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Introduction

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with small, symmetrical, upward-pointing curves at both ends and a central, slightly raised, ornate element.

Elise Hall

The aim of this book is to focus on Elise Hall, an extraordinary woman who lived halfway between two centuries (19th and 20th) and two continents (Europe and North America). Her uniqueness lies not only in the fact that she had to face changing times, but also in that she was very rich and fell in love with the saxophone, an underestimated instrument at the time. In addition to commissioning some interesting scores from leading composers such as Debussy, D'Indy, Florent Schmitt or André Caplet, among others, she was the first person in history to play the leading role on the saxophone in an orchestral-*concertante* score, in Boston specifically (1901). Likewise, no saxophonist had ever played as a soloist with orchestra before in Paris (1904) –or in France, for that matter–, and it is an even greater merit due to the fact that she was a woman and for them to play reed instruments like the saxophone was largely frowned upon. Her influence does not end there either, and transcends to a more substantial level, that of the construction of her country. Her work is a perfect example of the efforts that were being made in the United States to consolidate the young nation through culture and musical resources, copying Europe and then, by transforming the material, breaking away from it.

The book is structured in four chapters that develop significant stages or moments in her life. The first one is about her context and situation; as we have just pointed out, Elizabeth Boyer Swett Coolidge (1853-1924) –this was her maiden name– was in a very exceptional position and one that very few people in the world enjoyed (and enjoy nowadays): money was not a problem. Thus, the opening pages contain some relevant biographical aspects that, ultimately, will be decisive in understanding her economic and behavioural independence. However, contrary to what might have been expected, her existence –and her relationship

with the saxophone– was marked by a family tragedy that precipitated her turning solely to music. At this point in time we enter the second chapter: Elise, settled in the capital of Massachusetts, took the initiative to preside the Boston Orchestral Club, an active (and elitist) amateur musical association. Simply put, her dollars brought her to that management position and also paid for rent fees, reinforcements, instruments, music sheet arrangements and other material in order for that project to go ahead; but, more importantly, they were the true (and only) motivation for at least sixteen European and American composers –some of them the most valued in the world– to create twenty-four original works for saxophone, most of them *concertante* in nature¹. Of course, it is also very significant that several of these pieces were premiered by herself and her own group. By reviewing the programmes of the Boston Orchestral Club, the subsequent newspaper reviews and the comments of some of those composers, we can get an idea of this unique enterprise, which certainly attracted a lot of attention in Massachusetts high society. On the other hand, and as we have already pointed out, Elise Hall was the first person in the history of music to stand in front of a symphony orchestra playing the saxophone in the capital of France (1904), which also produced reviews that allow us to know the opinion of the toughest critics in the world about such unique music and, particularly, the performer and instrument. The chronicles on both sides of the Atlantic will help us understand why the saxophone was unlucky when it came to capturing the interest of the great composers.

One of those last musical bulwark is highlighted in the third section of this book which, due to his exceptional nature, deserved a separate analysis. Elise Hall and her teacher, Georges Longy, commissioned (1901-02?) a piece for a symphonic orchestra and saxophone from Claude Debussy, if not the best com-

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poser on the globe, the one with the most projection at that time. The *Rapsodie* of the symbolist genius was the first great achievement in the history of saxophone literature, which shows that it was possible to create a quality piece –even without complex technical requirements– counting on the gift or lucidity of someone who could carry it out. However, the birth of that score was not easy, not only because of the possible misgivings of the editors (MM. A. Durand and son), but also because the composer showed an insulting lack of manners, professional seriousness and respect. Following Debussy’s epistolary –in which he refers to Hall as “the lady [or woman] of the saxophone (*la femme saxophone*)”–, we will discover his strange prejudices and schemes to try to understand the complex and long gestation that almost relegated the work to being forgotten. The polysemic French word *affaires* which gives the third chapter its title is illustrative in connecting issues related to business, rudeness, infidelity and other circumstances that this work had to go through.

Hiring Debussy must have been very expensive, just like the other six *Prix de Rome* –a competition that unofficially distinguished the best composer of the year in France and Belgium– that Hall financed. We have already pointed out the importance of the money factor, but it will take us a few more pages –the fourth and last chapter– to further develop on other adjacent or derived aspects. For example, whether those outputs commissioned lived up to the generosity of the American woman, or who kept the commercial rights of those scores and how they were monetized.

Although we have ignored it because we believe it does not need much introduction, it may be useful to dedicate a few words to Hall’s instrument. Today everyone knows the saxophone, either because of its connection to jazz, because it is a regular instrument

in music bands, or simply because it is closely linked to some unique characters in the American collective imagination that have made it popular. For example, Lisa Simpson –from the popular animated series– or former US President Bill Clinton. However, readers might not know that it was patented in Paris (France) in 1846 by Adolphe Sax, a businessman of Belgian origin. In essence, it is a (fairly) conical brass tube dressed with a system of keys into which air is blown through a mouthpiece. The keys are mechanisms with plates that open and close the holes that the instrument has distributed throughout its body; and the mouthpiece is a kind of chamber or hollow piece to which a reed is attached. It is, in fact, a seemingly ‘easy’ instrument, an adjective that could also describe its technical and learning aspects, particularly in the initial stages.

The birth of the saxophone was linked to the Industrial Revolution, specifically to the development of metallurgy and the effervescence of new technologies applicable to brass in order to work more accurately and quickly. At the same time, it was possible for the saxophone to survive because it coincided with (some of) the new necessities imposed by the nineteenth-century rising bourgeoisie on the consumption of culture and music. For example, enjoying music of a band that played in a park’s bandstand, or that provided an evening entertainment for the surrounding cafes and restaurants. Also, when a group of this type participated in military ceremonies –very important during the instrument’s initial stages–, religious ceremonies, or civil festivals where its sound –and that of its metal ‘brothers’– was effective outdoors.

Nevertheless, in other cardinal forums, such as orchestral and opera arenas, it hardly had any representation; in fact, the situation was utterly disappointing. The total number of appearances during the

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19th century does not reach forty, even considering participations in the opera pit and stage, interventions with choir and scores that did not go beyond manuscript nor were ever represented². The causes seem to be multiple and heterogeneous, namely, the immutable focus of the orchestra on the violin family, or the complications –and increased costs– for a theatre when widening the usual (traditional) staff and hiring new staff and foreign instruments. Likewise, we can confirm other very interesting reasons not visible to the naked eye, such as the inconsistency between the words and deeds of the composers – among others, Berlioz, Halevy, Meyerbeer, Auber, Rossini or Ambroise Thomas–, who on the one hand praised the instrument in newspaper articles and reports, but then offered no music to it. It is easy to glimpse that those benign words were part of the theatrical attitudes typical of Romanticism. However, a certain degree of hypocrisy and lack of professional courage from these strongholds should be noted. Another of the strong reasons for that ostracism, but more complicated to establish because it was on an ‘unconscious’ (and cultural) plane, was the harmful effect of the novelty, originality and specificity of the saxophone’s timbre. Its ‘hybrid’ sound could scare away, confuse, or discourage potential composers because it is more difficult to merge with other conventional instruments. With the intention to make their time as profitable as possible, the composers and adapters opted for more established and explored wind instruments (mainly, the flute or the clarinet). And, if we add to all of this the lack of guarantees, responsibility, and expertise of the first saxophonists, the initial appeal of the instrument was not able to overcome these reservations.

In this sense, the situation of the nineteenth-century saxophone in Europe was worrying, but in the USA it was becoming even more distressing and barren. This

is very curious because, based on what the instrument represents today and its close ties to American culture, we would expect that the saxophone was used more broadly from the very beginning. A detail that supports this apathy was that it was not until 1879, saving the transcriptions³, that we find the first original contribution of chamber music (or small group) –*Quartette (Allegro de Concert)* by Caryl Florio– that was not even published. The issue was that the bulk of American entrepreneurs and businessmen of that time showed, despite their apparently disruptive nature, a very conservative artistic stance. And, as far as this story is concerned, that behaviour meant that the saxophone did not have a stable ground either (orchestra or opera) where it could stand in the New World. These American capitalists and merchants disguised their features as neophytes in power by imitating the tastes of the French, English or German and, just like them, did not sponsor upstarts merely to avoid endangering their social position. Hence the value and uniqueness of Hall, who was the daughter, niece and granddaughter of American bourgeois, swimming against the tide and creating a new cultural path in that country.

In any event, although unprecedented historical (and outlandish) events related to the saxophone took place in the USA –for example, the first public performance in the history of a strictly symphonic work (December 24, 1853) in which the instrument intervened (*Santa Claus Symphony* by William-Henry Fry); and, likewise, the earliest composition (1879) as soloist and with string accompaniment (*Introduction, Theme and Variations* by Caryl Florio), both connected with New York–, it must be kept in mind that the instrument in North America practically only featured in music bands, entertainers and circuses at the end of the *Ottocento* and the first decades of the 20th century. Those years also coincide with the time in

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which Elise Hall was active, so perhaps they deserve further contextualization, always taking into account the vast American territory.

The love for music bands was imported from the Old Continent, but with certain significant variations. One of the most distinctive is that some of these groups were also set up as regular companies. There, in this set up which required economic returns, ‘military’ saxophonists –rather, musicians with *allure militaire* (military look)–, which was part of the stage design, were made to stand out. For example, Patrick-Sarsfield Gilmore led a rather ‘magnetic’⁴ of band (business) that, during the last quarter of the 19th century, offered space, a certain prominence and (above all) employment for the saxophone in New York and in many other American capital cities and events.

It is also necessary to remember the numerous and almost always anonymous saxophonists –most of them clarinetists-turned-saxophonists– who earned their wages playing in circus bands, some (business-) shows that were experiencing a golden age thanks to the growth of railway networks throughout the territory. Contrary to what it might seem, the work of circus comedians and musicians was very hard, and the working day lasted more than twelve hours. The artists began in the morning encouraging the public in the typical street parade that used to have several carriages in which there was no lack of wild animals, comedians making a preview of their show and other extravagant or attractive claims. Music was a fundamental part of parades and among these musicians were saxophonists, sometimes dressed as clowns, which forged another close relationship with that trade that still remains on the retina of the collective imaginary. Furthermore, the soundtrack of the traveling show was characterized by the vulgarization of a repertoire that included marches and light music.

There followed a stage performance under the tent, in which functional music was heard and which enhanced the numbers followed. The day usually ended with a concert in the afternoon/evening, with drinks, food and dancing used to extend the entertainment and leisure and, at the same time, to ‘squeeze’ a little more out of people’s pockets⁵.

Even more so, it was the most famous American bandleader in history –John-Philip Sousa (1854-1932)– who illustrates and encompasses the situation of the saxophone in the first quarter of the 20th century. According to the author of the well-known and patriotic *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, the instrument was closely related to light and jazz music and, unfortunately, its burlesque or sly facet was abused ad nauseam. In addition, the musicians who played it did not project seriousness and, perhaps worst of all, was that the saxophone was accumulating too much of a ‘bad name’. Precisely in 1925, an interview of his appeared –“Sousa to Make the Saxophone [sic] Respectable”, as the article was entitled that emphasised the situation even more– in which the interviewer postulated the subject commenting that the instrument had become “the worst offender in the first [sic] crude jazz music”. Sousa was of the same opinion and regretted this “black sheep reputation”, but he also said that he had set out to ‘rescue’ it and offer a different perspective to his audience so that it could see the interesting qualities of the saxophone octet he had in his lineup at the time. Sousa declared himself aware of the instrument’s “orthodox” past, citing Berlioz, Bizet and Massenet⁶. What’s more, he pointed out that the New York Opera had been preparing Massenet’s *Le Roi de Lahore* two or three seasons ago and its original score included the saxophone. However, the production team deemed it prudent to suppress it and give its voice to the clarinet in order not to

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jeopardize the performance at the expense of the “clown of jazz” [sic]⁷.

These statements appeared in the *Beverly Massachusetts Times* of Salem, a town less than thirty kilometers away from Boston where Elise Hall, an American saxophonist, had already performed with orchestra and produced a corpus of over twenty ‘classical’ works by top European and American composers; and Sousa didn’t say a word about it. It is unknown whether Sousa had this information –the benefit of doubt should be granted to the most glorious American conductor in history– or, maybe, he straightaway omitted it.

As abovementioned, this journey tries to shine a light on this very brave lady and to do so in an entertaining, attractive and experiential way –e.g., by coloring some figures with AI and thus getting closer to the characters and settings–, but also in a rigorous and critical manner⁸. This implies exploring (and pointing out) other less friendly adjacent aspects. For example, her teacher (Georges Longy) hardly had any interest in caring for and preserving that professional legacy that was costing her student so much money, or the tremendous suspicion (indifference and contempt?, unacknowledged envy?) towards her by the reputed soloists and saxophone teachers of the referential and revered French band of the *Garde Républicaine*, who also turned their backs on that repertoire.

Of course, Elise Hall’s life still has considerable interest and admits different approaches –precisely, part of the music she produced is still in manuscript–; ours has as its sources the character herself –her actions– (and people who surrounded her), her link with the saxophone and the history of this instrument. In 2024 we will remember the first centenary of her death; may this brief book and its pages serve as a promoter

of more research and/or educational initiatives and, in a personal way, as a thank you and tribute to the “Saxophone Lady”.

