

Ruth Katz, *"The Lachmann Problem": An Unsung Chapter in Comparative Musicology*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2003 (The Jewish Music Research Centre in collaboration with the Jewish National and University Library)

Robert Lachmann (Berlin 1892 - Jerusalem 1939) was one of many Jewish musicologists who were driven out from Germany in order to preserve the racial purity of that "Most German of the Arts."<sup>1</sup> Instead of being "Driven into Paradise,"<sup>2</sup> he sought a new homeland in Palestine. Lachmann, whose first encounter with North African music occurred during his service as an interpreter in a prisoners-of-war camp in Germany during World War I, studied ethnomusicology at Berlin University under Johannes Wolf and Carl Stumpf. He took his doctorate there in 1922 with a dissertation on urban music in Tunisia, based on his own recordings and transcriptions. In 1927 he was appointed librarian at the music department of the Berlin *Staatsbibliothek*, and he made several recording expeditions to North Africa. At his initiative, the *Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der Musik des Orients* was founded in 1930, and he edited its quarterly journal from 1933 to 1935, when it ceased its existence. As the appointed chairman of the recording committee of the International Congress of Arab Music (Cairo, 1932), he selected and recorded performances of the best Arab musicians from Morocco to Iraq. One year later, on the threshold of a rising international career, he received a dry and laconic letter from the Prussian Ministry of Science, Art, and National Education announcing his "retirement" (at the age of 53!).

Ruth Katz's book, based on documents in the Lachmann File in the Hebrew University's archive and his personal files in the Jewish National and University Library, reconstructs, documents, and interprets, with empathy and with historical and psychological insight, Lachmann's accommodation to his new situation, and his endeavors to transfer his scholarly work to Palestine and to the young university in Jerusalem. His predicament, she claims, was triple: (1) his profession – musicology, let alone "Oriental and non-European Music" – was not one of the academic priorities of the new University and was considered a luxury; (2) he had migrated to an alien culture, and despite the vast research opportunities that Palestine, with its wealth of music cultures, offered him he remained "a foreigner in a new land" (p. 164); (3) he had to "missionize for his profession ... in an impossible organizational context" (p.16) – that of the Hebrew University, which was not only "short of money, space, [and] equipment" (p. 127), but also entangled in bureaucratic, academic and personal intrigues. His persistent efforts to establish a center for the study of oriental music at the Hebrew University was supported – wholeheartedly, but to no avail - by J. L. Magnes, the University's first chancellor, who was an ardent believer in the coexistence of Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

Lachmann's untiring though polite and soft-spoken fight to convince the University's authorities of the importance of his work gained him the doubtful status of a "case". His untimely death in 1939 put an end both to the "Lachmann problem" and to this "unsung chapter" in the history of ethno-musicological research in Palestine. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Pamela M. Potter, *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> As implied by Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff, eds., in *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

chapter IV of her book, Ruth Katz tries to interpret his death in terms of a religious drama: was he a tragic hero, "ousted by those who deformed the world he loved and respected" but remaining "inexorably drawn to its cultural attainments" (p. 274)? Did he die a "*Liebestod*" of one having transmuted "into a new spirituality with self-destruction as its highest rapture" (p. 277)? Fittingly, the questions are left open. I would prefer the author's sober interpretation in her previous paper on Lachmann: "It is a story of a vision that crashed in the face of a sad reality, where day-to-day practicality overpowered deliberate policy."<sup>3</sup>

"The book virtually begs for dramatic form", claims Ruth Katz (p. 6), and divides it into a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue – all of which are dedicated to Lachmann's life story, interpreted against the background of his time and the history of his scholarly discipline. Following the author's play with metaphors, one is tempted to conceive the book as constructed according to the rule of the 'golden section': Its third part reproduces selected documents, letters and lectures of Lachmann. Among them are delightful and illuminating letters he sent to his parents from his professional trip to Egypt in 1932, and a group of introductory lectures on "The Music of the East". Twelve of these lectures were broadcast in 1936-37 on the newly-born Palestine Broadcasting Station (a CD with musical examples is attached to the book), and four were delivered at the "International Association of University Women, Palestine Branch" – an organization one would like to know more about. Apart from their intrinsic value, they also attest to Lachmann's erudition and born pedagogical talent. Of no less interest are his annual reports for 1935-36 and April 1937 (pp. 138- 47 and 182-86 respectively) that provide fascinating insight into the history of ethnomusicology. All these certainly contradict Dieter Christensen's implication that Lachmann's interest in non-Western music was but "a serious hobby."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the book lacks an index, and thus many interesting details may evade the reader. There are also a few editorial problems, such as an inconsistent spelling of names (e.g., should it be Prof. Mayer, as on p. 181, n.78, or Meir as on p.81, n.52?), and lack of identification of persons in some cases versus redundancy in others (e.g., n. 97 and p. 210). A somewhat didactic tone used by the author in her eagerness to direct the reader's attention to certain facts and interpretations (e.g., "note that," "don't overlook that," "please pay attention," etc) is apparent in the first section of the book but fortunately disappears later on.

However, these are details that do not mar the whole picture. Seldom will a collection of letters and documents read if not as a drama then as a historical-psychological novel. It is an achievement on the part of Ruth Katz to have selected the materials, commented on them and put them into the context of time and place. This book is an important contribution not only to the history of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but also to the history of Comparative Musicology and to the story of the uprooted German-Jewish musicologists who had to adapt to new conditions and goals (cf. especially the letters of Curt Sachs and Manfred Bukofzer, pp. 244-49).

---

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Katz and Jenny Oizert-Levin, "A Missed Opportunity: Robert Lachmann and the Beginning of Ethnomusicological Research at the Hebrew University", in Shaul Katz and Michael Heyd, eds., *The History of the Hebrew University* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University 1997), pp. 646-54. (In Hebrew)

<sup>4</sup> Dieter Christensen, "Carl Stumpf and the Institutionalization of Comparative Musicology", in Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays in the History of Ethnomusicology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991), p. 208, n. 13.

Lachmann's archives contain many additional documents that should be explored. We learn from the author that his book on the music of the Berbers still awaits publication, and that she hopes to dedicate a special study to Erich von Hornbostel, on the basis of 92 hitherto unknown letters in the Lachmann files.

The "Unsung Chapter" of the life and work of Robert Lachmann, now that it has begun to make itself heard, should be continued.

Judith Cohen