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## The Saxophone in Classical and Popular Music (Honors)

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Dylan Propheter

## The Saxophone in Classical and Popular Music

### Background

Adolphe Sax was a prolific inventor and skilled musician, taking after his father, who helped to improve the design of many popular instruments of his day. He spent much of his life creating entire new families of instruments. A notable contribution is his line of brass instruments—the saxhorn family—still in use today in European military bands. Of course, Sax’s most influential contribution—and the reason many recognize his name—is the saxophone family of instruments. Saxophones are woodwind instruments played with a single reed, similar to the clarinet, and are a staple of modern popular culture. They are crucial in jazz music, and very prominent in contemporary popular and classical music. Sax was not afraid of challenging the status quo, and saxophones are unique instruments. They combine qualities of both brass and woodwinds: they have a large, piercing sound like instruments in the brass family, but they are flexible and agile like woodwind instruments. This unique combination led to decades of controversy—some prominent musicians greatly appreciated Sax and the saxophone, but many others hated it, going as far as attempting to drive Sax out of business. Soon after the saxophone was invented it saw some initial success, especially in military bands in France, thanks to Sax’s promotion of the instrument. Some very prominent composers of the period wrote for it, intrigued by its unique characteristics—or, in some cases, because they were friendly with Sax. Rival instrument manufacturers, however, were infuriated by Sax’s success, and did everything they could to block his path forward. Lawsuits haunted Sax for most of his professional career and the saxophone was attacked as being non-musical. Despite the early victories, these roadblocks proved troublesome for Sax. The instrument’s popularity in European classical music

declined around the turn of the century, but it saw a resurgence among amateur musicians in the United States. With the rise of jazz in the 1920's, the saxophone gained popularity it had never seen before. This led to both an incredible amount of popular music and a resurgence of its popularity in European classical music, thanks to the influence of jazz on composers in the continent. Ultimately, the unique characteristics that the saxophone brings to music—timbre, color, and opportunities for expression—caused the instrument to become a staple of musical culture, both in popular and classical music. This essay will analyze the initial gradual decline and subsequent rise of the saxophone, as the instrument fell into relative obscurity in classical music and Sax's influence waned, and then enjoyed unprecedented levels of popularity through popular music and the birth of jazz in the United States.

### Adolphe Sax

Antoine-Joseph “Adolphe” Sax was born in 1814 in Belgium to Charles-Joseph and Marie-Joseph Sax. His father was a craftsman and musician who worked tirelessly to improve instruments of the day. In 1824 he built his version of the omnitonic horn, an instrument designed to allow the French Horn to play in all keys without changing crooks—extra pieces of tubing that were added to the instrument to make it longer. Charles Sax's instrument incorporated all of the tubing and used a plunger to allow the musician to choose the pitch<sup>1</sup>. Invented ten years after the advent of the valve—still the standard on brass instruments today—the instrument did not see great success. While some musicians did avoid valves for a time, preferring traditional performance practices, the omnitonic horn was cumbersome and less practical than valve-based

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Strauchen-Scherer, J. K. Moore, and Jayson K. Dobney, *Musical Instruments: Highlights of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 181

horns. Impressive perseverance, and a certain lack of practical sense, are qualities Adolphe would inherit from his father.

Considering his father's musical career, it is no surprise Adolphe was a gifted musician and craftsman himself. He enrolled in the Royal School of Music, the precursor to the Royal Brussels Conservatorie, in 1828<sup>2</sup>. He studied the flute and later became very skilled at the clarinet. His ability was so great that a composer in residence at the conservatory, Joseph Kuffner, dedicated a collection of clarinet duets to him. In addition, he began working on instruments with his father, first exhibiting his work at the age of 15. He was especially successful in his work on woodwind instruments, with some of his early success coming from the clarinet family.

Sax, the skilled clarinet player, was dissatisfied with the quality of bass clarinets available as they had inconsistent sound and intonation problems, especially in the upper register. He redesigned the instrument, giving it a larger bore and changing the key placement, greatly increasing its consistency of sound.<sup>3</sup> He received a patent for his work in 1838. Though it was not his first patent, Sax's bass clarinet patent was one of his earliest to earn him widespread praise and help establish his reputation as a skilled instrument maker.

Sax always sought to promote himself and his instruments, and decided to take advantage of this good design. He still lived in his hometown, Brussels, so he decided to travel to promote the instrument. He went to Paris, a major musical center, to gain publicity for his work, and, while there, he met notable composers including Hector Berlioz and Jean-Georges Kastner, with

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<sup>2</sup>Stephen Cottrell. *The Saxophone* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012), 35

<sup>3</sup> Albert Rice, "The bass clarinets of Adolphe Sax: his influence and legacy," *Revue belge de Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 70, (2016): 91-105. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26623035>.

whom he would maintain close relationships for many years<sup>4</sup>. Both composers praised the improvements his instrument offered and helped him gain some notoriety in France.

The success that Sax found promoting his design in Paris contrasted with his experiences at home in Belgium. He exhibited instruments—several clarinets and an early version of the saxophone, the first use of the word—in the Brussels Exhibition of 1841. While his instruments were appreciated, he was deemed too young for a gold medal, and received only silver, which displeased him greatly. Further, an aide to the French king, Comte de Rumigny, visited Sax's workshop. He was seeking help for France's military bands, which had been struggling. Perhaps as a result of these events, Sax saw more of a future in France and he permanently moved to Paris in 1842.<sup>5</sup>

His arrival was warmly welcomed by Berlioz, who wrote in his praise, remarking that, "He invents and accomplishes"<sup>6</sup>. He is known to have regularly visited Sax and offered suggestions for instruments alongside mutual friend Jean-Baptiste Arban, a notable brass musician. Sax did everything he could to foster these kinds of connections with many different prominent musicians in France, and was successful. This, alongside his connection to French military bands through de Rumigny, gave him a solid foothold to begin his business in Paris.

### New Instruments in France

After arriving in Paris, Sax began designing new instruments. Off of the success of his bass clarinet design and wanting to make his mark on the Parisian music scene, he became especially ambitious at this point, choosing to create new entire instrument families: collections

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<sup>4</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 14

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ingham. *The Cambridge Companion to the Saxophone* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3

<sup>6</sup> Ingham, *The Cambridge Companion*, 3

of instruments in soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone/bass versions. Designing entire families of instruments offered many advantages: similar design between the instruments gave them a more consistent tone and made moving between the different instruments in the family much easier. For example, the fingerings for each instrument were the same. This meant that sheet music was transposed so that a note always corresponded to the same fingering, no matter which horn was used.

The first instrument family, granted a French patent in 1843, was the Saxhorn family of valved brass instruments. Compared to other brass instruments like the trumpet, the saxhorns offered a warmer, mellower sound. The similarities of the instruments to existing designs, however, would prove problematic for Sax, who faced many accusations of plagiarism through his entire career.<sup>7</sup> Despite the difficulties, the Saxhorns were an overall success, with baritone and alto models seeing continued use today in the military band tradition, where they are known as the Baritone Horn and Alto Horn. The Flugelhorn, still very much in use today, originated from the soprano member of the Saxhorn family.

In 1845, Sax patented another instrument family, the saxotrombas. Saxotrombas were also brass instruments, similar to saxhorns, but did not see the same widespread use. This family is much more vague than the others, resembling very closely the saxhorn family. No instrument has ever been identified as a saxotromba. Instead, it seems Sax elected to combine qualities of saxotrombas with the saxhorns, merging the two families, rather than creating two separate lines.<sup>7</sup> This makes sense considering both instrument lines fall in the brass family and would have likely served a similar purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> Eugenia Mitroulia, "The Saxotromba: Fact or Fiction?," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument* (2009): 123+

French military bands, one of Sax's primary reasons for moving to Paris, were a major focus for all of his instruments. He wrote letters to his old contact de Rumigny, France's Minister of War Marshal Soult, and the French king, suggesting that his instruments be adopted in the military ensembles. The traditional instrumentation that they were using was not satisfactory—the sound of the ensembles was weak. Many of the instruments they used produced sound that did not carry well outdoors where they typically played. Soult, the Minister of War, requested a comparison of musicians playing on traditional military band instruments and Sax's instruments. Sax felt his instruments were superior and promptly organized the comparison. Two ensembles were formed, one with 32 musicians playing the traditional military band instruments and another with nine musicians performing on Sax's instruments. The sound of Sax's instruments was deemed superior, so he drafted a formal proposal for a new military band instrumentation which included many saxhorns in the place of traditional instruments.<sup>8</sup>

### The Saxophone:

For the first few years Sax spent in Paris, all of his major patents were instruments in the brass family. That would change in late 1845 when Sax submitted a patent for the saxophone. Sax, primarily a reed player, spent many years perfecting the design, likely because he wanted his first major contribution to the woodwinds to be high quality. The patent was approved in 1846, allowing him to produce the instrument starting that year.

The Saxophone also demonstrated Sax's continued focus on military bands. In the patent for the instrument, he identified several of the issues the instrument aims to solve. He remarked that only brass instruments had the timbre and projection necessary to produce a quality sound

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<sup>8</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 20

outdoors, and that saxophones would bring that quality to the woodwinds.<sup>9</sup> These qualities made the saxophone a logical choice for use in military ensembles, and Sax revised his proposed instrumentation to include them once they had been patented. His suggested instrumentation was officially adopted by the French government.<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of this instrumentation was a major success for Sax, with full sets of Saxhorns and two saxophones required for every military band regiment. Further, because the instruments were requisite in those ensembles, the French military academy of music, *Gymnase de Musique Militaire*, had to begin teaching Sax's instruments. JB Arban, Sax and Berlioz's friend and accomplished brass player, became professor of Alto Saxhorn. Jean Cokken, the academy's professor of bassoon, took on an additional duty and became the first professor of saxophone.<sup>11</sup>

Sax's success with the French military bands meant that he would be the primary supplier of instruments for the French military. This greatly displeased rival instrument manufacturers, and, in retaliation, many of them filed lawsuits against Sax, claiming that the saxophone was simply a copy of other instruments. Some resorted to attacking the instrument, with one even claiming that, "The saxophones sound hollow and wrong."<sup>12</sup> These attacks continued for a while and made the promotion of the saxophone more difficult.

#### Sax's push for the saxophone:

Sax always did what he could to advocate for his instruments, but saxophones were a unique challenge. In addition to pushback from peers, Sax faced difficulties promoting an

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 24

entirely new class of instrument. Saxhorns were an evolution of existing instrument design and so relatively easy to add to an ensemble, but saxophones were essentially new. Achieving widespread adoption of a new instrument was a daunting task, so Sax did what he could to overcome it. His efforts began with finding places to train new saxophone players. Cokken's saxophone course at the Gymnase de Musique Militaire was closed by 1850. His was the only major saxophone education program at the time, so its closure meant there were no resources for musicians to learn the instrument. Sax took matters into his own hands and, in 1856, he, with the support of Berlioz, asked for a saxophone class to be opened in the Paris Conservatory to continue the education of saxophone players for military bands. A course was created and Sax himself was the instructor. As the instrument was only for military band use, the saxophone course was deemed less important than others and Sax never became a full professor.<sup>13</sup> In order to help create jobs for his saxophone students, Sax, always an advocate for his instruments, proposed yet another military band setup in 1854, this time including two of each instrument in the saxophone family, in addition to the large number of saxhorns. This was accepted and put Sax into a very prominent place in the French military band scene.<sup>14</sup>

Sax devoted much of his life to promoting his instruments. Skilled saxophone players would require repertoire to play, so he forged relationships with composers, who were his best chance at getting repertoire for the instrument and shifting public opinion in favor of the instrument. He even ran his own publishing business from 1858-1878, promoting material mostly written by friends and close colleagues. Despite the many vocal critics he faced, his close friends, including Berlioz and Kastner, always supported the saxophone. The relationships that Sax cultivated with composers and prominent figures in the French music scene helped to keep

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29

him influential, and keep the saxophone relevant. He knew that without his connections, the saxophone would have no chance, so he shaped his life around preserving them. In an effort to maintain his social status to ensure he could continue to promote his instrument, he even refused to marry the mother of his children, who was lower-class, fearing that she would harm his reputation.<sup>15</sup>

Much of Sax's effort, unfortunately, was in vain. Many of his prominent contacts died in the 1860's, including Kastner and Berlioz, so his influence waned. Sax, like many rival instrument manufacturers, came from a background of teaching and performing, not from business. Even if the saxophone had been universally well received, it never could have taken off without strong supply to support it. Sax's operation was small compared to many of his rivals—it is thought he generally employed a maximum of around 70 people. In comparison, a rival instrument manufacturer, Pierre Louis Gautrot, had up to 1600 workers by the 1870's.<sup>16</sup> Further, his continuous legal problems put a large financial burden on him. Sax declared bankruptcy in 1873 and again in 1877, forcing the liquidation of his instruments<sup>17</sup>. He lived the rest of his life quietly, never financially or socially recovering. He died in 1894. Though Sax struggled in his life, his instruments never would have achieved the incredible popularity that they enjoy today without his efforts.

### The Saxophone in Classical Music

#### In Europe:

Any instrument, no matter how good the design, needs music to play. Despite Sax's relatively extensive connections in the French music scene, classical material for the saxophone

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>17</sup> Ingham, *The Cambridge Companion*, 9

was rare.<sup>18</sup> Even Berlioz, a vocal supporter of Sax and his instruments, did not write much material for it. One of his only contributions was an 1844 arrangement, now lost, of his piece *Chant Sacre* for six wind instruments, including several saxhorns and a saxophone. Written before the saxophone had been granted a patent, the piece was likely composed to show the capabilities of Sax's instruments. It was performed in Sax's workshop, with the man himself on the saxophone.<sup>19</sup> Berlioz's lack of additional material for the instrument is curious considering how highly he praised it, but likely had to do with his own personal life—much of his work in the 1850's-60's was poorly received, and adding saxophone would have been another area for critics to attack, given the controversial nature of Sax's instruments.

Georges Kastner, another good friend of Sax, wrote for bass saxophone in C in his 1944 opera *The Last King of Juda*. This is a very unique instrumentation decision and, again, occurred before the instrument was patented.<sup>20</sup> Kastner also published an early saxophone method book, written in collaboration with Sax, in 1846. Many different method books were written in this time period, with authors eager to take advantage of a new, potentially very popular instrument. Cokken, the professor of bassoon and first professor of saxophone at the French military music academy, also produced a method book that year.<sup>21</sup> Given the instrument's adoption in military bands and Sax's close relationship with the performers, these are not surprising. The books were doubtless a huge success for Sax—better, more available material means more people buying and playing the instruments. Despite these successes, however, the instrument did not gain much traction outside of Sax's circle.

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<sup>18</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 103

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 104

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

In an effort to increase the amount of repertoire available for his instruments, Sax started his own publishing company in Paris which he ran from 1858-1878.<sup>22</sup> The company published many works, including 35 pieces for saxophone and piano. Much of the material was written by friends of Sax, notably Jean-Baptiste Singelee, who wrote many early works for the instrument.<sup>23</sup> He wrote for all of the commonly used instruments in the saxophone family, and also notably wrote the first saxophone quartet—soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone—with his 1857 *Premier Quatuor Op. 53*. The material was, in general, relatively lighthearted, written more to show off capabilities of the instruments than to make serious artistic statements.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, this played into the negative perception of Sax’s instruments by many critics who did not take the instrument seriously.

Outside of the material written by Sax’s contacts and, largely, published by the man himself, concert saxophone repertoire remained relatively scarce, especially in his lifetime. Bizet wrote for saxophone in his *L’Arlésienne Suite*, originally incidental music for the play *L’Arlésienne* by Alphonse Daudet. While the play was poorly received and did not run for long, Bizet’s music was very popular. The score was performed in 1885 as two orchestral suites.<sup>25</sup> The piece was written for pit orchestra and calls for alto saxophone despite the limited number of musicians available in such an ensemble. The saxophone had an expressive role in the piece and played through it consistently, not just occasionally to add color. The instrument’s strong sound added to the effect of the piece and is essential to the character of the music. Any other instrument would not have been able to fill the role. The saxophone was fully taken advantage of in this piece. This use of the instrument—as an essential part of the music—was not typical in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Lombard, “A “Revolution in the Making”: Rediscovering the Historical Sonic Production of the Early Saxophone” (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest LLC 2019)

<sup>24</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone* 99

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Macdonal, “Review of The Original Version of Bizet’s L’Arlésienne, by Geroge Bizet and Herve Lacombe,” *Notes* 71, no. 2 (2014): 345-349. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44734908>

concert music of the period. It saw occasional use like this for many years, but was never prominent enough in classical music to become fully established.

In opera, however, the saxophone found more of a footing. While other genres of classical music were very well established, somewhat elitist, and difficult to change, opera was more flexible. It was popular in France in the middle of the 19th century and somewhat relied on novelty and experimentation to help draw in audiences.<sup>26</sup> The saxophone fit this role perfectly—it had a unique sound that was seldom heard in other contexts.

Further, Sax was the director of the banda at the Paris Opera—musicians who played off to the side of the stage—until two years before his death.<sup>27</sup> He attempted to use this position to push for his instruments in their productions, and finally saw some success. Several composers at the opera gave it central roles in their works. Ambrose Thomas wrote for the instrument in *Hamlet* (1868) and *Francois de Rimini* (1882).<sup>28</sup> Jules Massenet wrote frequently for the saxophone, notably in *Werther* (1892). Vincent D’Indy even wrote for a saxophone quartet in his 1897 opera *Frevaal*.<sup>29</sup> The saxophone played such important roles in these compositions that by 1879 it was listed in the official instrumentation of the French Opera. It was performed by the bass clarinet player in the ensemble.<sup>30</sup> Had Sax lived for a few decades longer, it is possible that he could have continued to expand the success the instrument had in opera. Unfortunately, as his influence waned and he left his position at the opera, the instrument never rose beyond occasional use.

### Second wind from the United States:

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<sup>26</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 103

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 106

<sup>29</sup> Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin De Siecle* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006), 324

<sup>30</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 108

As the saxophone struggled in European classical music, the instrument was gaining traction in popular music in the United States, spurred on by a number of virtuosic soloists educated in the saxophone courses of European conservatories. An important American in the history of classical saxophone music was Elise Hall. She was born in 1853 and lived in France for much of her childhood before moving to New York and marrying a doctor. She began learning the saxophone later in life at the suggestion of her husband, who hoped the instrument would help her recover from Typhoid fever.<sup>31</sup> After his unexpected death in 1897, she devoted much of her time and money to it. She commissioned saxophone works from many very prominent French composers, and even premiered some for a Boston Orchestra Club which she helped found. Her performances were very high quality, and earned her praise from music elites of the period.<sup>32</sup> Some of her commissions include Vincent D'Indy's 1903 *Choral Verie* for alto saxophone and orchestra, which she premiered in Paris, Charles Loeffler's 1900 *Divertissement Espagnole*, and, most significantly, Claude Debussy's *Rhapsody for saxophone and Orchestra*.

Debussy's work and his reaction to the commission offer an interesting window into the perception of the saxophone by many composers around the turn of the century. Expressing his frustration with the commission, he referred to Hall condescendingly as "The saxophone lady" and called the saxophone a "ridiculous instrument."<sup>33</sup> Though commissioned and paid for in 1903, Debussy did not deliver the piece to Hall. Instead, he completed a draft of the work and abandoned it, passing away before completing it. His close friend, orchestrator Jean Roger-Ducass, completed the piece as faithfully to Debussy's style as he could.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 243

<sup>32</sup> Ingham, *The Cambridge Companion*, 38

<sup>33</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 244

<sup>34</sup> James Noyes, "Debussy's "Rapsodie pour orchestra et saxophone" Revisited," *The Musical Quarterly* 90, no. 3/4 (Fall-Winter 2007): 516-445

Debussy's *Rhapsody* used the saxophone in a unique way. While one might expect the piece to feature the instrument prominently and consistently, and take advantage of its ability to play highly technical passages, that is not the case. Considering Debussy's attitude to Hall and the instrument, echoed by many of his contemporaries, there are many possible causes for this unique use of the instrument. He never wrote other material for the saxophone and didn't take it seriously as an instrument, so he took advantage of only the most surface level quality of the instrument: its timbre. The *Rhapsody* is an orchestral piece with a saxophone to add color, more than a saxophone solo.

Though the turn-of-the-century works commissioned by Hall were incredibly important in getting quality repertoire and exposure for the saxophone, it still did not achieve widespread popularity in classical music. The decades after Hall's push for the instrument saw a return to limited material being written for it in Europe. It was not until the immense popularity of the saxophone in the United States, brought to Europe through its fixation on jazz, that it would enter the minds of classical composers as a viable musical instrument to be taken seriously.

### The Saxophone in Jazz and Popular Music

While the saxophone struggled to integrate into the very well established and somewhat elitist classical music tradition, there was much less resistance in the context of popular music. Very early in the saxophone's life, numerous European musicians had come to prominence as soloists on the instrument, often going on far-ranging tours including England and even the United States. The Belgian-born Henri Wuille (1822-1871), for instance, was a clarinet player who took up the saxophone after its patent and one of the first performers to play in the two countries. Charles-Jean-Baptiste Joualle was another prominent soloist who garnered praise for

both himself and the instrument with remarks made on the “incomparable and expressive qualities”<sup>35</sup> it had. Skilled soloists like Wuille and Joualle were heard mostly in promenade concerts—casual music events where audience members could stroll through a garden listening to music. While more formal concerts were only accessible to the upper-classes, these concerts were more open to everyone. They were much less expensive and consisted of more accessible popular music.<sup>36</sup> Wuille and Joualle both frequently performed at such events through their association with Louise Jullian, the organizer of the concerts. These very well-attended events were often peoples’ first exposure to the saxophone, which was often featured in them. Thousands of people came to each concert. Given the casual nature of the performances, the saxophone did not meet the resistance it did in formal concert settings.

In the United States, Wuille’s performances were very well received. He performed in New York with an ensemble organized by Jullian in late 1853 and was given praise for his playing. A US composer, William Fry, wrote *Santa Claus: A Christmas Symphony* for Jullian’s ensemble in the same year, marking the first time an American composer had written for the saxophone. This was the start of a huge increase in popularity of the instrument in the United States, spurred on by many incredible solo players like Wuille.

Edward Lefebre was another player who rose to prominence in promenade concerts. He was born in the Netherlands 1834 and permanently relocated to the US in 1872. In the United States, he became even more well known and gave many popular performances in the 1870’s and 1880’s. He also played saxophone in the well-known Gilmore Band and was later the saxophone section leader in the Sousa band, where he was dubbed “the saxophone king”<sup>37</sup> Lefebre was a

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<sup>35</sup> Ingham, *The Cambridge Companion*, 38

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

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

fixture of the ensemble and rose to national prominence through the exposure the ensemble brought him.

John Phillip Sousa, the enormously popular American band leader, got his start with military ensembles. He included saxophones in his bands from the 1880's on and, by 1892, he left military life to found his own ensemble, the Sousa Band, where he continued to employ them.<sup>38</sup> The band, incredibly popular with the American public, performed a wide variety of music, from classical works to popular music of the period. Importantly, they largely played arrangements. This meant that the saxophone's lack of history in the music they played was not an issue - a new part would simply be created in the arrangement. This, alongside the more casual nature of the concerts, removed many of the barriers the saxophone had faced in Europe.

Promenade concerts and the Sousa band were not the only venues where the saxophone saw success. It was also prominent in vaudeville acts, circus music, and minstrel shows. In vaudeville, a large pull for the instrument was its novelty—though it was much more widely known in the United States than before the efforts of Sousa and the European soloists, it was still not widespread. Vaudeville became a mainstay of American entertainment around the turn of the century, further contributing to the saxophone's popularity. One major act that helped establish the saxophone were the Six Brown Brothers, a vaudeville act of saxophone players. The group, firmly rooted in the racism pervasive in American culture, performed popular music in black face. They started performing in 1908 and immediately saw great success and critical acclaim. By 1920 they were reportedly the highest paid musical act in the country.<sup>39</sup> The group was influential in popularizing the saxophone and helped expose many people to the instrument.

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<sup>38</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 130

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Vermazen, *That Moaning Saxophone: The Six Brown Brothers and the Dawning of a Musical Craze* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2004), 3

Circus music was also vitally important in establishing the instrument in the United States. Circuses hired musicians to perform at shows, which was demanding work. The instruments they used had to be rugged to survive use in such an environment. And they had to be loud to project into the audience. The saxophone was the most logical choice, so it gradually became standard in such ensembles.<sup>40</sup> Minstrel shows, another very popular form of entertainment, also often incorporated saxophone. It was partly through these performances that the instrument finally penetrated mainstream consciousness<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the saxophone became a popular instrument among amateur musicians. It offered several advantages compared to other instruments available at the time: the saxophone produced sound more easily than many other wind instruments, it was widely available, and manufacturers began producing a version of the instrument in the key of C, known as the C-Melody saxophone. Typical saxophones are pitched in Bb or Eb, but an instrument pitched in C offered a key advantage—it could play sheet music for voice or piano without having to transpose. Printed sheet music was incredibly popular in the country around the turn of the century and the C-Melody saxophone could easily be used to perform it. These advantages led to a massive increase in the popularity of the instrument in the United States, which would set the stage for its rise in jazz music, easily the music in which the instrument made its most noteworthy contribution.

### The saxophone in jazz:

Jazz originated in New Orleans around the turn of the century. It constituted the first truly original genre of American music, the result of many different music traditions coming together. The history of the genre is complex, and there are many different interpretations of the exact date

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 134

it began. By the second decade of the century, however, it is agreed that jazz was established as an artform. The first jazz recordings originated in 1917, created by The Original Dixieland Jass Band. The perception that the band produced the first jazz recordings is likely rooted in racism—the ensemble was made up of only white musicians. This is ironic considering that jazz is a distinctly African American artform. The Original Dixieland Jass Band did, however, indisputably produce the first commercially successful recordings. Of particular interest to us is the fact that, in its original form, the band did not include saxophone. In fact, the instrument was not included in very early jazz bands at all. Instead, they included various brass instruments and, often, clarinets.

It was only a matter of time, however, before the saxophone rose to prominence in jazz music. The timbre and flexibility of the instrument, its ubiquity, and its durability all made it a logical choice for jazz bands. Musically, jazz originates from African folk traditions. In African folk music, there is a large emphasis on timbre. Many folk traditions emphasize the exploration of color and the manipulation of tone instead of striving for purity of sound.

The saxophone is a very flexible instrument capable of producing a huge variety of sounds – everything from growling sounds to aggressive slap-tonging. The saxophone also made practical sense for use in jazz bands. It was widespread in New Orleans by 1912, having been widely produced to meet the demand of amateur musicians in the United States.<sup>42</sup> They were frequently pawned, and this ubiquity, coupled with the fact that it was still not taken seriously as an instrument, made the saxophone more financially viable than many other instruments. Further, the instrument is louder and more durable than the clarinet, which it largely replaced.

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<sup>42</sup> Doug Miller, "The Moan Within the Toan: African Retentions in Rhythm and Blues Saxophone Style in Afro-American Popular music," *Popular Music* 14, no. 2 (May 1995): 155-174

The saxophone's adoption into the genre was spurred on by several incredibly popular soloists. The earliest among them is Rudy Weidoeft. Though he started on the clarinet as many of the first generation of jazz saxophone players did, he took up the saxophone by 1914. He notably performed on the then-popular C-Melody saxophone and made several early jazz recordings. His own group, the Frisco 'Jass' Band, produced their first recording in 1917.<sup>43</sup> He would go on to achieve widespread praise for his incredible technique on the saxophone.

Sidney Bechet is another important soloist. He was well traveled, performing clarinet to acclaim in Europe. It was there that he discovered the soprano saxophone, which he took up and became most well known for. Bechet, though critically acclaimed, never reached the heights of popularity of cornet soloists like Louis Armstrong. He did, however, set in motion the more widespread acceptance of the saxophone as a solo instrument in jazz.<sup>44</sup>

From this point on, the saxophone truly came into its own as an instrument. It was no longer a little-known novelty or a niche specialty instrument, but a popular culture fixture. Hundreds of thousands of saxophones were produced in the United States alone. Both among amateur musicians and in popular recorded music, the saxophone was a hit. As the instrument became more popular, especially in jazz, the needs of players changed, so the instrument changed with them.

#### Changes to the instrument:

The success of the saxophone in jazz brought changes to the original instrument. Adolph Sax had designed his saxophone with classical music in mind. In his vision, it was an orchestral instrument, intended to blend well with the sounds of other instruments in such ensembles. From

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<sup>43</sup> Cottrell, *The Saxophone*, 163

<sup>44</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55

the very beginning, that idea did not work out for him. His instruments were used for their loud, piercing sound, thanks to their prominent role in military bands. Jazz, however, was another story entirely. The saxophone suddenly had to actively compete with trombones and trumpets as a solo instrument. Its new use, along with its vastly increased popularity, led to physical changes to produce brighter, more piercing sounds. The mouthpiece, for example, changed drastically. In Sax's design, the mouthpiece had a large, barrel-shaped interior, making the sound darker and fuller, and the space between the reed and the mouthpiece was only between .8 and 1.5 millimeters. This design persisted until the 1930's, when the saxophone's place in jazz was set and the needs of saxophone players changed. Today, saxophone mouthpieces have smaller, cylindrical interiors, and the average space is between 1.8 and 2 millimeters.<sup>45</sup> The shape of the interior makes the sound brighter, and the larger gap between the mouthpiece and the reed allows more vibration, leading to a louder, more aggressive sound. Nowadays, there are also separate mouthpieces designed for jazz and classical playing. While the classical mouthpieces are closer to those conceived by Sax, they are still much different, with smaller interiors and larger gaps than in his original design.

Changes in the mouthpiece were so extreme that by the mid 1930's there was already a movement against it. Sigurd Raschèr was a saxophone player very important in classical repertoire in the middle of the 20th century. In his performances, he strove to return to the roots of the saxophone, playing with a sound closer to Sax's intention. In 1934, he performed a concert that was attended by Sax's daughter. She later wrote to Raschèr, agreeing that his sound was closer to Sax's intention for the instrument.<sup>46</sup> He advocated the use of vintage equipment to achieve the authentic saxophone sound envisioned by Sax. He even went as far as to design his

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<sup>45</sup> Timothy Rose, "The Evolution of the Saxophone Mouthpiece," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 46: 99-125

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 266

own line of mouthpieces in the 1970's, feeling that there were no mouthpieces appropriate for classical repertoire being produced.<sup>47</sup>

### The Saxophone's Resurgence in European Classical Music

#### Jazz in Europe:

In its new role as a fixture of American popular culture, with a huge following and a new sound, the saxophone took on a life of its own. Jazz brought the instrument levels of public attention and repertoire that it had never known before. It made more sense to invest in and learn an instrument that had a very prominent role in a very popular music genre than before, when the saxophone was more uncommon and mostly used as a specialty instrument. The changing role of the instrument was felt in Europe as much as the United States, as jazz penetrated European society. Especially by the 1930's, far more prominent European composers wrote for the instrument than ever before. The change was spurred by the effect of jazz on European classical music starting in the 1920's.

European acceptance of jazz was, unfortunately, largely rooted in racism. Exotism was a popular artistic movement in Europe in the early 20th century, and was based on the appropriation of elements from non-western cultures into European art, with the understanding that it was inferior. Orientalism and, more importantly here, primitivism, clearly represent that trend. Primitivism, an artistic movement that sought to portray cultures deemed 'primitive' was very popular. Stravinsky famously based his piece *Rite of Spring* on his perception of primitive cultures. The work centers around tribal peoples, emphasizing rhythms and using harsh dissonances to convey the perceived primitive nature of the people being portrayed. Works created under primitivism frequently included African folk traditions, and expanded to include

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

African American traditions, like jazz, as well. Duke Ellington's music, for example, was referred to as Jungle Music. Despite the racist causes for the fixation on jazz by European composers, it is undeniable that the genre had a huge impact on classical music. Demand for jazz in Europe was so great that not only did many important composers come to the United States to hear, many prominent jazz musicians spent years in Europe. Even Sidney Bechet spent a great deal of his later years in Paris.<sup>48</sup>

#### After jazz in Europe:

The increased awareness of the saxophone through the popularity of jazz led to vastly increased prominence in classical music, both in Europe and the United States. There were many pieces clearly influenced by jazz, but also many firmly rooted in the classical tradition. A notable example of a jazz-influenced composition including saxophone is Gershwin's 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue*. Considering its clear jazz influence, the saxophone plays a correspondingly important role in the work. A European composer, Maurice Ravel, was a huge proponent of jazz. He is even noted as remarking "'you Americans don't take jazz seriously enough.'"<sup>49</sup> Deeply influenced by jazz, he wrote for saxophone in several of his works, including his 1922 orchestration of *Pictures and an Exhibition*, and later in 1928's *Bolero*. Especially in *Pictures*, the saxophone plays a crucial role—a major solo in the second movement, *The Old Castle*—but it does not play in the rest of the work. Considering the year it was composed, 1922, the saxophone was still very early in its resurgence, so it likely would have met similar resistance as it had in Sax's own day.

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<sup>48</sup> Frank Salamone, "Jazz and its Impact on European Classical Music," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 4 (2005): 732

<sup>49</sup> Frank A. Salamone, "Jazz and its Impact on European Classical Music," *Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 4 (May 2005): 732-743, 732

With the rise in prominence of the saxophone, even classical composers who were not particularly influenced by jazz began using the instrument in their works. One notable example is the Austrian atonal composer Anton Webern, who wrote *Quartet for Clarinet, Tenor Saxophone, Piano and Violin, Op.22* in 1928. The instrumentation, quite unusual, uses the saxophone in the same context as incredibly well established instruments, demonstrating how quickly the instrument was increasing in popularity.

By the 1930's, jazz had reached a peak in popularity, and more repertoire was being written for the saxophone than ever before. Composers including Paul Hindemith and Aaron Copland wrote works prominently featuring the instrument with *Konzertstück for Two Alto Saxophones* (1933) and *Quiet City for Trumpet, Alto Saxophone, B♭ Clarinet, and Piano* (1939) respectively. Ralph Vaughan Williams' 1931 *Job - A Masque for Dancing* and Sergei Prokofiev's 1935 *Romeo and Juliet* included saxophone parts.

Further, the band tradition popularized by Sousa continues even today, with saxophone being a standard instrument in band music. Bands are an ideal environment for the saxophone. Most wind bands in the country are in public school, and the saxophone is a popular instrument, attracting many students. It works perfectly as an entry point into classical music through band repertoire.

The saxophone had a controversial start, with many musicians reacting very strongly either in favor or against it. It fell out of fashion in classical music around the turn of the century, but saw a resurgence in popular music. After jazz, the saxophone reached unprecedented levels of popularity. It was no longer a little-known instrument used as a gimmick. It certainly was not the object of the widespread disdain that it had in the past. Through its popularization in jazz, the saxophone attained the position that it holds today: one of incredible prominence. The fact that

the saxophone never became a standard instrument in the orchestra has many factors, likely including the fact that the instrument arrived too late. By the time it was finally popularized in the 20th century, the classical tradition had become so fractured in modernism that there was no single standard ensemble. Through jazz, band, and popular music, the saxophone remains very prominent to this day, a level of popularity of which Adolph Sax could only dream.

The saxophone's role, perception by the public and other musicians, and physical design have changed greatly over the decades. From its push through difficult times by Sax, to its fall in popularity, to its resurgence and acceptance through jazz and popular music, the saxophone has remained critical in modern music for many years. It cannot be overstated how important the instrument is. Jazz has influenced every popular genre of music around today and the saxophone greatly influenced the genre. The appeal of the instrument to students interested in music has doubtless created many lifelong lovers of music that never would have had the exposure otherwise. The saxophone only continues to increase in popularity, and will doubtless continue to affect music for decades to come. Despite the many obstacles he faced, Adolphe Sax changed the landscape of music forever.

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