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A Plea for the Saxophone

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR

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A Plea for the Saxophone

By A. G. ELLIOTT

WHY, in these days when it is the fashion for the musically-minded to proclaim themselves progressive, is the saxophone still frowned upon as an instrument below the dignity of the true musician? This may be an overstatement of the case, but certainly the average concert-goer has little or no appreciation of its possibilities, whilst to many it is merely a vulgar noise in a dance-band, commemorated in the realms of wit by such aphorisms as 'A gentleman is a person who can play a saxophone and doesn't' or 'The saxophone is the embodied spirit of beer.' (This last has been attributed, I believe, to Arnold Bennett.)

Yet there is precious little justification for the disparagement of Adolph Sax's brain-child. The modern saxophone has a range which compares very favourably with that of any other wood-wind, possesses a tone which blends the often too-noticeable gap between the brass and wood-wind sections of an orchestra, and is a brilliant solo instrument with a repertory which, although not large, is nevertheless representative of the best of various schools of composition of the last sixty years, a fact which seems to be unknown to even the majority of saxophonists.

I think the key to the situation is to be found in the outlook of those who would claim to come under this heading. Ignoring the large category of dance-band instrumentalists, the ranks of the saxophonists can be divided into two sections: those who play the saxophone as if it were a solo instrument, and those to whom it is a handy 'double.' It is a strange reflection on the state of music in the smaller orchestras that when a passage calls for saxophones almost inevitably the tenor, and often the alto as well, are played by violinists. The tradition that a violin should double on the saxophone is one which I have found in no other country, unless it be in America,

where the influence of the so-called light orchestra predominates. On the Continent, a violinist would no more think of playing the saxophone than he would the piccolo—'The piccolo is the legitimate double for the flautist,' he would affirm; and I claim that in a small orchestra the saxophone is the legitimate double for the clarinetist.

Unfortunately, British clarinetists are notoriously conservative; their refusal to adopt changes in the fingering system of their instrument is a case in point, and the tradition that the saxophone is not a respectable instrument dies hard. I will remember the occasion when I produced my first saxophone before that fine clarinetist, Frederick Weight. He looked first at me, then at the saxophone, and finally in sorrowful tones he opined 'Laddie, that's not an instrument—it's a glorified motor-horn.' It took me a long while to reconcile him to the idea that there was something to be said for my choice.

To provide a brief answer to the rationalizations of the intellectual snob I must explicitly and dogmatically set forth the capabilities and characteristics of the saxophone. Like the clarinet, it is a transposing instrument, the two types most commonly in use being the alto in E flat and the tenor in B flat. It is played with a single reed and mouthpiece in precisely the same way as a clarinet, but has a conical bore and is made of brass; because of this bore it overblows an octave, and has a nominal range of two and a half octaves—from the relative low B flat to the relative F in alt—though in the hands of a skilful player a range of four octaves may be obtained by cross-fingering. The saxophone is as much a wood-wind instrument as a metal clarinet, and cannot be treated as a hybrid brass-and-woodwind production. The possibilities of tone and expression are as varied as on a

clarinet, and those who base their opinion of the saxophone on the moanings of a swing-band would certainly be agreeably surprised if they took the trouble to listen to a record by such an artist as Sigurd Rascher.

There is a specious argument to the effect that the saxophone is not an orchestral instrument, and stands in the same relation to the clarinet as the cornet to the trumpet. A moment's reflection will serve to convince anybody that this is not so; the conical bore alone should disprove the assertion, and the saxophone is a distinct orchestral entity with a tone which is not merely a richer clarinet tone. I recently saw a demonstration in which the wind section of a well-known municipal orchestra was tested against an oscillograph—an instrument which analyses the components of noises in terms of light waves thrown on a cathode-ray screen—and of all the instruments it was the saxophone which gave the purest curve and the greatest range of true overtones.

In contradistinction to the clarinet the saxophone has several alternative fingerings for many notes, and the fact that the fingering is the same for octaves is a simplification which should be welcomed by any player. The break between registers presents few difficulties, as the notes from B flat to D natural may be played in either register, and such accessories as an articulated G sharp, forked B flat and so forth, are standard on every modern instrument.

The main problem is that of tone, and it is on this score that I would quarrel with many of my colleagues. An even tone is all-important, and defects in breathing or lipwork are often covered by an exaggerated vibrato and a tendency to smear notes. This is particularly so in the case of the man who has found that 'doubling saxophone' is desirable and who has taken up the instrument without tuition or sufficiently long practice. It is usual to find that such players have no range beyond that known as the mechanical range, and naturally they do not accept this as adequate for solo work. No less an authority than 'Grove' was guilty of accepting the total

range of the instrument as two and a half octaves, and it is largely due to the work of men such as Marigaux, Rascher and Vivard that the study of cross-fingering has been seriously pursued.

When one considers the limited capacity of the old-time saxophonist one is surprised to find so much of merit written for the instrument. Four years after its invention in 1840 we find it being used by Kastner in 'Le Roi de Juda,' and since that time its use has steadily grown. Berlioz proclaimed it the 'wood-wind instrument *par excellence*' and employed it freely, as did Bizet, Saint-Saëns, and more recently Delibes and Florent Schmitt. Klose, the adaptor of the standard Boehm clarinet fingering system and author of the famous 'Method for Clarinet' which bears his name, produced from 1850 onwards a large quantity of music for solo and concerted saxophones. Josef Holbrooke has written a Concerto for saxophone and orchestra which ranks among his finest work, Glazounov published a sonata which is an important contribution to the repertory, Ibert and d'Indy have both written concertos, and so have Lars Erik Larsson and Norman Demuth, although these latter are, I believe, not yet published. Debussy, Bauche and Coates have all produced rhapsodies for saxophone and orchestra.

Yet how often are these heard, or for that matter attempted? 'Technical difficulties' is the usual excuse for avoiding them, which being interpreted means that the player cannot achieve a top A or B flat. This is sheer laziness, and is the attitude which has been responsible for so much mud being slung at the saxophone.

I plead as a clarinetist. I plead for a wider use of the saxophone as a musical instrument by those who understand the technique of wood-wind phrasing and tone, and I plead that I may never again encounter the situation which confronted me when a conductor of international repute looked at the score of a ballet and said, 'I think the horn had better take the saxophone part. At any rate, I'll be sure then what noise I'm going to get.'

Amateur Orchestras in Choral Territory— War-time Difficulties

By A. HARGREAVES ASHWORTH

At the best of times the West Riding is a singing rather than a musical region, and even at that, a region in which the annual 'Messiah' is by now the only undertaking sure of a good audience. The standing orchestra of the region, the Northern Philharmonic, give a certain number of concerts in Leeds, but take part in quite twice that number of choral performances in Leeds, Bradford, Halifax and (though not under their own name) Huddersfield; while the Leeds orchestral concerts, though well attended, number half those given in Manchester or Liverpool. West Riding people have not yet learned to want orchestral music. Or, to put it

the way things go in the musical world, a constant supply has not created the demand for it.

Yet orchestral music is by no means neglected. Before the war one could count as many as ten amateur orchestras in this region, most of them presenting their two or three concerts a season. They did not perhaps receive much support beyond that of friends and relations. It is natural for amateur orchestras to enjoy showing what they have accomplished, but at the same time their sort of entertainment is better to give than to receive. They cannot expect to emulate the polish of a madrigal society or choral competition team; and even if they could, they must resign