

US Brass Instrument Production

Domestic & Global Influences

This is an attempt to put together historical influences affecting the production of brass instruments in the US in the 20th century. These can serve to explain part of the history of US makers and possibly be used to adjust serial number lists that are developed for owners of vintage brass.

1907 A severe financial depression shuts down the Martin Band Inst. Co almost completely in late 1907 with a gradual increase to four days per week by January 1908. This was the Panic of 1907, which started in early October in New York City. It likely affected all US makers.

1912 All military contract instruments change to “USQMC” as an added bell marking. These show up primarily during WWI and can aid in dating serial numbers. Previously it was “USQMD”.

1916 A large union strike during the year involves about 500 workers over many months. This continues into 1917 and 1918 for companies Conn, Buescher, Martin, Elkhart, Blessing, Holton, Jay, York, Grand Rapids, and White.

1919 It was reported in the June 1919 edition of Jacob’s Band Monthly that no imported band instruments were available during the war and that currently, no cheap imports were yet available as many of the former workers in Europe were either gone or were doing other work. This caused buyers to buy domestic brands or have their older instruments repaired. Many US companies at this time were expanding their repair departments. This domestic demand was increased even more by more people being patriotic and wanting to start or join bands.

1922 Domestic makers are protected by new import duties through the Fordney-McCumber Tariff Act. Paragraph 1443 sets musical instruments at 40%. [This helped the student-grade models as European imports were selling in the US for about half what the domestics were. In 1912, the Lyon & Healy catalog had their best imported cornet at \$30 and their lowest US cornet at \$55.]

1920s Makers like Buescher and Martin were devoting almost all of their production to saxophones due to their huge popularity. Conn was devoting about 75% of production to saxophones. The demand for the new Couturier sax in 1922 had them planning a doubling of production in December. Trumpets also take off and quickly surpass cornets in popularity.

1929 The Great Depression started in October. Many small manufacturers of brass instruments end within a short time. Most larger makers reduced production with a gradual increase in the late 1930s.

1930 The Tariff Act of 1930 continued import duties for musical instruments at 40%.

1936 The US made France a “most favored nation” which reduced their duties from 40% to 30%. The greatest effect was for woodwinds.

1942 Use of critical metals like copper are restricted to a percentage of that used in 1940 starting on March 1.

1942 All use of critical metals ends on May 31, and any remaining stock of brass instruments was purchased by the US armed services. The restrictions are not lifted until 1946. Many companies turn to wartime contracts to keep from closing. Instruments made for contracts have “US” added to the bell and are often silver-plated.

There was a shortage of nitrocellulose lacquer during the war which may have limited how many lacquered brass instruments could be made.

1946 Following the lifting of restrictions, there was a large demand for musical instruments. The US government was still regulating sale prices this year, according to testimony by Olds. This probably ended with material restrictions.

1948 Import duties for musical instruments were reduced from 40% to 20% effective April 21 through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. This creates more competition for domestic makers.

1951 US order M-47A restricts manufacturing with copper and aluminum due to the Korean War. Nickel silver was also prohibited. Reading the order seems to imply that there was no copper available, yet Reed’s history of brass instrument making in Elkhart reports that makers were able to use 35% of the quantity used in 1950. This still means a 65% reduction in production for all of 1952. The restriction ended in February of 1953.

1951 Due to the copper restriction and lower import duties, European import totals go from 9,000 in 1950 to 23,500 in 1951. At the same time, many countries adopt their own import duties and make US imports less competitive.

1966 US instrument production hit a post-war high.

1967 Yamaha began to export brass instruments to the US. All imports account for 10% of the US market.

1968 Import duties were reduced to 18% on January 1. Imported instruments were at about 23,000 for the year.

1969 Import duties were reduced to 16% on January 1. Wurlitzer closed their Martin factory in Elkhart and sells it to Leblanc.

1970 Import duties were reduced to 14% on January 1.

1971 Import duties were reduced to 12% on January 1. Domestic production is down 16% compared to 1966. All imports accounted for 24% of the US market and were at 51,000 units.

1971 In April, Conn began importing their student-grade Director trumpets and cornets as stencils made by Nippon Gakki Seizo Co (Yamaha). These were distributed through their Abilene, Texas location. The student market was 75% of their business.

1972 Import duties were reduced to 10% on January 1. Leblanc signs with Yamaha in mid-year to produce all their student models of brass instruments (about 90% of all brass). They imported unfinished instruments which were completed at their factory in Arizona.