

Once More - The Saxophone

Written by Sigurd Rascher

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A hundred years seems long in measuring a life span. But in thinking of musical history, a hundred years is not too long. The saxophone, much-maligned, unappreciated, has passed its hundredth year, and only now is beginning to be taken seriously as a musical instrument of artistic and aesthetic possibilities. Only now has the question of its acceptance into orchestral instrumentation come to the front. And even today the musical possibilities of this instrument have not been exploited fully.

In 1842, Berlioz described the saxophone as "... an instrument whose tone color is between that of the brass and the woodwinds. But it even reminds one, though more remotely, of the sound of the strings. I think its main advantage is the greatly varied beauty in its different possibilities of expression. At one time deeply quiet, at another full of emotion; dreamy, melancholic, sometimes with the hush of an echo....I do not know of any instrument having this specific tone-quality, bordering on the limits of the audible." Very few players of this instrument achieve this striking quality described by Berlioz. There are, to be sure, many good saxophonists - especially in this country - but the full capacities of the instrument have not been called upon.

What did Adolphe Sax seek when he invented his instrument in 1840? Did he expect that it would be welcomed into the symphonic orchestra group, or that it would remain almost an outcast for a century? We can leave it to history only to answer these questions. Antoine Joseph Sax (known as Adolphe) perfected the bass clarinet in 1835, when he was only twenty-one years old. In 1840, he was trying to produce a clarinet that would overblow an octave like the flute or oboe, and the result was his new instrument, the saxophone. His aims were definite. He wanted to fill the gap of tone quality between the strings and wind instruments

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on the one side, and between the brass and woodwinds on the other. Therefore, the new link should have the flexibility of the strings, the power of the brass, and the variety of tone quality of the woodwinds. But in addition the instrument should have a distinct character of its own. Sax was aware that in order to achieve all this in one instrument he must use a single-reed mouthpiece, similar to that of a clarinet, and a conical body of metal. To acquire the necessary flexibility of tone he broadened the mouthpiece outwardly and widened its inner measurements. To make the tone sufficiently voluminous to stand successfully against the brass of the orchestra, the inventor gave the conical body a parabolic shape. These features are mentioned in the patent which Sax took out for the instrument in June, 1846.

Science Plays a Part

Sax was pretty much of a scientist, and probably did not want the saxophone to be confined to a special field of music. He had, however, constructed an instrument which would enrich the possibilities of musical expression. It was thenceforth up to the player to make the most of this instrument. Sax studied acoustics, and it was he that gave light to the principle in wind instrument manufacturing that it is the proportions given to a column of air vibrating in a sonorous tube, and these alone, which determine the character of the timbre produced. In differentiating between clarinet and saxophone, he worked on the basic idea that the fundamental note given out by the conical tube when the lateral holes are closed is that of an open organ pipe of the same length, whereas a similar tube of cylindrical bore behaves as if it were a closed organ pipe, and its notes are an octave lower. This explains the essential difference between clarinet and saxophone.

One would think that Sax's contemporaries would have immediately seized upon this outstanding advancement in the means of musical expression. But this was not the case. Jealousy, indifference, and bigotry stood in its way, and it was difficult for a composer to score for the new instrument. Sax did succeed in interesting Berlioz and Halevy. In 1842, after an enthusiastic article by Berlioz had appeared in the "Journal des Debats," considerable interest was aroused among Parisian composers in the inventor as well as in the saxophone and his other instruments; saxhorns, saxotrombas, and the new improved bass clarinet. Sax had also made improvements in piston instruments by substitution of a single ascending piston for a number of descending ones.

The composer Donizetti had heard Sax demonstrate his new instruments and decided to use them in the score of his opera, "Don Sebastian." He sought a wholly new tonal effect through use of the saxophone and bass clarinet, since neither of them had been heard before in the opera orchestra. News spread amongst the musicians of the opera that Sax's new instruments were to be played, but no one offered to try them out. When asked to do so, the men flatly refused to look at the parts, let alone play the instruments. Donizetti was forced to withdraw most of the new instruments, but he wanted to retain the bass clarinet for a special part in the

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opera. He therefore asked Sax himself to play the part. The young inventor agreed readily, eager to demonstrate any one of his instruments to a large musical audience. The day of the first rehearsal approached while tension and resentment grew in the regular group of musicians. Donizetti was to conduct personally. The moment Sax appeared at the door, the concertmaster rose and announced: "If this gentleman enters the orchestra I will walk out, and so will all of my colleagues!"

No persuasion on the part of the composer could get the musicians to further a good cause: Donizetti was forced to yield, and all of Sax's instruments were removed from the score. Bizet had much the same experience, and the saxophone part in his "L'Arlesienne" was usually played by a clarinet. But Bizet did not change the score, and it stands today as one of the important and beautiful saxophone solos, the prime saxophone part in the history of this instrument as a member of the symphony orchestra.

A Struggle Against Conservatism

It was a fight against conservatism - both that of the players and of the instrument makers. The instrument manufacturers sensed in Sax a genius and a strong competitor, and they fought his patents for a long time, unsuccessfully. They did succeed in driving him bankrupt, but his friends lent him more money. Sax's lot was not an easy one, for on top of his troubles was the development of signs of cancer on his lip. Friends feared for his life, and suggested an operation. Somehow a "wonder-doctor" succeeded in curing the disease within three months. Some sort of toughness in his nature carried him through. Stories come to us of Sax's youth, which are interesting, and which substantiate his strength in the face of adversity. During his boyhood, in his father's house in Dinant, Belgium, he suffered a series of accidents which would have been fatal to the ordinary person. When only two years old he fell downstairs hitting his head on a stone; later he fell on a hot stove, burning his side severely. At three years of age, he mistook sulphate of zinc as milk, and gulped it down, almost meeting death. On another occasion, he was burned by exploding gunpowder. Further accidental poisonings gave him narrow escapes from death. A tile from the roof struck his head, leaving a scar which lasted his lifetime. While playing near the river one day, he fell into the whirlpool above the miller's gate and was saved miraculously. Neighbors began to call him, "Le petit Sax, le revenant" ("Little Sax, the specter!"). But just as continued adversities did not crush its inventor, the saxophone survived the animosities of Sax's contemporaries, and today after a century of ill treatment it is beginning to receive the recognition which it merits.

The difficulty of getting the new instruments into bands was not less than in the case of the orchestra. Sax had to get the public on his side if any progress was to be made. Accordingly, he succeeded in arranging for a competition to be held between two bands. The contest was to take place on the Champs de Mars, a large field where the Eiffel Tower now stands. The first band, in the old fashioned style of instrumentation, was entered by the army. The second band was

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one of Sax's assembly, and had a large number of saxophones, saxhorns, and saxotrombas, but no clarinets, oboes, and bassoons. The judges were Auber, Halevy, Spontini, Adam, Berlioz, and Onslow. An audience of twenty-five thousand crowded the field in front of the tribune.

The army band was all set to begin, but Sax had not yet arrived. At last he came in a chaise loaded high with instruments. Seven musicians had deserted him at the last moment, breaking their word of honor and contracts through bribes made by Sax's competitors. Sax, in his determined way, had decided to play the instruments himself, filling in where they were most needed. Thus began one of the strangest duels of French history. Both bands played a chord in E-flat minor. The army band's was thin and short; Sax's was majestic and sustained. Then followed an Andante and other pieces. The army band received hearty applause, but when Sax's band performed the public went wild with enthusiasm. Shortly afterwards his instruments were by decree taken into the instrumentation of the army bands.

A Strange Antagonism

We have stated that a hundred years have passed without the complete recognition of the saxophone's abilities. Here is an instrument that is, quoting Berlioz again, "...suitable for fast passages as well as for melodies of hymn-like character." Here is an instrument that can take the role of clown, that is capable of hysterical laughter, that can imitate the clicking of a typewriter or the dry twang of a banjo, and yet which can sing the sweetest of melodies. The potentialities of the instrument are manifold, and those potentialities will only be realized when serious, artistic expression on the part of first rate musicians becomes normal and not unusual.

A hundred years ago there was not the eagerness to express individuality that we find today. The instrument's range of two and one half octaves seemed to much of a limitation, but this range was extended to three and one half and then to four octaves; not by adding more keys, we may note, but by the development of proper embouchure, enabling the player to master the natural overtones, or harmonics. This enormous range, coupled with an unheard-of flexibility of expression challenges composers to neglect the saxophone no longer. Slowly, but surely, it is being used more and more in the orchestra as a solo instrument.

Perhaps the first appearance of the saxophone in the orchestra was in Paris, in the year 1844, in the production of Kastner's "Le Dernier Roi de Juda." Since that time it has been requested by various composers. Vincent D'Indy in his "La Legende de Saint-Christophe" calls for six saxophones, and in his "Fervaal" for three. Strauss, in his "Sinfonia Domestica" scores for four. Composers through Massenet, Thomas, Kastner, Villa Lobos, Walton, Copeland, Prokofieff, Carpenter, Hindemith, Beck, Puccini, Ravel, Honegger, Milhaud, Dallapiccola, Holbrook and

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many others have called for one or more saxophones in their orchestral works or operas. Solo literature for the instrument is as yet not very large, but is growing steadily. D'Indy wrote a "Choral Varie" with orchestra, Florent Schmitt a "Legende," and Claude Debussy A "Rhapsodie." The Debussy solo has a rather remarkable history, and the story of its composition goes back to the turn of the century when a Mrs. H. Hall was honorary President of the Boston Orchestra Club. She played the saxophone for the sake of her health, and was naturally eager to have solo pieces to perform at various functions. Mrs. Hall, therefore, commissioned Debussy, among others, to write something for her instrument with orchestra accompaniment. Debussy attended her performance of D'Indy's "Choral Varie," and his reaction was very unfavorable. Presumably he had not before heard the saxophone played by a really outstanding artist on the instrument. He did not like it, and he "thought it ridiculous to see a lady in a pink frock playing such an ungainly instrument"; he was not at all anxious that his work should provide a similar spectacle. He never finished the "Rhapsodie," but many years later sent only a pencil sketch to Mrs. Hall, which she could not perform. From this sketch, however, Roger Ducasse wrote a score in 1919. It was not until the year 1939 that the "Rhapsodie" was given a performance in its original form - that is, on the saxophone - when the writer played it with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

During the last decade European composers of almost every nation have contributed to the solo repertoire of the saxophonist. Concertos have been written by Glazounov (Russia); Dressel and Borck (Germany); Ibert and Vellones (France); Bozza (Italy); Coates and Demuth (England); Tarp and Bentzon (Denmark); Larsson (Sweden); Palester (Poland), and Martin, Eisenmann (Switzerland). Chamber music has been written for it with piano and other instruments by Swain of England; Hijman of Holland; Knorr, Jacobi, Brehme, Bumcke of Germany; Hindemith of the United States; Osterc of Yugoslavia, Reiner of Czechoslovakia; Pierne of France, and Paz of Argentina. We can include sonatas, concertos, quintets, and other works by such American composers as Creston, Brant, Ganz, Heiden, McKaye, and others. The "Quatuor de Paris" have played transcriptions of Haydn and Beethoven quartets as well as original compositions and their performances were of highest artistry. It is said that the Brown brothers achieved remarkable results in tone quality and were successful in combining saxophones of different pitch.

The list of works for saxophone is by no means small any longer. Most of the compositions require a range exceeding the traditional two and one-half octaves, but Henry Brant has asked for four full octaves on saxophone in his concerto, which can be played by true artists on the instrument. The repertoire for this instrument is constantly being enlarged, and horizons are unlimited.

The saxophone calls for as great a study and as close an application as any other instrument. The saxophonist who wants to master the instrument must train fingers, tongue, lips, jaw

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muscles, lungs, and diaphragm fully in accordance with the requirements of the instrument. But he must mentally go beyond these mechanical perfections in making the playing of the instrument a matter of musical beauty. He needs the ability of inner tone-imagination to a colorful, vivid degree. Coupled with the convincing power that characterizes the artists who perform on any of the accepted instruments must be a broad understanding, and respect for the instrument. The performer needs high aspirations, a desire for truly beautiful expression, to avoid the tincture of rudeness and clownishness which seems to have become the lot of the saxophone as an instrument. The saxophone is a truly admirable instrument in the hands of a cultured musician who approaches its performance with the attitude as well as skill which will give it a place in our contemporary musical culture. Without that attitude, the saxophone must fight many more decades for recognition.

Sigurd Rascher, the distinguished concert saxophonist, was born of Swedish and English parentage and spent his childhood in the Swiss Alps. Some of his studies were in Germany, as a clarinetist, but he turned early in his musical career to the saxophone and toured Europe with a dance band from 1927 to 1930. For a time after that he taught school, enjoying association with children in music and woodcrafts. He loved especially his work teaching the small boys and girls to play six-hole flutes, and to carve wooden bowls and boxes. Returning to his profession as an active musician, Rascher entered on his career as a serious and successful saxophone orchestral-soloist and recitalist. Ibert, Glazounov, Milhaud, and Hindemith were among a large number of European composers who wrote music for him and to this general list now has been added or will be added shortly the American names of Roy Harris, Dante Fiorello, Aaron Copland, among others.

It is interesting to note that the daughter of Adolphe Sax, when a very old lady, wrote to Rascher that, after hearing him play, she was convinced the instrument was at last being heard as her father had wished it to be known. - Editor's Note (originally from the Etude magazine).
