



## The Cultural Influence and Media Evaluations of Female Saxophonist and Patron Elise Hall (1853–1924)

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This article explores how Elise Hall challenged gender norms and media prejudice in the early twentieth century by performing as a classical saxophonist in Boston and Paris, commissioning French composers to write music for saxophone, and providing philanthropic support for both individual artists and orchestras in Boston.

How did a woman saxophonist, commissioner of new music and philanthropist influence musical culture in early twentieth century Boston, and how did her gender affect her media reception?

The authors posit that Elise Hall's combined role as a performing musician, an active philanthropist and a commissioner of new French music enabled her to gain respect as a female proponent for the classical saxophone and an important contributor to the musical culture of her time, despite ambivalent media commentaries that were partly influenced by gender biases.

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### Background

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### Context



- The article focuses on **Elise Hall's musical activities between 1900–1927** as follows: **performing as a saxophone soloist** in Boston and Paris; **commissioning 22 new works for saxophone** from 16 predominantly French male composers; **providing philanthropic support for a prominent conductor and two orchestras in Boston**: the Boston Orchestral Club and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.
- **The saxophone was still a new instrument (introduced in 1841) and considered unsuitable for women.** The first prominent women saxophonists mostly performed popular music, e.g. vaudeville and cabaret. **Elise Hall was one of the first women to perform and commission classical music for saxophone.**
- **Classical music critics and commentators of the time often applied gendered expectations and vocabulary to women performers**, expressing scepticism about both the social acceptability of elite women performing in public, and women's abilities to match the achievements of their male counterparts.
- **Female philanthropists to music were often subject to six stereotyped objections in American public discourse (cf. Locke, 1997)**, which belittled their motives, artistic choices and achievements.



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## Take aways & Learnings



- Elise Hall's performances and commissions were scrutinised in the North American and French press through the lens of gender biases and societal norms regarding female patronage and performance. **Reviews and commentaries contain a complex interplay of admiration and gendered critique, but, overall, she was viewed as a respected champion of the saxophone who shaped the musical culture of her time.**
- That Elise Hall was, on balance, seen as a legitimate contributor to the musical life despite her gender is probably due to **her unusual dual role as a performer and patron, which challenged the traditional distinction between artists (who create) and patrons (who finance).**
- Elise Hall's career is an example of how women with financial and artistic influence could shape musical culture and organisations, and challenge gender norms.
- The example of Elise Hall, as an innovative female commissioner of new music, philanthropic investor in orchestras, and occasional commentator on working conditions for musicians and funding for music education, suggests that **cultural entrepreneurship by female creators merits further study.**
- The authors **analysed 43 press reviews from North American and French media between 1900 and 1927**, examining how the media evaluated Elise Hall's contributions to classical music as a performer, commissioner of new music and donor to orchestras and individual artists. Note that the authors use the terms 'patron/patronage' in relation to two distinct activities: commissioning composers to write musical works, and providing financial support to orchestras and artists.

### An example of gendered critique of Elise Hall as a saxophone player

The French newspaper La Chronique des Arts, May, 1904, comments on Elise Hall's invitation to perform one of her commissioned works in Paris with the renowned Société Nationale de Musique:

*"I would never have imagined that the fancy would come to a lady to practice the saxophone and become a virtuoso in this thankless specialty. Mrs. Elise Hall made the trip from America to France on purpose to prove to us that the thing was possible. This forms a rather bizarre and, to tell the truth, ungraceful spectacle, which does little to show off feminine graces. But Mrs. Hall does not care and blows imperturbably into her copper pipe, like a man."*

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