

Adolphe Sax Podcast #1

Charles Joseph Sax was born to the parents Antoine Joseph Sax and Françoise Elisabeth in Dinant, Belgium 1790-93. Research is fuzzy on exactly the year he was born and it's understandable considering the times that it would be difficult to get the exact year that Charles Sax was born, but most researchers agree his day of birth was February 1.

Dinant was known for making objects in a silver and brass alloy. That's fascinating information considering the chosen profession of Charles Sax. And, considering that the saxophone was a marriage of brass and wood. It's good to know that Dinant had a strong history with brass.

Charles Sax studied architecture when he was young and was quite prolific. At the age of 15 Charles became an apprentice to a cabinet maker in Dinant. Charles was interested in music at that time and took up The Serpent. The Serpent is a wind instrument that looks like its name. It's a brass instrument, of sorts, with a curvy body that was designed to resemble a snake. He was borrowing a friend's "serpent" and decided to make his own.

He soon started working at a factory that produced spinning-machines and eventually graduated to a position of power at the factory. Somewhere in his mid-20's he meets a neighborhood girl named Maria Masson and they married. Their first child was a boy born on November 6, 1814, and is named after Charles' father, Antoine Joseph Sax. It's good to note that Charles Sax's son Adolphe, who invented the saxophone, was named after his grandfather. One reason he may have been given the nickname "Adolphe" was because he shared his name with his grandfather.

Adolphe's birth certificate listed his father's profession as "Joiner & Cabinet Maker."

The demise of Napoleon at "The Battle of Waterloo" in 1815 changed things for the Sax family. The factory that Charles worked in closed after the Waterloo battle. Charles, Elizabeth and their newborn child Antoine moved to Brussels.

A new father and newly unemployed Charles started making musical instruments and the Serpent instrument in particular. Over a few years he started adding other instruments. Bassoons, clarinets and various brass instruments as well. It must be noted that he was a self-taught instrument maker.

Over time his work and reputation grew so much that King William I made him the "Instrument Maker to the Court of the Netherlands," and he was given the contract to supply musical

instruments to the Belgian military bands. This success allowed him to add string instruments to his catalog and he produced violins, violas with new patents for piano, guitar.

In the Summer of 1830 things got a bit wild again for the folks in Brussels. The Belgium Nationalist Revolution left quite a few stores looted and Charles was forced to close his shop. Since the shop was closed temporarily that allowed him to spend more time studying the various aspects of acoustics and theory of some of the instruments. He studied diligently and he had his eldest son Adolphe as his apprentice by his side. Charles was a strict yet loving father to Adolphe and he made sure his son understood the mechanics of how the instruments worked. Adolphe was the first several children in the Sax family.

Adolphe was a rather clumsy child, and his parents and friends gave him the added nickname of "Young Sax, the Ghost" because he somehow lived through some extreme accidents. As a mere toddler he once fell down several flights of stairs and split his head open when he landed on the cement floor. Several times he escaped poisoning and once mistook vitriol mixed with water as milk. He knocked over a frying pan and burned himself at one time. Several other odd accidents befell him, but "The Ghost" always survived. He was a survivor in other ways as you will hear in the podcast.

Though he was a "walking accident", he never misused his father's tools when helping him in the workshop. Before Adolphe was a teenager, he was making instruments with great skill. Very much like his father Charles at the same age.

At the age of 14, Adolphe started playing the clarinet. He was an outstanding clarinet player, and understanding how a clarinet works sonically made him even more formidable. He attended the Royal School of Singing and studied clarinet and flute. He was an extraordinary musician and could have been a professional if he wanted. Still, his dad was an important instrument maker and, at one point, the "Instrument Maker to the Court of the Netherlands," so Adolphe was groomed to follow in his father's footsteps.

At the young age of 16 he had his first showing of instruments he made on his own. A flute and a clarinet. He was showered with praise and as they say "a star was born." It is said and written that this is the time when Adolphe started to develop the saxhorn, which we'll discuss later and saxophone. While his father Charles was busy making instruments to sell, Adolph was experimenting and laying the groundwork for many new ideas. This is the time when both father and son built the blueprint for the many instruments that would bear the 'Sax' name.

Adolphe, being the clarinetist and instrument maker, took a stab at improving the bass clarinet. It was known within the industry that the bass clarinet desperately needed improvement. Adolphe made quite a few improvements of the horn and was overheard performing on it by French conductor François Antoine Habeneck who demanded that the bass

clarinet that Adolphe made was used in his Opera orchestra in Paris.

Now I will unfortunately mispronounce some of the names and phrases that are French. Please forgive me. I do not speak French and I hope you understand.

Sax was a great clarinetist and clarinet maker and had to prove himself time and time again. He participated in many "Battle of the Bands" and "Clash of the Clarinetist" to prove the value of his talent as both instrumentalist and instrument maker. He made many enemies in doing so, and over the years as I will inform you in the podcast, his talent at both brought much turmoil and some triumph to himself and his family's life.

1839 was a major turning point in Adolphe's life when he happened to see a newspaper article about a performance at the Paris Royal Academy of Music. Celebrated clarinetist Isaac Franco Dacosta was to do a solo demonstration of his bass clarinet. He was planning to tour and demonstrate his talent as a clarinetist and clarinet maker. Sax thought he was better and picked up his bags and went to Paris. He was 25 years old. He found the great Dacosta and examined his clarinet. They both played the celebrated bass clarinet solo from Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" and Sax won! Even DaCosta's wife acknowledged that Sax's clarinet sounded better, and once you convince a man's wife that a rival is better, you have truly succeeded!

Sax began to network while in Paris and started relationships with composers Meyerbeer, Hector Berlioz and others. He demonstrated his instruments and they listened. He also became close friends with Jean Georges Kastner, and they stayed friends until Kastner died in 1867.

Sax returned home to Brussels only to see his brothers and sisters dead. The only survivor was his younger brother Alphonse and he and Adolphe were all that was left for his parents Charles and Maria. Alphonse was a nickname for this sibling. His given name was Charles Joseph Sax Jr after his father.

In 1841 (27 years old) Adolphe made a presentation at the Brussels Expedition. It's written that this may have been the first time the saxophone was shown to anyone other than the Sax family. Adolphe was a huge success at the exhibition and was offered the Gold medal for his work but because he was still quite young the judges decided to give him the Silver medal. Adolphe wasn't having any of it and complained that if he was too young for Gold, then he was too old for silver. He decided that he had to get back to Paris because Brussel was getting too small for him.

Shortly after his decision to move back to Paris, Sax was visited by the Lieutenant-General of the French military. He heard about Adolphe and he wanted Adolphe to help him improve the military bands in France. Charles, Adolphe's father had a similar job in Brussels, and Adolphe knew this was a great opportunity. Charles tried to convince his son to stay. Telling him how

hard it would be to integrate into the French community of instrument-makers etc. Adolphe wasn't having any of it. He packed his bags and was on his way with just 30 francs in his pocket!

This podcast is about the saxophone invented by its namesake Antoine-Joseph aka "Adolphe" Sax. However, it would be impossible not to mention another horn that is still used today that Adolphe "Invented," and I use that word "Invented" loosely. The Saxhorn, which I mentioned earlier. Some say Adolphe didn't invent a new instrument, when he introduced the saxhorn. Some researchers say he just added to what was already called "The Bugle" and any other brass instrument of that time and named it "Saxhorn." I'm not going to go much into the saxhorn here because this podcast is about the saxophone, but it has to be acknowledged that Adolphe made major contributions to brass instruments as well as woodwinds. I also want to note that one of the greatest sax players that ever lived whose name was also Charles, like Adolphe's father, the great Charlie "Bird" Parker started playing the baritone horn in high school, which is a brass instrument that very much resembles the saxhorn. Though Bird's mother gave him an alto saxophone when he was in middle school, he played the baritone in high school. We'll get to Charlie Parker later in another show. I just wanted to get that out to all that's listening.

Adolphe was constantly sued because of the saxhorn, because it resembled many other instruments. It was a major instrument for the Union and Confederate Army's in the American Civil War. With its upward-pointing bell, it was used by many military bands during that time. There's quite a bit of debate amongst researchers on who gave the name "Saxhorn" to Adolphe's "Inventions," but regardless, he was in court for decades over it and his saxophone too about their origins.

It was during this time in Paris that Sax also made more developments to his saxophone, and again he was met with lawsuits like his father Charles warned him about. There were some inventors who claimed he stole their ideas to develop his saxophone. A man by the name of William Meikle claimed his "Alto-Fagotto" also called a tenoroon was indeed the same thing as Adolph's instrument. But that was basically an alto bassoon, and though there is some resemblance, they are far apart, and Adolphe surely didn't steal his idea from that. There's little known about Mr. Meikle himself, and the history of the bassoon is well documented. Another instrument called the Caldonica also came up as a predecessor to the saxophone.

There's debate on which Sax had the initial idea for the saxophone. Charles or Adolphe? Charles schooled his son from a very young age to follow his example, and the actual lightbulb moment has never been revealed, found, or noted in history. It seems as if it just came to be and was presented. Some instruments are too old to find that moment of birth, but the saxophone was born sometime in the 1840s, and other than it being nurtured in Belgium and developed in Paris France, we have little else to go on as far as the idea that brought it to fruition.

The first saxophone was a bass sax or maybe a baritone actually. It was not a tenor or alto let's

put it that way. Some say since Adolphe was so much into his bass clarinet and Charles was into the Ophicleide that the two just came together and the saxophone was born. The Ophicleide is a brass mouthpiece instrument that is shaped like a saxtuba if that makes sense. Very hard to describe in this day and age. It's a French instrument that was invented shortly after Adolphe was born. Charles Sax made them and sold them in his shop and was trying to improve on the model. And if you put a bass clarinet mouthpiece on an Ophicleide it is said that it sounds like a saxophone. I've never heard it in person but here's a YouTube video on my website [letstalkaboutsax dot com](http://letstalkaboutsax.com) that demonstrates it.

There was a historic demonstration of this theory at the 1976 World Saxophone Congress at the Royal College of Music in London. Paul Sargeant the multi-instrumentalist did exactly that. He put a Bass Clarinet Mouthpiece on an Ophicleide and it sounded like a saxophone and freaked everyone out. The Ophicleide is a bass instrument so it makes sense that the first sax was a bass or baritone registered instrument. If you believe that theory.

It should be noted that Adolphe was granted a fifteen-year patent on his "family" of saxophones on March 21 1846 (31 years old). Now we know that the horn had been in development as early as 1841 (27 years old) and was presented at the Brussels Industrial Exhibition that year. Or rather researchers think it was at the exhibition. One story says that the saxophone was accidentally mangled before it could be displayed at the exhibition. If that is true then the idea for the sax could have come in the mid to late 1830's.

Copyright © 2020 Jeff Robinson