

The Saga of the F Alto Saxophone

by Paul Cohen
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The recent fascination and experimentation with the F and C saxophones has sparked a renewed interest in these closely-related yet distant instrumental kin. Many questions as to the origin and history of this distinctive class of saxophones have been raised, but unfortunately little historical documentation exists.

Of what is known, none have had a more colorful (and brief) history than the American F alto, produced some 50 years ago. The development of this instrument capped a decade of extraordinary activity and popularity for the saxophone. Never before had the saxophone enjoyed such acceptance, nor had the conditions been so conducive to the constant diversified research and experimentation undertaken by the major instrument companies.

A Brief History

Originally, the saxophone was conceived in two families - orchestral (F& C) and band (E-flat and B-flat). The very first saxophone - the bass - was in C, and was the instrument used by Berlioz in his *Hymne Chant Sacre* of 1843 (transcribed for instruments of Adolphe Sax). The first orchestral use of the saxophone by Kastner in 1844 (*le Dernier Roi de Jude*) also used the C bass.

Throughout the early history of the saxophone, the F alto was consistently mentioned in textbook descriptions of the saxophone family. As early as 1844, Kastner lists and F alto (alongside the E-flat) in the supplement to his *Cours d'instrumentation and Traite General d' instrumentation* both of 1837. He also includes the F alto in his *Complete and Systematic Method for the Saxophone* of 1845. The orchestral intention of the F alto is indicated by its absence in Kastner's 1847 *Manual General de Musique Militaire*, which dealt with military bands.

In 1855, the Industrial Exhibition in Paris issued in the jury report an article extremely complimentary to Adolphe Sax, in which the F alto is listed. It was common during this time for exhibitions such as this to sponsor instrument makers' exhibitions and competitions. In that same year, Berlioz' new edition of his *Grand Traite d'instrumentations et Orchestre Moderne* lists both an F alto and an F baritone.

It seems as if the instrument was known outside of France, for an F alto is listed in an Italian treatise of 1848 - *Practical Treatise on Instrumentation* (indicated as "contralto saxofonu in F").

The orchestra use of the F alto was less extensive than its listing would indicate. Kastner used F alti in three of his works:

- Polka Carnavalesque (1857) 2 F alti, 2 C tenors
- Overture de Festival (1860) 2 F alti
- La Saint-Julien des Menetriers (1866) 2 F alti, 1 E-flat alto, 2 C tenors.

The most famous use of the F alto is Strauss's *Symphonia Domestica* (1904). Here, Strauss employs a quartet of saxophones (C soprano, F alto, C tenor, and F baritone). A damper on the enthusiasm, though, for a Strauss piece that uses saxophone - Mr. Rascher tells me that Strauss was most reluctant to include the saxophones, but did so only at the insistence of his publisher! This might help to explain why the quartet parts only double string and woodwind parts.

The last orchestral use of an F alto that I have uncovered was by the English composer Joseph Holbrooke in 1910. Holbrooke was apparently fascinated by saxophones, for he wrote a sonata and a concerto, in addition to a chamber work using the entire family of saxophones. His orchestral work *Les Hommages* (Symphony No. 1) includes parts for B-flat soprano, E-flat and F alto, B-flat tenor and E-flat and F baritone. (I have not seen the score, but in all probability the F parts are alternates to their E-flat counterparts.)

Existing chamber works using F alti are equally sparse. Gustav Bumcke (Germany) wrote a fascinating Sextett in *As Dur*, op. 19 in 1907 for clarinet, English horn, F alto saxophone, horn, bass clarinet and bassoon. In reviewing the sound characteristics of the E-flat vs. F, I find that the F alto is an appropriate choice in the sextet, for its slightly higher slightly sweeter sound quality helps to offset/balance the low dark registers of the horn, bassoon, English horn, and bass clarinet.

In the late 1920's, in conjunction with the production of the American F alto, Rubank published (with the coercion of Conn) some of their saxophone ensemble music with alternate F parts. (More on this later.) Finally, in 1933, Percy Grainger provided an F alto part in his elastically scored transcription of John Jenkin's *Fantasy for 5 Viols*. This, however, was never published.

The American F Alto

No discussion of the American F alto can rightfully begin without at least a brief look into the amazing decade that spawned its creation. From approximately 1915 to 1925, there existed a saxophone craze that brought unprecedented popularity to the instrument. It is said that over one million saxophones were sold in this period, which is amazing considering the population and economic condition of the time. To give a rough contemporary comparison, the saxophone was as popular then as the guitar was in the 1960's. Everybody had to have a saxophone, for it was involved in all facets of music making. It was an integral part of the community band (there were few orchestras in these days) as well as the famous military and touring bands.

It became extremely popular in vaudeville and the various touring circuits. Famous groups like the Six Brown Brothers Saxophone Sextet, who wore clown suits and had an actual act or routine (performing such tunes as *That Moanin' Saxophone Rag*, *Bull Frog Blues*, and *Chasin' the Chickens*, etc.) flourished and brought the excitement of the saxophone to millions. A more musical balance was achieved through the efforts of musicians, like Rudy Wiedoeft, who brought a highly artistic and serious (though sentimentally slanted due to the vaudeville orientation) aspect of the saxophone to a great segment of the populous. Wiedoeft also achieved and maintained great popularity through his phenomenal success with recordings. He made dozens of records (mostly of his own compositions) for different record companies, and most of those were best sellers in their day.

The saxophone became indispensable to theater orchestras, and there was so much playing (work) to be had that I am told that one could literally get on-the-job training in the pit. The wildly popular C-

Melody saxophone was everyone's favorite home instrument and was to be found in all clubs and hotels as the "house instrument." Being non-transposing made it relatively easy for the player to either read from violin, flute or oboe parts, or to read over the pianist's shoulder and eke out popular tunes of the day. In the middle of the decade, Variety estimated that there were as many as 60,000 dance bands or combos working in the United States, all of which used at least one or more saxophones.

Children could take up the saxophone to play in newly created school bands (wildly promoted and sustained by the instrument manufacturers), while more advanced amateurs could participate in saxophone quartets, or given rampant enthusiasm, play in saxophone bands - ensembles of over 30 saxophones (plus piano and drums). The publishers naturally obliged, and brought out dozens of quartets and saxophone orchestra arrangements.

The Armistice of World War I ushering in the "Roaring Twenties" a period of accelerated lifestyle and new-found economic prosperity. This era produced a veritable epidemic of saxophone mania, and accounted for most of the saxophone sales. Despite the fact that all the manufacturers sold all the horns produced (and constantly expanded their production facilities), competition amongst the instrument maker was fierce. A key endorsement by a popular artist or ensemble would often make the difference between good years and great ones. Consequently, everyone endorsed everything, and praised the virtues of the particular instrument in hand to exalted heights.

The prosperity of the manufacturers (and the relatively cheap labor) allowed the larger companies (Buescher, Conn, King) to maintain a full-time research and development division. From the musical aspect, it allowed for research into advancing and improving the design and manufacture of instruments. Given an enlightened management (buoyed, no doubt, by the overwhelming profits), these departments, in addition to addressing themselves to the practical and theoretical problem of the horns in production, were given free reign, to experiment. Thus, Conn made at least one soprano saxophone in A, in addition to developing the Strobe-O-Conn. King made a curved soprano (only one that I have documented - incidentally, other curved sopraninos do exist, manufactured by a European company of more recent origin) while Buescher built a curved soprano that could be played with one hand (left) in addition to experimenting and producing (for the American Selmer company) padless alto and tenor saxophones.

The desirability of a particular saxophone was based less on how well it played, but rather on who played it, and what it could do for you (In some respects, this has not changed). Novelty and individuality were key ingredients in the society of the twenties. Vaudeville was the haven for "novelty acts". People dressed differently - independently - asserting their own newly liberated bordering on promiscuous lifestyle. The roaring Twenties was indeed making a loud noise.

The importance of novelty did not escape the attention of the instrument makers. The prospect of increased sales prompted many of them to develop and produce new or unusual variations of saxophones to capture the fancy of the public. Thus, both Conn and Buescher included E-flat sopraninos (straight) in their catalogues. This served a dual function; it preserved the integrity of the companies as being "complete" saxophone manufacturers (these horns do play well), as well as maintaining a novelty item for consideration (as they were advertised).

Lyon & Healy sold (they did not manufacture their own wind instruments) a bizarre soprano saxophone in the shape of what can best be described as miniature alto clarinet. (Its pitch and response is as novel as its shape). King came out with their very popular (though suspiciously tuned) Saxello, which

somewhat resembles a foghorn (in shape only!) King also experimented with an alto in the shape of a Saxello. The conventionally curved soprano, of which many today are especially fond, began as a novelty item. It persevered no doubt because the acoustical characteristics were found to be artistically desirable (though somewhat temperamental). Martin brought out an alto that was touted for it's contemporary, appealing appearance. It boasted a rounded pearl on every key of the horn. (Every key, including low E-flat and C, low C-sharp, B, B-flat spatula, high D, E, & F, and the right hand side keys. Playing it feels as comfortable as walking barefoot over rocks. I will be examining these unusual instruments in greater detail in a subsequent article.)

Toward the end of the 20's (beginning circa 1926), a change began overtaking the country. The overt faddism of the saxophone was drawing to a close. Although still popular, it would never again sell in such astounding numbers as in previous years. Newer forms of entertainment began competing with established mediums, and this began to produce fundamental changes in the fabric of American Society. The movie industry began enjoying tremendous growth, and this competed directly with vaudeville, dance halls, and clubs. With the introduction of talkies (c. 1927), the need for live music during the picture was eliminated. Radio enjoy similar growth. "The first licensed station in America, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting in 1920; commercial sponsorship of radio programs began in 1922; and the National Broadcasting System initiated nationwide network broadcasts in 1926." No, people did not have to leave their homes to hear "live" music, music of different styles, or even to go to the baseball games.

The emphasis began to change - slowly at first - from performing artist to studio musician. There was also an undercurrent of severe economic uncertainty (mostly ignored and misunderstood by the federal government). Dangerous signs of financial instability began surfacing with more and more frequency. The rampant speculation and over-extension of credit that produced this illusion of affluence for many Americans was bit by bit caving in. A mild recession developed in the late '20's that culminated, to a disbelieving and unprepared America, in the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and the subsequent Great Depression.

An examination of the sales records of the two largest instrument manufacturers, Conn and Buescher, will help to illustrate the turn of events. From approximately 1921-1926, Buescher averaged 25,000 instruments sold each year. In 1927 it dropped to 13,000, reaching 4,000 by 1931. Similarly, Conn averaged approximately 23,000 reed instruments sold each year until 1927 when it suddenly dropped to 16,000 , reaching 5,000 by 1931.

It was in this context of dwindling sales, despite remarkably (though deceptive) affluent times, that the major instrument manufacturers (Conn and Buescher) decided on a course of action designed to bolster the saxophone's popularity. So, Buescher came out with their straight alto and tipped-bell soprano in January of 1927. This involved only minor retooling, as they were still in E-flat and B-flat. Conn, the larger and more ambitious of the two, designed two completely new instruments - the F Mezzo-Soprano, and the Conn-O-Sax.

The F Mezzo-Soprano was introduced with great fanfare, and obvious great expectations. The official debut took place in the Spring 1928 issue of Conn's magazine, Musical Truth. The Conn Company did not exactly hide their enthusiasm for the instrument, and incessantly extolled its virtues and benefits. The May 1928 issue of Musical Merchandise, a trade magazine of the industry, commented on the instrument and the publicity. Conn never let up.... The major obstacle to the acceptance of this instrument was, of course, the total absence of music. This problem was quickly reconciled by Conn,

who persuaded major music publishing companies to include F mezzo parts in their saxophone arrangements.

In addition to the F Mezzo-Soprano, Conn later in the year (Fall 1928) introduced the amazing Conn-O-Sax. This extraordinary instrument had a key range from low A to high G! It was advertised with a heavy emphasis on the novelty aspect, apparently trying to woo the diminishing vaudeville clientele.

Both instruments were made very well, and from personal experience I can report that they play beautifully. Apparently Conn expected to sell many of these instruments. They tooled up especially for these horns, which for a saxophone is a tremendously expensive proposition. Unfortunately, the instruments did not sell all that well. This can be deduced from the testimonial that appeared in the December 1928 issue of Musical Merchandise, just eight months after the formal introduction of the instruments. The anticipated voluminous sales simply never materialized. Despite heavy advertising and dealer promotion, they simply did not catch on.

Conn had badly miscalculated in a number of ways. First of all, the novelty aspect of the horn never caught on. As discussed earlier, vaudeville was dying; people were getting out, not getting in. The “screamer” days of the '20's were drawing to a close. As the economic recession deepened, people were less concerned with new and exotic instruments and more concerned with basic necessities. In addition, there simply was little music of value for the F horns. Despite the advertising, there was really no place for these horns to play. The paucity of music with F parts undoubtedly contributed to its demise.

This is not to say that Conn sold none of them. They had a strong promotional department in addition to tie-ins with virtually all the music stores in the country. In addition, there were many curious buyers who gave it a try. However, they manufactured many more than they sold. Conn expected that the F Mezzo would become a regular member of the saxophone family. Consequently, they probably had more F Mezzo's left in their warehouse than Conn-O-Saxes, for I find the F Mezzo listed (pictured in the Conn catalogues) as late as 1934, while there is no mention of the Conn-O-Sax after 1930.

What happened to these unsold instruments is indeed a sad story. Conn operated a repair school in Elkhart where people could study the craft of instrumental repair. Ron Davis, ace repairman from Billings, Montana, was a student at the school. He explained to me that F Mezzos were used as practice repair instruments. He remembers seeing overhauled and beautifully restored F Mezzos, after careful inspection by the class instructor, being thrown, far and deep (without case) onto a huge shelf high in the back of the classroom, and of hearing the clash and clatter of the instrument colliding with other horns that had met a similar fate.

Ron Semak, an extraordinary collector from Detroit, recounted to me a story told to him by a member of the Conn School in which, when the day came where the class would learn how to remove dents and other abrasion from saxophones, the instructor would take an F mezzo off the shelf, very often a brand new one that had not been sold, and bash in the bell and underside with a large sledge hammer. Then, the class proceeded to learn how to take the dents out.

Surely an undeserved fate for such a distinctive class of saxophones. The fortunes of the F saxophones in a way paralleled that of the saxophone in general. It would never again enjoy the pre-eminent stature that it attained in the twenties. Such was the change, that after 1920, the instrument companies no longer manufactured soprano, curved soprano, C soprano, or bass saxophones. (Some of these were

still advertise in the catalogues; they were either leftover from previous production runs, or could be special ordered.) By the middle thirties, the C Melody was deleted, and soon after, the soprano would all but disappear. The commercial orientation of music making stressed doubling and other utilitarian concerns. Specialization was not income-productive any more. Naturally, the more one played everything, the less one played well any one thing. The most useful and easiest to handle of the saxophones were of course, the alto, tenor and baritone.

It took the raised consciousness of succeeding generations to rediscover and apply the artistic possibility of the entire family of saxophones. The recent experimentation with the F & C instruments reflect this renewed interest. The “saxophone craze” of the twenties is no longer with us, but we can be thankful that the productive imagination of those times created such an array of varied instruments. Those efforts of yesterday are aiding us today in the satisfaction of our contemporary creative and artistic impulses.

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