

# MAKING SWEET MUSIC

## Conn-Selmer Crafts Instruments, Supports Education Efforts

By **Crickett Gibbons**

How long does it take to make a clarinet?

Would you believe 108 years?

“It takes 100 years to grow the tree,” explains Bob Lichty, woodwinds category manager at Conn-Selmer, during a recent tour of the company’s Elkhart South Plant. “The wood has to be that old to be that dense,” he says, pointing to a rack of shaped, drilled clarinet pieces.

He shares that cut wood blocks are stored in a climate-controlled environment for another seven years. Then they are carved by hand before a machine drills the necessary holes.

“The more precise we are at this stage, the easier it is for the finishers,” says Lichty, adding that the machine can work on 75 instruments a day.

That focus on quality – from start to finish – is a common refrain at Conn-Selmer, which manufactures and distributes band and orchestra instruments for student, amateur and professional musicians under 14 different brand names. The oldest brand, Leblanc, dates to 1750 and is produced at the Elkhart South Plant.

“This is the last place in the United States that is making student flutes and clarinets,” Lichty attests.

In fact, it’s the largest and last full-line manufacturer of band and orchestra instruments in the U.S., according to the company.

### Legacy brands

Along with Armstrong flutes and Leblanc and Selmer clarinets, the South Plant also makes other woodwinds – flutes, bassoons and oboes – and percussion instruments including chimes, xylophones and marimbas.

Brass instruments – like the highly-respected Bach Stradivarius professional trumpets – are shaped, soldered, polished, assembled, buffed and readied for shipping at a second Elkhart plant, which also



Skilled employees at Conn-Selmer’s Elkhart plants carefully craft and assemble student and professional instruments by hand, including woodwinds and brass.

makes string instruments.

The Stradivarius name originates from when musicians compared trumpets made by Vincent Bach in the 1920s to the Italian violin-maker Stradivarius, known as the very best, reveals Tedd Waggoner, director of Bach operations and a trumpet player himself.

Between the two Elkhart facilities, roughly 50,000 instruments are made each year, with others manufactured at plants in North Carolina and Ohio. Approximately 375 employees work at the two plants and the company headquarters in Elkhart, with another 375 at the other locations.

The Bach brand was part of The Selmer Company when it merged with United Musical Instruments in 2002 to form Conn-Selmer Inc. Conn-Selmer later purchased the G. Leblanc Corporation, which added other legacy instrument brands, including Leblanc.

### Strategy for survival

After the 2002 merger, Conn-Selmer focused on improving efficiency without sacrificing quality. The plants moved from a piecemeal system, in which employees are paid by the piece, to lean manufacturing, explains Conn-Selmer President and CEO John Stoner, who has been with the company for 15 years.

Keeping quality at the forefront also helped the company survive during the U.S. economic downturn in the late 2000s, when many manufacturers shut down or went to China, he says. Instead of moving manufacturing offshore, Conn-Selmer continued to make instruments in Elkhart and at its other U.S. facilities.

“We decided to use the downturn to improve the process ... to be a better-quality manufacturer than we were before the downturn,” Stoner imparts.

That gamble paid off.

The U.S.-made instruments outlast imports, according to Stoner, therefore being a better investment, especially for dealers that rent instruments to band and orchestra students.

“The big advantage is ours last 20 years, give or take. A lot of instruments out of China last less than five,” Stoner contends.

### Making the music

Conn-Selmer also is growing globally, with about 35% of its business from outside the United States, Stoner notes. “The quality, sound, playability of our instruments have put us in a very good position in the market.”

Waggoner and Lichty also emphasize quality and efficiency during factory tours, pointing out the Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines and crediting the



Michael Jackson (bottom) at the Elkhart North Plant uses the same process as in years past when forming the bell for Bach Stradivarius trumpets from a single piece of brass.



skilled employees who craft the instruments and keep the necessary machinery operating.

The Bach Stradivarius trumpets are made – start to finish – at the North Plant. “It takes 465 different operations to put the whole thing together,” Waggoner shares.

“Sound production is our biggest advantage,” he continues, as we watch employee Michael Jackson make a horn’s bell, which is the part where the sound emerges. The torch heats up to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit, capable of burning a hole in the brass if it is heated too long.

“Anyone can copy the material, but what they can’t copy is what we do with the material,” Waggoner adds.

Annealing, or heat-treating the trumpet,

is key to the Bach recipe for sound, and a process that’s kept under wraps. “It’s our ‘11 herbs and spices,’” he says with a smile.

Many of the plants’ employees have honed their skills over decades of experience in the factories. Lichty and Waggoner greet many by name during the tours, and Waggoner points out instances where multiple family generations work there.

Longtime employees help train ones who are just learning the techniques. Perfecting their skills can require months – even up to a year.

Stephanie Artley, a solder in the Bach area, says, “It takes about a year to get comfortable, where they’re working the fire instead of the fire working them.”



An artisan works the brass bell to create the distinctive sound of a Bach Stradivarius trumpet.

## Selecting the perfect sound

Professional musicians travel from all over the country – and the globe – to hand select instruments, a testament to the quality of the Conn-Selmer brands.

“All of our instruments sound great,” Stoner clarifies, “but as a professional musician, one may speak to you differently.”

Professionals can test different instruments in the WAVE room, or the Wenger Acoustic Virtual Environment, one of only two like it in the world, according to Waggoner. While nondescript on the outside, inside the artists can hear what the instrument will sound like in different environments, including a 300-seat recital hall.

Musicians work through a Conn-Selmer dealer to arrange a visit to test and select specific instruments. The artist also chooses a handful for the dealer to sell, with a card noting the musician handpicked it.

“We just had the principal trumpet player with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra come in,” Waggoner mentions. “He selected two for himself and five for the local dealer.”

## Growing the base

Professional musicians aren’t the only ones who visit the plant. Band directors and music educators frequently tour as part of the Conn-Selmer Division of Education VIP Program.

Stoner believes the Division of Education is one of two things that helps set the company apart; being a U.S. manufacturer is the other.

“People do things in education, but not to the extent that we do. They are not personalizing it like we do.”

Led by Tim Lautzenheiser, who Stoner refers to as the “Pied Piper of band directors,” the Conn-Selmer Division of Education

provides several programs and services, as well as advocacy, to support music education.

Through the VIP Program, band directors tour the facilities, see firsthand how the instruments are made and talk with Conn-Selmer artisans and leadership.

“We bring in anywhere from eight to 10 band directors (at a time) from all over the country – today there is one from Honolulu – and we show them what we are doing, show them the factories,” Stoner explains. “We talk about what we can do to better support them. We get a lot of ideas to help support them.”

Suggestions from VIP tours have led to new programs and services, including the Conn-Selmer School Partnership Program. Aaron Albin, director of education communications, offers that it provides access to an online instrument inventory management system and educational support managers who visit schools and music organizations.

Other in-person professional development opportunities include The Conn-Selmer Institute, which is an annual three-day workshop for music directors, program leaders and college students, and the Music Administration Collaborative for music administrators.

Music program leaders and directors can also get assistance on particular topics from Conn-Selmer educational clinicians – mostly master teachers – and online videos. Video topics range from recruiting band students to specific instrument care and maintenance.

These initiatives are part of an effort to help sustain and grow music programs.

The VIP Program is “not attached to the sale of an instrument, but just how can we help education with the understanding that if more people are in band, then music will thrive,” Albin says.

And when music thrives, so can Conn-Selmer.