

A Musical Instrument of Modern Times

Written by Sigurd Rascher

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There is one musical instrument of modern times which has given rise to more controversies than any other. This new arrival has aroused disputes, calumnies, hatred, admiration, praise, enthusiasm, profanation, vulgarization, and so forth. It is an instrument with a tone that penetrates into the hearer's heart in a more than any other, stimulating it - in accordance with its musical-ethical expression - to enthusiastic support or to scornful rejection. The listener's experience is in no way determined by musical traditions or by social ties of any kind. In regard to this instrument, player and listener alike must rely completely upon themselves. From a musical aspect we may say: The listener or player is the "only one" and the instrument "his property".

The "history" of the saxophone begins - unlike that of any other instrument - in the spirit of its inventor, around 1840. Adolphe Antoine Sax's desire for a wind-instrument with greater power of expression led to his decision to construct one. The details of his research and construction are only known to us in a fragmentary way. Sax tried all kinds of tubes and mouthpieces and wanted to build an instrument relatively easy to play, uniting within it the expressive power of string instruments, the impetus of brass wind-instruments and the many shadings of wooden wind-instruments. These requirements were met most closely by an instrument equipped with a metal conical tube and a mechanism of valves, rather like an oboe, and with a mouthpiece outwardly resembling that of a clarinet. But it presented different proportions, especially in regard to its inner structure.

In his native Belgium, Sax did not find the recognition he deserved when he exhibited the new instrument at Bruxelles, and so he walked to Paris in 1841. Paris was unstintingly at that time the Mecca of music and the abode of the greatest musicians, such as Rossini, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, etc. They all praised the new instrument unstintingly - its "beautiful sound", "priestly calm", "pontifical dignity" - and said that future composers would derive from its tones an undreamt-of power of expression in the orchestra - and so forth. But today, on hearing the bawling saxophone on the radio or television, the above remarks induce us to ask: Has tone of the saxophone changed, or have our own concepts of musically beautiful sounds undergone a change? It is easy to ascertain that the first is true. The saxophone (speaking in very general terms) has - during the past 20 or 30 years - undergone changes greater than that of any other musical instrument. Many reasons may be adduced for this.

As already mentioned, the saxophone has no noble traditions, as for instance the clarinet, the youngest orchestra instrument. In France the saxophone has often been used in orchestras, but it could never assert itself, because musicians are slow in accepting anything new. ("Mozart managed without a saxophone so why this passion for innovations?") Then came the rapid development of dance music, chiefly in America in form of jazz. The saxophone with its

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unrivaled power of expression and flexibility was highly welcome in this field. Its musical entourage greatly differed from an orchestra; trumpets and trombones tried to outdo the noise of dancing feet and animated talk and the new arrival (at first, the saxophone was not used in jazz music) had to assert itself. The mouthpiece, not the instrument itself, was altered, so that it could be played very loudly. This implied the loss of many of its original characteristics. Today, the vulgar, obtrusive sound of the saxophone is so generally accepted that it is commonly known as "saxophone tone". The non-existence of a traditionally recognized tone-quality gave rise to this grotesque situation. No wonder that serious musicians disdain the saxophone!

But I must remind readers that in reality the player determines the quality of the sounds coming from the saxophone. It is he who chooses the instrument, the mouthpiece and his own individual way of playing. According to the inventor's original intention, the saxophone's possibilities of expression exceed those of other wind-instruments. This extra ordinary advantage is at the same time its greatest disadvantage - in the hands of certain players! For they cannot resist the temptation to give expression and to stimulate certain emotions which should better be kept in the background. Thanks to the saxophone's almost unlimited flexibility, it is more adapted to this purpose than any other instrument. And we have almost reached the point in which its partial possibilities are taken for its fundamental character.

In the development of musical instruments the saxophone - so it seems to me - has reached the nadir of the former birthplace of music, the cult. The saxophone is the orphan among musical instruments; it enjoyed no longer the advantage of being used by Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, the representatives of a spiritual music. It has no tradition enabling us to trace it back to the temple of Solomon (like the trombone). One solitary human being invented and constructed it. It is the most human of all instruments, with all the weak points and wonderful possibilities of a human being, so that it can either glide away from the musical sphere, or lift us once more to the Spiritual in man and in music.

Science (i.e. the construction of the instrument) and knowledge (i.e. its possibilities) have gone far ahead of the instrument itself. Have our moral capacities and our moral imagination kept pace with it?

The reply to this questions must be given by the musician himself - in conscious freedom.

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