

When Sabian was launched in 1981, the conventional wisdom was that the cymbal business would become a zero-sum game, dominated by a crushing price war. No one predicted that the flurry of innovative product development would trigger the biggest growth spurt ever. Herewith, a look at Sabian's role as a

CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Nineteen eighty-one was hardly an auspicious year to launch a cymbal manufacturing business. A deep recession had hammered industry sales, and the majority of companies were struggling just to stay in the black. Making a dark scenario even gloomier, the meteoric ascent of electronic musical instruments left dealers and manufacturers worrying that acoustic instruments were dinosaurs headed toward imminent extinction. But none of this seemed to matter to Robert Zildjian, as he and his sons, Andy and Bill, supervised the first production run of Sabian cymbals. Centuries of Zildjian family involvement in cymbal making had left them genetically wired to make cymbals. Just as birds migrate and water runs down hill, they were drawn towards the cymbal maker's craft in a way that had nothing to do with business considerations.

A year earlier Bob and his brother, Armand, had had a falling out in managing their family's celebrated Avedis Zildjian Company. After the two reached an impasse, Bob was confronted with two choices: taking a cash payout for his interest in the Zildjian Company and retiring, or getting the keys to a cymbal factory in Meductic, Canada, that Zildjian had opened in 1968, and getting a green light to continue as a cymbal maker. At a hastily convened family meeting in their

kitchen he presented the two options to his wife, Willi, and their three children, Sally, Billy, and Andy. The decision was immediate and unanimous: take the factory and stay in the cymbal business. Sabian Cymbals came into being a few months later. (Willi can take credit for the company name, which represents an amalgam of the first syllables of in the names of their three children.) After launches in Europe and Asia in 1982, the Sabian cymbal line made its debut in the

U.S. market.

Twenty-five years later, Sabian Cymbals Ltd. has emerged as one of the industry's more dramatic success stories. From production of 40,000 units in its first full year, annual output has grown to nearly one million cymbals sold in over 120 countries. This quarter-century arc, from fledgling company operating on a shoestring budget to a true global brand, is more than just the story of good products, clever marketing, and consistent sales growth. Bob Zildjian and the team at

Sabian have also played a critical role in transforming the cymbal business.

In 1981, after the two Zildjian brothers split, the conventional industry wisdom was that Sabian and Zildjian would be locked in a perpetual zero-sum battle for market share, and the resulting price war would impoverish both companies. Few if



Bob, Andy, and Bill Zildjian with an artists rendering of the current Sabian plant in Meductic, New Brunswick.



Putting the soul in a cymbal.
Despite heavy investments in plant automation, Sabian management contends there is no substitute for hand hammering.

any anticipated the real outcome of the split: an unprecedented flurry of product development that injected unexpected growth into the global cymbal market. Consider that in 1981, the combined product offering of all the world's cymbal companies added up to about 300 different models. Today, drummers can choose from a range of product that includes around 3,800 distinct cymbal models. Not surprisingly, with so much choice available, cymbal sales have hit levels no one projected 25 years ago.

After 25 years of consistent growth, Sabian has accumulated an impressive portfolio of assets: a well-turned out factory boasting advanced computer-controlled equipment, a trademark that resonates with drummers around the world, and an extensive global distribution network. However, ask any of the management team to single out the company's most valuable asset, and they will say, without a moment's hesitation, the accrued manufacturing skill of the employees. More specifically, they refer to the elite team within the factory

that has mastered the arcane art of hand-hammering cymbals.

In an era when so many manufacturing tasks have been delegated to computer-controlled machinery, the notion of artisans wielding a hammer and anvil to make cymbals seems a bit quaint. But at Sabian, it's a core element of the production process. At the Meductic plant, a team of five hammerers, under the tutelage of veterans Charlie Brown and Dwight Grant, toil away using techniques that would be immediately familiar to a cymbal maker from Istanbul 200 years ago. It is not an easy job. The hammering process takes between ten and 20 minutes per cymbal, depending on its size and the character of the metal, and hammerers have to take breaks to avoid repetitive stress injuries and because after too much non-stop hammering they lose their "touch." What's more, mastering the craft requires a multi-year apprenticeship and no small amount of dedication.

Sabian management has no sentimental attachment to arduous handwork, as evidenced by the wide use of automation

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Sabian's cymbal production is a careful blend of skilled handwork and automation. The lathing process requires a delicate touch that takes years to master.

throughout the plant. Computer-controlled heat sensors are used to monitor oven temperatures during the casting and annealing processes. There is also a slick robotic arm that adds efficiency to the process of buffing cymbals to a brilliant golden hue. But the reason for continuing with the outwardly antiquated hand hammering process is simple: it works. According to Andy Zildjian, who was made president earlier in the year, "Hand hammering is what gives these cymbals their musical soul and what sets Sabian apart in a competitive market."

Hammering a cymbal alters the molecular make-up of the metal and, ideally, helps vibration flow through the entire cymbal, creating a more expressive and dynamic tonal quality. Poorly hammered cymbals tend to vibrate only at the edge, creating a shrill, harsh sound. Machines can effectively hammer cymbals, and Sabian offers a well-accepted line of machine-hammered cymbals. However, Andy says nothing can replace the human touch. He explains, "Because of the secret process we use in casting the bronze alloy, the metal has inherent inconsistencies in it. Every cymbal blank is not identical. A skilled hand hammerer can feel and hear these inconsistencies and compensate, either by hammering harder or lightening up.

The result is a cymbal with a rich, organic sound."

In 1982, when the first Sabian cymbals began trickling into U.S. stores, Andy says it was the sonic properties of hand hammering that first caught the attention of drummers. "With our HH series, we brought the sound back to where it had been in the '60s and early '70s," he says. "It was a rich, emotion-filled sound that was different from anything else that was available. And people noticed."

It would be nice to say that the unique tonal properties of the Sabian cymbal catapulted the company to overnight success. In reality, however, during the early years, the company experienced the kind of setbacks that would have discouraged anyone less determined. Discussing Sabian's initial foray into the

U.S. market, Bob Zildjian says, with typical bluntness, "We signed up all the drum companies to distribute our cymbals—Ludwig, Slingerland, Gretsch, Pearl, and Sonor. Within a year, everything collapsed. Ludwig was sold to Selmer and Selmer's management said 'dump the cymbals.' Gretsch and Slingerland went bust. We bought Charles Alden, the Sonor distributor, and took over a can of worms in the process. In the first year we ended up buying back 25,000 cymbals from the U.S. market and opening a depot in Chicago



But buffing cymbals to a gleaming finish is performed by a team of computer-controlled robot arms.



Where it all begins. Disks of a special bronze alloy are heated prior to being rolled into cymbal blanks.

just to store all the stuff.”

Sabian later solved its distribution problem through a joint venture with Hohner USA. Dubbed H.S.S. (for Hohner, Sonor, Sabian), the operation fielded a crack sales team that secured a solid foothold for Sabian cymbals throughout the U.S. (Sabian has since terminated its relationship with Hohner and now relies on Kaman Music Corp. for U.S. distribution.) Once distribution was in place, Sabian management was free to focus its energies on the challenge of product development. The result has been a steady stream of new products that have expanded the horizons of drummers while enlarging the cymbal market.

Sabian’s core product line is produced from a bronze alloy known as B20, which consists of 80% copper and 20% tin. Because of the amount of labor involved in rolling, hammering, and lathing, a cymbal made of B20 has to carry a fairly steep price tag. In a company meeting in the mid-’80s, then Sabian Vice-President of Production Dan Barker asked the question, “How do we go about making a good-sounding cymbal that fits the price range of a beginning drummer?” The inquiry set in process a full court press in R&D that yielded Sabian’s immensely successful B8 cymbal line. Formed out of a rolled bronze alloy consisting of 92% copper

and 8% tin, the B8 line was not entirely without precedent. Other companies had made cymbals using similar alloys. But Sabian’s B8 stood apart due to what Andy terms “superior sound” and innovative marketing. Sabian pioneered “pre-packs,” which made it easy for

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beginner drummers to select an appropriate range of cymbals. Retailers also loved pre-packs because the colorful packaging served as a highly effective “silent salesman.”

If the B8 line expanded Sabian’s shelf space in the retail channel, the AAX line, introduced in 1993, established Sabian’s reputation as a company willing to venture in new directions. In any cymbal, most of the sound is projected off the ridges, the “peaks” between the

grooves. Change the shape and size of the ridges in the lathing process, and you alter the sound of the cymbal. For the AAX line Sabian developed a completely new “proprietary” hammering technique and “pinpoint” lathing—a process that yields smaller ridges and a more focused sound with greater dynamic range. Today the AAX product range is a well-accepted component in the Sabian line, but back in 1993, says Andy, it was “a revolution. We view the AAX as the first truly modern cymbal,” he states. “It had a sound and dynamic quality unlike anything else that preceded it.”

Lessons learned from the AAX led to the creation of the HHX, which combines pinpoint lathing with hand hammering for a cymbal that offers volume and a cutting sound quality ideally suited for contemporary music. In total, Sabian’s product development effort, which is largely headed by Bill Zildjian, Nort Hargrove, and Mark Love, has spawned nine separate product lines and over 1,000 distinct models.

Given the variables of cup size, metal type, thickness, shape, lathing, and hammering patterns, Sabian could conceivably create a near infinite number of different cymbals. Although Bill and Mark Love are acutely aware of how each of these variables affect tonal quality, they ultimately turn to musicians for guidance in deciding what kinds of cymbals to build. Bob Zildjian emphasizes, “More than anything else, the music being played determines what we build. It’s not us sitting around a table throwing product ideas against a wall to see what sticks. It’s creating a musical instrument that fills the need of a musician. Every manufacturer has some short-lived products. The products that have staying power are the ones that help the musician express themselves.”

In trying to determine and define the sounds drummers are looking for, Sabian’s marketing efforts are as much about listening to the market as they are about promoting the company’s product line. Take artist endorsements. “Like everyone else in the percussion market, we recognize that endorsers influence purchasing decisions, especially among beginning players,” says Andy. “But equally important is the fact that our endorsers show us the sounds we should



The ultimate quality-control system. Every Sabian cymbal is tested by skilled players, like Kevin Laskey, above, before

be making. They keep us on top of the trends and they push us to try new things.” Citing just one example, he notes, “Terry Bozzio wanted a specific type of cymbal that had a bright attack and a rapid decay—a sound envelope very similar to a drum. There was nothing like it on the market, but he challenged us to come up with something. The result was the Radia cymbal line, which has an unprecedented lathing pattern. It will never be our best-selling cymbal, but we learned a lot making it that has been applicable to other products. We’re better cymbal makers because of the exercise.”

Sabian’s successful “Vault Tour” promotion is another marketing effort that is equal parts promotion and listening to the customer. At face value, the event gives Sabian management a chance to hold in-depth product clinics at retail stores across the country and discuss the company’s new products with interested drummers. Andy notes, “What I like best about these events is the chance to

hear what consumers say, listen to how they play, and watch which product prototypes they gravitate to. It’s tremendously helpful in guiding the direction of our product development.”

Standing in front of a consumers and asking them point-blank, “What do you

think?” is the kind of exercise that takes requires both confidence and a thick

**“OUR ENDORSERS
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skin. At most companies, sales reps go to extremes to keep top management away from consumers for fear that a member of the public might say something embarrassing. At Sabian however, the corporate motto could well be “Let’s hear it all: the good, the bad, and the

ugly.” Andy says this willingness to listen is an outgrowth of a free-wheeling family business culture. “We’re pretty open among each other up here, and I doubt there’s anything anyone on the outside could say that’s any harsher than our normal give and take,” he jokes. “We take our business seriously, but we don’t take ourselves too seriously. We also recognize we don’t know everything and we’re anxious to learn from others.”

When he was making the first cymbals in Meductic, did he think that at some point in the future, he would be shipping nearly one million Sabian branded cymbals yearly? Bob Zildjian answers without hesitation, “No way!” But on reflection, he adds, “Over the course of my career, which started in 1946, the industry has grown far beyond my expectations. When I first went on the road selling, there were only about 12 drum shops in the entire country. Some of the bigger full-line stores carried a few cymbals behind the counter, but the rest of our sales came from teachers who sold a few cymbals to their students. It’s hard to imagine today how much smaller the business was; six cymbals was a big order. Today, any city with hundred thousand has a drum shop, and it’s fantastic. The quality of the products, the merchandising, and the availability are all so improved.” As to the next 25 years, Bob steers clear of concrete predictions, but despite an outwardly gruff exterior, is resolutely optimistic. “The talent of the drummers, the interest in music, and the creativity of all the people working in the industry guarantee a bigger and better future.” Business considerations may not have been paramount when he launched Sabian, but it turned into a stellar operation nonetheless.

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Star Performers In The Percussion Market

SABIAN TURNS 25