



# LÉON LEBLANC

1900-2000  
UN HOMME, UN SIÈCLE  
A MAN, A CENTURY

LE MUSÉE  
DES INSTRUMENTS À VENT  
LA COUTURE-BOUSSEY



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# LÉON LEBLANC

1900-2000

UN HOMME, UN SIÈCLE

A MAN, A CENTURY



DEPARTEMENT DE  
**L'EURE**

en Normandie



ÉVREUX  
PORTES DE NORMANDIE



# AVANT-PROPOS

**Emanuele Marconi**  
**Directeur et responsable scientifique**  
**des collections**



Ouvriers devant l'atelier Leblanc.  
Carte postale, début XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Workers in front of the Leblanc  
workshop.  
Postcard, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Léon Leblanc a vécu ce que l'historien Eric Hobsbawm nomme le « court vingtième siècle » dans son ouvrage paru en 1994, *L'Âge des extrêmes*. Cette définition s'adapte parfaitement à la facture instrumentale qui passe d'un système de production préindustriel à un système de production de masse, à une production industrielle globalisée.

Léon Leblanc est l'un de ces acteurs motivés par la recherche ininterrompue d'amélioration sonore, d'efficacité de production et de réduction du coût. Fils de Georges Leblanc, facteur d'instruments à vent et musicien, et de Laure Clémence Jeuffroy, ouvrière « en instrument de musique », il sera bercé par la musique dès sa plus tendre enfance. Une enfance vécue dans les ateliers, au contact des ouvriers, des machines, des bois et des musiciens de l'Harmonie que son père Georges, bassoniste, dirigeait.

1921 sera une année charnière pour lui. Après l'obtention d'un diplôme en clarinette au Conservatoire de Paris, un voyage de trois mois aux États-Unis pour promouvoir les clarinettes Noblet-Leblanc lui fera découvrir le potentiel du marché outre-Atlantique : ce voyage constituera le baptême de Léon comme entrepreneur. En 1997, à l'occasion de son 97<sup>e</sup> anniversaire, il écrira : « Dès le 1<sup>er</sup> voyage en 1921, j'ai réalisé ce qui devait être fait pour gagner le marché américain. À mon retour à La Couture, avec des idées américaines, j'en parle avec mon père qui m'a laissé carte blanche ».

Un fils entreprenant et visionnaire et un père résolument tourné vers l'avenir : tels ont été les ingrédients du succès de la marque. Au milieu des années 1920, de nouveaux ateliers seront installés dans le quartier de Belleville, au 70 rue des Rigoles dans le 20<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris et une usine pour la fabrication de clés sera créée à Yzeure, dans le Département de l'Allier. Les nouvelles technologies développées par Pierre Cluzel, mécanicien expert et ancien camarade de Léon au collège Saint-Nicolas à Paris, constitueront le premier passage d'une fabrication manuelle à une fabrication industrielle qui améliorera la qualité et permettra l'interchangeabilité des pièces.

La rencontre en 1944 avec Vito Pascucci, futur partenaire d'affaires, trompettiste et réparateur pour la Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band, marquera profondément la vie professionnelle de Léon Leblanc. En 1946, Noblet-Leblanc deviendra ainsi une entreprise internationale reconnue : The Leblanc Corporation. Grâce à cette collaboration, d'autres sociétés verront le jour en Angleterre, en Suisse et en Australie. The Leblanc Corporation deviendra en quelques années la plus grande manufacture de clarinettes aux États-Unis et Léon ne cessera de voyager à travers le monde pour promouvoir ses instruments.

La traversée du siècle de Léon Leblanc s'est interrompue quelque mois avant d'atteindre ses 100 ans. Le dernier représentant d'une tradition artisanale remontant au siècle précédent s'en est donc allé, sans bruit, non sans avoir transformé à jamais le monde de la manufacture instrumentale et avoir inscrit durablement La Couture-Boussey comme un lieu de pèlerinage pour des milliers de musiciens et d'amateurs.

# FOREWORD

**Emanuele Marconi**  
**Director and Scientific Head of Collections**



Marriage de Louis Prudent Leblanc (1877-1907)  
avec Henriette Félicité Chedeville (1881-1971),  
08 octobre 1900.  
Archive Chennesseau.

Wedding of Louis Prudent Leblanc (1877-1907)  
with Henriette Félicité Chedeville (1881-1971),  
08 octobre 1900.  
Chennesseau archive.

Léon Leblanc lived through what the historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his 1994 work *The Age of Extremes*, dubbed the “short twentieth century”. This definition is perfectly suited to instrument making, which moved from a pre-industrial production system to a mass-production system, and then to globalized industrial production.

Léon Leblanc was one of these instrument makers, driven by a tireless search for improved sound, efficient production, and lower costs. The son of Georges Leblanc, a maker of wind instruments and musician, and Laure Clémence Jeuffroy, a musical instrument worker, he was surrounded by music from a very young age. He spent his childhood in workshops alongside workers, machines, woodwind instruments, and the musicians of the wind section conducted by his father Georges, a bassoonist.

1921 was a pivotal year for him. Having obtained a clarinet diploma from the Conservatory of Paris, he took a three-month trip to the United States to promote Noblet-Leblanc clarinets, and it was there that he realized the potential of the overseas market. This trip was Léon’s introduction to the world of business. On his 97<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1997, he wrote: “From my very first trip in 1921, I understood what had to be done to win over the American market.

When I returned to La Couture, full of American ideas, I talked about it with my father, who gave me carte blanche.”

An enterprising and visionary son and a determinedly forward-looking father: these were the ingredients of the brand’s success. In the mid-1920s, new workshops were set up in the Belleville district, at 70 Rue des Rigoles in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, while a key factory was established in Yzeure, in the Allier Department. The new technologies developed by Pierre Cluzel, an expert mechanic and former classmate of Léon at the Saint-Nicolas school in Paris, formed the first step in the transition from manual manufacturing to industrial manufacturing, improving quality and making parts interchangeable.

In 1944, Léon Leblanc met Vito Pascucci, his future business partner, a trumpeter and repair technician for the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band. This meeting would have a profound effect on his career. In 1946, Noblet-Leblanc thus became an internationally recognized company: the Leblanc Corporation. Thanks to this collaboration, other companies sprung up in England, Switzerland, and Australia. Within a few years, the Leblanc Corporation became the largest clarinet manufacturer in the United States, and Léon traveled the world tirelessly promoting his instruments.

Léon Leblanc’s journey through the century ended a few months before he reached his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. The last representative of an artisanal tradition dating back to the previous century passed away quietly, but not without having forever transformed the world of instrument making and having permanently established La Couture-Boussey as a place of pilgrimage for thousands of musicians and enthusiasts.



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Vue de l'intérieur de l'atelier Leblanc,  
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Interior of the Leblanc workshop,  
1960s.

# SPANNING THE CENTURY

**Bernard Groulier  
Mayor of La Couture-Boussey  
(1994-2008)**

On November 24, 1900, at 4:30 a.m., in the small family house located at 11 Rue des Gravieres in La Couture-Boussey, Léon Leblanc was born (we could call him a child of the 20<sup>th</sup> century!). He was the only son of Georges Leblanc and Laure Clémence Leblanc, née Jeuffroy.

He was immersed in the world of the family business from a very young age, and his parents guided him toward general studies, but also toward music. He told me: “As a baby, I was by my parents’ side in the workshop. I hollered and cried constantly. My mother rocked me with one hand while she worked with the other.” He lived with his parents close to the factory, a place where order and cleanliness reigned supreme.

I remember a finisher at the factory confiding to me: “It was an impeccable factory; the equipment was all orderly. We weren’t allowed to sing, whistle, or smoke; we had an hour to assemble a metal clarinet intended for the United States, and an hour and twenty minutes for an ebony one. He was a very strict boss!” Everything from turning to finishing was done by modern, automated machines that were for the most part designed on site. When I visited the workshop for the first time, Mr. Leblanc noticed my amazement straight away and immediately told me: “I mechanized everything that used to be done by hand in order to lower the cost price of clarinets so that beginners could buy very high-quality equipment. I started by mechanizing the production of keys, and the rest followed.”

From the age of five, he took music theory lessons and then clarinet lessons before taking up piano and soprano saxophone, all while attending the village school. A gifted pupil, the young Léon became a boarder at the Saint Nicolas school in Paris from 1911 to 1916 under the watchful eye of his teacher Charles

Houvenaghel, a musician, renowned acoustician, and friend of his father. An education “earned the hard way, with visits home only allowed every three months” as he explained to me. After graduating from high school in 1916, Léon returned to La Couture-Boussey and the family business, where he spent twenty-four months getting to grips with the various stages of making a clarinet. In 1918, he enlisted in the 104<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment in Paris as a musician; this allowed him to attend the National Music Conservatory of Paris twice a week and thus continue his musical studies. A brilliant student, he was awarded the 2<sup>nd</sup> prize for clarinet in 1919. However, the ambitious young Léon did not stop there: he took home the 1<sup>st</sup> prize the following year.

After the First World War, the Leblancs were inundated with orders, forcing them to reorganize their workshop to guarantee deliveries. In 1923, his father Georges Leblanc bought a building with a plot of land at 70 Rue des Rigoles in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris and had a factory built there. From that point on, Noblet would be headquartered in La Couture-Boussey, while Leblanc’s head office would be in Paris. In 1924, the Moulins workshops, built on previously purchased land in Yzeure (Allier Department), started production. These workshops were responsible for tooling and the industrial manufacture of keys (previously made by hand). Pierre Cluzel, a friend of the family, was hired to manage them. In 1938, Léon Leblanc—recognized for his unparalleled expertise—was appointed President of the wind-instruments section of the Musical Instrument Manufacturers Union. He set off by boat for the United States to promote his brand. He later delighted in telling friends and journalists: “During one of my trips, Maurice Chevalier and Mistinguett were on board the ocean liner. One evening, they organized a small gala, and I played the clarinet.” On September 1, 1939, he was mobilized and appointed to the supply corps in Le Petit-Quevilly, Seine-Maritime, with the task of supplying the 3<sup>rd</sup> army corps; he was demobilized in Cusset in the Allier Department in September 1941.

He was suffering from bronchopneumonia and doctors thought he was a lost cause, but his health began to improve, and he headed to the Alps to convalesce. During his return journey, he was hit on the head by falling luggage when the bus braked suddenly. He was left with a fractured skull and orbital rim, a broken nose, lockjaw, and split lips. Another tough blow, but fortunately, Léon recovered well. In 1944, the Leblancs met Vito Pascucci, a brilliant trumpeter and skilled musical instrument repair technician, and they became friends. In 1946, the Leblanc corporation, which would go on to be vitally important, was founded in Kenosha, Wisconsin (USA). From that point on, the company’s musical instruments would be sold in Japan, Switzerland, Australia, the United States... in other words, all around the world. 70% of its products were exported.

In 1949, Léon was injured in a serious car accident in Juvisy in the Essonne Department. He broke both his legs and could not walk for ten months. On February 1, 1950, Mary Lambret, a woman with a big personality, joined the Parisian workshop team. She would stay with Léon for the rest of his life. On the night of 12-13 February, 1950, while Léon was in Paris, where he was recovering from his most recent car accident, a fire broke out in the La Couture-Boussey factory. Everything was destroyed by the flames, but the factory was quickly rebuilt. However, fate had another blow in store for him: in 1953, he was the victim of another car accident near Bonneval in Eure-et-Loir. The outcome: two days in a coma, one broken shoulder, one broken collarbone, and two broken arms. He was out of action for several months. During his lengthy recovery, his father ensured that the business kept running smoothly—always with his son’s consent. On April 24, 1957, he organized his parents’ diamond wedding anniversary; his friends and collaborators were invited to the reception.

Every November 22<sup>nd</sup>, on the day dedicated to Saint Cecilia, patron saint of luthiers, it was a tradition for manufacturers to put

on a banquet for their staff: a reward for those responsible for the work. Of course, the gourmet meal served by the Noblet-Leblanc company was the talk of the town!

Léon Leblanc’s father, a benefactor, offered the town a house which was used to set up a pharmacy, something that was in high demand among the local population at the time. This is why Rue des Gravieres (the street on which the factory was located) became Rue Georges Leblanc on Tuesday, February 28, 1964. Following a short speech by the mayor at the time, André Buffet, a very touched Léon Leblanc thanked the local people for coming to honor the memory of his father. His mother Clémence, whom he loved very much, died the following year.

On July 1, 1968, a second fire (following the 1950 blaze) broke out in the factory following repair work. This time, there was nothing left. Two hundred million francs of damage... the antique instruments that Mr. Leblanc was so fond of went up in smoke. Despondent but tenacious and courageous nonetheless, he had the factory rebuilt on the site of the old one.

The company used to sponsor professional ensembles, such as the famous “Leblanc clarinet quartet” (which would later become the “Paris clarinet quartet”) and the “Leblanc clarinet sextet.” Keen to enrich his village, Mr. Leblanc repeatedly asked these internationally renowned artists to perform at La Couture-Boussey’s church. The residents thus enjoyed concerts by talented musicians: clarinetists from the Republican Guard, but also musicians from the musical division of the Air Force and the National Police. On June 6, 1982, the new Museum of Musical Instruments was opened in La Couture-Boussey. In his speech, Robert Poilvert, the mayor, mentioned all those who had contributed, eventually turning to Mr. Leblanc: “Next, I would like to mention the role played—and what a role it is—by the doyen of manufacturers: Mr. Léon Leblanc. You have devoted and continue to devote your life to making instruments. I know how reserved, discreet and modest you are, but on behalf of the municipal council and on behalf of myself, allow me to extend our

very sincere thanks for your priceless help.” Indeed, Mr. Leblanc’s generous contribution, including the donation of numerous clarinets, had helped set up the new museum. He struck a very optimistic tone when speaking about lutherie: “This trade is far from dead!”. He envisaged fully industrialized manufacturing in the future. Ninety-two years old... time to retire! “That was when my life stopped,” he told me nostalgically, but “I still had plans in mind.”

In December 1997, at Mr. Leblanc’s request, I visited his house. There, to my great surprise, he announced his intention to marry Mary Lambret! He explained to me: “If we had married earlier, we would definitely have divorced dozens of times! We’re very independent of each other.” Mr. Leblanc wanted to celebrate his partner’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday with great ceremony, so he asked Mary to marry him on the very same day. His future wife accepted, confiding in me: “I wasn’t sure of my own mind—I thought about it for forty-five years before I said yes!” Mr. Leblanc was then taken ill; he was suffering from a lung infection. A frightened Mary feared that her partner “wouldn’t make it” and accepted his proposal, specifying to me that it needed to be “private and very discreet,” which it was. And so, on February 28, 2008, I married Léon Leblanc, aged 97 years 3 months and 4 days, and Mary Lambret, aged 70, both of whom were marrying for the first time. Only four couples were invited to the town hall. The ceremony ended with a meal at the restaurant. The wedding blessing was postponed to Saturday, June 13<sup>th</sup>, at the Church of Notre-Dame in La Couture-Boussey.

Many of the couple’s friends were in attendance that day. For Mr. Leblanc, music was a calling. So why not open a music school that would bear his name? For this reason, in 1999, he donated a house and some land located on Rue Hotteterre to the municipality.

It was the municipality’s responsibility to keep the school running for at least ten years. The land, meanwhile, allowed infrastructure to be built in the heart of the village: the village hall, the preschool, the sports

complex and, more recently, the school cafeteria. In the same year, for the last time, he attended the concert staged by the music school’s students.

Innovative musical instrument manufacturer, holder of more than fifty patents, recipient of the French honor of Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters): Léon Leblanc had an exceptional career. Yet he remained a modest man who never sought fame.

He died in Évreux on February 17, 2000. His funeral was held on Wednesday, February 23, 2000, at the Church of Notre-Dame in La Couture-Boussey. Many people came to honor his memory and pay tribute to him one last time.



## LÉON LEBLANC, UN SOUVENIR RECONNAISSANT

**Leon Pascucci**  
Ancien Président de G. Leblanc Corporation,  
USA

Leon Pascucci (à gauche) avec Léon Leblanc à Kenosha, dans les bureaux de G. Leblanc Corporation, Wisconsin, États-Unis, vers 1958. (Avec l'aimable autorisation de Leon Pascucci).

Leon Pascucci (left) with Léon Leblanc in Kenosha, at the offices of the G. Leblanc Corporation, Wisconsin, United States, circa 1958. (Courtesy of Leon Pascucci).

« I voted for Chirac, of course, but held my nose » (« j'ai voté Chirac bien sûr, mais en me bouchant le nez ») m'a dit il y a longtemps Léon Leblanc dans un anglais parfait, après une élection.

« Et pourquoi ça ? » ai-je demandé à mon parrain et éponyme.

« Parce qu'il ne parle pas bien français ! »

Cette conversation offre un aperçu de l'humour de Léon – de son niveau d'exigence, de sa recherche du progrès et de la perfection dans tous les domaines possibles. J'ai eu le privilège de le connaître tout au long de ma vie, mais surtout à partir de la fin des années 1970 où nous avons été beaucoup plus fréquemment en contact, de visu, par mail et au téléphone : je suis entré à la G. Leblanc Corporation, l'entreprise familiale fondée en 1946 par Léon et mon père, Vito. Le lien professionnel et amical qui les liait était unique dans l'industrie de la musique et une source d'inspiration et de bonheur pour moi.

M. Leblanc, comme sa compagne de longue date et finalement épouse, Lucette (Mary) Lambret et moi-même – étions tous trois enfants uniques, ce qui nous a liés. Je considère toujours Léon Leblanc comme l'homme le plus poli, le plus astucieux et le plus modeste que j'ai jamais connu. Je ne me rappelle d'aucun mot méchant ou d'attitude désobligeante, même lorsqu'on le provoquait. Et mon père et Mary le provoquaient souvent ! Telle est la passion, je pense, lorsque les émotions s'emballent entre personnes qui s'aiment. Léon était magnifiquement rationnel, ce qui semblait tellement français dans mes yeux d'Américain du Midwest.

Son travail dans le domaine de la clarinette est bien connu, et je me rappelle bien d'un exemple de son dévouement. Je le regardais souvent accorder lui-même les clarinettes Leblanc Paris, travaillant avec un collègue sur l'harmonium (qui avait une intonation parfaite) dans son petit laboratoire derrière son bureau à La Couture-Boussey. Note après note, écoutant, pinçant, parfois renvoyant l'instrument à l'atelier pour qu'il soit ajusté. Aucun autre fabricant ne s'impliquait aussi personnellement et ne prenait autant soin de ses instruments.

Il a accompli le désir d'une vie, de créer une famille entière de clarinettes pour doubler la portée de l'orgue à tuyaux, depuis octocontrebasse à soprano, une avancée majeure pour les instruments à vent. Les clarinettes se sont tournés vers lui, y compris des musiciens primés. Leblanc a travaillé en étroite collaboration avec beaucoup d'entre eux tandis qu'il perfectionnait et améliorait leurs instruments et leurs embouts (Leblanc SA a fabriqué ses propres embouts pendant de longues décennies).

Il avait même fabriqué spécialement pour moi un ensemble adapté de clarinettes « LL », BB et A, avec des clés à plateau, quand je luttais pour couvrir les orifices de ton. Il était depuis longtemps un fervent défenseur des clés à plateau, bien qu'elles n'aient jamais été largement diffusées.

Je souhaite aussi aborder quelques points sur la personnalité de Léon Leblanc. Sa fascinante et très longue vie a vu passer le développement du transport aérien, deux guerres mondiales, des crises et des booms économiques, l'informatisation et l'exploration spatiale : des changements qu'il a vécus au cours de ses presque 100 ans !

Léon aimait la vie à la campagne et à l'atelier, préférant vivre à La Couture-Boussey plutôt qu'à Paris. Il avait l'habitude de se rendre en voiture à Paris le lundi, s'occupant de l'administratif, rencontrant les musiciens et ses ouvriers parisiens, ne retournant à la campagne que tard le mardi. Jeune, au volant de sa Citroën, il avait la conduite sportive, ce qui lui a causé de nombreuses blessures liées à plusieurs accidents de

# LÉON LEBLANC: IN GRATEFUL MEMORY

**Leon Pascucci**  
Former President of the **G. Leblanc Corporation, USA**

“I voted for Chirac, of course, but I held my nose,” Léon Leblanc once told me in perfect English long ago, after an election. “Why’s that?” I asked my godfather, the man after whom I was named. “Because he doesn’t speak French well!”

This conversation offers a glimpse of Léon’s sense of humor, and of how demanding he was in his quest for progress and perfection in all possible fields. I had the privilege of knowing him from as early as I can remember, but especially from the end of the 1970s onward, when we were in contact much more frequently, in person, on the phone and by email: I had joined the G. Leblanc Corporation, the family business founded in 1946 by Léon and my father, Vito. The professional and personal bond between them was unique in the music industry and was a source of inspiration and happiness for me.

Just like his longtime partner and eventually wife, Lucette (Mary) Lambret, Mr. Leblanc was an only child, as was I—something all three of us had in common. To this day, I consider Léon Leblanc to be the politest, shrewdest, and most modest man I have ever known. I don’t remember a single unkind word or any display of disagreeable behavior, even when provoked. And my father and Mary often provoked him! That’s what passion is, I think, when emotions spill over between people who love each other. Léon was wonderfully rational, which seemed very French to me as an American from the Midwest.

His work in the clarinet world is well known, and I remember an example of his dedication. I often watched him tune Leblanc Paris clarinets himself, working with a colleague on the harmonium (which had perfect intonation) in his little workshop behind his desk in La Couture-Boussey. Note after note... listening, pushing and pulling, sometimes sending the instrument back to the workshop to be adjusted. No other manufacturer was so personally involved and took such good care of their instruments.

He fulfilled the desire of a lifetime: to create an entire family of clarinets to double the range of the pipe organ, from octocontrabass to soprano, a major step forward for wind instruments. Clarinetists came to him, including award-winning musicians. Leblanc worked closely with many of them as he perfected and improved their instruments and tips (Leblanc SA manufactured its own tips for many decades). He even made an adapted set of “LL” clarinets (Bb and A) with plateau keys specially for me, when I was struggling to cover the tone holes. He had long been a staunch defender of plateau keys, although they had never been widely used.

I would also like to mention a few points about Léon Leblanc’s personality. His fascinating and very long life saw the development of air transport, two world wars, economic crises and booms, the dawn of the computer age, and space exploration: all changes that he experienced during his almost 100 years of life!

Léon loved life in the countryside and in the workshop, preferring to live in La Couture-Boussey rather than in Paris. He used to drive to Paris on Mondays to take care of administrative matters and meet with musicians and his Parisian workers, not returning to the countryside until late Tuesday. As a young man, in his Citroën, he liked to drive fast, which led to him sustaining numerous injuries in various car accidents; later, he continued to drive until past the age of eighty, albeit more cautiously. Life in the country was more informal, of course, and despite my father’s constant encouragement to dress elegantly, Léon preferred simple and comfortable clothes. Walking his dog—always a Brittany—was, in his eyes, a nice, pleasant way to exercise.

I vaguely remember Léon’s mother, Clémence, whom I met during a trip to France when I was a child. His father, Georges, had already passed away at that point. Clémence was very petite but showed immense strength of character, which rather frightened me at the time. She was dressed all in black, as the custom at the time dictated, but it was like nothing I had seen back in Kenosha,

Wisconsin. My own mother reminded me how much Clémence loved me and spoiled me, offering me plenty of ice creams.

Gardening was another of Léon’s hobbies. My father gave him 75 roses for his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, which made for a splendid flowerbed in La Couture-Boussey. A vegetable garden, which he carefully cultivated, provided him with fruit and vegetables for most of the year. The layout of the garden was somewhat “wild.” He told me with a chuckle that he didn’t want “anything uniform.” Hearing that from the mouth of someone who had strived like no one before him for the most flawless uniformity in clarinet production... Through his gaze, I learned to appreciate the beauty of nature, the sets of plants, colors and shapes, a world away from Le Nôtre’s standards. I remember a memorable trip to Giverny, strolling through Monet’s gardens.

Mary Lambret Leblanc was originally hired as a translator for Léon (although he spoke and wrote excellent English). She had studied English as an *au pair* in England. She was an intelligent woman with a lively and whimsical spirit: she taught me so much about France, and its way of life and way of thinking. She was a tremendous speaker, and Léon seemed to relish her forceful points of view, gently stroking her hand from time to time to calm her down. Mary and my father often had “lively” discussions, which added fuel to the fire.

I remember many enjoyable dinners at Léon’s house in La Couture-Boussey, at restaurants in the surrounding area, and also in Paris. Once, he and Mary took my father and I on a barge on the Seine, far from the tourists, and I remember that evening perfectly. How Léon loved seafood, how each meal invariably ended with strawberries sprinkled with Calvados or kirsch (in his eyes, a sandwich was not a real meal). If Léon put on weight after these sometimes very long dinners, he only ate soup the next day. At home, Léon followed the news with a passion, reading *Le Figaro* (a French newspaper) and watching the news on TV after dinner. To relax, he watched his favorite program, *Starsky and Hutch*.

Mr. Leblanc often came to the United States, and I remember that in the 1960s, he brought with him the prototype octocontralto clarinet, a unique model that he had developed with an acoustician in his employ named Charles Houvenaghel. One of Léon’s last memorable trips was the Frankfurt Music Fair in the 1980s. It had been years since he had left France. He received a lavish welcome from musicians and manufacturers, with a ceremony organized in his honor. He had a lot of fun that evening.

When the time came for Léon to think about the future of Leblanc SA, he naturally turned to my father, and after very lengthy negotiations with the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Industry and a few regional state representatives, my father bought his shares and took over the management of the French firm. It was a difficult period for our industry. Instrument sales were dropping, and it was a tough time of transition for all of us. A funny story: when we repainted the walls of the workshops in La Couture-Boussey and Moulins, Léon jokingly called it his “painter’s disease.”

The need to sell the American company and its French firm was a difficult decision that I had to take following my father’s death. To my enormous regret, the new owners abruptly closed the La Couture-Boussey workshop as well as the two American workshops, contrary to my understanding of the situation during the sale.

At Léon’s funeral, I remember saying to Mary: “This is a day that I never imagined would come.” With tears in her eyes, she replied: “Yes, Léon seemed eternal.”

His life was wonderful, long, and productive. He gave opportunities to many. On that gray day, many friends and relatives came to the church in La Couture-Boussey, then to the cemetery, where we also honored the memory of the Noblet family (the Noblets founded the first La Couture brand in 1750 and later employed Georges Leblanc, who eventually transformed the firm into G. Leblanc Compagnie in around 1907).

Léon chose to establish this beautiful museum dedicated to the manufacture of wind instruments in the birthplace of this art, keeping the tradition alive for future generations. He was extremely proud of this museum, which we often visited with him. He was careful to include all the region’s manufacturers, with his generous spirit acknowledging all those who shared his immense love for music.

That is a kind of eternity, wouldn’t you say?

## AUX ORIGINES

Né le 24 novembre 1900 à La Couture-Boussey, dans un milieu propice à la musique, Léon Leblanc est le fils de Georges Leblanc, facteur d'instruments à vent et musicien, et de Laure Clémence Jeuffroy, ouvrière « en instruments de musique ».

Léon passe son enfance dans les ateliers de facture instrumentale, au contact des ouvriers, des machines et du bois, la matière d'œuvre. Sa mère, qui travaille à l'emballage dans l'atelier, le bercera du pied, à l'aide d'une ficelle astucieusement placée dans son couffin, tout en poursuivant sa tâche. La musique elle-même est omniprésente : son père, Georges, est bassoniste et dirige les musiciens de l'harmonie.

Georges Leblanc, né en 1872, a commencé sa carrière comme facteur chez Denis Toussaint Noblet (1850-1919), propriétaire de la maison éponyme fondée en 1750, pour en devenir le successeur en 1904. C'est dans les Établissements Noblet que le jeune Léon grandit, au son des outils et de la musique.

À 6 ans, Léon entreprend l'étude du saxophone soprano. Il a 8 ans lorsqu'une personne décisive entre dans sa vie. Charles Houvenaghel (1878-1966), jeune acousticien et professeur de clarinette à Paris, fait la connaissance de son père dont il devient l'ami. En 1909, Léon passe à la clarinette et deux ans plus tard, en 1911, sur les conseils de Charles, il est envoyé au Collège Saint-Nicolas à Paris pour se perfectionner.

À 16 ans, Léon obtient son B.E. (Brevet Élémentaire). Il qualifiera ces années d'apprentissage comme de « cinq ans dans une forte discipline ».

1921 est une année charnière. Après son Premier Prix de clarinette au Conservatoire de Paris, il fait un voyage de trois mois aux États-Unis pour y présenter les clarinettes Noblet-Leblanc. Il découvre alors le potentiel du marché outre-Atlantique. Il s'agit là de ses premiers pas en tant qu'entrepreneur.

En 1997, à l'occasion de son 97<sup>e</sup> anniversaire, il écrira : « Dès le premier voyage en 1921, j'ai réalisé ce qui devait être fait pour gagner le marché américain. À mon retour à La Couture, avec des idées américaines, j'en parle avec mon père qui m'a laissé carte blanche ».



Détail de la marque au fer de la clarinette en Si bémol  
D. Noblet Aîné, deuxième moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, n° inv. 780.

Detail of the branding of the D. Noblet Aîné Bb clarinet,  
second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inv. n. 780.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Born on November 24, 1900 in La Couture-Boussey, a breeding ground for music, Léon Leblanc was the son of Georges Leblanc, a maker of wind instruments and musician, and Laure Clémence Jeuffroy, a “musical instrument worker.”

Léon spent his childhood in instrument workshops, in constant contact with workers, machines, and wood—the material of choice. His mother, employed in the workshop packaging items, would rock him with her foot using a cleverly positioned string in his basket while she got on with her job. Music itself was ever-present: his father, Georges, was a bassoonist and conducted the wind section.

Georges Leblanc, born in 1872, began his career as an instrument maker with Denis Toussaint Noblet (1850-1919), owner of the company of the same name founded in 1750. He took over the firm in 1904. Young Léon grew up in the Noblet factories, his ears filled with the sounds of tools and music.

At the age of 6, he began studying the soprano saxophone. He was 8 years old when a key figure entered his life. Charles Houvenaghel (1878-1966), a young acoustician and clarinet teacher in Paris, met Léon’s father, with whom he struck up a friendship. In 1909, Léon moved on to the clarinet, and two years later, in 1911, on Charles’ recommendation, he was sent to the Saint-Nicolas school in Paris to hone his skills.

At 16, Léon obtained his Brevet Élémentaire (school leaving certificate). He described this period of learning as “five years under tough discipline.”

1921 was a pivotal year. After being awarded first prize for clarinet at the Conservatory of Paris, he took a three-month trip to the United States to promote Noblet-Leblanc clarinets. It was there that he discovered the potential of the overseas market. These were his first steps as an entrepreneur.

On his 97<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1997, he wrote: “From my very first trip in 1921, I understood what had to be done to win over the American market. When I returned to La Couture, full of American ideas, I talked about it with my father, who gave me carte blanche.”



Détail de la marque au fer du flageolet  
D. Noblet Aîné, c. 1870-1875, n° inv. 2019.1.25.

Detail of the branding of the D. Noblet Aîné flageolet,  
ca. 1870-1875, inv. n. 2019.1.25.

Transcription:

n° 46

Naissance de Leblanc Léon

« Du samedi vingt-quatre novembre l'an mil neuf cent à midi, acte de naissance d'un enfant qui nous a été présenté et a été reconnu être du sexe masculin, né aujourd'hui à quatre heure et demi du matin au domicile paternel en cette commune, section de La Couture, fils légitime de Leblanc Georges-Alexandre, luthier, âgé de vingt-sept ans et de Jeuffroy Laure Clémence, sans profession, âgée de vingt-cinq ans, mariés à La Couture-Boussey le vingt-quatre avril mil huit cent quatre-vingt-dix-sept; lequel enfant a reçu le prénom de Léon. Sur la réquisition et présentation à nous faites par le père de l'enfant susnommé, en présence de Julliot Djalma, fabricant d'instruments de musique, âgé de quarante-deux ans, et par Leblanc Louis, luthier, âgé de vingt-trois ans, demeurant tous deux à La Couture.

Le déclarant et les témoins ont signé après lecture, le présent acte qui a été fait double en leur présence constaté suivant la loi par nous, Thibouville Martin, Maire de la commune susdite, remplissant les fonctions d'officier public de l'état-civil. »

Signature: Leblanc Jeuffroy, D Julliot, Leblanc Chedeville, Thibouville Martin.

Léon Leblanc's birth certificate, Eure Departmental Archives (DA Eure), Classification n°: 8 Mi 4734

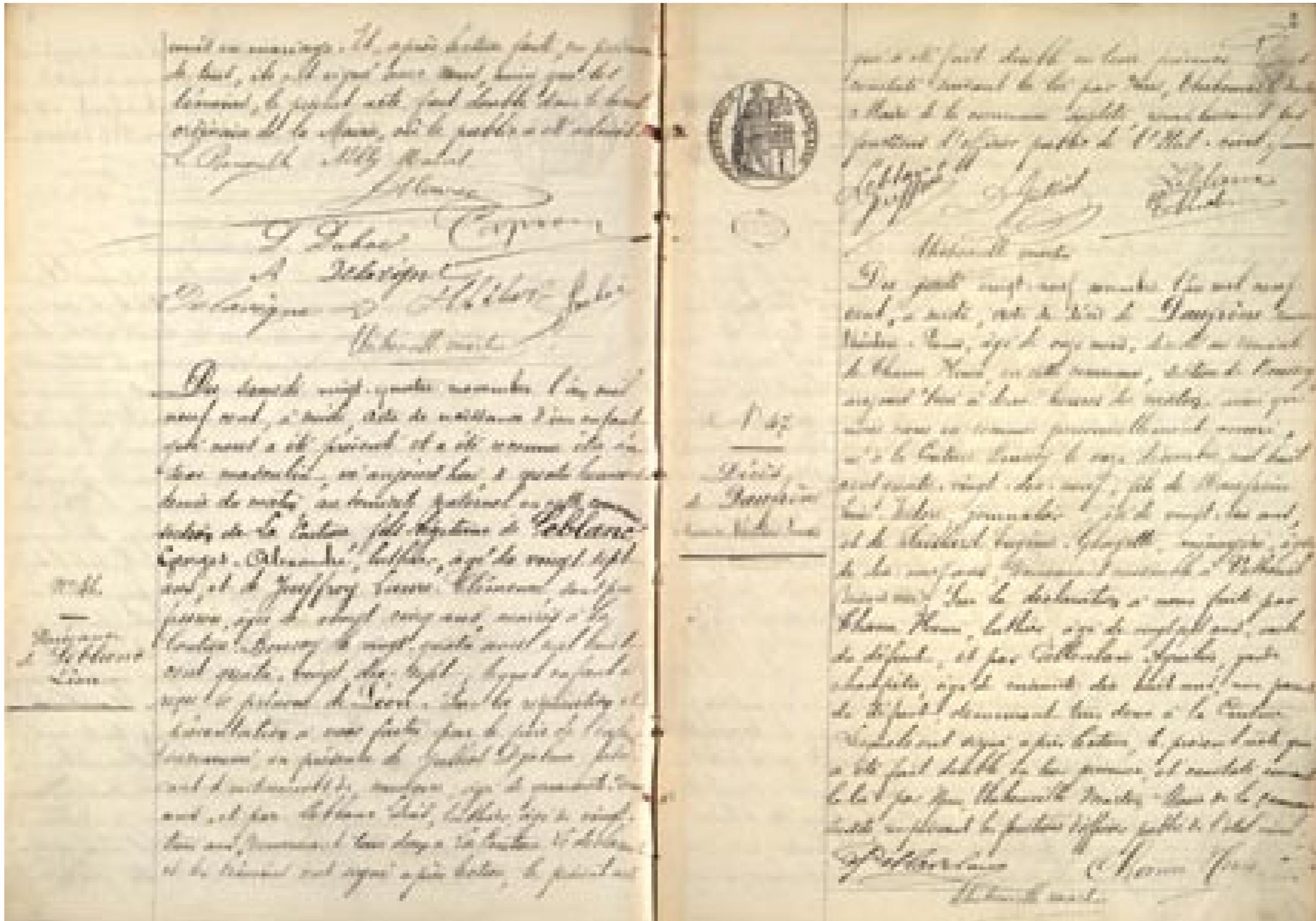
Transcription:

n° 46

Birth of Leblanc, Léon

"Saturday, November twenty-fourth of the year nineteen hundred at noon, birth certificate of a child who was presented to us and was recognized as being of the male sex, born today at four thirty in the morning at the parental house in this commune, La Couture section, the legitimate son of Leblanc Georges-Alexandre, luthier, aged twenty-seven, and Jeuffroy Laure Clémence, of no occupation, aged twenty-five, married in La Couture-Boussey on April twenty-fourth eighteen ninety-seven; said child has been given the first name Léon. As requested and presented to us by the father of the aforementioned child, in the presence of Julliot Djalma, manufacturer of musical instruments, aged forty-two, and by Leblanc Louis, luthier, aged twenty-three, both residing in La Couture. After reading it, the declarant and the witnesses signed this certificate, a duplicate of which was made in their presence, observed according to the law by me, Thibouville Martin, Mayor of the aforementioned commune, serving as the civil registrar."

Signatures: Leblanc Jeuffroy, D Julliot, Leblanc Chedeville, Thibouville Martin.





Pages 56-57:  
Georges Leblanc dans l'atelier, 1930-40.

Pages 56-57:  
Georges Leblanc in the workshop, 1930-40.

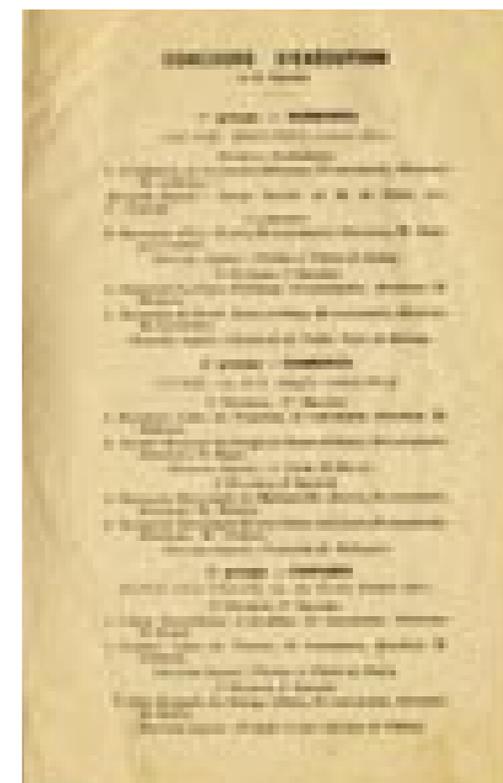
Harmonie « La Musique de La Couture-Boussey », entre 1895 et 1900. La plupart des musiciens sont employés comme ouvriers dans les ateliers du village.

"La Musique de La Couture-Boussey" wind section, between 1895 and 1900. Most of the musicians were employed as workers in the village's workshops.



Partie de hautbois de la transcription de *Les dragons du Villars*, opéra-comique de 1856, composé par Aimé Maillart sur un livret de Lockroy (Joseph-Philippe Simon) et Eugène Cormon. Transcription effectuée le 22 juillet 1888 par Georges Leblanc, hautboïste.

Oboe part from the transcription of *Les dragons du Villars*, a comic opera from 1856, composed by Aimé Maillart with a libretto by Lockroy (Joseph-Philippe Simon) and Eugène Cormon. Transcription made by Georges Leblanc, oboist, on 22 July 1888.



Programme de l'harmonie « L'Industrie de La Couture-Boussey » dirigée par Georges Leblanc, pour le concours de musique organisé en 1932 à Mantes-La-Jolie.

Program for the "L'Industrie de La Couture-Boussey" wind section, conducted by Georges Leblanc, for the music competition organized in Mantes-La-Jolie in 1932.



Ci-dessus : Les ouvriers de l'atelier Noblet-Leblanc en 1922. En haut à l'entrée, Léon, Clémence, sa mère, et Georges, son père. Léon en 1921 a voyagé trois mois aux États-Unis et il est revenu avec une vision très claire pour le futur de l'entreprise familiale.

Ci-contre : Georges et Léon dans leur stand, probablement à l'occasion de la Foire de Paris de 1922.

Page suivante : Léon devant la façade de l'usine de La Couture-Boussey, après la reconstruction de 1968, indiquant l'inscription « Noblet 1750 ».

Above: The workers of the Noblet-Leblanc workshop in 1922. At the top by the entrance: Léon, his mother Clémence, and his father Georges. In 1921, Léon took a three-month trip to the United States and returned with a very clear vision for the future of the family business.

Opposite: Georges and Léon in their stand, probably during the 1922 Paris Trade Fair.

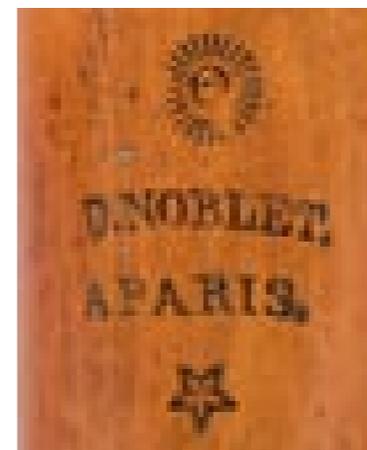
Next page: Léon in front of the facade of the factory in La Couture-Boussey, following the 1968 reconstruction, pointing to the sign reading "Noblet 1750".





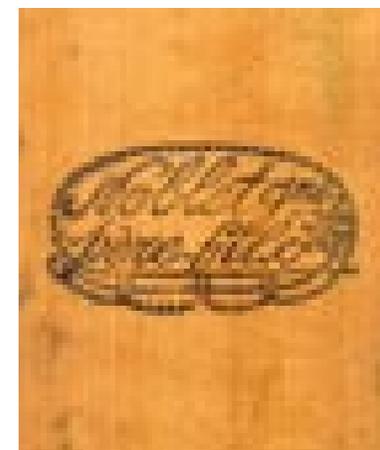
Clarinete en Sib, Denis Noblet Aîné, deuxième moitié XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, n° inv. 780.  
Buis, 4 viroles et cercle de pavillon en ivoire.  
4 parties : barillet, 2 corps, pavillon. 13 clés rondes et plates en laiton, montées sur boules; 2 clés fixées sur des axes en laiton.

Bb clarinet, Denis Noblet Aîné, second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inv. n. 780.  
Boxwood, 4 ferrules and bell rim in ivory. 4 parts: barrel, 2 joints, bell. 13 round and flat brass keys mounted on balls; 2 keys fixed on brass pins.



Flûte traversière, Denis Noblet, 1830-1840, n° inv. 2019.1.5.  
Buis, bagues en cornes. 5 parties : tête, barillet, 2 corps et pattes. 5 clés en laiton montées sur patins en forme de demi-lune.

Concert flute, Denis Noblet, 1830-1840, inv. n. 2019.1.5.  
Boxwood, horn rings. 5 parts: head, barrel, 2 joints, and foot. 5 brass keys mounted on half-moon shaped pads.



Flûte traversière, Noblet Jeune, père et fils, début XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, n° inv. 2019.1.8.  
Buis, bagues en corne. 4 parties : tête, 2 corps et pattes. 1 clé ronde en laiton montée sur tenon en bois.

Concert flute, Noblet Jeune, père et fils, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, inv. n. 2019.1.8.  
Boxwood, horn rings. 4 parts: head, 2 joints, and foot. 1 round brass key mounted on wooden joint.



Léon Leblanc a vécu ce que l'historien Eric Hobsbawm nomme le « court vingtième siècle » dans son ouvrage paru en 1994, *L'Âge des extrêmes*. Cette définition s'adapte parfaitement à la facture instrumentale qui passe d'un système de production préindustriel à un système de production de masse, à une production industrielle globalisée.

Originaire de La Couture-Boussey et héritier d'une tradition locale remontant au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Léon Leblanc a véritablement révolutionné le monde de la clarinette. Musicien et entrepreneur d'exception, il a dédié sa vie à la musique en faisant résonner le nom de ce petit village normand dans le monde entier.

« Leblanc » est ainsi devenue une entreprise capable de se placer sur le marché international, sans jamais oublier ses origines et son patrimoine historique, et de produire annuellement des milliers d'instruments en direction des étudiants, des amateurs et des professionnels.

—

Léon Leblanc lived through what the historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his 1994 work *The Age of Extremes*, dubbed the “short twentieth century”. This definition is perfectly suited to instrument making, which moved from a pre-industrial production system to a mass-production system, and then to globalized industrial production.

Originally from La Couture-Boussey and the successor to a local tradition dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Léon Leblanc truly revolutionized the clarinet world. An exceptional musician and entrepreneur, he dedicated his life to music, and in doing so he made the name of this small Normandy village echo around the world.

“Leblanc” thus grew into a company capable of competing on the international market and producing thousands of instruments each year for students, amateurs, and professionals, all without ever forgetting its roots and its historical heritage.

Prix : 12 €

