

The Music Trades

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From The Largest
To The Smallest...

Kanstul

Can Build Them All

Trained by the men who invented the modern brasswind industry, Zig Kanstul has forgotten more about building horns than most people will ever know. At Kanstul Musical Instruments, he strives to keep alive a tradition—building unique instruments that no one else can.

In the F.E. Olds factory in 1952, trumpet assemblers completed 12 horns a day like clockwork. Payment was on a piecework basis, but after building the first 12 trumpets, the rate for each additional horn dropped precipitously to a measly 50 cents. “It’s not worth my time building another trumpet for 50 cents,” they reasoned, so the assemblers called it quits after 12 horns. For a young

Zigmont Kanstul, with a new family to support, every extra penny counted, so he kept working even as the piecework scale edged down. Endowed with exceptional manual dexterity and a talent for simplifying complex manufacturing operations, Kanstul soon had his co-workers shaking their heads in amazement as he turned out 39 perfect trumpets in an eight-hour workday. Kanstul’s extraordinary prowess on the

workbench soon caught the attention of two of the most influential figures in history of the brass instrument industry: Foster Reynolds, the manager of the Olds plant, who had pioneered large-scale manufacturing techniques for brasswinds; and Eldon Benge, whose Chicago Benge trumpet largely defined the modern-day professional trumpet. As mentors, Reynolds and Benge launched Kanstul on a lifelong career in

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the brass business that included management posts at Olds, King, and Conn. Since 1981 Kanstul has been self-employed, presiding over Kanstul Musical Instruments based in Anaheim, California.

Companies are often described as the reflection of a single individual, and that's certainly the case at the Kanstul company. Like the virtuoso musician who can't wait to tackle the toughest score, Zig's greatest satisfaction comes from building unique instruments that other larger manufacturers shun. When the President of the United States' own Marine Band needed a dozen "fanfare" trumpets with a three-foot-long bell, they eventually found their way to Kanstul. Famed trumpet player Herb Alpert hatched an idea for a trumpet with two bells that would allow him to switch between a muted and an open sound with the push of a lever. Other manufacturers dismissed the idea, but Kanstul seized the opportunity to design and build the unorthodox instrument. Sitting in a small office surrounded with half-built instruments, unusual prototypes, and various brass parts, Zig deadpans, "I guess we build the stuff no one else wants to build."

Tucked away in a small industrial park a mile from Disneyland, Kanstul's manufacturing operations are something of a magic kingdom for brass-wind aficionados. At 32,000 square feet, the plant isn't large by industry standards, yet it could possibly have the single most extensive collection of instrument tooling anywhere. This vast storehouse of tooling for fabricating tubes, bells, leadpipes, and valve parts explains why Kanstul's 48 employees routinely build everything from a piccolo trumpet to a four-valve tuba.

Going up against much larger competitors, Kanstul's decision to focus on building unique specialty instruments is a classic case of finding a niche in a tough market. However, the company's broad-based product line stems as much from market considerations as it does from Zig's deeply held convictions about how to run a proper factory. After 50 years of building instruments, he asserts that the most expensive



HORN MAKER EXTRAORDINAIRE, Zig Kanstul with a collection of trumpet prototypes at his factory in Anaheim, California.

things to develop—and the key to product quality—are skilled craftsmen. "The people on the factory floor are our most important asset," he declares. "You need good people to get both quality and efficiency."

To help nurture this vital asset, Zig is a constant presence in the factory, offering words of encouragement and helpful suggestions to the workers on the bench. Equally important to developing the skills of his staff is constant change on the production line. Unlike some factories where a worker could build the same trumpet for weeks at a time, in the course of a single day a worker at the Kanstul plant may work on a trumpet, a flugelhorn, or a euphonium.

"I looked at our workers, and I was struck by the fact that they were old. Unless we brought up a new crop of craftsmen, we were going to be in trouble when they retired."

A manufacturing consultant might argue that such small production runs are inherently inefficient, but Zig counters that variety is the key to quality. "When someone is doing the same job over and over again everyday of the week, pretty soon their mind wanders and they're thinking about girls, or fishing, or where they'd rather be," he explains. "But when you constantly change the jobs that people do, they have to think about their work, and when they think about their work, they get better at it." Affirming the wisdom of this unorthodox approach to factory management is a lengthy roster of illustrious Kanstul users, ranging from top L.A. session player Wayne Bergeron to the brass sections of Michigan State University and the University of Texas.

From spinning bells to final assembly by hand, much of Kanstul's manufacturing relies on highly traditional means, but the company has eagerly embraced new technology wherever possible.

Computer-controlled turning centers, representing a multi-million dollar investment, are used to fabricate small parts like valve caps, water keys, and ferrules. Zig's son Mark has even developed a cutting-edge water treatment system that enables the Kanstul plating operation to comply with California's stringent environmental regulations. "I don't think they'll ever be able to automate the assembly process," states Zig, "but these computer-controlled machines are great for producing parts to consistently tight tolerances."

Zig is particularly proud of new a technology that allows the company to cost-effectively produce exact copies of any existing brass mouthpiece. Developed by his son-in-law James New, the system uses a computer-controlled probe that creates an exact digital profile of the exterior and interior mouthpiece dimensions. This digital profile is then transferred to a computer-controlled lathe that shapes the mouthpiece from a piece of brass bar stock. "Other people have similar technology," states New. "What makes ours unique is that we can do an exact profile of the interior as well as the exterior dimensions of the mouth-

piece.”

With this unique blend of computer-controlled machinery and a team of crack horn makers, Kanstul Instruments is managing to thrive at a time when most of the U.S. band instrument industry is struggling against a combination of inexpensive Chinese competition and an enormous glut of used product. Some might attribute Kanstul’s current success to an astute strategy, but Zig insists that he is simply using “common sense” and following the advice Foster Reynolds dispensed to him 50 years ago on the floor of the Olds plant. “Reynolds had been at this business so long that he knew everything that could go wrong in a factory, and he knew all these tricks for getting the job done right—everyone uses string to measure out a tuba, but he insisted that we used braided fishing line because it wouldn’t stretch, and you’d get a more accurate measurement. He taught me that to run a good factory you have to pay attention to everything because there are no unimportant details,” he recalls. “He also used to tell everyone in the factory, ‘Be glad you’re leaving at five o’clock; our dealers have to work until nine to get this stuff sold.’ It was his way of letting us know how important the dealer was.”

Reynolds did such a thorough job of indoctrinating Kanstul into the importance of constant vigilance on the factory floor and good dealer relationships that as Kanstul’s career progressed he had a hard time dealing with anyone who deviated from these basic principles. Some might call his unyielding attitude arrogant, but in every argument he was eventually vindicated by events. Or as they say in Texas, “It ain’t boasting if it’s true.”

By 1970, when Olds band instruments became part of Norlin, a conglomerate that also operated an Ecuadorian brewery and cement factory, Kanstul was in charge of manufacturing. He has a vivid recollection of the first visit he received from his new boss from Norlin: “I offered to give him a tour, but he said he’d rather walk through the plant by himself. I watched him walk down the main aisle of the factory without looking left or right. When he came back



SKILLED CRAFTSMEN fabricate an nearly limitless variety of horns at Kanstul’s California plant...



WHILE COMPUTER-CONTROLLED metal working equipment is used to produce component parts, ensuring consistency...



BUT WHEN IT COMES to final assembly and testing, there is still no substitute for an experienced hand.

about two minutes later and said he’d seen all he needed to see, I knew we were in trouble.” Kanstul resigned a few months later. Within six years the once-profitable Olds plant in Anaheim had been shuttered, the victim of colossal mismanagement.

Eldon Benge, the principal trumpeter with the Chicago Symphony, had begun making his own trumpets after World War II because he couldn’t find a new horn that matched the tonal quality of his prized 1920s-era Besson. Overnight the Benge instruments became sought after among professional trumpeters. When Benge moved to Burbank, California, to do film score work, he brought his trumpet business with him. In the early ’50s Zig augmented his income at Olds by moonlighting at the tiny Benge plant, working side by side with Eldon Benge. So it was a natural transition when, after leaving Olds in 1970, Zig took over manufacturing operations at Benge. In a ten-year period he transformed the company from a small custom shop to a large-scale operation with 150 employees producing an extensive line of trumpets and marching instruments.

In 1980, however, Kanstul’s strongly held convictions led again to conflicts with his superiors. Benge had been sold to King Musical Instruments, and a new King CEO pledged 35 percent sales growth to the shareholders. To fuel this growth, he promptly maxed out the company credit line and mortgaged all the company real estate. “I told him it was a crazy move that was way too risky,” recalls Zig, “and he suggested that I leave because I wasn’t part of the growth program.”

Events vindicated Zig’s predictions again, as King was pushed to the brink of collapse by a combination of rising interest rates and a tough recession. However, King’s troubles eventually presented Kanstul with the greatest opportunity of his career. Faced with mounting losses, in 1981 King management opted to consolidate all manufacturing in Cleveland and shutter the Benge factory in Anaheim. Overnight, 150 skilled horn makers were let go and several million dollars of manufacturing equipment was set

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to be sold as scrap. At the same time, U.K.-based Boosey & Hawkes (since renamed The Music Group) was looking to re-create the famed Besson trumpet. With perfect timing, Kanstul secured a contract from Boosey & Hawkes to build the Besson and used the guaranteed sales to get financing to purchase the Benge equipment and tooling. With a skeletal crew of 14 of the most skilled former Benge employees and a factory full of tooling, in late 1981 Kanstul Musical Instruments began operations.

A year later, when a currency shift rendered British-made student instruments uncompetitive in the U.S. market, Boosey & Hawkes shipped a container full of instrument parts to the Kanstul plant with an expanded contract for him to build entry-level horns. Student instruments are low-margin products that larger manufacturers rely on primarily just to absorb fixed overhead, and for a small plant like Kanstul's they made little financial sense on paper, but the typically cost-conscious Kanstul seized the Boosey & Hawkes contract. He explains, "I looked at our workers, and I was struck by the fact that they were old. Unless we brought up a new crop of craftsmen, we were going to be in trouble when they retired. The opportunity to build student horns gave us the perfect vehicle for training a whole new generation of instrument builders. It's a lot easier to learn on entry-level product where the tolerances and requirements aren't quite as demanding." The decision to build student horns two decades ago is why today Zig boasts that he has the youngest workforce in the industry. "Our average age is around 35, compared with 55 at some



KANSTUL is a completely self-contained factory. The company even does its own plating.

of the other U.S. plants."

In an about-face, five years ago Kanstul curtailed student instrument production entirely, opting to focus on professional instruments and custom work. "I saw how the quality of Chinese products was improving, and I knew that there was just no way we could compete effectively in that market," he states. "Instead of losing money in the commodity market, we decided to just focus on products no one else could or would build."

Abandoning the student market caused a short-term sales decline, but within a year Kanstul's business resumed its upward trajectory. As other manufac-

urers struggle with an all-out price war, Zig's earlier reading of the market now looks prescient. In a characteristically self-effacing manner, he brushes aside any suggestion that his experience has given him any particular talent for anticipating trends. Rather, he says his decisions were based on necessity. "Unlike some of the bigger companies, we can't afford to have money-losing product lines," he states. "We're working with our own money so we have to be careful."

Fifty years in business has taught Zig the importance of consistent profitability, which is why he runs one of the leanest operations in the business. Offices at Kanstul are modest, company cars are non-existent, and aside from Zig, there is virtually no layer of factory management—supervisory responsibilities are shared by the workers on the line. The company carries virtually no finished goods inventory, opting instead to build products only on an on-order basis. This focus on cost control is why Kanstul can maintain a strong balance sheet while investing millions in production equipment.

Zig takes obvious pride in the financial success of his company; however, his primary passion is with the art of brass-wind manufacture. His idea of a relaxing Saturday is an afternoon spent on the workbench, tinkering with new prototypes without interruption, and he considers it an obligation to pass along to the next generation the lessons he has learned from Foster Reynolds and Eldon Benge. "There's a great tradition of building instruments in this country," he says, "and I was fortunate enough to learn it from some of the very best. It's something worth preserving."

KANSTUL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

**Factory: 1332 S. Claudina
Anaheim, CA 92805
714 563 1000 Fax 714 563 1661
www.kanstul.net**



**Showroom: 231 E. Palais
Anaheim, Ca 92805
714 563 3325 Fax 714 563 3328
sales@kanstul.net**