

# THE SAXOPHONE AND THE ORCHESTRA

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### Abstract

This paper will look at the history and development of the saxophone and the life of Adolphe Sax. Also contained will be brief examinations of the works of composers from Donizetti to Rachmaninov with their works pertaining to the usage and adoption of Sax's instruments, specifically the saxophone family.

The birth of the saxophone began with the birth of a child, Adolphe Sax. It is the story of a small Belgian boy born on the sixth of November, 1814 that would culminate in the story of one of the most versatile musical instruments to ever be created.<sup>1</sup> His early life was one of much prosperity and ingenuity that would culminate and allow the young Adolphe to follow in his father's footsteps. From here, his inventions and innovations would go on to shape the way in which the sounds of the orchestra are heard to this day.

Adolphe Sax was a Belgian born in the early portion of the nineteenth century in the relatively small country of Belgium, in the even smaller town of Dinant. Born to a father whose trade was instrument making, Adolphe began all too soon to follow in his father's way, as was the tradition of the time. His father was an extremely preoccupied instrument maker as he was the supplier to the King of Brussels.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the innovation portion of the family business was left to young Adolphe, whose skills were trusted, as by the age of six he could bore the body of a clarinet and turn the bell of a horn.<sup>3</sup>

At the age of sixteen, Sax would take one clarinet and two flutes of his construction to the Brussels Industrial Fair. Due to their ivory bodies and superior craftsmanship, they were judged to be the best of the fair.<sup>4</sup> It is due to this that Sax would later travel to Paris to unveil a redesign of his very own bass clarinet. It is this redesign that would poise him for an illustrious career as

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<sup>1</sup> Constance Meyer, "The Saxophone, on a More Serious Note." Los Angeles Times.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Life and times of Adolphe Sax." in *The Saxophone*, (Yale University Press, 2012) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12.

an instrument maker as it was on this first trip that Sax would meet and prove the worthiness of his instruments to individuals such as Bizet and Meyerbeer.<sup>5</sup>

It would be in the year 1842 that Sax would open up his first shop in Paris. In part, this would be due to the economic benefits of being in a land with a higher demand for musical instruments of his creation. Also, this would partly be in defiance of the Brussels committee at the Brussels Industrial Fair who had refused to award Sax first, as they knew they would have nothing to award him come the following year. Sax would later be quoted stating, "If I am too young for the gold, then I am too young for the silver."<sup>6</sup>

This defiant manner of Sax's would become one of his defining and salient features as the years would continue. His prowess as a player of the clarinet and flute would also define him and his move to Paris as he could, and eventually would, showcase his instruments in the public.<sup>7</sup> However, before this large battle was to take place, Sax needed to begin once again at the drawing table.

Sax, as a multi-instrumentalist, knew the orchestra quite well. However, it would be his advantage as a wind player that would allow him to identify a key problem with the main symphony orchestras at the time.<sup>8</sup> This would be the great divide in the tones of the winds as it connected with the lower reaches of the orchestra. Sax did not personally feel that the bassoon

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

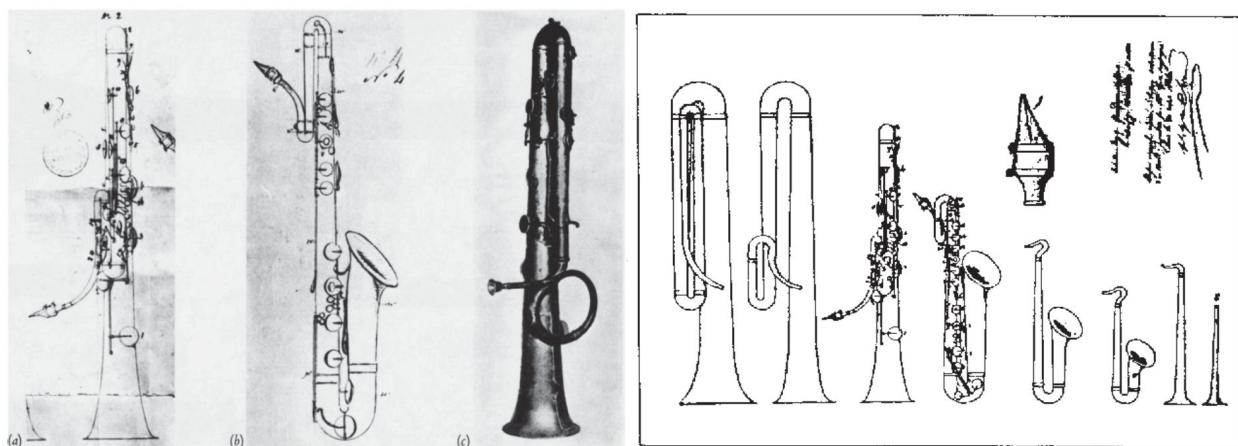
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Saxophone Family." in *The Saxophone*, (Yale University Press, 2012) 42.

did enough to bridge this gap and it would be from this identified problem that Sax would devise his solution.

His first Solution would be that of the contrabass clarinet. Taking a close resemblance to the bass clarinet with minor extensions, there would be some that would compare the sound to only being less louder than thunder itself.<sup>9</sup> It was also at this time that another instrument was making its way into the Parisian musical scene, this would be the ophicleide. Having the range of the modern tuba, with a large cylindrical shape, the ophicleide would offer the tones that Sax desired with only one undesirable feature, the mouthpiece. It would be Sax's first sketch of his "saxophone" that can easily be identified as an ophicleide's body with a single-reed mouthpiece.

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It is valid to point out that at the time of its conception, Sax had envisioned a large family for this instrument. It is hard to say whether this was just the nature of the man, or if this is due to the fact that at the time of its conception, the orchestra was growing at the largest rate than it had

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>10</sup> William McBride, "The Early Saxophone in Patents 1838-1850 Compared." *The Galpin Society Journal* 35, 118.

for years preceding.<sup>11</sup> A culmination of these factors is what would most likely lead to such a large conception, but regardless, Sax had already cast the dye for himself from the beginning.

It would be at the beginning of the saxophone's career that the instrument would find much success in large music circles, due in part, to many small factors. One being Sax's move to Paris, where he opened his Adolphe Sax Musical Instrument Factory at No. 10 rue neuve Saint-Georges.<sup>12</sup> This allowed him to start to sell many of his musical instruments in Paris and there was no better way to do so other than to perform on them himself. He once even opened a four hundred person concert hall adjacent to his factory which Bizet would later state was a much-needed chamber concert hall on the Paris music scene. Bringing to light, point two, his high ranking affiliates who he had impressed with the versatility of his new instrument. Most notable among them being Bizet and Donizetti. Rossini would state at one point, "The saxophone produced the finest blending of sound that I have met with." Hector Berlioz would later have this to say in regards to the saxophone,

It cries, sighs and dreams. It possesses a crescendo and can gradually diminish until it is only an echo of an echo. I know of no other instrument that possess this particular capacity to reach the outer limits of audible sounds.<sup>13</sup>

Most importantly for the French audiences, the critics initially fell in love with the instrument, often speaking to the effect of its tone quality, timbre and dynamic capabilities. In 1843 Castil-Blaze would write a segment praising Sax and his instrument stating,

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<sup>11</sup> Bret Newton, "Saxophone Sections in the Orchestra – Part 2."

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Saxophone in the Nineteenth Century." in *The Saxophone*, (Yale University Press) 112.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Dean, "THE SAXOPHONE: A Soloist's Instrument." *American Music Teacher* 24, no. 6 (1975) 30.

The sonority and the timbre are admirable, it will be the “bull” of the orchestra and yet the huge vibrant full rich gratifying sounds of the saxophone can be softened almost to the final degree of pianissimo without effort, without constraint. The saxophone can sing and play a melody with the charm and polish that can be obtained on the English horn. The sound, the timbre of this instrument are completely unheard of until now, and I cannot give you anything to compare it with. It is a beautiful acquisition for the orchestra. The saxophone is made in a complete family, with an alto and two sopranos. The effect of three or four saxophones introduced into a symphonic orchestra would be charming. Their clinging and connected sounds and those sounds struck with vigor will be doubly valuable in supporting the mass of harmony.<sup>14</sup>

With this great success in Parisian circles, Sax would also create some formidable enemies. This would come to a large culmination in a military affair involving Sax and the establishment of instrument production. This “battle of the bands” was set for April 22, 1845 at the Champ-de-Mars, which is now the site of the Eiffel Tower. The committee for the competition would be comprised of some of the greatest composers of the era. A formal invitation was sent out to many instrumental manufacturers of the time, and though many declined, those who applied were rejected due to a combination of factors. Most prevalent among these being the fragility of their instruments. The contest took place with nearly every instrument manufacturer in Paris backing the status quo band as their instruments were on the line, and Sax on the opposing side. Sax also lost many players before the battle due to bribery and coercion as the Parisian instrumental manufacturing foundation still held much power. However, even with a smaller band, Sax’s instruments and alternative configuration was judged to be far superior to that of the status quo, not only by the committee but also by the 20,000 people in attendance that day.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Lily Rothman, “Adolphe Sax and Why the Saxophone Wasn’t Taken Seriously.” Time.

This should have been the final battle that Sax had to face, unfortunately, it was only the beginning. The Parisian establishment took note of Sax from the beginning and kept a close eye on his progress in Paris. The very way that Sax manufactured his instruments opposed all that the Parisian shops stood for, where the trade would be passed down from generation to generation. Not only this, but the shops would source parts of third party manufacturers which Sax was cutting out through his designs. Sax oversaw every portion of the process in the creation of his instruments, which if left unchecked, would eliminate much of the established music in Paris.<sup>16</sup>

Sax's competitors proved to be unrelenting in their attacks on Sax, the first and perhaps most damaging of their attacks were the civil litigations that they brought up against Sax. These would mostly be taken up in the form of patent law violations from the original conception of the instrument.<sup>17</sup> A more scheming tactic would be when the competitors of Sax would purchase some of his original instruments and send them to foreign manufacturers to have serial numbers reengraved. They would then buy them back and sell them to patent lawyers who would then bring Sax up on more litigations.<sup>18</sup> Going further than this, the established manufacturers would wait until Sax decided to publicly trade his company where they would then buy more than a third of his company and sell the stock for half of it's buying price.<sup>19</sup> These financial loses would devastate Sax and his business as it would force him to declare bankruptcy twice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Cottrell. "The Saxophone in the Nineteenth Century." 123.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 131.

Most shocking of the establishment's actions were two attempted assassinations on Sax. Though they were both ultimately foiled, the toll that it took psychologically on Sax would last a lifetime.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of all these attempts, the saxophone would find its way into the orchestra. Sax had envisioned a family of four seated with the winds: baritone, tenor, alto and soprano; but because of the efforts of the establishment, there would be problems getting even one into the orchestra.<sup>22</sup>

A now-famous story of the problems that Sax's instruments would come to face came with one of Sax's friends, Donizetti. In his opera *Dom Sébastien*, Donizetti had scored for bass clarinet, which was at that point associated with Sax. The players of the orchestra refused however to play any instrument of Sax's invention. When Sax himself offered to play the instrument for the opera, Donizetti's players declared that they would walk out. Left with no choice, Donizetti removed the bass clarinet from the score.<sup>23</sup>

A composer who was able to work one of Sax's instruments into one of his pieces effectively was Bizet. It was for a set of incidental music to the play *L'Arlésienne* by Alphonse Daudet that Bizet would be able to implement the usage of the tenor saxophone. This would be historic as the usage of the instrument on October 1, 1872 would be the first recorded usage of the instrument symphonically.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Life" 37.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Saxophone as Symbol and Icon." in *The Saxophone* (Yale University Press) 308.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Cottrell, "The Saxophone as Symbol" 332.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 333.

Ravel in 1928 would be the most famous French composer to score for the saxophone in the orchestra. It would be Ravel's *Bolero* that would be scored for two soprano saxophones and one tenor. The usage of the saxophone in this piece along with the general nature of the piece itself would be some of the greatest examples of exoticism in the western music canon. The melodies and harmonies are truly unique and foreign, evoking the exotic dance-like nature of the piece. Though the saxophone is subtle in the piece, it becomes one of the greatest and most prominent usages of it in the orchestra to this day.<sup>25</sup> The saxophone, most of all in the piece, of all the other instruments, also acts the best as "the other." The nature of the instrument as it pertained to the Parisian audiences must have truly had an effect on the perception of the instrument and the piece as a whole. The greatest bit being that the fantastical nature of the piece and the sax solos still have a dramatic effect on entranced audiences to the present day.

However, this "other" nature as it pertained to the saxophone would not last long, as it would only be a few years later than Rachmaninov would compose his *Symphonic Dances* in 1940. This would be the first usage of the saxophone symphonically where the instrument would be characterized for a signature tone color that pertained to the entire orchestra as a salient feature of a piece. Not only this, but that color would be evocative of sobering effects such as melancholy and nostalgia.<sup>26</sup> It is this integration of the unique saxophone color that is lost in modern compositions for the large symphonic orchestras, though in the realm of classical music, the saxophone mostly lives on in the circle of minimalism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Deans, "THE SAXOPHONE: A Soloist's Instrument." 32.

<sup>26</sup> Lily Rothman, "Adolphe"

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

As the saxophone continued to develop, it would later become associated with minstrelsy through groups like the Jones Brothers. Other popularization would come in the form of jazz and blues with the other plethora of western popular music. To this day, the saxophone is widely used in almost every genre with the sole exception of classical.<sup>28</sup>

However, there is still much hope for the dream of Adolphe Sax to be introduced, with a full section of saxophones in the symphonic orchestra as composers continue to become more daring with their approach to postmodern music and the sounds that will define this era.

Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* is the focus of much report, as besides *Carmen*, the work is probably the most well known of Bizet's. The truth behind *L'Arlésienne* lies in the fact that modern audiences today do not hear it performed often, and those that do will not hear it in its entirety.<sup>29</sup> *L'Arlésienne* is originally a play by Alphonse Daudet in three acts; it would be Bizet that would compose music for its 1872 premier in Paris.<sup>30</sup> The play was met with little success at the time and after only eighteen runs was forced to close. It would be thanks to an amalgamation of conductors in 1889 than would allow for *L'Arlésienne* to be put on once more. This run would see extreme success as the show would reach one-thousand runs in Paris by 1964.<sup>31</sup>

The *L'Arlésienne* that audiences know today are the orchestral suites reworked by Bizet himself. They are concise yet expanded in their nature as opposed to the original 1872 composition. Because of the nature of the music being for a play, the small pit could only sustain

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Deans, "THE SAXOPHONE: A Soloist's Instrument." 33.

<sup>29</sup> Hugh MacDonald, "THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF BIZETS L'ARLÉSIENNE." 346.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 346.

twenty-seven players and many cuts had to be made to the orchestration. This is why there are abnormalities in the original score such as a piano, in place of a harp, and a tubular alto drum, in place of timpani.<sup>32</sup> Regardless, the alto saxophone is present in both the workings of the score along with the rest of the orchestra, something unprecedented at that time. Though the saxophone was completely new to the orchestra, Bizet was not the only composer experimenting with its usage and development in the ensemble.<sup>33</sup> However, it is only in Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* that the saxophone is given a permanent role throughout the duration of the piece.

The usage of the saxophone in the piece is mainly pertained to two salient features: doubling melodies with the other winds and bridging the tonal gap in the middle of the wind section's harmonies.<sup>34</sup> In a way, the saxophone in this piece resembles the narrative of the play that the incidental music is set to. The title *L'Arlésienne* means, "the woman from Arles." This is a place that at the time was considered the near east and would become the predecessor and early influence for later works of Bizet's such as *Carmen*.<sup>35</sup> In *L'Arlésienne* the title character of the woman is actually never seen in the show and instead becomes encapsulated by the surrounding characters that are seen frequently on the stage.<sup>36</sup> This is much the same as the orchestration of the saxophone in the instrumentation of the winds; heard, but never to the point where a person could definitely say, "that is a saxophone."

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<sup>32</sup> John W. Klein, "Bizet's 'L'Arlésienne'." *The Musical Times* 445.

<sup>33</sup> John W. Klein, "The Centenary of Bizet's 'L'Arlésienne'." *Music & Letters* 364.

<sup>34</sup> Klein, "Bizet's 'L'Arlésienne'." 445.

<sup>35</sup> Donald N. Ferguson, "Georges Bizet (1838–1875)." In *Masterworks of the Orchestral Repertoire: A Guide for Listeners*, (University of Minnesota Press) 128.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

The play on a larger scale deals with these ideas of “the other” when dealing with the subject matter of the exotic. At the time of the plays premier, this concept was reflected through a simple idea that the exotic is something that everyone knows, but no one truly understands. It will be these generalizations that would come to define the show in modern circles when a small theater troupe from London would revitalize the production in its entirety in 1964.<sup>37</sup>

Most of what can be said about the saxophone when it comes to salient features in the music itself is especially noticeable in the *L'Arlésienne Suite No.1* where during the Andante molto the sax is allowed, for a brief time at the beginning, to double the melody with the clarinet.

**Andante molto (♩=63) et la 2<sup>e</sup> Clarinette jouera la partie de la 4<sup>e</sup>**

**NOTA** Lorsqu'on exécutera ce morceau sans le Saxophone la 4<sup>e</sup> Clarinette sera chargée de ce Solo **15**

Other than moments like these, the saxophone takes more of a backseat role in the winds and the greater orchestra as a whole. Yet, as previously stated, this adds to the proposed narrative that the saxophone is “the other” and the music lends greatly to this effect. However, it cannot be totally proven if this was the intention of Bizet as the original score is not available in its entirety, and therefore is not liable to be cross referenced with the new orchestration.

An interesting feature in modern editions comes in the form of the continuation of the Parisian stigma against the saxophone. Even the writing in the presented score excerpt above is indicative of this. The fact that substitutes can be made for the saxophone in some ways is

<sup>37</sup> Klein, John W. "Bizet's Admirers and Detractors." *Music & Letters* 408.

artistically appalling. The greatest example of this in the score for *L'Arlésienne* comes in the middle of the Minuet.

It is in simple markings such as this that the saxophone can be replaced with a clarinet even if the instrument is present that nearly makes the instrument unemployable in this piece. There would be no sense in putting a marking such as "use oboe if even if there is an english horn." If the orchestra does not have the player for the part, then the part should not be played or repertoire that can be handled by the orchestra should be chosen. Otherwise, there is an unhealthy precedent that is chosen and set by allowing for complete instrumental substitutions in the orchestra.

Most of the notes for the bassoon part during moments of smaller textures for the winds are even written with this exclusive message that the notes written should only be played if there is a substitution or replacement needed for the saxophone. This continues on and on throughout the score and there is really no need for this. The saxophone, in my opinion, should be demanded in any performance of this wonderful piece of music.

The orchestral suites together are both masterpieces in their own rights, paired with the subdued narratives touched on here make them truly astounding pieces as commentary and innovation during the late nineteenth century.

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