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## Early History and Performance of the Saxophone

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EARLY HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE OF THE SAXOPHONE

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HONORS PROJECT

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at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for graduation with

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## **I. Introduction/ Guiding Research Questions**

The saxophone is an instrument that was invented around the 1840s by musician and instrument maker/inventor Adolphe Sax. Commonly mistaken as a brass instrument, this woodwind instrument uses a mouthpiece and a single reed attached to a curved, brass body to produce a wide variety of sounds based on the musician and their needs. While the saxophone today is one of the most well-known instruments, especially to non-musicians given its use in popular music and culture, the saxophone has a unique history. Since it is one of the only instruments that was invented, the saxophone is new in relation to its symphonic counterparts; and while the saxophone is undoubtedly most known for its inclusion in jazz, its origins and intentions were classical. The saxophone is an incredibly versatile instrument with its history rich in successes and failures, and looking back on this history, we are able to use that information to enhance performances of works from the same era.

For the research part of my honors project, I investigated the life of Adolphe Sax and the invention of the saxophone. There are several questions to answer during the paper. Why was the saxophone invented, and how does this original intent differ from contemporary perceptions of the instrument? What was the role of Adolphe Sax in the integration or lack of integration of the saxophone during this time? And lastly, how does knowing the historical background of the saxophone allow musicians to perform works from a similar time period better, and what are some of the practical applications of this historical context?

## **II. Literature Review**

As stated above, the saxophone was invented by Adolphe Sax around the 1840s. While the patent for this instrument was filed on June 22, 1846, the instrument was likely “invented several years prior”; this hesitancy in applying for a patent is likely due to Sax’s involvement in another lawsuit involving another of his inventions – the saxhorn.<sup>1</sup> Sax’s motives for inventing the saxophone stem from his ambition to improve orchestral wind sections. In his patent for the saxophone, Sax explains that “wind instruments are either too harsh or too weak in sonority” especially for bass instruments, and that by inventing the saxophone he is creating an instrument that is able to “reconcil[e] with the stringed instruments” and is able to “change the volume of its sound better than any other instrument.”<sup>2</sup> The first saxophone was similar to the bass saxophone, and it was Sax’s intention to fill the lack of a strong orchestral woodwind instrument through this invention. The only other orchestral bass woodwind instrument at this time was the bassoon; while it “blends well with string instruments,” it had a “weak sound” that could only be used “for accompany and filling parts.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Fred Hemke states that the saxophone was “a new orchestral bass voice” with the “ability to reconcile the brass with the strings” and while still possessing a “force and intensity” to its sound.<sup>4</sup> Initial reactions of the saxophone were positive with many musicians praising the new instrument. Even Hector Berlioz, a famous French composer, had many praises for the instrument: “Flexible and suitable for rapidly-moving passages and for charming passages of song, for religious and dreamy harmonious effects, saxophones are useful to a great advantage in every kind of music.”<sup>5</sup> From the reactions of others and Sax’s own descriptions, it seems like the saxophone would have been a great addition to

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Hemke, *The Early History of the Saxophone* (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Adolphe Sax, “Brevet d’invention: No. 3226” (Paris, 1846), 2, quoted in Fred Hemke, *The Early History of the Saxophone* (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Hemke, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Grand traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes* (Paris: Schonenberger, 1855), 286, quoted in Jaap Kool, *Das Saxophon*, trans. Lawrence Gwozdz (Baldock: Egon Publishers Ltd., 1987), 29.

classical music and specifically the orchestra; however the integration of the saxophone into classical music was riddled with both successes and failures. Specifically, despite the potential benefits of including a bass saxophone into the orchestra, as Sax points out, the saxophone never became a permanent member of the orchestra. There are various reasons why the integration of the saxophone was not smooth, but one of the main reasons is because of Adolphe Sax himself.

Adolphe Sax was born on November 6, 1814, in Dinant, Belgium. While Sax would go on to be a well-known musician and inventor, it was his father that first had the passion for music and inventing. Charles Joseph Sax was born in 1793, and while he studied architecture as a child, he became “an apprenticed cabinet-maker in Brussels” at the age of fifteen.<sup>6</sup> Sax first began creating instruments around this time when he was “annoyed at having to use a borrowed instrument” while playing the serpent in a “local music society,” which led to him studying this instrument and recreating it with great success.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not until after the birth of his first son, Adolphe, that he began to work full-time as an instrument maker, first making “serpents and flutes” and then extending his catalogue to “include clarinets, bassoons, and instruments in brass.”<sup>8</sup> Because of Charles Sax’s occupation as an instrument maker, Adolphe Sax subsequently grew up and became interested in this line of work as well.

From a young age, Adolphe Sax was interested in his father’s work. The older Sax encouraged his son into music- and instrument-making which led to Adolphe “work[ing] in his father’s shop from his earliest years” and eventually going on to study “solfeggio, flute, clarinet and harmony at the Brussels Conservatory” while also working as an apprentice in his father’s

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<sup>6</sup> Wally Horwood, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894, His Life and Legacy* (Baldock: Egon Publishers LTD, 1983), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Horwood, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Horwood, 18.

workshop.<sup>9</sup> Having a solid musical background allowed Adolphe to succeed as an instrument maker and inventor where others could not. Fred Hemke states: “Because Sax was an excellent performer, he understood the capabilities and acoustical theories of his instruments prior to applying any manufacturing techniques, allowing him the advantage of constructing instruments which were free from the usual manufacturing faults.”<sup>10</sup> The combination of growing up around a seasoned instrument maker and having education in various musical pursuits allowed Adolphe Sax to be well prepared for his future career as an instrument maker and inventor; however, several aspects of his childhood and personality proved to be a detriment instead of a benefit.

While Sax grew up in a perfect position to learn as much as possible about music and instrument making, the number of misfortunes that occurred in his early childhood made any future for him look impossible:

Before he was two, he fell headlong down three flights of stairs and cracked his head on a stone floor. When only three he almost expired through drinking a mixture of vitriol and water in mistake for milk, being narrowly saved by the application of liberal doses of olive oil. Three other poisoning mishaps followed involving white lead, copper oxide and arsenic as well as the swallowing of a pin. A gunpowder explosion gave him severe burns and threw him a considerable distance; he was again burned when a frying pan was knocked over. A lifelong scar on his head was caused by a falling roof-stone. Once he went to bed in a room where some newly varnished objects were drying, being found in time to prevent asphyxiation from the fumes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hemke, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Hemke, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Horwood, 19.

With the apparent “agents of misfortune” that seemed to “conspire relentlessly” against Sax, it is no wonder that his mother is recorded to have said about Sax: “The child is doomed to suffer; he won’t live!”<sup>12</sup> However, Sax did live, and he grew up to become a prolific musician and inventor, but there is reason to believe that his propensity for misfortune would follow him to his adulthood. While it is debatable that these early childhood accidents were all Sax’s own fault, there is something to be said about Sax’s tendency to act rashly and not think his actions through. These misfortunes could show that Sax was “accident-prone,” or it could be argued that Sax might not have been able to “perceive potential danger” in childhood which could have led him to be an adult that was “oblivious as to the probable reactions” of others and his own actions.<sup>13</sup> This obliviousness would lead Sax to make many enemies within the music community which served to make his career and life much harder than it needed to be.

Adolphe Sax had a history of making enemies within the classical music realm. It was not uncommon for Sax’s “jealousy of others” to “plague his life” to the point of seeking out conflict with his fellow musicians.<sup>14</sup> In a specific instance with M. Bachman, a professional clarinetist, surrounding Bachman’s refusal to play Sax’s bass clarinet, Sax challenged the musician to a public musical duel in order to demonstrate “the superiority of his [Sax] invention.”<sup>15</sup> This was not uncommon for Sax, and he ended up winning many of these “duels.” However, though Sax had gained favor with the public, many musicians despised him and therefore, his options for integrating the saxophone into the classical music realm were small. One area that did allow for

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Segell, *The Devil’s Horn: The Story of the Saxophone, from Noisy Novelty to the King of Cool* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Horwood, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Horwood, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Horwood, 23.

integration of the saxophone was the French Military Band, although even in that setting there were complications.

Because the saxophone was met with much praise in its sonority and technical abilities from the public, it gained the interest of high-ranking officials in the French Military band. Specifically, General Rumigny was impressed by the saxophone and was in support of a French Military Band Reform which allowed Sax to integrate the saxophone into this ensemble.<sup>16</sup> In 1844, Sax wrote a proposal to the Commission for the “reorganization of regimental bands” that was encouraged by King Louis Philippe himself as he was a “great enthusiast of music” and wanted to see the French Military Band succeed.<sup>17</sup> After much discussion with the officials of the French Military, a new instrumentation for the ensemble was created. This new instrumentation included saxophone for the first time in a large ensemble as a permanent member, and while the leaders of the French Military and King Louis Philippe himself were in favor of the reform, many musicians were not.

Even though the French Military officials highly favored Sax’s proposal, “[v]irtually no one connected to the military bands—musicians, instrument makers, conductors, military brass—favored the reforms.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, other musicians and instrument manufacturers decided to submit their own proposals for a different instrumentation. The main subsequent proposal was suggested by Michele Carafa, director and educator of many of the army’s musicians and a rival of Sax. In order for the Commission to “come to an equitable judgement” on whose proposal was better, a public performance of both ensembles was planned on April 22, 1845 on the Champ de Mars parade field.<sup>19</sup> During this performance, both ensembles played for

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<sup>16</sup> Hemke, 193.

<sup>17</sup> Hemke, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Segell, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Hemke, 199.

musicians, military officials, and the public for four hours, during which a verdict was reached that Sax's ensemble was superior; this was because Carafa's group "did not have the carrying power of Sax's instrumentation" which "possessed fuller sonority and greater equality of tone."<sup>20</sup> After this success, the French Military Band Reform was complete with Sax's saxophone included in the final instrumentation. This also set the precedent for saxophones to be included in the standard symphonic band instrumentation. While the French Military Band was a success in terms of Sax's diligence and motivation surrounding the integration of the saxophone, similar conflicts to this made the saxophone "unwelcome" in the ensembles such as different orchestras, with musicians of the time commenting that it was unlikely to "ever become a regular member of the symphony orchestra."<sup>21</sup> Sax's efforts to advocate for the saxophone often ended up working against him and making him many enemies within the musical community.

In addition to the numerous misfortunes and his own rashness that made success difficult to achieve for Sax, there was also the matter of his finances and competition that furthered his struggles. Throughout his lifetime, Sax had "incurred a considerable number of debts" due to his various "battles in the French courts" which led to his having to declare bankruptcy in 1852.<sup>22</sup> It was not until 1860 that the French courts "reestablished Sax's solvency" by citing that Sax had made "unique contributions" to the industry of musical instruments.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Sax's patent on the saxophone was extended from fifteen to twenty years, and he was "only the second man in French history since 1791 to have his patents extended."<sup>24</sup> That being said, this extension only

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<sup>20</sup> Hemke, 201-2

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Cottrell, *The Saxophone* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 229.

<sup>22</sup> Hemke, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Hemke, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Hemke, 72.

bought Sax five extra years, and in 1866, Sax's original patent for the saxophone went into the public domain.

Immediately after Sax's patent entered the public domain, other instrument makers began proposing their own patents based on Sax's. Instrument manufactures such as Millereau and Company, Gautrot, Pierre Louis and Company, Pierre Goumas and Company, and many others all developed patents for the saxophone that were similar to Sax's original model, sometimes with changes or improvements.<sup>25</sup> Because of this rise in patents for the saxophone, Sax found himself "fight[ing] against counterfeiters of the saxophone" as well as "oppos[ing] those who copied any part of the instrument."<sup>26</sup> This constant fight for the saxophone left Sax even more in debt, and he is said to have "complained of the shortness of French patents" as it made it difficult for him to make "a living while others illegally copied all parts of his saxophone."<sup>27</sup> The competition surrounding saxophone patents and the envy at Sax's instrument expertise eventually rose to the point of suspected attacks against him. In 1844, a fire broke out at one of Sax's instrument plants that originated from "no apparent normal cause," and with the "evidence of broken and scattered tools and instruments untouched by the fire," we can assume that this was a purposeful attack rather than an unfortunate accident.<sup>28</sup> Due to the amount of money and time spent dealing with competition, patents, and court battles, Sax continued to struggle financially until, in 1877, he decided to sell his personal instrument collection that contained instruments gathered over forty years.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hemke, 73-76.

<sup>26</sup> Hemke, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Hemke, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Hemke, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Hemke, 103-4.

#### IV. Methodology

To complete the research portion of my honors project, I used a variety of scholarly approaches to answer my research questions. First, I accumulated a variety of academic and credible sources about the saxophone and Adolphe Sax. To accumulate these, I used various databases (such as EBSCO, JSOTR, Oxford Music Online, Project Muse), books within the BGSU library system, and books from my professor's, Dr. John Sampen, personal collection to find resources of a scholarly nature. Because research on the life of Adolphe Sax and the invention of the saxophone is generally within the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the sources are from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; however, I do have a couple of more recent sources. I investigated the author and publisher for each book or article to make sure that they are of credible nature by investigating their credentials and sources. I then looked through these sources and notated specifically what they say about the saxophone and Adolphe Sax and accumulated all my notes surrounding this topic. After accumulating all the information, I started to answer some of my research questions by synthesizing the research from various sources to make sense of the historical events and their consequences.

Out of all the sources, the two I found the most helpful were *The Early History of the Saxophone* by Fred Hemke, and *Adolphe Sax: 1814-1894* by Wally Horwood. Hemke's dissertation is a well-known resource for early saxophone history for the saxophone community. Dr. Fred Hemke was an American saxophonist and professor of saxophone at Northwestern University between 1962 and 2012. While it is not a requirement for the author of a book about early saxophone history to play the saxophone, the fact that Hemke was a saxophonist adds a level of understanding for the instrument in his writing that was found in few other sources. This

dissertation was extremely helpful in putting the saxophone in context of the wider musical world at the time, and it gave some information about Adolphe Sax that I had not seen elsewhere. *Adolphe Sax: 1814-1894* by Wally Horwood, on the other hand, was much less focused on the saxophone and more focused on Sax himself. It was beneficial to get another perspective on early history of the saxophone with a much heavier emphasis on Sax as opposed to the saxophone as an instrument.

For the performance and presentation parts of my honors project, my quartet members and I used the historical information that we gathered to choose pieces that we believe are representative of the time and are important to early saxophone history: we chose a saxophone quartet arrangement of Hector Berlioz's *Hymne for six wind instruments of Adolphe Sax* (1844), which was the first written piece to include saxophone; *Quartette (Allegro de Concert)* (1879) by Caryl Florio which was an early saxophone quartet; *Premier Quatuor op. 53* (1857) by Jean Baptiste Singelée which is potentially the first saxophone quartet written; and finally, *Quatuor pour Saxophones* (1861) by Jerome Savari which is also potentially the first saxophone quartet written. The quartet ensemble then worked individually on the pieces over the Summer and started rehearsing the pieces together in the Fall leading to our lecture-recital. In the rehearsals, we made sure to discuss historical practices and events that may affect the performance of the piece. Some of these included specific styles of articulations or dynamics that are different from how we would play them today. Ultimately, we hoped to create an informative lecture-recital that presented music surrounding the invention of the saxophone while providing the historical context surrounding these specific pieces.

## **V. Results**

Throughout this project, I came to many conclusions surrounding my guiding research questions. One question revolved around Sax's role in the integration of the saxophone. While researching, I could not help wondering what effect the various misfortunes had on his life, especially because Sax is infamous for his reckless nature in how he dealt with adversaries. Based on what I read, it seems as if some scholars believe that this propensity for misfortune at an early age could have been a sign that Sax was reckless and did not think his actions through. While I agree with this, I think that his early misfortunes can also be a sign of curiosity and interest in the world around him. This curious nature would have made him well suited to being an inventor, and with his father's skills as an instrument maker, Sax had the perfect combination of personality and circumstance to become the inventor that he did.

Additionally, while the notion that Sax was reckless might be true, there could also be some historical context missing. While I do believe Sax was prone to conflict, part of this might have been due to the pushback he initially received from his self-promoted instruments. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "engaging too obviously in self-promotion" was looked down upon and was "regarded as inappropriate conduct" that could "serve to tarnish rather than enhance an image."<sup>30</sup> This fact could describe why so many musicians initially disliked and heavily criticized Sax, and I think that because of this pushback, Sax might have fought harder for his inventions which in turn, made musicians dislike him even more. Additionally, while one could argue that musicians might have been wary of a new instrument entering the orchestra, the tuba was invented in 1835, only a few years before the saxophone is thought to have been invented, and it is a standard member of the orchestra; this shows that musicians were not completely opposed to new

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<sup>30</sup> Nicolas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010).

instruments which leads some to believe that Sax's personality played a significant role on the lack of the integration of the saxophone.<sup>31</sup> As shown by history, Sax's conflicts, personality, and self-promotion backfired on him, and if the musicians of his time had been more accepting of self-promotion and new instruments, the saxophone might have had a less tumultuous history.

The lack of acceptance of the saxophone during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has had long lasting effects on saxophone in the classical music community today. One effect shown in the fact that the saxophone is not a permanent member of the orchestra to this day. Despite Sax inventing the saxophone for the purpose of filling a void in the lower woodwind voices of this ensemble, the saxophone is only included in a handful of orchestral pieces. As unfortunate as this fact is for current classical saxophonists, it is accepted as something that will be unchanged. This is due to the orchestra's propensity for playing music from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and ignoring much new music that could be written to include newer instruments, such as the saxophone. While many musicians in the classical realm would be happy to allow saxophonists into the orchestra, the fact that the music typically played is not written for saxophone excludes them from this ensemble. Additionally, another reason why orchestras decide not to program pieces that include saxophonists could be because it would mean having to pay another musician. This leads to orchestral pieces with saxophone not being played, or the pieces being played by an orchestral musician who does not specialize in saxophone, resulting in performances with potentially mediocre saxophonists. I believe that it will not be until orchestras make more of an effort to

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<sup>31</sup> Clifford Bevan, "Tuba," *Grove Music Online*. 31 Jan. 2014; Accessed 2 Nov. 2021. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561692630-e-1002257418>.

play new music, or that they invest in playing the music that does include saxophones, that saxophonists could have the opportunity to play at the professional level within these ensembles.

In addition to answering questions through research, I was also able to identify practical applications of this historical information to perform the chosen early works better. One aspect of my research that I found helpful to the performative aspect of my honors project was analyzing why the saxophone was created. Adolphe Sax created the saxophone for the orchestral and classical environment. While it is now known widely for its use in jazz and popular music, the original intention for the instrument was to be used in the classical setting. As a result, when our quartet was choosing the pieces to play on our lecture-recital, we chose pieces that reflected the original intention of the instrument. That is not to say that the evolution of this instrument to be involved in various other styles is unimportant or frivolous, but our quartet thought it appropriate to show the saxophone and the saxophone quartet in the style of music that Sax had intended. Additionally, we were able to consider the perception of the saxophone from Berlioz (as referenced above) and use his opinion of the saxophone as a lyrical instrument to inform our musical decisions surrounding the piece we played by him.

Another aspect of my research that I found enhanced the performance of our works was understanding the mechanics of the instrument. As stated above, Sax had invented the saxophone as an instrument that had a strong sonority that could project in various halls while still being able to blend with strings and have good technical ability. Knowing this has allowed our quartet to pick pieces that showcased all these aspects. We utilized the entire dynamic range of the horn throughout all our pieces and had various technical passages that highlighted our technical abilities throughout the entire range of the horn. We also focused on blending and making our

instruments work together seamlessly by matching our tone, intonation, articulation, and style in the same way that early saxophonists did in larger ensembles. By knowing the aspects of the saxophone that Sax was most proud of, we were able to choose pieces that highlighted those features within our lecture-recital.

The last aspect of my research that I found enhanced our performance was the fact that we can have a greater appreciation for the music and the musicians of that period. Because we know that the saxophone was very young when these pieces were written, we can assume that there would be very few saxophonists at the time who were truly professionals on the instrument. This would have made these pieces extremely difficult for the musicians at the time because the caliber and expectations of the saxophonists was much lower than today. Therefore, while the pieces we played are not difficult by today's standards, we can appreciate how early performances of these pieces served to further expose the saxophone to wider audiences that allowed it to start the journey to where it is today.

## **VI. Implications for Future Research and Practice**

My research here has various implications for future research and practice. One implication is to encourage more composers to write for the saxophone. I believe there to be a misconception surrounding the abilities of a saxophonist to play classical music well. Because of the saxophone's involvement in jazz and popular music, many composers do not necessarily think about the saxophone as a classical instrument that is able to play lyrically and technically in a classical setting. Some scholars even think that the saxophone's involvement in jazz and

popular music was “the best way to ruin this beautiful instrument.”<sup>32</sup> Personally, I do not agree that other styles of music ruin the saxophone, and I feel that the saxophone’s involvement in many different genres and styles shows the versatility of the instrument. The saxophone can act as a chameleon of instruments where it can blend and play in most ensembles, styles, and genres, and I believe this should be celebrated and not looked down upon. However, I do think that less-informed composers and musicians might turn away from the saxophone because of the mainstream reputation and sound. Therefore, I believe that with this research on the early history of the saxophone, composers and musicians will be exposed to the initial intent of the instrument in the classical music realm and learn about how well it blends with other instruments; this will hopefully make these composers and musicians more willing to write for and play with classical saxophonists.

Another implication for future research or practice is the understanding of the unfair treatment towards Adolphe Sax and the saxophone. As mentioned above, other instruments invented around this time did not have the hardships that the saxophone, and by extension Sax, did. Especially because of the outlook on self-promotion, musicians of the time did not give Sax the credit nor respect that he deserved. And while it is fair to mention that Sax also had his hand in making enemies within the classical music realm, ignoring the fact that Sax was probably looked down upon initially is ignoring context that shows Sax in an understanding light. I think that understanding Sax as a person will allow scholars and musicians to have more of an appreciation for him and his inventions. Additionally, I hope there will be more research into the effect that the self-promotion of the saxophone had on its integration or lack thereof.

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<sup>32</sup> Jaap Kool, *Das Saxophon*, trans. Lawrence Gwozdz (Baldock: Egon Publishers Ltd., 1987), 41.

## VII. Appendix

Some additional information that I would like to submit are the names of my quartet members that aided me in the performance of my honors project. The quartet was comprised of Laney Sheehan on soprano saxophone, myself on alto saxophone, Derek East on tenor saxophone, and Kaitlyn Grella on baritone saxophone. This lecture-recital took place on November 14, 2021, in Bryan Recital Hall in the Moore Musical Arts Center. The following is a link to the lecture/performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msiu3D5gAA>

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