

# HOMAGE TO CURT SACHS

1881–1959



Sachs reading in his New York apartment

Curt Sachs, born on June 29, 1881 in Berlin, came from an established centuries-old Jewish family in Germany. He attended the French Gymnasium in Berlin and received his musical education from K. Johnen (piano), C. Rausch (clarinet), and L. Schrattenholz (theory and composition). Sachs wrote 27 songs for voice and piano, which were published as op.1 to 6 and op.8 in seven volumes by Ries & Erler in Berlin. He first studied art history with Carl Frey and Adolf Goldschmidt at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, in addition to musicology as well. In 1904 he earned the doctoral title of Dr. phil. with the dissertation *Das Tabernakel mit Andrea's del Verrocchio Thomasgruppe an Or San Michele zu Florenz: Ein Beitrag zur Florentiner Kunstgeschichte*. In addition to his first art history works and publications, he continued his musicology studies with Hermann Kretzschmar, Oskar Fleischer, Johannes Wolf, and Max Friedländer, which soon received his full focus. In 1908 he married Irene Lewin, daughter of world-renowned pharmacologist and toxicologist Louis Lewin. The first major musicological publications by Sachs became part of local history. They began in 1908 with the *Musikgeschichte der Stadt Berlin bis zum Jahre 1800*, which as an additional result of archival research, included *Musik und Oper am kurbrandenburgischen Hof* in 1910 as well as extensive essays in

the 'Hohenzollern Annual' (XIV, 1910, pp. 181–191) to Prinzessin Amalie von Preußen als Musikerin and in the 'Anthologies of the International Society of Music' (XI, 1909–10, pp. 105–137) followed by the Ansbacher Hofkapelle unter Markgraf Johann Friedrich. Sachs also published a selection of letters by Beethoven (1909, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition 1927) and Mozart (1911). In organology, he initially limited himself to shorter studies, which he published in professional journals and commemorative publications, until 1913 when the *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente zugleich ein Polyglossar für das gesamte Instrumentengebiet* published the first of his basic works on the study of musical instruments. It was followed in 1914 in the 'Journal of Ethnology' by the *Systematik der Musikinstrumente* developed in collaboration with Erich M. von Hornbostel, which became the internationally recognized classification system for all musical instruments.

From December 1919, Sachs led the 'Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments in the State Academy of Music in Berlin', today's Musical Instrument Museum. In addition to the concern for the preservation and presentation of the rich and precious inventory of more than 3,000 objects, for whose exhibition he had neither the space nor the conservational conditions, Sachs also successfully managed to obtain other rarities. Thanks to his connections to the National Museums and as a result of his investigative skill, these included a racket from Heinrich Carl Tolken (cat. no. 1598), a wind instrument of western music used from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century of which there are only a few remaining specimens, 'that arrived via strange detours in China and then at the East Asian Department of the National Museums', as well as the 'only surviving specimen of a "gemshorn", a goat horn shaped into a flageolet' (cat. no. 3436), which Sachs had discovered in the National Armory. In 1929 he succeeded in finding an excellent way of enriching the collection with the acquisition of 24 instruments from a gamelan orchestra (cat. no. 3487–3510), which was acquired thanks to the mediation of Jaap Kunst from a Javanese prince. Unfortunately, only remnants of this magnificent ensemble remain. The torso of an ancient Egyptian angle harp (cat. no. 3527), which was acquired in 1931 by the conservator of the collection, Adolf Hartmann under difficult conditions is completely lost as well as its 'true to the original replica in playable condition' (cat. no. 3528).

When taking office, it was primarily the effort of Sachs that made the inventory of the collection accessible



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and usable to scientific study. In as early as 1922 he presented a catalog thereof, whose classification, typological preliminary remarks, and terminology gave it an importance that went beyond merely an inventory. A supplementary *Handbuch der Musikinstrumentenkunde* (handbook of organology) for the catalog appeared as early as 1920. That same year, Sachs qualified as a professor at the University of Berlin, where he became a professor of musicology in 1921. He also taught organology at the State Academy of Music and at the Academy for Church and School Music.

Sachs' book *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente* (1929), a cultural history 'from the Paleolithic to our world today', in which organology was intensified to the level of intellectual history, came at the end of his rich period of research and publication in the twenties. *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes* (1933), followed in continuation of this thought process, a bold, sometimes vehemently criticized foray into new territory and the last great work of Sachs in German. In September 1933 he was dismissed from office by the National Socialists and left Germany.

Until 1937 Sachs worked in Paris as a visiting professor at the Sorbonne and as a colleague of André Schaeffner in the department of ethnomusicology of the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro, which is now located in the Musée du quai Branly. His first book in French, *Les Instruments de musique de Madagascar*, appeared in 1938. After that, the Carl Lindström AG in Berlin, under Sachs's management in 1930, published an album with 12 records titled *2000 Jahre Musik auf der Schallplatte*, whose examples ranged from old Greek Seikilos songs to the French suites by Johann Sebastian Bach, he published a major series of records with early music, the *Anthologie sonore*. Among the studies and contributions of the Paris years, the 1934 treatise drafted on behalf of the Institut de Coopération intellectuelle for the League of Nations Journal 'Museum', *La signification, la tâche et la technique muséographique des collections d'instruments de musique* is remarkable, because in it Sachs gives advice and guidelines for the direction and work of a museum of musical instruments.

In 1937 Sachs relocated to New York, where he next worked as a visiting professor at New York University, later at Columbia University, often visiting Harvard University and other institutions of higher education in the USA to give guest lectures. In addition, he was appointed advisor to the music department of the New York Public Library.

It is likely due to his extensive teaching that Sachs primarily wrote overviews of music history. At first it was the musical instruments once more, whose structured history according by epochs was contained in *The History of Musical Instruments* (1940). In *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World, East and West* (1943)—Sachs called the book his first attempt at a musical archeology—Sachs examines the musical cultures of the Old World in their relationships to

one another and their legacy in the music of East and West. A German edition of *Die Musik der Alten Welt in Ost und West. Aufstieg und Entwicklung*, edited by Jürgen Elsner and Gerd Schoenfelder, was published by Akademie Verlag, Berlin (Ost) in 1968. *Our musical heritage. A short history of Music* (1948) is a compact music history starting from the beginnings of music to the present. *The Commonwealth of Art* appeared between them in 1946. *Style in the Fine Arts, Music and the Dance*, a beloved topic of an overview of the arts by Sachs the music and art historian, with which, however, he met with opposition from his colleagues. *Rhythm and tempo. A Study in Music History* (1953), a study of the movement impulses in the music of all cultures, is one of the last works by Sachs. He was unable to finish *The Wellsprings of Music*, an ethnomusicological work dealing with the beginnings of music, their archetypes, and their methods of investigation. His friend Jaap Kunst prepared it for publication, but he too didn't live to see its release in 1962. During this time Sachs had long since moved beyond the field of organology with this work.

Among the honors bestowed on Curt Sachs, there is his appointment as Honorary Doctor of Hebrew Letters by the Hebrew Union College and Honorary Chairman of the American Society for Ethnomusicology. In 1956 the German government appointed Sachs professor emeritus after having been awarded honorary membership by the Society for Music Research and the title Dr. h. c. by the Freie Universität Berlin in previous years.

Curt Sachs came to Europe from the USA just once, namely in October 1957 to Paris for the first Congress of Jewish Music, of which he was president. From 1951 on he maintained correspondence with his former place of activity, the Berlin Museum of Musical Instruments. Curt Sachs died on February 5, 1959 in New York.