1. Introduction

We can’t imagine what our military bands would be without all the inventions of Adolphe Sax.

By his personality and his genius, he is certainly the most important instruments manufacturer for wind instruments. Kris Schauvliege did a very good choice (and a good work too!) to celebrate the 25th anniversary of IMMS. I have a dream and probably we could realise it this year. After our International Competition of Classical Saxophone, we are going to organise for the first time a military tattoo in Adolphe Sax’s native town: Dinant. I’m sure it will be a fantastic Tribute to Adolphe Sax.

Foreword written by Alain Crepin, Saxophone Teacher at the Brussels’ Conservatory, Bandmaster of the Royal Band of the Belgian Air Force and composer of A Tribute to Sax.

2. Adolphe Sax (06/11/1814 – 04/02/1894)

Adolphe Sax was born on 06/11/1814 in Dinant (Belgium). Adolphe Sax’s official name was Antoine-Joseph. His father established himself in Brussels as an instruments manufacturer. He was the instrument supplier of the Royal House of the Lower Countries, under the auspices of King Wilhelm I. In 1820, his father received an award at the Industrial Exhibition. It is very common for a son to follow in the steps of his father. While still an apprentice in his father’s workshop, Adolphe Sax was a pupil of the Brussels Conservatory and soon became an excellent flutist. He was taught to play the clarinet by Jean-Valentin Bender, the later conductor of the Belgian Guides Band. He was twenty when he improved the bass-clarinet. Such instruments already existed, but their sound was defective. The bass-clarinet became a standard part of the woodwind orchestras.

In 1841 at the National Exhibition of Brussels, Adolphe Sax presented the bassaxophone (the 1st saxophone). He played the instrument for a jury behind curtains to avoid plagiance. Althought the center of his activity was still Brussels, Adolphe Sax became well known in the principal music centers of Europe. He dreamt of a success in Paris. General de Rumigny was staff member of King Louis-Phillip. He asked him to improve the instrumentarium of the French military bands.

Adolphe Sax moved to Paris in October 1842, there he met Hector Berlioz, the romantic composer, in Paris. Berlioz liked new paths and adventures in music. Berlioz supported the ideas of Adolphe Sax and in his project to invent new instrumentfamilies. Other musicians like Auber, Halévy, Habeneck, Meyerbeer and Monnais praised him greatly.

On 22/06/1846, Adolphe Sax obtained the patent for his new instrument; the bassaxophone. Later he would invent four new instrumentfamilies: saxhorns, saxtrombos, saxophones and saxtubas. Sax created seven different types of saxophones, e.g. in 1853 he
produced the alt-saxophone. Sax had to deal with a lot of jealous competitors and critics of mediocre musicians. Nevertheless, he received a lot of orders to produce saxophones for the French military bands. After the revolution in 1848, the new republic recalled this order. Hence, Adolphe Sax went bankrupt. In 1849, Sax restarted his business and received the Gold Medal at the Industrial Exhibition. Two years later, he received the Grand Médaille d’Honneur at the International Exhibition. Nevertheless in 1854, the government during the 2nd empire to reintroduced the saxophones in the military bands. In 1858, Napoleon III appointed Adolphe Sax as Imperial Instrument maker. From 1843 till 1860, Adolphe Sax produced about 40000 instruments and his company had 100 workers. The German-French war of 1870 caused a 2nd bankruptcy for Sax. His entire collection of instruments were sold in 1877. Adolphe Sax was not a successful Businessman and died in debt.

After his death on 07/02/1994, Sax received the honour and respect which he deserved. His son, Adolphe Edouard Sax continued to produce instruments in a small shop. Nevertheless, in 1928 Selmer & Cie took over the company “Adolphe Sax & Cie”.

3. Application of the saxophone in the military bands

The creation of the saxophone and the saxhorn, reformed and improved the quality of the wind bands and other orchestras. Even famous composers wrote works for the new instruments. Berlioz wrote a transcription of his choral work “Chant Sacré” (03/02/1844). George Kastner mentioned in his book: “The first saxophone constructed belonged to the bass compass. I was the first to make use of it in the score of my grand opera The Last King of Juda, performed at the Paris Conservatory on 01/12/1844”.

Despite of his creation and the support of many composers, Adolphe Sax, encountered problems his promotion of his instruments to the military (wind) bands. On 25/02/1845, the French Ministry of Defense organised a commission to determine the composition of the military bands for the future. General De Rumigny was assigned as director of this commission. George Kastner was his secretary. Musical advisors were: G. Spontini, D. Auber, A. Adam, de Saint-André, J. Halévy, M. Carafa and Onslow, military advisors were Colonels Gudin and Riban, and for the technical problems (sound) following persons were assigned; Colonel Savart, Baron Séquier and G. Kästner. On 11 March, the commission agreed that the reformation of the military bands was necessary. There were two solutions; one of Enrico Carafa, principal director of the Military Music Conservatory of Paris, the other Adolphe Sax with his new instrumentation. Sax himself had been offered a seat in the commission. However, he declined the proposition, thinking he could not act as judge and defendant at the same time. The first experiment was not well prepared. Sax had only 9 musicians to present his proposition. Carafa had 32 musicians. The commission took a wise resolution: a contest in open air and calling the whole population to decide between the two rivals. On 22/04/1845 the contest was held at the Champ de Mars in Paris. Each group had to perform a work chosen by the jury; an unpublished excerpt from “Le Diable à Quatre”, a ballet from Adolphe Adam, a member of the commission. Each group should perform another work of their choice. Carafa conducted his own band of 45 musicians. Alexandre Fessy, a close friend to Sax, was conductor of that band and consisted of 38 musicians in stead of 45. Seven musicians were not available and in the last minutes, two musicians declared themselves unable to perform. So, Sax himself, replaced those two musicians by playing two different instruments during the performances. The work choosen by Carafa was “La Muette de Portici” of Auber. Sax has choosen “Fantaisie”, especially composed by Fessy. It was
quite a success, and 22000 visitors acclaimed Sax. The commission decided to combine both bands and approved the result of those massed bands. Initially, they decided to reform the infantry bands to 74 musicians, including sax' instruments. However due to financial problems, the number of musicians was reduced to 54. Cavalry bands should contain 36 saxhorns. On 09/08/1845, the decree of the reorganisation of the French military bands was printed in the “Moniteur de l’Armée”.

First composers for the new instrumentation were Alexandre Fessy and Jules A.E. Demersesseman (1833-1866), who composed the Marche des Géants. On 26/07/1846, there was a huge military festival at the Franconi Hippodrome, where 1800 musicians performed a very eclectic program in front of a brilliant audience, presided over by the Duke of Monparsact. Berlioz’ transcription for sax instruments of the Apothéose from the Symphonie Funèbre et Triomphale was included. One year later, on 14/02/1847 Berlioz reported in his column that teaching of the precious instruments begun at the Gymnase Musical. In the same year, on 12/10/1847, first awards were organized for the saxophone class. The King Lous-Philippe, was impressed by the sound of the sax instruments. Nevertheless, the King was dethroned in 1848. And the new Republic disapproved Sax. On 21/01/1848 a counter-reformation of the military bands was introduced: the 1845’ decree was revoked. Even Napoleon III was a great admirer of Sax. In 1852, authorised the reformation of his National Guard Band who consists of 46 musicians. This band was presented to the public, which Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Halévy, Thomas and Adam attended. In 1856, a decree was issued that the Imperial Guard Band should serve as model for the French military bands: infantry bands got 57 musicians and cavalry bands 37 musicians).

4. Bibliography

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Article written by Kris Schauvliege, Chairman International Committee & Belgian Branch, IMMS, for the 25th anniversary of the International Military Music Society. With the support of Alain Crepin and Stanley Pyne.