

Mario Marzi

the
saxophone
book



Presentation

A single volume that brings together the historical-musical, instrumental, biographical, educational and technical aspects of the saxophone's creation and its evolution over time had not previously been available in Italy. This comprehensive text, written by Mario Marzi, is the result of many years of in-depth research. Even more importantly, it bears witness to his life and career as an outstanding musician, who has always been immersed in the sound and the musical universe of this fascinating instrument. The book opens with an extensive chapter on the life of Adolphe Sax, the genius who invented this instrument, and he appears again at its conclusion, in a series of interesting statements made by his 'friends' and 'enemies'. Cesare Pavese's poem, found at the end of this volume on page 438, is perhaps the utmost poetic expression of the emotions conveyed by the sound of the saxophone: "My entire soul / shudders and trembles and surrenders / to the raucous saxophone".

RICCARDO CHAILLY

Preface

*M*orciano di Romagna, January 1974. The conductor of the town band, Francesco Imola, put an alto saxophone in the hands of a very young musician and advised him to treat it with care. This was certainly no landmark moment in the history of music, but that day unquestionably changed my life: the boy who received that shiny instrument from maestro “Checco” (as Francesco was affectionately called) was me. Immediately, the biggest and most radiant smile that any kid my age could ever display spread across my face. I was so excited because that sax seemed like the most beautiful gift I had received... except, perhaps, for my first football! Right from the start, I couldn’t resist its fascinating shape and magical sound. It didn’t really matter that this particular instrument was almost impossible to play, so much so that at times I would fill it up with water in an attempt to get the pads to close. My initial enthusiasm was matched only by my disappointment when I found out that this instrument would be taken away from me at the end of the month, so that two other kids could play the only sax owned by the local band. I already felt as though it was mine, and the idea of parting with it made it seem like a broken toy, leaving me with a sense of profound injustice. I could never have imagined that this instrument, which I chose almost by chance, or perhaps more as an excuse to spend time with the other kids, would become an inseparable companion and even my profession as an adult. Over the years, I have always tried to “respect” it, maintaining the same enthusiasm, which has invariably been repaid with a personal enrichment, leading me

along a journey of constant experimentation, insight and rethinking that continues to this day.

When the editors approached me with the idea of writing a book about the saxophone, I was immediately eager to comply, but I soon had to come to terms with my inexperience in this field: how do you write a book, where do you start?

Until then, I had generally tried to communicate my emotions through the sound of my instrument, instead of attempting to transcribe my experience and feelings, putting them all down on paper.

Driven by my desire to learn and improve myself (“some people only get to know themselves through adventures”, as Gide said), I began to ask for advice from friends who had more experience than me.

The most curious, but at the same time practical, tip was: “don’t overthink it”. It also helped to just get started, perhaps haphazardly, but nonetheless make some progress.

The friend who told me this backed it up with an example from Zen philosophy, quoting the incredible tenacity shown by children building sandcastles by the sea without a thought to the waves that might destroy them.

Thus began the long period in which I jotted down little notes and reflections, all of which wound up on loose pieces of paper with various sizes, scribbled down on the spur of the moment and put inside a box, awaiting further meditation.

It actually ended up working. All kinds of observations and ideas began to ferment and take shape, almost by magic.

The result of a great deal of work appears in this book: the story of an instrument and one of its many instrumentalists.

As we retrace the main stages of its development, from its invention to the present day, we will see how the saxophone, after a fair number of ups and downs, gradually managed to define its personality and carve out a well-deserved claim to fame. With considerable effort and seemingly against all odds, this huge “nickel pipe”, as Jean Cocteau dubbed it in the early 20th century, and that Igor Stravinsky portrayed as having a “juvenile-delinquent personality”, has now amply affirmed its own identity.

A little over one hundred and seventy years after its birth, Adolphe Sax’s favourite creation can now be heard almost everywhere, insistently affirming its modern voice and in some cases becoming a symbol and a cult object. Today, with no fear of exaggerating, we could define it as the instrument of the present and the future. Nor would we be going out on a limb if we claimed that its many voices will make it one of the favourite instruments of future generations.

A chapter unto itself is dedicated to the saxophone in jazz, outlining its role in one of the greatest musical expressions of the twentieth century. This is most likely where the instrument discovered its true soul, which in turn enabled many composers to make better use of its resources and adopt it in music written in the European tradition.

We will also focus on its repertoire and the influence that composers, along with the performers themselves, have had on its growing popularity.

Particular attention will be paid to various aspects of teaching the sax, in an attempt to offer musicians materials on which to reflect. Writing down what I have experienced time and time again, during lessons with students or discussions with fellow saxophonists, was an interesting exercise for me, and also gave me the chance to clarify and deepen my understanding of some fundamental aspects of this instrument.

The chapter dedicated to instrumental technique does not, however, set out a dogmatic approach to “correctly” teaching the saxophone, but only a modest and, I hope, interesting account of my personal experience.

The underlying principle that goes for all aspects of technique is to seek a natural balance in our relationship with the instrument, through relaxation. The right coordination between mind, ear and body will then provide the right solutions for our needs.

The instrument should ideally become a natural extension of our body and an amplifier of our emotions.

Our ultimate goal is to freely express ourselves, thanks to a better knowledge of the physical, technical and artistic aspects involved, without losing sight of the playful and enjoyable side of making music.

This book is dedicated to all my saxophonist friends who have an intimate relationship with their instrument, hoping that they will have the patience to follow me on this journey through the world of the sax. I would also like to stimulate their curiosity towards our beloved instrument and share their sense of the long and demanding work that is necessary to obtain a significant artistic result.

I will furthermore attempt to look into and perhaps solve a few problems, raising doubts and stimulating a debate or two, without claiming to have access to any absolute truth and well aware that every idea inevitably brings with it another.

In the following pages, therefore, I have tried quite simply to talk about my experience with the instrument, almost striving to use the saxophone as an excuse to capture not only the pleasure that music conveys, but also the exceptional pleasure of verifying and enjoying, thanks to the sax’s peculiar features, some entirely new aspects.

I would like to thank all those who have collaborated in this literary undertaking of mine, continually stimulating me with new ideas and giving me valuable advice.

A special dedication goes to my family, for all the love they have always given me, and to “Lu” for sharing this travel making a dream possible.

The Zecchini brothers also deserve my heartfelt thanks, for their friendship and endless patience.

This book is meant for everyone who has fallen or has yet to fall in love with the sound of the saxophone.

So, enjoy the music, or rather I should say (sorry, some habits are hard to break), the book.

MARIO MARZI

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Adolphe Sax

“The power of genius”^(*)



Adolphe Sax. Lithograph by Auguste Bry, from a portrait by Charles Baugnet, 1844.

The year was 1814. Napoleon Bonaparte, exiled to the Isle of Elba, was planning his last great military campaign, which one year later would lead to his final defeat in Waterloo.

Far away, in the industrious town of Dinant, built on the steep, rocky shores of the river Meuse in the province of Namur, in what is now southern Belgium, the ingenious Monsieur Charles-Joseph Sax was producing excellent musical instruments made of wood and brass. An accomplished artisan with a good nose for business, while still a young man Charles-Joseph set up a company and immediately began producing flutes, clarinets, bassoons and serpens. Ranging from single- to double-reed instruments and from woodwinds to brass, all of this variety required a considerable amount of employees and machinery, not to mention a special sort of *savoir-faire* in dealing with the manufacturing techniques and raw materials involved. Business flourished. Despite its modest size, his company quickly gained prestige and important contracts for supplying instruments to orchestras, bands and military ensembles in the region's larger cities. After being con-



Charles-Joseph Sax. Copyright Association Internationale Adolphe Sax, Dinant (Belgium).

^(*) With the collaboration of ALBERTO CAPROTTI.

Many thanks to Alberto Caprotti for his help in drafting this chapter.

holes, he then included short toneholes soldered to the body. The padding, made of lambskin, was entirely new. The resulting instrument, a brass bass saxophone equipped with a newly designed mouthpiece, had a range of three octaves. Its creator himself was not overly happy with the sound produced in the highest register, but there was no more time for modifications: the date of the exhibition was approaching. Sax sensed that this time he succeeded in making pro-

gress, but since he was aware of the new instrument’s immense potential, he decided at the last minute not to reveal it to the eyes of the public. On the other hand, however, he still wanted to spread the word about his invention. To evaluate the reaction of the public and the military authorities, his company’s main customers, he therefore decided to allow those visiting the exhibition a chance not to see, but only to hear the sound of the new instrument. Hence, he set up a curtain in the exhibition hall, behind which he could play without being seen. This was a rather last-minute decision, certainly due to Sax’s somewhat theatrical nature; a skilled promoter, he knew the commercial value that some suspense and a touch of mystery would bring, and he could also perceive the earliest signs of envy that the success gained by him and his factory had already aroused in his competitors. The lively competition that

In 1841, during the Belgian Industry Exhibition in Brussels, Sax presented a “saxophone basse en cuivre” in C. Since he had not yet registered the patent, and for fear of being robbed of his new invention, when playing the instrument that would make him famous for a jury to hear, he remained hidden behind a curtain (a green cloth).

reigned in liberal Belgium in those years was certainly a stimulus to creativity, but it could also lead unscrupulous competitors to steal such a promising invention, that had not yet been patented.

This time, Sax knew he had hit the mark and, after the huge commotion caused by his hidden performance, he expected top honours. So he was extremely disappointed when the gold medal awarded by the exhibition’s organisation for the most deserving product was not given to him, even though it remained in the family, going to his father. *The Médaille de Vermeil* (a gilded silver medal) he was to receive couldn’t quite console him: fully aware that he had created something unique, Sax proudly did not accept this second prize. Firmly believing in himself, he later challenged his competitors, who had cri-

At the Universal Exhibition in Brussels in 1841, Sax was considered by the jury “too young to be given the gold medal”. Apparently, Adolphe was annoyed by this and refused the “Médaille de Vermeil” offered to him, saying that “if he was too young to be given the gold then he was too old for the silver”.



Adolphe Sax baritone sax (courtesy of Henri Selmer, Paris).

History and evolution of the magic “nickel pipe”

“The last mechanical instrument in history”

*“...It was a nickel pipe
and people laughed just to see it”.*

MARCELLO PIRAS

1 Foreword



n 21 March 1846, Adolphe Sax proudly filed the patent for his new instrument, destined to go down in history.

It was probably no coincidence that Antoine Joseph, then in his early thirties, chose the first day of spring to make his new creation official. Deep down, he knew perfectly well that he had invented “THE INSTRUMENT”

that would make him famous, one that would bridge the *gap* between woodwind and brass instruments and bring a breath of fresh air to the world of music.

Its form was indeed revolutionary: a single-reed wind instrument no longer made of wood, but of brass and with a conical shape, the result of extensive studies in acoustics. The metal body, modelled on the ophicleide,



Saxophonists “at work”.
Library of Congress, Wash-
ington.

was combined with a key mechanism like the one used for flutes and clarinets and a single-reed mouthpiece similar to that of the bass clarinet. It combined the features of single-reed instruments with the mysterious resonances of horns, in an unusual, almost “transgenic” combination.

Sax had hit the mark. What he created was a new, extraordinary instrument, with a timbre not unlike stringed and woodwind instruments, but with a sound as powerful as brass instruments. Strength and malleability, quality in timbre and dynamics: all of this makes a beautiful blend, no doubt about it. The qualities of this instrument did not go unnoticed, and its shape and sound soon went down in history. The ups and downs that followed its immediate success, due to envy, slander, rivalry, oblivion and rebirth, leading to its definitive success, only make the saxophone and the myths surrounding it more fascinating.



Adolphe Sax's alto sax in E flat (courtesy of Henri Selmer, Paris).

Going against the theories advanced by some of the leading acousticians of his time, who believed that the materials used (wood, copper, brass, etc.) were directly related to the timbre of an instrument, Sax discovered after lengthy research that timbre is essentially determined by “*the proportions given to the column of air in relation to those of the body of the instrument containing it*”.

Thanks to this revolutionary theory, Sax was able to build entire families of instruments with a degree of perfection of tone and intonation that had never been achieved before.



Portrait of Adolphe Sax. Copyright Association Internationale Adolphe Sax, Dinant (Belgium).

The saxophone and its bards

“Jazz across the Atlantic welcomed the saxophone as a ‘messiah’, while in the old continent, in the late 19th and early 20th century, it survived almost exclusively thanks to military bands and a few heroic soloists”.



The cover of a CD recorded by the Sax Chorus, conducted by Alberto Domizi (cover: Giorgio Ciommi).

1 Pioneers

The success gained by an instrument depends to a great degree on its performers, musicians who are able to make it known and appreciated for its qualities. Their role has been, and still is, fundamental in productively stimulating composers and their creativity.

The balance between the performer and their *alter ego*, and the dynamic relation that arises between this pair, is precisely what led to the birth of the greatest masterpieces in the history of music.

“Without their alter egos”, as Renè Leibowitz said on this matter, “composers are incomplete. Without this interaction, no masterpiece can be born. Without meaningful compositions, an instrument is superfluous”.

The saxophone, much like other instruments and especially in what is referred to as classical music (recalling that in jazz, the saxophone almost immediately found its most “heroic” musicians, partially thanks to the fact that performer and composer came together in a single figure) saw its role change from a supporting actor to a protagonist in the 1920s and 1930s, with the appearance of the first professionals of this instrument, outstanding musicians and “full-time” saxophonists.

Their gradual entry onto the scene, indeed, led an increasing number of composers to take an interest in and write for this instrument. All saxophone enthusiasts should therefore be particularly grateful to these musicians, precisely because at a time and in an environment in which the instrument was marginalised, almost relegated to a musical “ghetto”, they believed in its great potential and dedicated a huge amount of energy to bringing its resources to light.

Without their contribution, the history of the saxophone would probably be quite different today.

Early saxophonists

The first to play the saxophone was naturally its inventor. The famous instrument-maker Adolphe Sax, besides being an eclectic and tireless inventor, was also educated as a musician, a gifted instrumentalist who played the flute, clarinet and saxophone. He cannot, however, be considered a performer in his own right, since his aim was mainly to play the instrument “properly” and thus demonstrate its potential or make modifica-

The sax in Italy

The “sassofono” or the “saxofono”?

To convey an idea of how important the “phenomenon” surrounding the sax has become in Italy, we might simply mention that over one hundred musicians teach this instrument to roughly three thousand students in the country’s conservatories, municipal schools and private institutes. Semi-professional students, small chamber groups, quartets, larger ensembles and even entire orchestras playing the “golden elephant’s

The “Hallo Mr. Sax” orchestra
(photo: Hallo Mr. Sax).



trunk” (as the saxophones played by American bands touring the old continent were called in the early 20th century) bear witness to the fascination the sax has exerted in the country that saw the birth of bel canto. In the last quarter century, the fortunes of the sax have risen exponentially, going from a secondary instrument or a poor relative of the clarinet to an object of desire. Marcello Piras has described this reversal as follows: *“Like a beggar who won the lottery, the saxophone has seen its status overturned, moving from anonymity to superstar status. Once a rarity or not much more than a bizarre object, it is now perfectly familiar”*.

Yes indeed, the saxophone has come quite a long way. From its humble origins, it was deservedly promoted to the “big leagues”, playing on an equal footing with its older and theoretically more reputable brothers. Personally, I can’t help thinking back to when I was a student in the mid-1970s, when everyone in the musical institutions wanted to convince me that I had chosen a “second-class” instrument.

Time and time again, I was told to “repent” and take up the clarinet as soon as possible. “If you know how to play the clarinet, then switching to the sax will be easy!” “What on earth are you going to do with that pipe

The italian saxophone repertoire

Thanks to its remarkable tonal and expressive potential, its affinities with jazz and pop music and its undeniably modern voice, the saxophone has attracted a steadily increasing amount of attention from composers. Today, even without including jazz or popular music pieces, we can count as many as 500 Italian composers who have written for the instrument and around 3,000 classical-contemporary works, some still unedited, with and for sax. New works are constantly appearing and composers, while favouring classical ensembles such as the quartet, sax and piano duo or solo sax in their scores, are progressively tending to include the sax in mixed ensembles, juxtaposing it with more noble



Photo: Mario Marzi.

Learning the saxophone

“The essential instrument for the new millennium”

“Its foremost virtue, in my opinion, lies in the variable beauty of its accent, at times grave and calm, at times passionate, dreamy or melancholic, or again vague like an echo of an echo, like the indistinct moan of the wind in a forest, or even more precisely, like the mysterious vibrations of a bell long after it has been struck. No other musical instrument exists, to my knowledge, that has this particular sonority, lying at the edge of silence... it has the most beautiful low voice currently known in music”. HÉCTOR BERLIOZ (“Journal des Débats”, 21 April 1849)

“... The most important thing in playing, in teaching and life is to share something with others. The best part of us is not recognising this, but offering it”. YO-YO MA

1 Introduction

I am always amazed by the overwhelming enthusiasm and infectious energy that young people pass on to me during our lessons. I am grateful to them for this and often feel that they are offering me much more than I can give them in return. This leaves me feeling regenerated each time, as if my own “batteries” had been recharged.

Sometimes I ask them why they chose the saxophone. For me, it is of the utmost importance to find out if their motivations are strong enough and, in some way, similar to my own.

The answers they give me generally leave no room for doubt. At times this not only surprises me but also makes me reflect on how lucky I’ve been since embarking on this adventure.

Among the many reasons to study this instrument, one of the most beautiful (and poetic) I have ever heard was expressed by a young girl, still a beginner, who smiled shyly and confessed: *“I chose the saxophone because it makes the sun shine even when it rains”*. Every time I recall her words, I find the energy I need to overcome difficult moments in my studies and professional life.

The topics discussed during our lessons take into account each student’s different musi-

cal experiences and their technical level, but generally, above and beyond certain indications concerning the instrument, I try to convey the concept in which my first teacher so firmly believed, as do I: *“Above all else, be musical”*.

Most often, all students trust their teacher’s advice and make progress by following it.

**My first teacher,
“Checco”.**

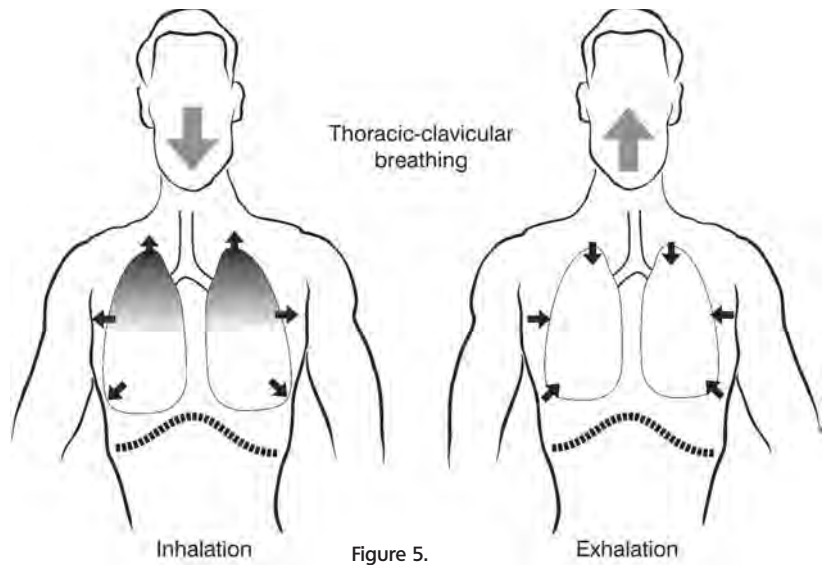


7 Key breathing techniques

Let us now clarify the differences between the possible forms of breathing.

The increased volume of the ribcage can occur thanks to so-called **high** (or costal) breathing, **low** (or **diaphragmatic**) breathing, or a combination of the two, defined as **total** or **full breathing**. The diaphragm comes into action in each type of respiration (high, low and total), and its involvement is directly and proportionally linked to the type of breathing adopted.

There is also a type of **breathing** called **continuous** or **circular breathing**, which we will discuss see later on (among the other extended techniques) as regards its characteristics and application.

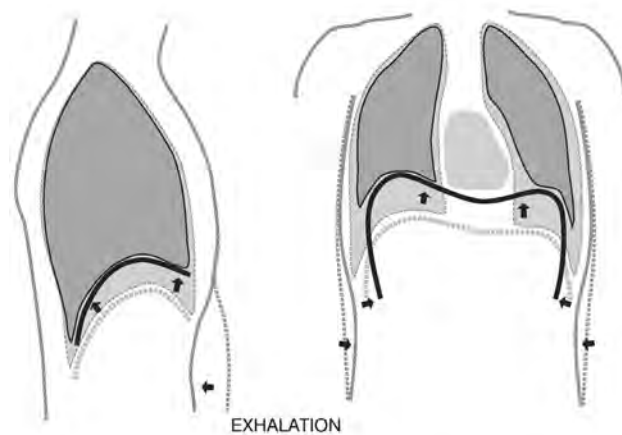
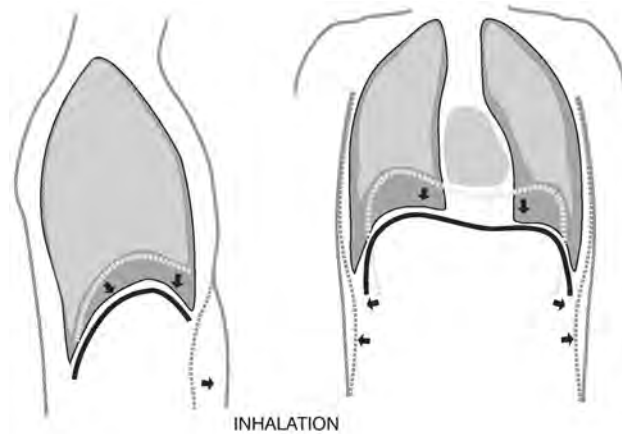


High or clavicular breathing

In women, breathing is often predominantly costoclavicular (high breathing). Athletes also use this type of ventilation, since it is particularly functional in all situations where the body's demand for air is substantial. When we have an urgent need for oxygen, for example during sports, this kind of breathing allows us to quickly bring in a large amount of oxygen.

During high inhalation, the ribs rotate into a horizontal position and the lungs are filled by expanding the ribcage upwards and forwards. This occurs due to the action of the external intercostal muscles, which cause the anteroposterior diameter of the chest to increase (see Figure 5).

When inhaling, we can notice a typical upward movement of the shoulders (which allows the air to enter more quickly), and while exhaling the ribcage returns downwards to its initial position.



Diaphragm

Figure 6.

Low or diaphragmatic breathing

This type of respiration, also known as abdominal breathing, relies on the lower part of the chest during inhalation and directly involves the abdominal muscles during expiration. During inhalation, the lungs fill up and expand downwards thanks to the elastic movement of the diaphragm. This expands the thoracic cavity ("vertically"), thus allowing more air into the lungs. While exhaling, the diaphragm carries out the opposite



Various types of Selmer mouthpieces, from soprano to baritone, classical and jazz (courtesy of Henri Selmer, Paris).

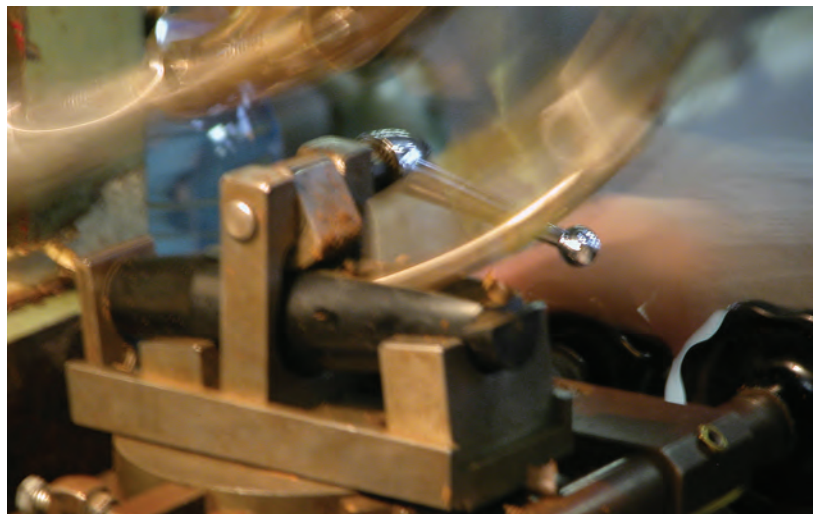
Advice

Especially at the beginning, when our technique (emission and embouchure) is yet fully developed, it is a good idea to use a mouthpiece with a medium opening, preferably made of ebonite. This will generally make our emission more comfortable and intonation easier to control. We can always look for a mouthpiece more suited to our musical requirements at a later date. When changing it, we will naturally have to reconsider and adapt the strength of our reed to its new features (opening, baffle, facing curve and material). When choosing one, we will pay due attention to the characteristics of the internal chamber, which defines the acoustic reflections and thus plays an important role in forming the tone. In general, higher and concave chambers will produce a warmer, darker tone, while lower and convex chambers allow for a larger volume of sound and more projection, also bringing out the higher harmonics.

In the latter case, controlling our sound and intonation will generally be more difficult. We should also pay attention to the table of the mouthpiece (which must be perfectly flat and smooth) and the uniform curve of the two side rails. We can easily check this with the help of a flat surface such as a mirror or a piece of glass.

If we habitually play in different styles and aesthetics, e.g. classical or jazz, the best solution might be to alternatively use two mouthpieces with different, even opposite characteristics.

Once again trusting Monsieur Sax, we should bear in mind that here too the proportions (opening, facing curve, chamber)



Shaping the inner chamber of the mouthpiece (courtesy of Henri Selmer, Paris).

are what causes differences in tone. The material is almost irrelevant if the right proportions and dimensions are respected. It is only responsible for slight nuances that have more of a psychological influence on us, giving us a more or less favourable feeling and thus making us more or less comfortable when playing. I like to recall in this sense that Marcel Mule, who had one of the most beautiful sounds ever, universally recognised as the “master” of the classical sax, played with a Selmer metal mouthpiece (“Standard Model”).

Furthermore, a mouthpiece that fits properly into the neck and thus goes deeper into

The saxophone in jazz

1 Introduction

by Luca Bragalini

The history of jazz now spans an entire century, and if its epic tale were to be told by one single instrument, it could only be the saxophone. Saxophonists have dominated the history of “syncopated music”, so if we were to attempt to mention all of these outstanding musicians in the few pages of this chapter, we would risk giving the reader little more than a bland inventory. We have therefore opted for a concise but hopefully detailed and stimulating treatment of the four most important and influential saxophonists in jazz history. A paragraph on the role of the sax in early jazz (a fascinating and unjustly neglected field of research) opens this chapter, and two additional paragraphs dedicated to the sound of the saxophone in Afro-American music and jazz performance, along with a discography that lists the most essential 50 compact discs, round off our discussion of the fascination exerted on African-American musicians by the Belgian inventor’s “nickel pipe”.

“What-a-phone?”

The script for a vaudeville play entitled *A Musical Absurdity*, copyrighted in 1902, is now found at the Library of Congress in Wa-



Archie Shepp and Reggie Workman in a watercolour by Alessandro Curadi.

shington (as mentioned in previous chapters, this genre of comic theatre was extremely popular in the United States around the turn of the 20th century). Reading the manuscript, we see that one of the highlights of the show involved a short melody played by a strange new instrument called the sax-

Left, a suggestive photo by Pino Ninfa.

An alternative history of the sax, and other odds and ends

W

1 The saxophone, seen through the eyes of women

Who knows whether Adolphe Sax could ever have imagined that his instrument, designed to make the sound of brass instruments more full-bodied and “virile”, would one day attract female musicians, like the beguiling song of a Homeric siren?

Although pioneering female saxophonists already existed in the United States at the turn of the century, Sax did not, alas, live long enough to hear his prized invention played by a woman. Unquestionably, however, he would have been extremely enthusiastic. In all likelihood, his mind would have raced far beyond the ingenious system he invented to ventilate the hair of the beautiful Parisian ladies who, forced to wear curious hats and whimsical belle époque wigs, frequently suffered from terrible migraines. He may even have invented some devilish and sophisticated device that could make the sax more pliant and better suited for a feminine approach.

In any case, it is undeniable that the instrument, until relatively recently, was considered a kind of strictly male musical domain. The image of a saxophone letting loose while playing a joyous solo immediately brought to



Elise Boyer Hall in 1905 (photo: “Musica” magazine archive).

mind musicians such as Sidney Bechet or Johnny Hodges, Coleman Hawkins or Charlie Parker, to name but a few. One could easily imagine it being played in the African-American neighbourhoods of Kansas City or some seedy club frequented by gangsters, prostitutes and drug dealers, or again in an American band specialised in swing and rhythm and blues.

If we think back to its origins, the saxophone seemed to have been born to embody typically male qualities. Strong, vigorous, lyrical, impetuous and irreverent, it immediately came across as being handsome and rebellious; for this and other reasons, it was immediately used as the main instrument in exclusively male military bands. Its size, shape, material, timbre and weight make one think that it was created for the hands and lungs of men only, and by convention, it, therefore, became all too easy to attribute it to the male sphere of expression.