

Hornbostel-Sachs Classification of Musical Instruments[†]

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Lee, Deborah. 2020. “Hornbostel-Sachs Classification of Musical Instruments.” *Knowledge Organization* 47(1): 72-91. 73 references. DOI:10.5771/0943-7444-2020-1-72.

Abstract: This paper discusses the *Hornbostel-Sachs Classification of Musical Instruments*. This classification system was originally designed for musical instruments and books about instruments, and was first published in German in 1914. Hornbostel-Sachs has dominated organological discourse and practice since its creation, and this article analyses the scheme’s context, background, versions and impact. The position of Hornbostel-Sachs in the history and development of instrument classification is explored. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the mechanics of the scheme, including its decimal notation, the influential broad categories of the scheme, its warrant and its typographical layout. The version history of the scheme is outlined and the relationships between versions is visualised, including its translations, the introduction of the electrophones category and the Musical Instruments Museums Online (MIMO) version designed for a digital environment. The reception of Hornbostel-Sachs is analysed, and its usage, criticism and impact are all considered. As well as dominating organological research and practice for over a century, it is shown that Hornbostel-Sachs also had a significant influence on the bibliographic classification of music.

Received: 27 May 2019; Revised: 4 June 2019; Accepted: X June 2019

Keywords: Hornbostel-Sachs, scheme, musical instruments, classification

† Derived from the article of similar title in the ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization Version 1.1 (= 1.0 plus details on electrophones and *Wikipedia*); version 1.0 published 2019-01-17, this version 2019-05-29. Article category: KOS, specific (domain specific). The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, as well as the editor, Professor Birger Hjørland, for all of his insightful comments and ideas.

1.0 Introduction

The “Classification of musical instruments” by Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs (from here onwards, shortened to Hornbostel-Sachs) is arguably the most important classification system for musical instruments. In fact, the scheme has played a significant role in the development of the domain in which it was created: “organology,” which is the study of musical instruments. First published in German in 1914, Hornbostel-Sachs has seen modifications and changes throughout its history, but the scheme remains part of contemporary musical instrument discourse and practice. While designed primarily to classify physical collections of musical instruments, Hornbostel-Sachs was redesigned in the 2000s as an ordering system for digital information about instruments. Hornbostel-Sachs’ originality centres upon its method of categorising instruments, its desire to be universal in terms of musical culture, its borrowing of decimal notation from bibliographic classification and more.

Its reach spreads throughout organology, and arguably Hornbostel-Sachs is sometimes seen as being synonymous with instrument classification.

The article starts with an overview of the origins and history of Hornbostel-Sachs, placing the scheme within the context of general developments of musical instrument classification and discussing the original purposes of the scheme. Next, the mechanics of the scheme are explored, including its basic structure, atypical notation, warrant and typographical layouts, among other areas. An exploration of the versions and translations of Hornbostel-Sachs follows, highlighting the significance of the English translation of the scheme to its dissemination and discussing new versions of the scheme. This is followed by an account of the reception of Hornbostel-Sachs, which considers its usage and criticism and culminates in an examination of how Hornbostel-Sachs’ reach stretches beyond organology and instrument collections and becomes a cornerstone of bibliographic classifications of music.