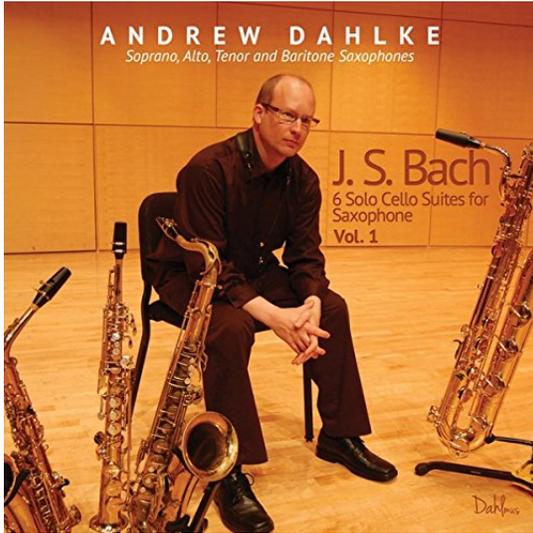


Feature Article by [Jerry Dubins](#)

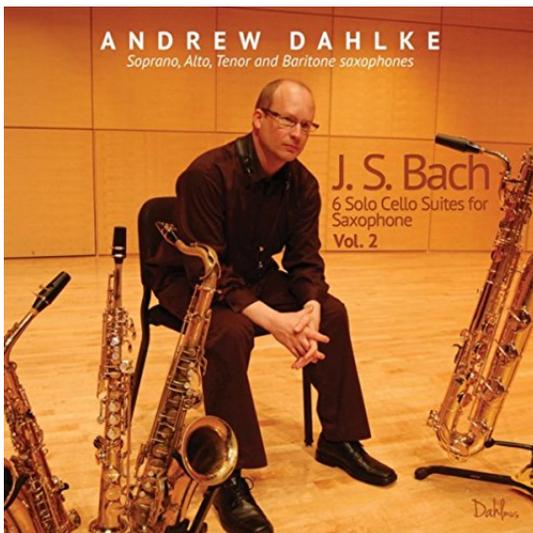
Bach on Saxophone? What Would Bach Say? Andrew Dahlke Tells Us



[J. S. Bach: 6 Solo Cello Suites for Saxophone, Vol. 1](#)

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[J. S. Bach: 6 Solo Cello Suites for Saxophone, Vol. 2](#)

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At first blush, arranging Bach's Cello Suites for saxophone would seem to be a fool's errand. Not only did the instrument not come into existence until almost 100 years after Bach's death, pressing questions relating to the saxophone's technical capabilities present themselves—for example, how and what to do about the profusion of double-stops and chords Bach wrote for the cello.

Ordinarily, this is not an assignment I'd have agreed to take on, especially since I tend to look askance at arrangements and transcriptions of musical works in general. But as I've shared with readers before, the saxophone holds a special significance for me beyond my just liking the sound of it. It was the instrument my father played, and my love for music and any musical talent I may have inherited, came from him, my mother being tone-deaf as a rock. So, while admittedly skeptical at first, I was intrigued by Andrew Dahlke's undertaking to arrange Bach's six Solo Cello Suites for a combination of soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones.

Who is Andrew Dahlke? With degrees in music from the University of Michigan and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in saxophone from the University of North Texas, Andrew is currently professor of saxophone at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. Increasingly recognized across the U.S. and abroad for his versatility and high level of artistry, Andrew regularly performs with the Philadelphia Orchestra and has appeared with the orchestra at a number of festivals, as well as at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, working with, among others, music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

An Aspen Music Festival alumnus and frequent performer at the Festival, Andrew has performed with the Aspen Chamber Symphony, Aspen Philharmonic Orchestra, Aspen Wind Ensemble, and the Opera Theatre Program, working with well-known conductors such as David Zinman, Leonard Slatkin, and Robert Spano. Andrew also frequently performs with the Colorado Symphony in Denver with conductors including Marin Alsop, Jeffrey Kahane, and Larry Rachleff.

So, let me begin by asking Andrew the first question out of the box. Why Bach's Cello Suites? What initially led you to believe they would make suitable candidates for saxophone arrangements?

There is a history of classical saxophonists experimenting with playing Bach's Cello Suites. Many years ago, my saxophone professor at the University of Michigan, Donald Sinta, first introduced to me the possibility of performing Bach's First Cello Suite on saxophone. Don also had a video tape in his studio of Pablo Casals performing and teaching the suites, which I watched. The French classical saxophonist in Lyon, Jean Marie Londeix, published an edition of Bach's First Cello Suite for saxophone in 1963. In addition to the suites, other saxophone transcriptions of Bach's music were in the literature.

In general, the musical affect of the Baroque period resonates with me. I find it to be especially powerful, poignant, characteristically rhythmic, melodic, and dynamic. The fact that it is so improvisational, and that so much of the music-making and interpretation is flexible and spontaneous and can be shaped by the performer, is appealing. I was very moved and influenced about six years ago before starting the Cello Suites project by the two Glenn Gould recordings of the Goldberg Variations. Then, when I started listening to different cellists performing the suites, in addition to Casals, I favored Anner Bylsma's playing and Rostropovich's, ultimately settling on Rostropovich as my primary influence. The Cello Suites represent a major benchmark for cellists and other instrumentalists for study and performance. I wanted to do something that hadn't been done before, and also to choose a project that had the potential for wide accessibility and recognition. One of my goals has been to bring the classical saxophone to a more mainstream audience.

Some of the challenges in performing live and recording the suites were daunting. But, with each new challenge I was able to negotiate a solution and received positive feedback from audiences and peers which spurred me on. Recently, David Kim, the concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra, listened to my recording and commented on how much he enjoyed listening to it and how beautiful the music sounds.

I understand that you studied these works at length and in depth, and that you came up with your own performing and printed edition. How did you overcome the obstacle of the extensive double-stopping in the original cello scores, and beyond that, what other technical challenges did you face in making these arrangements?

I dealt with the polyphony in several ways. Most common was to roll the double stops and chords, which is actually how many of them are played on the cello. In some instances, I was able to create a similar musical/harmonic effect through the use of overtones. The saxophone can sound more than one note simultaneously by overblowing the fundamental tone and manipulating the resultant sequence of harmonics. In some of the movements, where there are so many double-stops that rolling them all doesn't work, I reworked or recomposed them as melodies with definite rhythms to maintain the structure of the movement. Probably the greatest challenge is the breathing. It is necessary to pause to take breaths where the cello is not hindered by the breathing aspect. In the end, I think having to breathe makes the suites more human in a way; it defines phrases more clearly, and shapes the music in a fresh way.

Rostropovich phrases according to breathing as well. The melodicism and vocal nature of Bach's music (including the suites) also makes it easy in most cases to find places to breathe. There are, however, some places where it is difficult to make the phrase on a single breath, particularly in the Third Suite on the baritone saxophone, which requires the most air. The endurance is also very tough, as the full suites range from between 16 and 33 minutes, with no breaks or periods of rest for the instrumentalist. It is truly an athletic endeavor to perform a suite on saxophone.

You use four different instruments in your arrangements and for your recording—a soprano sax in the Suites 4 and 6, a low A alto sax in the Suites 1 and 2, a tenor sax in the Suite No. 5, and a baritone sax in the Suite No. 3. What were the considerations, both technical and musical, that led you to choose the instrument you did for each of the suites?

There are only a couple of published transcriptions of the cello suites for saxophone. As I am aware, the suites are transposed in order to match the range of the saxophone. After working with the music, initially I decided that the suites sound the best in the keys that Bach chose, so my editions and recordings leave the suites in their original keys. The decision as to which horn to use was based on matching the character of each suite and range considerations.

The first issue with range is that the cello's lowest note is a concert C, whereas the various saxophones, with the exception of the baritone, commonly only go to a low D \flat . The baritone does go to the low C. So, the works that I play on the E \flat saxophones (alto and baritone), when transposed to the saxophone, do utilize the low C, a few times in the First and Second Suites, and a great deal in the Third Suite.

The Third Suite strikes me as very grand and majestic and a good match for the baritone saxophone, which can also play the many low Cs with ease. For many listeners, the Third Suite in C Major is their favorite from my recordings. The range of the baritone saxophone also matches the cello. I was having lunch with the jazz saxophonist Dick Oatts and discussing this project and these issues, and Dick offered to lend me his father's low A (concert C) alto saxophone for Suites One and Two. This was a special alto saxophone that the Selmer company made for a while that included the extended range (low C). I ended up liking the sound of the horn and using it for the recordings of the First and Second Suites. These horns did not become standard and are not used today, so my editions include options for performing Suites One and Two without the extended range. In those few instances, the low C is either displaced to the octave or reharmonized to a different note.

Another technical consideration was the upper end of the range. For example, the Sixth Suite in D Major would have put too much into the altissimo, or very high range of the alto saxophone, and wouldn't have worked well, so I used the B \flat soprano saxophone. The Fifth Suite in C Minor is particularly dark and intense, with speculation that it was written after the premature death of Bach's first wife. The color of the B \flat tenor saxophone matches the serious nature of the suite well.

Tell me about your work with the Philadelphia Orchestra and playing with the orchestra in general.

I first played with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Colorado five or six years ago. It went really well and I fit in well with its sound and musicality. I played again in a subsequent summer in Vail and spoke at length with Ricardo Morales, the principal clarinetist, and others about performing with them more frequently and in the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. I have close family in Philadelphia, so it's easy for me to travel and stay there. Since then, I have performed many concerts with the orchestra in Philadelphia and Saratoga, New York, among other places, including 20 concerts this year. Highlights include playing the Berg Violin Concerto this year with Gil Shaham, and the soprano saxophone solo in Ravel's Boléro this summer in Saratoga in a concert which included Yo-Yo Ma.

In May, I performed with the orchestra and music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin for the large production of Leonard Bernstein's Mass, which was very moving. This work is rarely performed, in part because of how many people are involved and the logistics. Playing with the Philadelphia Orchestra is certainly one of the high points in my career. I learn every time I am with the orchestra. The commitment to excellence and level of music making collectively, and from each individual, is extremely high. Most notable is how well the musicians listen, blend, and communicate with each other musically, which ultimately makes for the most powerful experience for the performer and the audience. The orchestra is also one of the nicest groups of people I've had the opportunity to work with, which also shows up in the music-making. Being able to participate in that longstanding tradition and the artistic community in Philadelphia is very special for me.

You've expressed a strong desire to promote the classical saxophone within the mainstream classical community, as well as the community at large. What sort of community outreach projects and activities are you engaged in to further that goal?

The classical saxophone is well represented in higher education and the academic community. The current level of musicianship and activity within that community is impressive. A great deal of new music has been written for the instrument in the last 40 to 50 years. The genre of saxophone quartet has been particularly successful. The major American chamber music competitions, such as Fischhoff and Coleman, are frequently won by and often award prizes to saxophone quartets. At the same time, I am amazed at how few people in general are aware of classical saxophone and how beautiful it is. The instrument got off to a late start (circa 1840) and the level of playing took a while to develop.

Prior to recording the Cello Suites I made a conscious effort to perform them as much as I could in order to get to know the music, and to follow through on my mission of bringing the classical saxophone to a wider audience. Locations included an adult day care center for Alzheimer's patients, an agricultural products company office, and a Presbyterian church, in addition to more traditional recital and concert venues.

A current project I'm very excited about has to do with a student saxophone quartet I put together and am working with at the University of Northern Colorado. The group consists of four guys who are of Mexican descent. In addition to the standard saxophone quartet repertoire, we are also arranging and performing more traditional Mexican music, including singing and the use of guitar. The idea came about to provide music for one of our signature university concerts that features the whole school of music. The theme this year was world music. My idea was to recognize the cultural background of these students in order to inspire them and take the group outside of the university in order to inspire others, including Hispanic youth in the community to go to college and pursue their dreams. Ultimately, my plan is to empower the group to be professional and perform gigs and concerts. The city we live in has a large Hispanic population.

We have already performed for a Mexican studies class at the university and will be performing for a bilingual college fair at a local school and in other K-12 schools.

I work with another saxophone quartet at the university that is very active in seeking out non-traditional performance venues in the community. They have performed classical saxophone music in town squares, farmer's markets, brew pubs, etc.

My previous question is a natural segue to this next one, which I think you're in a unique position to answer because of your extensive teaching experience both here and abroad. Coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up at a time when music classes were part of the public school curriculum. Kids were exposed, however superficially, to classical music, and many, if not most, however rudimentarily, learned to play an instrument. That served a dual purpose. One, it passed on from one generation to the next at least some degree of cultural awareness that music history did not start with The Beatles; and two, it provided a continuous supply of musically motivated high school graduates to the higher halls of learning as they entered our colleges and universities. Today, with public school music classes pretty much nonexistent, kids grow up having never heard a note of classical music, unless it has been purloined for a movie soundtrack or TV commercial, and unsurprisingly, they are acculturated to believe that rap is great art. Okay, I'll get off my soapbox now and get to my question. What are your thoughts about the state of music education in the U.S. today, and how would you contrast it with the state of music education in South Korea and China, where I understand you spent some time teaching and performing? Tell me more about your experience abroad.

These are tough questions to answer in brief. I would agree that general education in classical music in the K-12 schools in the U.S. is mostly nonexistent. How much this has changed I am not sure. I believe at the high school level that there used to be music appreciation classes that served to introduce the general student population to art music. I believe there is a music theory AP test that is offered at the high school level, and a few high schools may offer this class. At the college level it is common for schools of music to offer music appreciation courses and music history courses as electives to non-music majors. These are usually well attended.

It is quite eye-opening in Asia to witness the elevated status and importance given to education in general and the respect that is afforded to teachers and professors. It seems obvious to me how empowering and absolutely important education is to human beings and societies; yet in the U.S., as of late, we have this seemingly "anti-education" sentiment among the population. As someone who has been working in education my whole career and sees its challenges and benefits first-hand every day, this makes no sense to me and is very troubling. Teachers are working with children every day to mentor them to become productive and fulfilled human beings. Teachers deal with an incredible range of issues beyond academics—issues that students often hide from their parents and peers. At the college level today, students are really struggling with their work ethic, focus, identity, social skills, morals, mental illness, physical health, and the list goes on. It is an incredibly demanding, and often exhausting, job and responsibility to work with young people, yet a critical one; and I think we need to get back to recognizing that and supporting it. OK, there was my soapbox talk.

Elementary and instrumental music education in American public schools has always been subject to economic conditions in terms of its prevalence. In South Korea, instrumental music education is not part of the K-12 schools. A student needs to seek out instruction elsewhere. This is difficult because kids in South Korea go to school pretty much year round and all day. After school, during the academic year most students attend "hagwons." These are schools for "after school." This starts at a young age. The major music conservatories in Korea do have excellent instrumentalists; but overall, South Korea's instrumental music has not been a part of educating the larger population.

In China, instrumental music education has also taken place as an extracurricular activity, outside of the cursory education. However, unlike in South Korea, instrumental music in China is very popular and experiencing tremendous growth, with the saxophone being very popular among youth and the adult

audience. Each major city in China has a college music conservatory and there are many saxophone students. The conservatory in Wuhan has over 100 saxophonists. This past summer I took my saxophone quartet on a tour of China. The group is called the Global Saxophone Quartet. We performed to packed and sold-out houses in Beijing, Tianjin, and Wuhan, in part because we played saxophone. Further evidence of this growth in China is that we are planning to hold a saxophone quartet camp here at the University of Northern Colorado next summer, consisting of students from China, to help develop the music education of Chinese students. A big concern in China is still the lack of outside resources getting into the country. Juilliard also recently developed a master's degree program at the Tianjin Conservatory in that major Chinese port city. Students can now get a master's degree from Juilliard without leaving China.

What is very interesting about Korean culture is that there is a shared musical culture of traditional songs that everyone seems to know. These are taught in the schools. This is also true for Mexico. It is a great cultural trait and multi-generational. Grandparents, parents, and children all know and enjoy, appreciate, and sing the same folk songs, something our more diverse American culture does not do to that extent. These songs impart positive meaning and teach healthy concepts for living, solving problems, understanding life, etc. In Asia, the respect for one's elders and educators can be traced to Confucianism, which is a very different cultural outlook from ours in the U.S.

What has your experience been teaching at the university level? I know that by the time I started college, I already knew most of the mainstream classical repertoire as a result of playing an instrument (violin) and through listening to as much music as I could on record and over a local classical music radio station. What is the "musical knowledge quotient" of the students who come to you at the University of Northern Colorado? Do you find there's a lot of remedial work to be done just to catch them up?

Excellent question. This will vary according to the demographic of the student population at the various music schools. The University of Northern Colorado services a range of students from the most talented to students who are less developed but show great potential. In general, I'd have to say the "musical knowledge quotient" is not what one would like to see. Believe it or not, I attribute a large part of this to the movement away from LP records and CDs. It used to be that if you were serious about playing or listening to music, you spent a lot of time in the record stores going through the stacks and reading about each recording, or doing the same at home after you purchased the recording. Liner notes are an excellent source for this general musical knowledge. Today, students mostly download an mp3 file (which, as we know, is also compressed and of poorer sound quality) and listen to it without exploring who the other musicians are on the recording or reading the liner notes for other important information and detail. So, yes, we are charged with filling in the gaps where the outside musical culture has fallen short with changes in technology and distribution, among other things.

Traditionally, I think, the saxophone is more closely associated with jazz than it is with classical music, though certainly there have been a number of concertos written for it, as well as prominent parts in orchestral works. I know that you're no stranger to the jazz world, and you've said that it's a mission of yours to turn young people on to classical music through a medium they more commonly identify with. So, do you use your jazz experience when working with students as a way of "crossing them over," so to speak, into the classical realm?

I would say that part of what I do has to do with turning young people on to classical music; most of my students already are to a point. That mission was centered on the New Bach Rock CD project more specifically, in which I produced and essentially electrified classical favorites to make them more accessible to a younger audience. I don't use my jazz background for this purpose; I treat both jazz and classical as equal art forms. I do, however, impress upon my more jazz-focused students the benefits and opportunities of experience and ability in the classical genre, and vice-versa. Having the understanding and facility in music to be able to compose and improvise used to be much more a part of being a classical performer.

Related to my previous question, I understand you have a new CD out titled New Bach Rock. I'm sorry I haven't heard it, but can I assume from the title that it fits in with your effort to bring young people to classical music by demonstrating how the "old" relates to the "new," and to provide an example of the technical discipline and musical inspiration that are common to both?

Most definitely. It is surprising how many professional musicians were first exposed to the classical music genre through more commercial/radio versions of classical music, which led them to the original scores and recordings. Honestly, for me it was the disco version of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. After hearing that on the radio, picking up the 45, and browsing one of the record stores in the local mall, I bought the LP of the full Beethoven's Fifth and couldn't stop listening to it. I remember my grandparents complaining because I kept playing the record over and over again. For jazz, it was my father taking me to see local jazz concerts in the Detroit area and hearing Spyro Gyra and Grover Washington on the jazz radio stations. This led me initially to Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, and Phil Woods.

What other recording projects, performing activities, and musical collaborations are you currently involved in?

I recently recorded a CD with a pianist, Anne Breeden, who comes from a very musical family. Her father and mother were members of the San Francisco Symphony and her grandfather, Leon Breeden, developed the well-known jazz program at the University of North Texas, of which I'm an alumnus. Our CD is solely music for soprano saxophone and piano, combining both original music for saxophone and transcriptions. This CD is also intended to reach and affect a more mainstream audience, with pieces by Ravel, J. S. Bach, Villa-Lobos, Rodney Rogers, and Francis Poulenc. The soprano saxophone with piano is an extraordinarily beautiful combination. Hopefully that recording will be released in the first part of next year.

With Anne Breeden, I am part of a new trio that includes the fantastic string bassist Susan Cahill, who is a member of the Colorado Symphony in Denver and plays a lot of chamber music. We first got together to perform on a series called Denver Eclectic Concerts. I arrange a wide spectrum of music for the group, crossing over into jazz and improvisation as well, which Susan has a great interest in. We have also secured funding to record a CD.

I am excited about composing original music for a jazz project and have ideas I am fleshing out with more music by J. S. Bach.

Finally, let me ask you about a business venture you're involved in. I understand you have your own company, Dahlke Mouthpieces, which sells your personally designed, professional saxophone mouthpieces. To a non-saxophone player like me, a saxophone mouthpiece would have little purpose other than as an infant's pacifier, so explain please, if you would, what makes your mouthpieces different and special from others in common use.

The mouthpiece is a critical component of the instrument and has everything to do with the timbre and response of the sound. One could compare it to the head joint on a flute, or a bassoon bocal, for example. There have traditionally been two chamber designs (shape of the inside of the mouthpiece before reaching the bore of the mouthpiece) for classical saxophone mouthpieces: square and round. Each type of chamber supports certain qualities. Square chambers allow for more flexibility of timbre, or the ability to manipulate the color of the sound more easily. Round chambers tend to provide more stability, more consistent intonation, and a homogenous scale.

My goal with the first mouthpiece design (Virtuoso Series RS) was to create a mouthpiece that offered all of these qualities, combining the best attributes of both square and round chambers. The RS stands for rounded square. After much work and testing we came up with a chamber that ended up being similar to an A-frame with rounded corners. I am very happy with this innovative new mouthpiece, which is being used by some excellent saxophonists.

The mouthpiece is also constructed from a uniquely rich material created by Behn Mouthpieces. Bradford Behn of Behn Mouthpieces is my business partner and an established, world-class clarinet mouthpiece maker. Currently, my mouthpieces are the only saxophone mouthpieces in the world made from this material, which is similar to the high quality rod rubber that was used to make mouthpieces in the 1920s and 30s. These older mouthpieces from that time are very highly sought after because of the material. Also in production from Dahlke Mouthpieces is a round chamber alto saxophone mouthpiece, and a jazz alto saxophone mouthpiece which I have been developing with the jazz icon Charles McPherson.



BACH Solo Cello Suites Nos. 6, 2, 3 (arr. for saxophones by A. Dahlke) • Andrew Dahlke (sax) • DAHLMUS 10001 (75:03)



BACH Solo Cello Suites Nos. 1, 5, 4 (arr. for saxophones by A. Dahlke) • Andrew Dahlke (sax) • DAHLMUS 10002 (63:20)

Every once in a while we need to be jostled out of our comfort zone, and these arrangements of Bach's Solo Cello Suites for saxophone surely gave me a jolt. Much as I adore the sound of the saxophone, in all honesty, I can't say I'd have come on my own to these recordings by Andrew Dahlke without a little prodding by our fearless leader in Tenafly, New Jersey. I have him to thank for convincing me to give Dahlke's Bach a listen.

I don't honestly know what Bach would say to the question posed about these arrangements in the article title. The saxophone had not even been invented in his lifetime, and he might likely have been just as puzzled by the definitional incongruity of a woodwind instrument made out of metal as he would have been intrigued by any such instrument having all those keys. But clearly, the transcribing of pieces for instruments other than those for which they were originally written was not a novel concept to Bach, and, in the end, I think he would have approved of and enjoyed hearing his Cello Suites in these saxophone arrangements.

Obviously, as Dahlke himself concedes, adjustments and compromises were necessary to realize on various saxophones music that was conceived for a string instrument. I say "string instrument" rather than cello because speculation is strong that Bach did not compose every single one of these suites with the same instrument in mind. It is now widely believed and generally accepted that the Sixth Suite was intended for a five-stringed violoncello piccolo, with its fifth string tuned to E, a perfect fifth above the A-string. It has also been suggested, though without much supporting evidence, that the Sixth Suite may have been written for a cello da spalla, an instrument played on the shoulder like a viola, or even a viola pomposa, a viola with a fifth string tuned to E above its top A-string.

These considerations, especially of overall range and comfort of tessitura, would have to figure in any transferring of the music from one medium to another. That Andrew Dahlke has done the work of an expert craftsman in tailoring Bach's Cello Suites to soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones is evident in every movement of each of these works. But his accomplishment goes beyond the mechanics of craft. He brings to the suites playing of artful technique, great beauty of tone, and exceptional feeling for the style and essence of this music. The result is a deeply communicative and satisfying listening experience, which I can only urge you, as I was urged, to hear for yourself in these extraordinary performances of Bach's Cello Suites arranged for saxophone. Jerry Dubins

This article originally appeared in Issue 39:4 (Mar/Apr 2016) of *Fanfare Magazine*.