

Historical Overview of the Spread of the Saxophone Family

When most people think of the saxophone, the first music that comes to mind is jazz. Yet the saxophone is a nineteenth-century European invention, while jazz is a twentieth-century American development. It is intriguing to trace how the instrument traveled and was used until it found the musical style in which it has become so well-known, and how this set the stage for the worldwide, ever-growing traditions of concert, popular and ethnic saxophone music that have developed in parallel with jazz.

Although its patent was delayed until 1846 due to pending lawsuits, the official debut performance of the saxophone was given on February 3rd, 1844 in the *Chant Sacré* that Hector Berlioz wrote especially for Sax's new types of instruments. Berlioz personally conducted the performance, and Sax himself played the bass saxophone, which was very favorably reviewed by those who heard it. In December of the same year, Sax's friend and supporter Georges Kastner included the bass saxophone in his biblical grand opera *The Last King of Judah*. The following year, Kastner published the first solo piece for saxophone and the first piece for the saxophone family (a sextet for soprano through contrabass saxophones) along with a method book for learning to play the instrument. By 1849, Sax had introduced contrabass through soprano saxophones to the public. He continued to display this full saxophone family at expositions and on promotional tours over the next several decades.

A slowly growing circle of composers began to take notice and to risk the political repercussions that often came from attempting to write for saxophone. Solo and chamber music began to be published; the first significant saxophone quartet was written by Jean-Baptiste Singelée in 1857¹ and it is still being performed by quartets a century-and-a-half later. It would be an error to assume that the saxophone was not also used in the nineteenth-century orchestra. One early and rather surprising use was in 1861: when it proved impossible to find enough horn players to cover the twelve horn parts for the Paris

¹ Paul Lindemeyer, *Celebrating the Saxophone* (New York: Hearst Books, 1996), 30.

premiere of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*; saxophones and saxhorns were used instead. More deliberate use came in such pieces as Jacques Fromental Halévy's *Le Juif Errant* in 1852, Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* in 1864, Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* in 1868, George Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* in 1872, Léo Delibes' *Sylvie* in 1876 and Camille Saint-Saëns' *Henri VIII* in 1883. Jules Massenet used various saxophones in his *Le Roi de Lahore* of 1877 and *Werther* of 1892; his 1879 *La Vierge* and 1881 *Hérodiade* used the contrabass saxophone as part of the orchestra.²

Several important saxophone soloists (usually converted clarinetists) began touring in Europe, Africa, America and the Far East in the 1850s.³ Several of the most important were Henri Wuille, Charles "Ali Ben" Soualle and Édouard Lefèvre. It was Wuille who gave the first known performances of the saxophone in the United States of America in 1853 as alto saxophone soloist with Louis Jullien's band. During that year, the band toured across the country and performed two hundred concerts in the United States. However, Philadelphia composer William Henry Fry had discovered the saxophone independently a year earlier, as he scored for soprano saxophone in his *Santa Claus Symphony* of 1852. Fry also wrote for soprano and bass saxophones in *Hagar in the Wilderness* and for tenor in *The Dying Soldier*, both written in 1854.

The saxophone began to spread quickly. Harvey Dodworth used tenor saxophone in his New York Central Park band in the 1860s.⁴ A photograph shows a saxophone in the ceremonial band for the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory Utah in 1869. Photographs also show Western frontier cavalry bands employing saxophonists on horseback in the 1880s.⁵ Minstrel shows and circus bands began to adopt saxophones of various sizes. And as community bands began to spring up all over the USA, the saxophone gradually found a very natural and eventually permanent home in those ensembles.

² Hemke, 307.

³ Segell, 23-25.

⁴ Lindemeyer, 30.

⁵ Segell, 55.