathrm{p}})/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ ratio fluctuations but fail to reproduce the increase of $(\mathrm{K}^+ + \mathrm{K}^-)/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ ratio fluctuations.

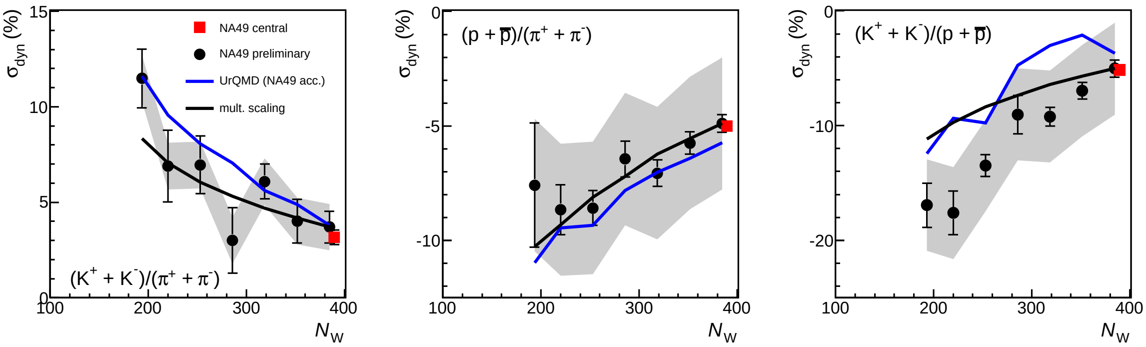

Figure 4: Centrality dependence of the $(K^+ + K^-)/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$, $(p + \bar{p})/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ and $(K^+ + K^-)/(p + \bar{p})$ fluctuations in Pb+Pb collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 17.3$ GeV. The centrality is expressed in terms of N_W, the number of "wounded" or participating nucleons.

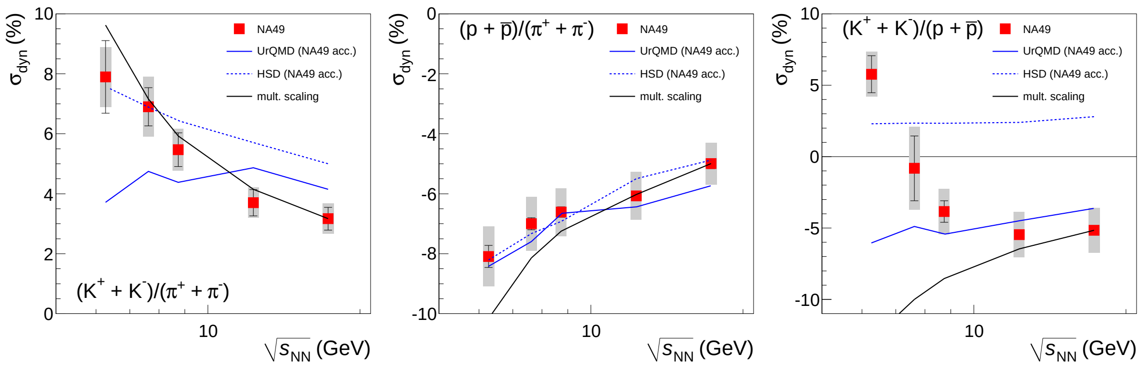

Figure 5: Energy dependence of σ_{dyn} for $(K^+ + K^-)/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$, $(p + \bar{p})/(\pi^+ + \pi^-)$ and $(K^+ + K^-)/(p + \bar{p})$ in central Pb+Pb collisions, compared to results from the transport models UrQMD and HSD, as well as to the multiplicity scaling proposed in [6]

The fluctuations in the kaon to proton ratio were also investigated [8] , motivated by their conjectured connection to the baryon-strangeness correlation. The results are shown in Fig. 5 (right) for the combined charges ratio ($(K^+ + K^-)/(p + \bar{p})$). σ_{dyn} shows a strong dependence on $\sqrt{s_{NN}}$, going from positive values at low energies to $\sigma_{dyn} < 0$ at high energies. HSD and UrQMD show practically no energy dependence in strong contrast to the data. The simple scaling model mentioned before fails to decribe these data which might indicate that the underlying correlations between kaons and protons are changing with energy.

5. The NA61 experiment

The NA61/SHINE experiment [9] will continue the program of NA49 with the main aim of searching for the critical point and studying in detail the onset of deconfinement by performing a two dimensional scan of the phase diagram in T and μ_B (Fig. 6 (right)). This will be achieved by varying the collision energy (13*A*-158*A* GeV) and the size of the colliding systems (p+p, p+Pb, Be+Be, Ar+Ca, Xe+La).

Several upgrades of the detector, inherited from NA49, are now completed. They will help to significantly increase the statistics of collected events (upgrade of the TPC readout electronics and DAQ system) (see Fig. 6 (left)), extend the acceptance for particles with momenta below 3 GeV/c (a new detector - Forward Time of Flight, FTOF) and decrease the secondary interaction rate (a new low-mass helium-filled beam pipe). In 2011, a new Projectile Spectator Detector was completed to replace the NA49 Forward Calorimeter. It will provide single nucleon energy resolution for precise determination of the collision centrality, which will be essential for the fluctuation studies.

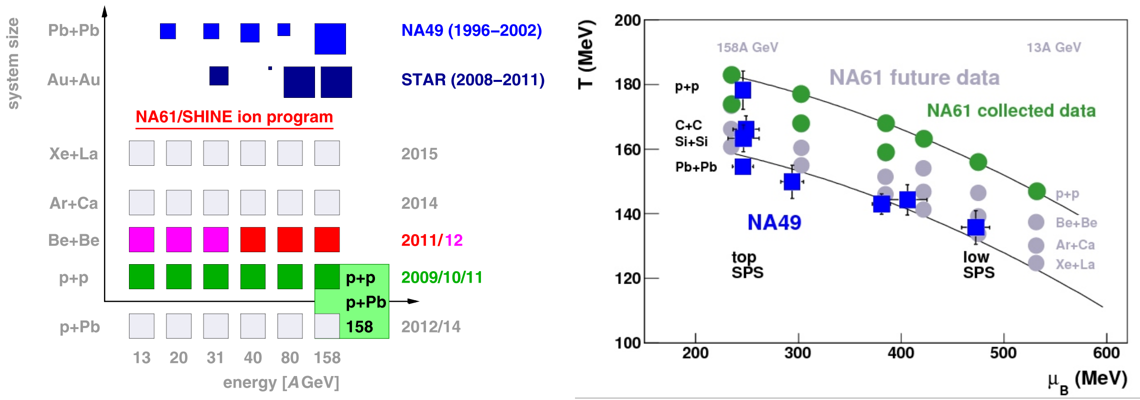

Figure 6: Left: Data sets planned to be recorded by NA61/SHINE within the ion program and those recorded by NA49 and STAR. The p+p data at six energies and Be+Be data at 40*A*, 80*A*, 158*A* GeV are already taken. The area of the boxes is proportional to the number of registered central collisions, which is typically 2×10^6 for the SHINE ion program. Right: Scan of the phase diagram by varying collision energy (μ_B) and size of colliding nuclei (T). Squares show the freeze-out points covered by NA49, circles indicate recorded NA61 data (green) and the planned measurements of NA61 (grey).

The first part of the system size and energy scan program, namely p+p collisions at 13, 20, 30, 40, 80, 158 GeV beam energy and Be+Be interactions at 40*A*, 80*A*, 158*A* GeV were already recorded. Be+Be (13*A*, 20*A* and 31*A* GeV), Ar+Ca and Xe+La runs are foreseen for 2012, 2014 and 2015 respectively (Fig. 6 (left)).

Acknowledgements

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PoS(WPCF2011)012