

YAMAHA WINDS CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

A legacy of close partnerships with pro artists and educators has made Yamaha's brass and woodwinds essential tools of performers at every level

You might say Midtown Manhattan is to music what Silicon Valley is to technology. Home to Juilliard and Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and Broadway, it's matched by only a few places on earth as a crossroads for the talent, trends, and ideas that power the music industry. That's why it's also home to Yamaha Artist Services, the Fifth Avenue base where the instrument maker works with pro artists both local and visiting. In its Band & Orchestral Atelier on the 11th floor, top musicians and Yamaha pros trade insights that shape the company's most advanced brass and woodwinds—and trickle down the product line to the Yamaha instruments played in school ensembles and marching bands everywhere.

For a different company, 689 Fifth Avenue would probably be called the “nerve center.” At Yamaha, however, it's one of several. There's the headquarters in Hamamatsu, Japan that's its R&D base for not only its Winds division but keyboards, drums, and more. There's the Toyooka factory 50 miles east in Shizuoka, the source for its high-end instruments. And there are other Atelier facilities in Los Angeles, Vienna, Hamburg, and Tokyo. Branching out from there, the Yamaha Winds line has been shaped by decisions made everywhere from its factories in China and Indonesia to the Texas Music Educators Association Conference in San Antonio. “The company has been built for the sharing of knowledge,” says Yamaha Winds Marketing Manager Brian Petterson. “And as the world gets smaller, we're increasingly connected to the musicians who play our instruments as well.”

The Yamaha Winds division is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and the first sign of that was its exhibit at the Winter NAMM Show. In a chronological gallery, the company arranged about a dozen of its landmark instruments from the past five decades. Among them was the Nikkan Fanfare Trumpet, a Yamaha collaboration used for the opening of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Further down the line was the

A limited-edition saxophone, commemorating Yamaha's 50th anniversary in the winds business.



YAS-62 saxophone, the top-selling alto designed with virtuoso artist Eugene Rousseau in the 1970s. Also on display were the Aida Trumpet, Vienna Trumpet, Vienna Horn, and Vienna Trombone, created during a years-long association with the Vienna Philharmonic. There was the “Thanks 5 Million” tenor saxophone and then the “Thanks 10 Million” trumpet, both created to mark milestone units of total winds production.

“It’s very meaningful to us to have reached 50 years,” says Petterson. “A lot of companies come and go, but Yamaha has stood the test of time and shows no signs of stopping.”

Established as a keyboard instruments maker in 1887, Yamaha first dabbled in brass and woodwinds during the post-World War II school music boom. Its early instruments were collaborations with Nikkan, a fellow Japanese instrument maker that made bugles for the Japanese army band. Combining Yamaha’s talent for logistics with Nikkan’s experience in winds, the partnership yielded a range of Nikkan-branded instruments from the 1950s through the mid-’60s. The first Yamaha-branded model debuted in 1966 with the YTR-1 trumpet. That same year Schilke Music Products founder and orchestral trumpet player Renold Schilke came aboard in a consultant’s role as the line expanded into other wind instruments. By 1971 Yamaha was offering all of what it calls the “big five”: flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, and trombone—meaning that if you wanted to, you could supply most of a beginning band with nothing but Yamaha winds.

“Those were really glory days for school band,” says Petterson. “With the expertise we had in other instrument segments, Yamaha saw an opportunity to come in and contribute—but I think we always had a long-term view of where we could take it.”

As early as the late ’60s, Yamaha began exploring higher-level production, first with its “Professional” series instruments launched in 1967. In 1970, though, it broke through with a range of trumpets known as the “Custom” series that became a landmark for Yamaha. Every few years afterward, the company added another instrument category to its Custom lineup: first clarinets, followed by trombones, horns, oboes, bassoons, saxophones, and euphoniums. What makes the Custom series “custom” is the design process: a close collaboration between professional musicians and Yamaha’s high-end designers, along with premium materials and construction tech-

A Half-Century Of Yamaha Winds...



Twelve “Aida” fanfare trumpets commissioned by the Vienna Philharmonic for the 1980 Salzburg Festival reflect Yamaha’s versatile production skills.



There’s no better demonstration of Yamaha’s attention to detail than its “Custom” instruments, crafted with precision in a dedicated section of the Toyooka factory.

niques. “It’s really about the partnerships we have with our high-level artists,” says Petterson. “And we’re lucky to have the permanent R&D teams, both in Japan and the U.S., that are equal to this kind of work.”

Looking back, one of Yamaha’s earliest and most influential collaborations was the one it undertook with Eugene Rousseau, the artist behind the YAS-62 saxophone. Starting from the YAS-61, Yamaha’s first professional-level sax, Rousseau worked alongside Yamaha designers through years of refinements before the launch of the finished product in 1978. One classic photo shows Rousseau in an eye-covering “sleep mask” doing a blind test on two versions of the instrument in production. Acclaimed from the beginning, the YAS-62 would be updated in 1989, 2003, and 2013. It now ranks as one of the most widely used sax models in history, and is still played by discerning professionals today. “It just kind of blew up the saxophone world,” says Petterson.

Yamaha’s work with Rousseau set a blueprint for the artist collaborations that still drive the evolution of its line. As Petterson explains, a trumpet made today might *look* like a trumpet made in 1985—or 1885, for that matter. Beneath the surface, though, changes in repertoire and popular playing styles have brought subtle changes to high-end instrument production.

That makes Yamaha’s Atelier locations, devoted to sales, service, and consultations with professional artists, a critical channel for market research and insights at this level. “It means we’re able to keep our ears to the rail and understand the players, the modern trends, and how needs change,” says Petterson. “Maybe there’s some new repertoire or this crazy new technique players are using, and the artists come to us to ask how the instrument can help them achieve that.”

Through this process, Yamaha has created some of the most successful upgrades of the past several years. One involves the company’s Custom EX alto saxophone, which it updated with the input of world renowned classical sax player Nobuya Sugawa. Although previous versions of the EX were already known for their excellent ergonomics,

A COLLABORATION WITH EUGENE ROUSSEAU YIELDED THE YAS-62 SAXOPHONE, WHICH, OVER FIVE MILLION UNITS LATER, IS ONE OF THE BEST-SELLING INSTRUMENTS OF ALL TIME



Sax virtuoso Eugene Rousseau in a literal “blind test” of the YAS-62 model he helped design—now one of the best-selling saxes of all time.



The Toyooka factory in Shizuoka, Japan, is Yamaha’s production base for its high-end winds lines.



Famed brasswind designer Renold Schilke was an early consultant on the Yamaha Winds line.

Yamaha and the artist had a shared goal of adapting it for some demanding new repertoire. “You’ve got to be able to get from the highest of the high end, all the way down to the bottom of the horn and back,” says Petterson, “and you’ve got to be able to do that in a way that is efficient.” With Sugawa’s help, Yamaha reworked the instrument’s ergonomics to meet the challenge, while incorporating other changes including adjustments to the tone holes on the lower part of the instrument—making it possible for players to hit low notes at a pianissimo volume, usually a challenge on the sax. In another recent partnership, Yamaha worked with David Bilger of the Boston Symphony on an update to its New York Trumpet models 9335 and 9445, ultimately crafting a model now used by every member of the Boston Symphony’s trumpet section.

“It’s impossible to quantify the value of the knowledge we gain from these relationships,” says Petterson. “And it’s a pleasure for us because we get to offer products that are so extremely well-thought-out and well-made.”

With their advanced feature set and detailed specs, Yamaha’s Custom instruments are made in a dedicated section of its Toyooka factory in Japan. The company’s original brass and woodwinds production site, Toyooka has expanded several times over the years to meet capacity and add updated equipment. As Petterson mentions, the thing that strikes people who visit Toyooka is the sheer cleanliness and precision of the place: “It’s an environment that leads to a really high level of ability and technical production,” he adds. “It’s important to remember that making great instruments is not just about design—it’s about the technology that’s used to make them. Technology has allowed us to be even more exacting as we produce these instruments. The tolerances get tighter, and the quality control gets better.”

Between Toyooka, the Hamamatsu R&D center, and other state-of-the-art factories in China and Indonesia, Yamaha Winds has achieved two of the hallmarks found in other Yamaha sectors. First: the sharing of information across not only product categories but also whole divisions. “In Hamamatsu, we have R&D teams working out of the same collaborative office where they can immediately bounce ideas off each other,” says Petterson. “And I don’t mean just the Winds team, but keyboards, drums, stringed instruments, etc.”

Second: the application of technology to traditional products. On this score, probably the most striking example is the Silent Brass line first introduced for trumpet in 1995. Now offered for tuba, French horn, euphonium, and more, the systems combine a “Pickup Mute” with advanced modeling technology to yield a natural, un-muted sound that the player listens to through headphones while practicing in silence. “There are so many great applications for the technology—and no one had done anything like it before,” says Petterson. “It’s really an instance of thinking outside the box to meet a

need.” In a more recent show of Yamaha technology, the company has developed a system for its Custom oboes known as Duet+. By incorporating an ebonite lining on the inner bore of the oboe’s upper joint, the design prevents moisture from directly affecting the wood and causing cracks. Eventually, the same technology could be adapted for clarinets and bassoons. “It’s a way to get out ahead of a problem before it even happens,” says Petterson. “The goal is to create an instrument that plays on day one the same way that it will play on day 500 or day 1,000.”

In the Yamaha tradition of vertical integration, advances at the high-end are just the start of a domino effect that eventually works its way down the line. Six years ago, for example, the company completely redesigned its elite 800 and 900 Series flutes, handmade in the Toyooka Custom Shop by artisans who are also professional flutists. Three years later, Yamaha translated some of the same refinements to its intermediate 500, 600, and 700 series flutes—and two years after that, to its student-level 200, 300, and 400 Series models. “It was a great example of being able to pull those features down from above,” says Petterson. “By understanding those elements from the high-end models, you learn to take them as far down the line as you can without blowing the price point.”

**PROFESSIONALS,
EDUCATORS, AND
YAMAHA ENGINEERS
COLLABORATED TO
DEVELOP THE CSV
ALL-WOOD CLARINET**

As much as this highlights the common threads in instruments up and down the Yamaha Winds line, it also illuminates their differences. As Petterson explains, “The approach you take in a handmade flute played by principal orchestral musicians will be different from the one you take for a 200 Series flute that has to survive in a rental pool for many years.” In other words, building for the student level demands a different kind of craftsmanship: the kind that can survive young students who are still learning how to play their instruments—never mind set them up, clean them, and store them properly. If there’s an element the company values above all others at the student level, it would be consistency, says Petterson: a guarantee to dealers, teachers, parents, and students that if they choose Yamaha, they’ll be getting a certain standard of quality and durability along with Yamaha’s signature keywork, intonation, and sound. Some of the same skillset has also been applied to Yamaha’s line of marching brass instruments, a complete range created in the early 2000s. At that time, one of Yamaha’s objectives was turning the page from lesser instruments considered “good enough for marching band” to brass and winds of much closer to concert band quality—but with the extra level of durability and ergonomics that the marching field demands. “All of these instruments are built like a tank,” says Petterson. “And not only do they need that durability, but they need to still perform at the end of the day.”

If there’s a project that brought together Yamaha’s education side with its high-end craftsmanship, it might be one of its more recent introductions: the CSV clarinet unveiled at the NAMM Show two years ago. While part of the Custom series, this grenadilla-wood model was designed from the ground up for the advancing student as much as the professional. In a years-long design process, Yamaha collected input not only from its pro artists but also from teachers and professors, student players, and at conferences including the Midwest Clinic and TMEA. “The goal was to hit that sweet spot in price and quality,” says Petterson. “We couldn’t do that without the feedback we got from educators and students. This is all a matter of listening to the people who are actually playing our instruments: When they’re successful, we’re successful.”

As Petterson adds, today’s Yamaha Winds would not be recognizable to the company as founded 50 years ago. Enmeshed with performance and education at almost every level, it’s both broader in scope and closer to musicians on the ground. “Serving that market 50 years ago and serving it today takes two totally different companies,” he says, “and the company has evolved over the years to continue meeting those needs. The relationships we develop and the things we learn about what people need from our instruments will keep leading us forward from here.”

<http://usa.yamaha.com/products/musical-instruments/winds/>

How Music Education Drives Yamaha Winds



Yamaha has been a partner to the Madison Scouts Drum and Bugle Corps since 1985 (the year this picture was taken).

RESEARCH SHOWS that the average K-12 teacher spends \$500 out of pocket per year on classroom expenses. For music teachers, though, that figure is nearly double: \$945 per year. At Yamaha, already a leading supporter of music education programs, this statistic sparked one of its most recent efforts: a partnership with the educators' crowdfunding platform DonorsChoose.org, where teachers can request funding for classroom needs from instruments to sheet music, accessories, and even repair costs. Starting last year, Yamaha committed to match up to \$500 in donations on any DonorsChoose project raising funds for these "music essentials." All told, the company donated \$125,000, reaching more than 350 classrooms and 8,200 students in every state in the U.S. Now sporting a wall's worth of thank you cards from students helped by the donations, the company is matching funds again this year.

"We wanted teachers to have the tools to do their jobs so they could stop worrying about how to buy strings or sheet music and concentrate on the kids and the work they do as teachers," says Lisa Steele-MacDonald, director of marketing for Yamaha's Band & Orchestral Division.

As Yamaha Winds marks its 50th anniversary, any history of the division would be incomplete without an account of its efforts in music education. For years, the company has been a leading supporter of school music, marching band, drum corps, and after-school music programs hosted by such groups as Be Part of the Music, a recruiting and retention tool for music educators, and Youth Education in the Arts, a non-profit that connects young musicians to a variety of musical opportunities. While a complete list of Yamaha's initiatives would be too lengthy to include here, these are just a few more of its key efforts.

- **United Sound:** For three years, Yamaha has been a sponsor of this organization pairing students with special needs with peer mentors who work with them to learn an instrument and take part in music. Many go on to perform as active members of their school bands and orchestras. The group was founded by Julie Duty, a music educator who "looked around and saw this entire population that loves music and should be able to participate," Steele-MacDonald says.

- **The Boston Brass:** One of the newest Yamaha Artist ensembles doubles as one of its newest outreach efforts. Hosting educational clinics 50 out of 52 weeks a year, this highly engaging quintet will now be supported by Yamaha in school and conservatory appearances nationwide. "They're amazing," says Steele-MacDonald. "They're our boots on the ground."

- **Music for All:** In one of its closest and longest-running associations, Yamaha is Presenting Sponsor for this broad-based provider of music experiences for students. In fact, the company maintains an office at the organization's base in Indianapolis. Closely affiliated with Bands of America, a premier presenter of marching and drum corps activities, Music for All also hosts music festivals, camps, competitions, and honors ensembles for students nationwide. "At Yamaha, we recognized that the instruction and musical experiences they offer are second-to-none," says John Wittmann, director of artist relations and education for Yamaha's Band & Orchestral Division. "It was a perfect match for us to get in the trenches with them to create more music makers."