

# A Little Story Long Ago With A Surprise Ending

A disastrous fire that started in the Conover Piano plant and then spread down Chicago's Wabash Avenue, claiming 15 lives, was the top story in the May 18, 1898 edition of *The Music Trades*. In addition to the Conover building, the fire destroyed more than a dozen music stores and threatened to disrupt trade in Chicago for some time. Buried in the back of the issue, under the innocuous headline, "An Interesting Visit," was a four-line account of a visit by Torakusa Yamaha to our offices, then on Union Square in lower Manhattan. An anonymous staff member wrote, "We were visited the other day by a genial little man from Japan, Mr. Yamaha, who was accompanied by a representative of the Japanese consulate who served as his translator. Mr. Yamaha presides over Nippon Gakki, a small maker of reed organs in the city of Hamamatsu, and he has come to the United States to learn about piano making. He hopes to take that knowledge home with him to start a piano factory."

If the long-deceased scribe who penned those lines was miraculously brought back to life, he would no doubt be amazed by technological advances like air travel and the personal computer. However, nothing would be more shocking than to learn that Mr. Yamaha's "small reed organ company" had evolved into the world's largest musical instrument maker.

Yamaha merited another brief mention in our columns in 1916, when U.S. wholesalers began stocking its "Butterfly" brand harmonicas. World War I had disrupted Hohner production in Germany, and Yamaha filled the void in the market. It was only after Yamaha opened an office in Los Angeles in 1960 that it became a regular newsmaker. Since then the company has made up for lost time in generating a succession of major stories.

Over the past five decades, Yamaha has been the catalyst for some of the most significant new technology in the industry, like the creation of digital tone generation with the DX-7 and the Clavinova, the introduction of the Disklavier digital player piano, and the creation of digital mixing consoles. Yamaha has also provided us with some of the most colorful interviews in our 120 year history. In 1987, the late Genichi Kawakami, the man who transformed Yamaha from a small piano maker into a diversified global manufacturer, explained his reverence

for General Douglas McArthur, who commanded the U.S. occupation forces in Japan after World War II. "He is my greatest hero," said Kawakami. "Because of his generosity, we were able to rebuild our company and create decent lives for our employees."

The story of Yamaha over the past 50 years mirrors the global trends that have reshaped the industry. In 1960 the company's management was committed to keeping all production in Japan. Reacting to rising protectionist

fears in the '70s, they had a major change of heart and opened plants in the U.S. and the U.K. More recently, they closed their U.S. plants and shifted production to China. Today, like most large global firms, Yamaha presides over a dispersed manufacturing operation with facilities in Japan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, and the U.S.



Teddy Roosevelt didn't care much for the press, calling them

"useless critics" who risk nothing and contribute little as they, "point out how the doer of deeds could have done them better." He reserved his admiration for "the man in the arena, whose face is marred by sweat and blood who strives valiantly. Who, at the best, knows the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, at least fails while daring greatly."

Yamaha's evolution from a small company devastated by war to a position of leadership is the story of hundreds, if not thousands, of "men in the arena," who set high goals and then delivered on them with products that have enriched the lives of millions. As members of the press, we're probably deserving of Roosevelt's harsh judgement, with one caveat. Reviewing Yamaha's record, we're at a loss to point out how these many "doer of deeds" could have done it better. A story on the company's 50 years in the U.S. begins on page 60.

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