

Adolphe  
**Sax**

A man of genius in Dinant

Albert Remy

Edition de l'Association Internationale Adolphe Sax

The saxophone: *"In my view, its greatest merit lies in the varied beauty of its tone which can range from being deep and serene, to being passionate, fantastical or melancholic, or alternatively haunting and distant like the soft soft resonance of an echo, like the faint whisper of a forest breeze or the mysterious vibrations of a bell at eventide interminably reverberating through the stillness after being struck. I know of no other musical instrument which possesses this curious sonority welling up on the very threshold of silence"*. Hector Berlioz

# Adolphe Sax, a Dinantais of genius

*"... Although he was no doubt a punctilious, proud and legitimately ambitious man, he nonetheless won the esteem of a number of his adversaries. In the history of his time, Sax will remain a wind instrument maker of genius"*.

Malou Haine



With great names such as Joachim Patenier (1485-1524), the creator of paysagisme ("landscapism"), Antoine Wiertz (1806-1865), the lyric painter, and a host of sculptors, painters, musicians, copper craftsmen and others, Dinant can be truly proud of having offered many fine artists. One of these, Antoine-Joseph, otherwise known as Adolphe Sax, was born within the city walls on 6 November 1814 and was destined to become an ingenious and imaginative inventor and manufacturer of musical instruments.

In 1860, the chronicler, Oscar Comettant, wrote: *"Through the services he has rendered to the art of making music, through the hardship which he has had to face in order*

*to bring his inventions to fruition and defend them from despoilment and through the recompense which he has received from all the industrialized nations, (the life of Adolphe Sax) takes on the dimensions of a major event in the history of society. Indeed, the novelist would find in his strange life much material for mysterious and even moving vicissitudes (as a footnote to this we may add that the "Sax case" would provide legal scholars with almost inexhaustible insight into matters of jurisprudence), while moralists would find in his story a certain sense of abnegation, physical courage and perseverance of which only a person endowed with a truly elevated spirit and a generous heart is capable."*

## A troubled childhood

Adolphe Sax: *"A man whose spirit is incisive, lucid, determined and persevering against all odds, a man capable of skill, (...) careful calculation, an acoustician with a fascination for devising, machining and moulding matter. A man of thought and action, inventiveness and impeccable execution"*.

Hector Berlioz, 12 June 1842, in *"Le Journal des Débats"*

Antoine-Joseph Sax was born in the street which has borne his name since 1896 in a modest dwelling which was destroyed in 1914. In the place where his house once stood, there is now a large building with shops.

On the wall of this building there is an inscription engraved in the stone and covered

with a brass plaque: *"Ici naquit Adolphe Sax. 1814-1894"*. (*"Birthplace of Adolphe Sax. 1814-1894"*). The solemn inauguration of this inscription took place on 27 June 1954 at the initiative of the Syndicat d'Initiative et de Tourisme (local tourist agency) under the mayorship of Mr. Léon Sasserath. It is the work of Mr. Jean Jadin who drew the cartoon and of Miss. Maggy Arzée, who were trained by Miss Yvonne Gérard and Mr. Perot, both teachers of graphic arts and decoration in the Namur Academy of Fine Arts then directed by Mr. Lambeau. The work was completed under the supervision of Professor Van de Capelle.(1)

Born the son of Charles-Joseph (1791-1865) and Marie-Joseph Masson (1813-1861), Antoine-Joseph was the eldest of eleven children (six boys and five girls, of whom only four subsequently survived, the others having died between the age of 20 and 25).

Sax had a tragic childhood. When still a mere toddler, Antoine-Joseph fell down three flights of stairs and hit his head against a stone and was thought to be dead. At the age of 3, he swallowed a cup of water injected with vitriol, then a pin. Later, he received serious burns when some gunpowder exploded. He fell on a cast iron stove and was burned on one side. He almost died three times of poisoning and suffocation in his bedroom where newly varnished objects were left lying around during the night. On another occasion, he was hit on the head by a paving stone. He fell into a river and was rescued in the nick of time.

*"There is a curse on this child. He will not live"*, said his mother. In the neighbourhood, he was known as *"Sax the little ghost"*.

Alas, these first serious incidents were but a prelude to a life full of vicissitudes such as few have ever experienced. In 1858, after contracting lip cancer, Adolphe Sax was to be miraculously saved by a black doctor who knew the healing properties of certain Indian plants. No-one knows what would have happened if not for this unorthodox treatment.

## Charles-Joseph Sax.



A carpenter and cabinetmaker by trade, Charles-Joseph Sax quickly gained success when he branched out into the manufacture of musical instruments. Indeed, he had a large workshop in the "rue Neuve". He in fact gained such a reputation in this field that in 1815 (when his eldest was only one year old), he set up a workshop in Brussels (where the brothers and sisters of Antoine-Joseph were to be born). He was living in Brussels when he was called by William I of Orange (this was the time of the Dutch occupation of Belgium), who appointed him instrument maker to the Court and entrusted him with the task of providing suitable musical instruments for the Belgian regiments.(1)

Charles-Joseph Sax was self-taught, and went on to manufacture not only wooden and brass wind instruments, but also violins and pianos. He was awarded around a dozen patents and spent time perfecting his

instruments. He achieved some success at exhibitions where he received highly positive commendations.

In addition to receiving some guidance from one of his uncles, who was a primary school

teacher in Dinant, Antoine-Joseph, instead of playing and having fun with his friends, would observe his father at work and help him in his workshop. He was an intelligent boy, and his inventiveness came to the fore even at this early stage thanks to his love of music (in his tender youth, he followed singing and flute lessons). He subsequently received training from his father, who quickly realized how gifted he was and did everything he could to develop these talents.

Far from neglecting the aspirations of his son, Charles-Joseph Sax made him his apprentice and became increasingly aware of the importance of the boy's work as if he sensed this was his destiny.

In 1853, after the death of seven of his eleven children and financial problems with his Brussels workshop, Charles-Joseph joined his son in Paris. At this time, the master craftsman thus became his son's workman and was entrusted with the task of making saxophones until he died in 1865.

## A hard-working young man.

*"Only the sax could produce a sound imbued  
with tenderness and delicate and contained passion".  
Georges Bizet*

In his teenage years, Antoine-Joseph was helped and supported by his father. He created, perfected and played instruments. At the age of 16, he presented ivory flutes and clarinets at the Brussels Industrial Exhibition. When he was 20, he was to present a new invention, a 24-key clarinet which was the masterpiece born of the imagination of this manual worker. He then produced a new bass clarinet which was lauded by Habeneck, the conductor of the orchestra of the Paris Opera who was visiting Brussels and who referred to the other clarinets as *"barbaric instruments"*.

However, these new inventions were already causing some jealousy. The soloist of the *"Grande Harmonie Royale"* of Brussels (Royal Grand Wind Ensemble) refused to use the instrument, saying that it was the work of that *"measly little pupil Sax."* *"Why don't you play your clarinet and I'll play mine"*, retorted Sax. The soloist accepted the challenge which Sax won the day in front of four thousand spectators. He thus became a soloist. Musical works were written for him which were so difficult that, after he left, they were no longer interpreted!

The young genius thus pursued his work. He invented a sound reflector, a new contrabass clarinet and a technique for tuning pianos (a process which remained the inventor's secret as he was never able to exploit the idea, probably due to lack of money). He also invented a steam organ *"which could be heard throughout the whole province"*. This last invention shows Sax's predilection for all things grandiose!

Sax's debut throws a surprising light on his character (he has by now come to be known as Adolphe). He was a man of energy, courage, dynamism and total self-confidence. He refused to go to St. Petersburg to set up an institution and turned down an offer to move to London.

This is an indication of his international reputation. Sax was conscious of all his talent and potential. He was at this time in the process of conceiving the work which he felt he was destined to achieve. He did this with great hope and inspired by a belief that he had every chance of success. He felt he must aim high to reach the target and found his little native country was stifling his inspiration.

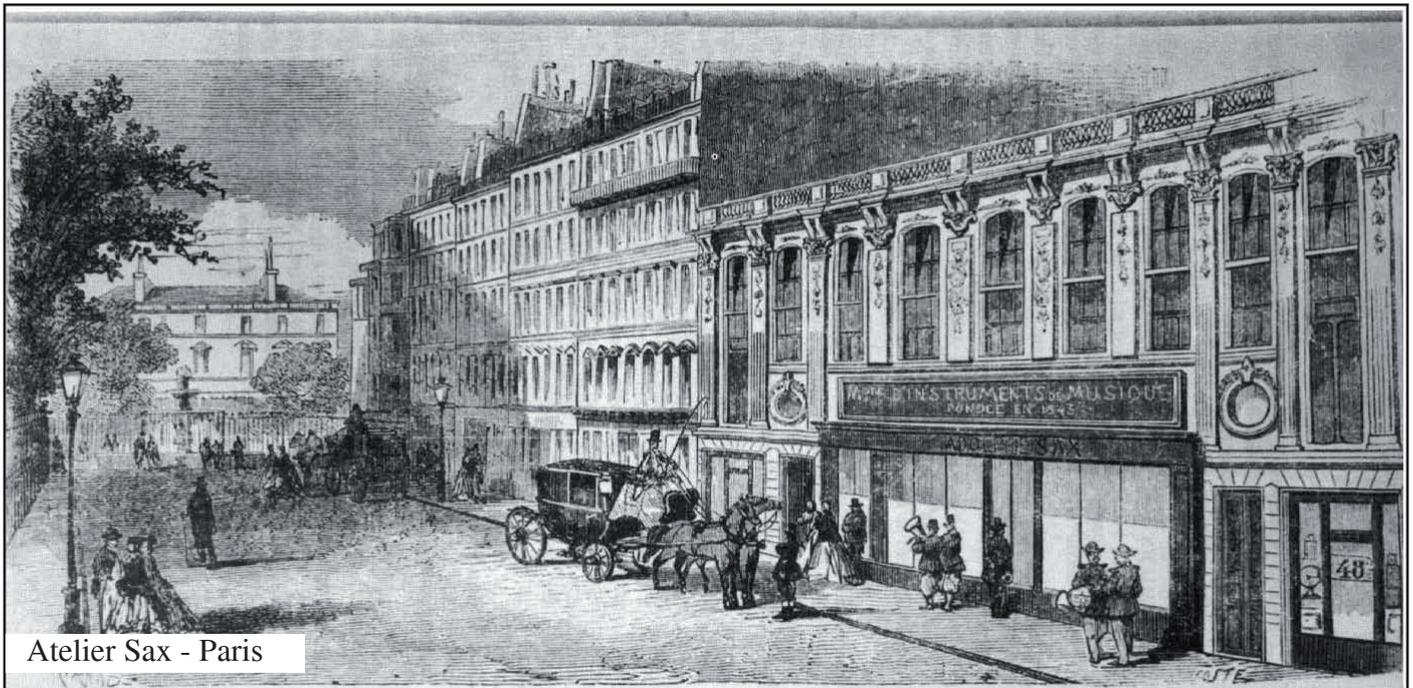
In 1840, he presented nine inventions at the Belgian Exhibition. He was refused the first medal on the grounds that *"he was too young and there would be nothing left to award him with next year."*

Sax did not take this as fitting commendation. Indeed, this wounded his self-esteem and

was even an affront to his pride. He turned down the Vermeil medal which they wanted to award him with, replying haughtily: *"If they think I am too young to merit the gold medal, I, for my part, think I am too old to accept the Vermeil medal."*

# A summons to Paris.

*"The saxophone:  
the best blend of sounds which I know"*  
Rossini



Atelier Sax - Paris

Paris, the centre of culture in Europe, was beckoning and indeed obsessing the inventor.

The composer Halévy wrote to him of the great hopes placed in his inventions by composers: *"You must hurry to finish off your new family of instruments (saxophones) and come to the aid of poor, forlorn composers who are in search of novelties and of the public who are eager for these instruments, if indeed they can be found."*

Having received this invitation after the affront to his pride in Brussels, and with his family problems weighing on his mind, Sax had no hesitation in deciding to leave for Paris. He left for the French capital *"with his head full of ideas but little money in his pockets"*. In fact, he had only thirty francs!

1842 was the great turning-point in the life of Sax. He had a new invention to his credit, the saxophone and the saxophone family. The previous year, he had in fact been introduced to the public in Brussels anonymously behind a curtain so as not to divulge his identity and to avoid plagiarism.

Adolphe Sax was by now almost thirty years old, *"an age when a man reaches the peak of his creative talent and when his personality is confirmed"*. It should be remembered that Bonaparte was 27 when he won the first battle of his Italian campaign. Newton was 24 and Einstein was 26 when they expounded their theories. Mozart died at the age of 35 and Schubert at the age of 31. There are many other examples of precocious geniuses.

In the words written by a former Dinantais(1), *"a distinction must be drawn here between, on the one hand, the man who himself devises the very instrument which he will then use as a vehicle to express his own genius and who is capable of using mere signs*

*and symbols to produce wondrous art which issues forth like water gushing from desert rock, and, on the other hand, the man who must go through the slow and laborious process of learning complicated techniques required to call into being a tangible materialization of his brainchild. In this respect, one should bear in mind the number of child prodigies, whether they be mathematicians or physicians. The first type of prodigy does exist while the other is not to be found. Sax, for his part, belongs to the select group of intellectuals who are exponents of matter, not of pure form."*

Adolphe Sax thus decided in 1842 to move to Paris and established himself in a simple warehouse in the rue St. Georges. To do this, he had to borrow money from a musician friend.

## Thanks to Berlioz...

In June 1842, through Halévy, Sax met Hector Berlioz, whose influence in Parisian musical circles was considerable, notably in the criticisms he wrote for "*Le Journal des Débats*". The two men talked for several hours, and during this time Adolphe Sax explained to the great composer all his ideas and spoke at length of his inventions and future plans.

Berlioz was rather nonplussed and listened sphinx-like. After this meeting, he told Sax "*Tomorrow, I will tell you what I think of your work.*" This rather ambiguous reaction left some doubt - perhaps for the first time in his life - in the mind of Adolphe Sax.

On 12 June 1842, in "*Le Journal des Débats*", Berlioz astonished everyone by eulogizing Sax to the skies in several columns of the Journal. The article was widely published in the French and Belgian press.

This was the breakthrough Sax needed to embark on a life of fertile and prodigious work, but it was also the start of a troubled period marred by envy, jealousy, injustice, hatred and adversity for which he was only much later recompensed with glory.

This was the moment when the doors to the world of music finally swung open to welcome Sax. He was at this time accepted into the company of many composers who placed their trust in him. He was received in literary salons. In his various workshops and rooms, he organized many gatherings at which he would explain his work, and his name became a household word.

## Sax's struggles.

Sax essentially gave his name to four major families of instruments: saxhorns, saxtrombas, saxtubas and saxophones. In this respect, Sax was the first maker of musical instruments who took an interest not only in one single instrument but in a whole family of instruments. The saxophone family includes seven instruments(1) spanning the entire range of sonorities from sopranino and soprano, including alto, tenor and baritone to the depths of the bass and contrabass. Saxophones gave the world an innovative and fabulously seductive sound in a new aesthetic form made of brass, thus breaking the time-honoured tradition of wooden instruments. The form which Sax discovered and adopted was a parabolic cone. The instrument is played with a reed. It imitates the sound of a deep instrument played with a bow. This is the technical secret behind the beauty of the saxophone. It was Sax's knowledge of the principles of proportion which gave him indisputable superiority over all the other musical craftsmen.

This in fact proved to be the main source of problems to this inventor who was no stranger to challenges. He only obtained the patent for the saxophone on 21 March 1846. He had by then been playing the instrument for four years or more. Under assault from many quarters, Sax issued, perhaps rather naively, a challenge to his enemies and rivals: *"I will wait another year before I take out this patent. We shall see if another instrument maker is capable of making a real saxophone during that time!"* No-one took up this challenge and Sax kept his promise.

## Troubled times.

*"If the violin is the king of stringed instruments, the saxophone is the most moving, the most captivating and the most pleasant of the wind and reed instruments (...) thanks to its soft and fascinating sonority, the warmth which the musician can exude and the speed of play which can be achieved..."*

Eugène Bozza

The years which followed were a difficult period for the inventor who was faced with the unflinching enmity of his rivals, competitors and counterfeiter who clubbed together to confound him. The techniques used included debauching his personnel, preventing musicians from using his instruments, publishing poison-pen articles with hurtful caricatures. The saxophone was at this time exported after the maker's mark was erased and then openly reimported to France after undergoing a few changes and bearing new inscriptions.

Sax was taken to court by people who demanded that his patents be annulled. One could write a book on all the court proceedings initiated at every level of legal procedure. Sax won every case, sometimes going as far as to put forward plaintiff's claims for damages, until he was finally given complete recognition for his work.

All these legal proceedings ruined Sax and he was pronounced bankrupt three times: in 1852, 1873 and 1877. However, his staff of around one hundred workers produced around twenty thousand instruments in his workshops between 1843 to 1860!

Of these problems, which ruined Sax's health, Berlioz wrote: *"The persecutions heaped upon Sax are highly reminiscent of the way in which Benvenuto Cellini, the Florentine sculptor, was treated by his enemies in the Middle Ages. His workers were kidnapped, his drawings were stolen, he was accused of madness and he was taken to court. With a little more audacity, he would have been killed.(1)*

*This is the extent of the hatred which inventors have always provoked among rivals who have not been able to invent anything."*

## The reform of military music.

One of the great exploits of this ingenious Dinantais and, indeed, one of his greatest victories, was the reforming of military music.

In 1845, French military music had fallen out of use. Adolphe Sax put forward a proposal to General de Rumigny, then Minister of War, to whom he offered his instruments, to which

the General responded by setting up an ad hoc commission at whose behest a competition was held between the traditional system and Sax's new proposals.

A large fanfare spectacle was organized on the Champ de Mars (where the Eiffel Tower now stands) on 22 April 1845. The old type of military music was defended by 45 professional musicians conducted by Carafa. Sax competed against them with 38 musicians whom he had managed to band together with considerable difficulty, as seven of them let him down. He in fact had to play two different instruments himself as two of the players turned their back on him at the last minute!

*Twenty thousand people acclaimed Adolphe Sax! Sax and his supporters triumphed and, on 10 August of the same year, Sax's music was officially adopted, although many of the musicians excluded at this time added to Sax's list of enemies.*

## Inventions and fine tuning.

The list of Sax's inventions and perfection is extremely long. In addition to the families referred to above, one must mention a reform of musical notation, compositions, methods (Sax became a music teacher for soldiers in the Paris Conservatory conducted by Auber), a paper on the influence of wind instruments on the lungs, a plan to set up a school for budding inventors, an orchestra reorganization plan, a remarkable study on hall acoustics, improvements to most brass and wood instruments.

In total, he is the father of some forty achievements, not including a wide range of rather extravagant and highly imaginative paraphernalia showing Sax to be a highly inventive and constantly productive inventor.

## The Saxophone . . .

*"The saxophone is not a squawking or piercing instrument, but possesses a soft and rounded voice with incisive tones in the high notes, with full, rich sonorities in low notes, while the medium range produces depth and variation. With its shimmering golden half-tones, the sax is an instrument with a captivating tone sensually enhanced by a lustrous amber glow".*

Marcel Perrin

The invention of the saxophone did not prove to be an immediate success among the composers of the time, despite the many commendations of the work of Sax and the firm support of his friends in the world of music. Indeed, the acceptance and subsequent popularity of this new instrument throughout the world was a long and slow process.

Nonetheless, the enthusiasm of competitors, many of whom were great names, meant that the use of the saxophone increased year by year. It was not until 1942 - one hundred years after it was invented - that the first saxophone class was opened in the Paris Conservatory for Marcel Mule, the founder in 1928 of the first saxophone quartet. Brussels followed suit, notably due to the encouragement of Professor Daneels.

The first musical scores and arrangements which were published were those of the



great classics. This can be explained by the fact that many composers did not think of the saxophone at all or were wary of using it in ensembles.

In fact, the saxophone did not really take off until it was popularized by Berlioz, Halévy, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Verdi, Ambroise Thomas, Bizet, Wagner, Massenet, Delibes, Saint-Saëns, Puccini, Vincent d'Indy, Debussy, Glazounov, Ravel, Pierné, Richard Strauss, Satie, G. Charpentier, Tchaikowsky, Honegger, Singelée, Florent Schmitt, Jacques Ibert, Milhaud, Villa-Lobos, Gershwin, Britten and many others; the Belgians include: Paul Gilson, Léon Jongen, Jean Absil, Mortelmans, Marcel Poot, Théo Dejoncker, Van Moer, Dury, René Bernier, Gaston Brenta, Léon Stekke, René Barbier, Raymond Chevreuille, Victor Legley, René Defossez, Jacques Leduc, Henri Pousseur, Jean-Marie Simonis, Pierre Boulez and others; from Dinant, Arthur Patinet, Pierre Rodrigue, Alain Crepin.

According to one calculation, there are more than six thousand symphonic musical works which include music

for one or several saxophones, mainly alto and tenor saxes.

Saxophone congresses and competitions have been organized in many countries.

And who is to say that if the saxophone had been invented a hundred years earlier Beethoven and Mozart would not have used it?

## ... and the development of the sax

Later on, musical formations such as quartets and sextets started using the saxophone and musical works were written for them. Methods, studies and exercises were written and many fanfares and civil and military wind bands incorporated saxophones.

In his book, *“Le Saxophone”*, published in 1955, Marcel Perrin, professor in the Algiers Conservatory and creator of a quartet, stated that *“the literature of the saxophone may in fact be divided into three stages:*

1. *-Period of stagnation: 1845 to 1918: “Rococo” style, rather timid compositions, with variations on themes, salon music and competitions.*

2. *-The boom period: 1918 to 1930: jazz, jazz and more jazz... America!... the triumphant breakthrough when the saxophone breaks free from the persistent cloud of negativism which threatened to smother its development.*

3. *-Period of steady growth: 1930 to the present: the saxophone has finally been circumscribed and “saxophone music” has been defined. The sax has become a more subdued and somewhat “serious” instrument. In this new more fitting guise, the saxophone is accepted as being worthy to feature in major concerts...”*

# Jazz.

*“Jazz is not in the music,  
it’s in the way in which the music is played”.*  
Paul Withmann

*“What would music be without jazz? And what would jazz be without the sax?”*

This phrase is often repeated, but one may add: “It was jazz that made the saxophone successful, and vice versa. As everyone knows, it was in the U.S.A. (South Carolina and Louisiana) that jazz was born out of African musical reminiscences. As early as 1850, America saw the first negro orchestras, which (with the sax) brought fruition to the human voice. Not long after this, in 1857, the historiographer of Adolphe Sax, Oscar Comettant, said: *“The precious inventions of Mr. Sax have born fruit in America as they did in Europe.”*”

It was thus in 1918 that the jazz craze hit France, then the rest of Europe. New and exciting wind bands caught the public imagination, despite the uneven quality of these ensembles. This was the time of “rag-time” and “hot” jazz.

Although the basic principles of the saxophone have remained the same as in the days of Sax, the instrument has undergone many transformations according to new requirements. It now reigns supreme in the world of jazz.



Coleman Hawkins

After the period of vogue (five years between 1918 and 1923), jazz was “overdone” by rhythm and noise fanatics, and the sax itself was discredited. Fortunately, excellent musicians, some negro, some white, appeared such as Trumbauer, Hodges, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins (who came to Dinant in 1962), Carney, Alix Combelle, Hubert Rostaing, Benny Carter, and the Belgians Bob Jaspas, Jacques Pelzer, Steve Houben, Erwin Vann and many others, in addition to bands formed by Paul Withmann, Ray Ventura, Jo Bouillon who gave new blood to jazz and restored the sax to its rightful place with more expression and greater emotive force.

Technological progress (recording techniques, films) was extremely beneficial to the sax, not only in the world of jazz but also in the field of symphonic and lyrical music and in military and civil bands.

## A personal tribute.

On a personal level, Sax never married. Nonetheless, he did have a lady in his life, a woman of Spanish origin, Louise-Adèle Maor, who died at the age of thirty leaving him with five children who were all recognized by their father. It would appear that she was from a modest background, and for this reason Sax was reluctant to let her appear in public...

The Dinantais genius, who cannot be eulogized enough, died in Paris on 7 February 1894. He was put to rest in the “Montmartre” cemetery (18th district of Paris) in a chapel tomb beside six members of his family.

One of his sons, Adolphe-Edouard, carried on with the business. In 1928, his

company was taken over by the Selmer company in Paris.

Dinant can truly be proud of its son of genius, Adolphe Sax!

May his memory remain throughout generations to come!

Albert REMY

# Bibliography.

The bibliography of Adolphe Sax is extremely extensive.

The author of this brochure was chiefly inspired by the following works:

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Paul Gilson and Albert Remy: *"Adolphe Sax"* brochure-program of the I.N.R. n° 26 - 1939

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Malou Haine: *"Adolphe Sax, sa vie, son oeuvre, ses instruments de musique"*  
Published by the University of Brussels - 1980

And many press articles.

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*"A sax quartet can be captivating, moving and even rapturously lamenting in delicate virtuoso sonorities which never cease to charm. However, being a light-hearted and even "effusive" instrument, the saxophone in a quartet can be frivolous and even burlesque".*

Paul le Flem



**Rue Grande, 37**  
**B-5500 Dinant**  
**Tél.: (+32) 0 82.21.39.39.**  
**Fax.: (+32) 0 82.22.72.43.**