Adolphe Sax

Saxophone Celebration

Featuring Paul Forsyth with the NSU Saxophone Studio

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

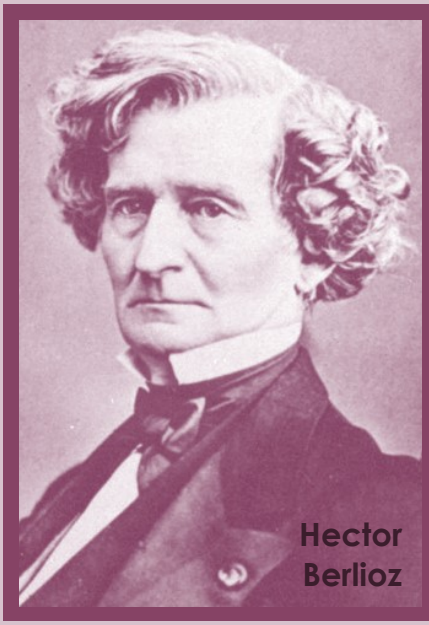
Tonight at Nachtmusik we celebrate the life and work of **Adolphe Sax (1814-1894)**, inventor of the saxophone, who was born on this day 204 years ago. For this reason, we have invited Paul Forsyth, professor of saxophone at Northwestern State University, and his saxophone studio to share with us a program of saxophone music. Their repertoire is all classical, with one notable exception. Several pieces are arrangements, but several are also original compositions for this instrument. Additionally, their program combines solo pieces with works for quartet, quintet, and full saxophone choir. In sum, tonight's concert hurts little for variety—a fitting celebration which highlights many aspects of the saxophone and its distinctive repertoire.

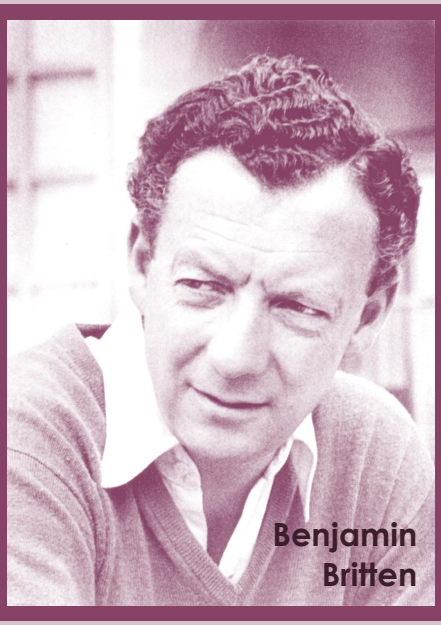
The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of remarkable innovation in the development of wind instruments: as the members of the clarinet family were reaching their finished forms, brass instruments were gaining valves, effectively outmoding predecessors like the natural horn and the keyed ophicleide. Adolphe Sax, the son of a Belgian instrument maker, was born into this ripe environment and was perhaps the most innovative of any of his contemporaries. Himself a flutist and clarinetist trained at the Brussels Conservatory, he understood well both the musical aspirations of wind players and the technical limitations of their instruments. He first applied himself to his own instruments, presenting new flutes and clarinets at the Brussels Industrial Exhibition of 1830, and in 1838 he patented a bass clarinet superior to any yet developed. Feeling stifled in his native country, however, he relocated to Paris in 1842, quickly making contact with Hector Berlioz who was eager to incorporate new instruments and their unfamiliar timbres into his radical compositions. By 1845, Sax had patented his first saxhorns, a family of instruments not unlike the modern tuba or euphonium. A year later, in 1846, Sax patented the saxophone.

It is suspected that Sax began work on what would become the saxophone, the most original of his new instruments, as early as the 1830s while still in Belgium. In fact, he had already unveiled what he termed the *saxophone basse en cuivre* at the Second Brussels Exhibition in August 1841; thanks to Berlioz, the name "saxophone" has remained in common usage. Sax introduced the saxophone, originally pitched in the bass register, as a replacement to the ophicleide which had previously served as the low brass of orchestras and wind bands. By the time of its patent, the term "saxophone" had come to encompass a family of eight instruments in various sizes, with a single reed mouthpiece and a key layout similar to the flute and clarinet. He had already gained a virtual monopoly as instrument supplier to French military bands, and saw to it that his new saxophone family was also tailored to their use. Soon, the saxophone had become an essential participant in military and civic wind bands alike, and it was through this context that in the early twentieth century it found its place in jazz. There it has been the weapon of choice of such formidable musicians as Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Dexter Gordon.

Classical composers as early as Berlioz offered considerable praise for the saxophone, yet it never established itself as regular member of the symphony orchestra. Jean-Georges Kastner who was first to employ the saxophone in his opera, *Le dernier roi de Juda* (1844),

and four years later published a method book, described it as "powerful, far-reaching, expressive, and beautiful… uniting strength and charm… the perfect instrument." Berlioz regarded its lower register as eminently solemn. Sax taught the saxophone at the Paris Conservatoire from 1857 to 1870, but he had no successor there until 1942. It was instead exclusively in Brussels and in Lille, near the French-Belgian border, that saxophone was taught until the twentieth century when other music schools and conservatories created degrees in saxophone. Major nineteenth-century composers of French opera like Georges Bizet and Jules Massenet employed the saxophone in their pit orchestras. Yet, the saxophone was still considered quite novel to orchestral music by the 1920s when Darius Milhaud, George Gershwin, and Maurice Ravel began integrating it into their orchestras, if largely for its jazz associations. Alexander Glazunov, who had settled in France by the 1930s, was one of the first composers to offer a more authentically, classical approach through his Saxophone Quartet (1932) and Saxophone Concerto (1934).


Hector Berlioz


Benjamin Britten

Today, there remains little of the bias against the saxophone, previously decried by some as an amateur's instrument or as the exclusive property of jazz. It maintains its jazz associations, of course, but there are entire idioms of saxophone writing suited to the classical tradition, not to mention its importance in rock, blues, funk, and other popular genres—all musical worlds upon which the skilled contemporary composer is able to draw. Many saxophonists, too, are equally skilled at playing in these multiple idioms. American composer, John Adams, who wrote a Saxophone Concerto in 2013, indeed, chose to draw on not the French tradition of saxophone playing, but the jazz tradition. New chamber music is also being composed for saxophone, especially music for saxophone quartet, an ensemble which typically consists of soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones. Dr. Forsyth, for example, is active in the Iridium Quartet who has recently released two new albums: *Skylines* with music by Gregory Wanamaker, Carl Schimmel, Peter Lieuwen, and others, and another recording featuring the Concerto for saxophone quartet and wind ensemble by David Maslanka.

The American composer **Steven Bryant (born 1972)**, whose *Dusk* for saxophone choir begins our program tonight, is well-regarded for his music for wind ensemble. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, the son of a professional trumpeter and music educator, Bryant has gone on to study at Julliard (with John Corigliano), University of North Texas, and Ouachita University. Corigliano has praised Bryant for his "compositional virtuosity" and, likewise, Samuel Adler has remarked of his talent for orchestration. Major works include *Loose Id* for orchestra, his Concerto for wind ensemble, and *Ecstatic Waters* which melds wind ensemble with electronics. *Dusk* began as a piece for wind band in 2004, and the version we hear for saxophone ensemble was made by the composer and José Oliver Riojas in 2012. The piece is brief but passionate with sweet harmonies depicting the calm of sundown. Bryant is actually a saxophonist himself and on at least one occasion has played with the jazz saxophonist, Branford Marsalis.

The French composer **Eugène Bozza (1905-1991)** has been praised for his fluent and sensitive writing for many wind instruments, including the saxophone for which he wrote over twenty chamber and instrumental works. His aesthetic was already fully-developed before World War II, and thus draws on Neo-Classicism and Post-Impressionism which dominated French composition during the interwar years. *Improvisation et Caprice*, which we hear tonight, is an original for solo saxophone. This piece in two movements began as the sixth and seventh of twelve etudes for saxophone, published by Bozza in 1944. They were then reissued as *Improvisation et Caprice* in 1952 by Leduc and have remained among Bozza's most popular works. The first movement, *Improvisation*, is meant to sound improvised, though as if a classical cadenza as opposed to a jazz solo. To this effect, it undergoes frequent tempo and meter changes, and often asks for *ritardando*, which again detracts from a measured feel. The second movement, *Caprice*, as its name implies, is much faster and lighter; it has even been compared to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. Bozza dedicated *Improvisation et Caprice* to Marcel Mule, professor of saxophone at the

Paris Conservatoire from 1942 to 1968 who mentored many of the great saxophonists of the French tradition.

The English composer **Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)** wrote his *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* for solo oboe, Op. 49 in 1951, and they are dedicated to the oboist Joy Boughton who gave their premiere on June 14 of that year at Aldeburgh. It is not uncommon, however, for these works to be performed on soprano saxophone. It is on this smaller instrument, which resembles the oboe, that we hear three of the six movements performed by Dr. Forsyth. Each movement describes a different mythological character in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Phaeton is the subject of the first movement heard tonight. Phaeton was the son of Apollo who nearly crashed his father's chariot of the Sun before being struck-down by Jupiter's thunderbolt. Fittingly, the music assigned to Phaeton moves at a quick pace, galloping along as if pulled by out-of-control horses. The next movement reflects on Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflection and was consequently transformed into a flower; his music is single-minded and decorative, if not completely self-obsessed. Arethusa, a nymph who became a fountain, is described in the final movement.

We next hear two movements from the Saxophone Quartet by contemporary French composer, **Ida Gotkovsky (born 1933)**. The eldest daughter of musical parents, Gotkovsky studied with Olivier Messiaen and Nadia Boulanger at the Paris Conservatoire. She is now on the theory faculty at that same school. Her music has been supported by the French government and is also known around the world. She has written, "To create a universal art and ensure a contemporary language, a composer must draw from vigorous structures and a unity of musical expression to transcend all time." Indeed, this is the artistic philosophy to which she ascribes. Gotkovsky composed her Saxophone Quartet in 1983, and since then it has been commercially recorded at least seven times and performed live countless others. The work is in six movements, the first two of which we hear tonight. The first movement, marked *Misterioso*, possesses an enigmatic character with its jaunty rhythms in a largely homophonic texture. The second movement, *Lento*, only gradually reveals itself through an expressive, solo melody which is passed around from instrument to instrument.

One of the most respected composers of classical music from South America, Brazilian **Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)** combined the musical traditions of his homeland with the teachings of European art music. Especially in his series of nine compositions titled *Bachianas brasileiras*, Villa-Lobos merged the contrapuntal, harmonic, and formal concerns found in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach with the spirit and splendor of native Brazilian music. We hear the fifth piece from this cycle tonight in an arrangement for saxophone quintet. The original is for soprano and eight cellos, an instrumentation that allows one melodic voice to resound over an impressively homogenous ensemble, though this work has been heard in many arrangements. Composed between 1938 and 1945, it has long been Villa-Lobos's most famous work, and might even be familiar to our audience members tonight. Its melody, sung largely without words, is sensuous and the accompaniment, certainly on cellos but also on saxophones, is equally warm.

The tenor saxophonist **Sonny Rollins (born 1930)** is a well-known name among jazz aficionados. His apprenticeship was spent with Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet before he set-out on his own in the mid-1950s. The albums *Saxophone Colossus* (1956) and *The Freedom Suite* (1958) are revered as landmarks in the world of jazz, if for entirely dissimilar reasons. Whereas the former witnesses Rollins exploring calypso rhythms and what Gunther Schuller has called "thematic improvisation," the latter foreshadows the political direction much jazz would take in the 1960s. Since these landmark recordings, his music has at times been adamantly experimental and at others remained fairly close to his original bebop idiom. "St. Thomas," the tune which Dr. Forsyth plays tonight on alto saxophone, is from Rollins's album, *Saxophone Colossus*. It is based on a folk melody which Rollins's mother would sing to him when he was a


Ida Gotkovsky


Sonny Rollins

child. She was from the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, and the melody is well-known there, though it ultimately has European origins as well.

Tonight's program closes with another familiar number, the *Turkish March* by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 -1791)** heard in an arrangement for saxophone choir. The *Turkish March*, properly known as *Rondo alla turca*, originally concluded Mozart's Piano Sonata in A major, K. 331, composed in 1783, but is often excerpted. Turkish music was a popular diversion for composers working in Classical-era Vienna. The Austrian Empire had come into contact with Turkish military music through a series of wars with the Ottoman Empire, and Viennese composers were fond to imitate these foreign sounds. Mozart, in particular, uses exotic stereotypes like the loud pounding of drums, the crashing of cymbals, and insistent—in their opinion, banal—rhythms in a number of works, including his opera, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, and his Violin Concerto No. 5; Beethoven's Ninth Symphony also has a Turkish-themed interlude. For the Viennese, the Turks were not just to be feared as battlefield rivals, but their culture also exerted some element of mystery which Mozart and others were eager to recreate through their so -called Turkish music.

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a master's candidate in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has been awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. His current research focuses on French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho, exploring the aesthetic ramifications of timbre, harmony, and melody in this new music. He has recently shared this research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, NC and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. Since that time, he has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. Also a composer, his music has been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

Read additional program notes at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.