

By Roby Hill

VOSBEIN, BOSPHORUS KEEP TURKISH CYMBAL-MAKING LEGACY ALIVE

A lot has changed since the first half of the 17th century.

A man strolling down the streets of Constantinople in 1625 would have been in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, then at the height of its reign. He would know of the Holy Roman Empire, which still existed, but not the United States of America, which wouldn't for another century and a half. He would no doubt be fascinated by the spectacle of a man making a cymbal, using for the first time a special method of craftsmanship.

Some things haven't changed.

The Bosphorus Strait, the modern doorway between Europe and Asia, lies between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. With its tall shores lined with palaces, ruins, villages and gardens, this picturesque area is one of the most beautiful in modern-day Turkey. It could also be called the "cradle of cymbalization," home to some of the world's best cymbal master craftsmen.

Hasan Seker, Hasan Ozdemir and Ibrahim Yakici own Bosphorus Cymbals. These three

masters oversee every step in which the cymbals are handcrafted from raw ore to final musical instrument. They apprenticed for many years, adopting the rich time-honored techniques of Turkish cymbal-making before they started Bosphorus more than a decade ago.

"Having all three masters present in every phase of the process creates a harmony in the work," said Erhan Kornurcu, adminis-

trator for Bosphorus International. "Their craftsmanship is breathed into every cymbal, creating unique instruments of magic and distinction."

Their meticulous attention to more than 300 years of tradition and perfection is what inspired Michael Vosbein to become president of Bosphorus Cymbals USA, the company that is the North American distributor for Bosphorus International.

"These are the hippest cymbals in the world," Vosbein said. "I'm very passionate about cymbals, like everyone in our company. We believe that the company is firmly in line with this great legacy of handmade cymbals, which the industry has gotten away from. There's very little tradition left in mass produced cymbals."

Background

Originally from the heartland of American Jazz, New Orleans, Vosbein moved to Miami when he was eight. At age 11, while visiting a relative who had a drum set, Vosbein climbed onto the kit for the first time and a lifelong passion for percussion ignited.



"I guess it was the sense of freedom that first attracted me," Vosbein said. "I knew after about 10 seconds that this was for me. It's probably like that for anyone who has a passion for what they do."

The family moved to Atlanta when Vosbein was in high school and he got involved with the high school band. He got his first taste of performing as a professional his senior year, working with a band at Six Flags Over Georgia. After graduating in 1973, he attended the University of North Texas and the University of Miami, both schools with noted music programs.

He honed his chops by going on the road with the Glenn Miller Orchestra, touring through America and Canada, before moving to L.A. in 1981 to freelance. After eight years, Vosbein left to serve as an artist-in-residence at the renowned music school at Saint Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia before moving to Atlanta in 1990.

"Probably the best thing about living in L.A. was that I was able to study privately with some wonderful drummers," Vosbein said. "My real mentor is the great jazz drummer Jeff Hamilton. I spent many years under his direction and he remains a good friend."

The Company

Hamilton is not only a mentor and friend – he is also a partner. When Vosbein put together the management group to buy and run Bosphorus Cymbals USA, he was adamant that the top brass know their bronze. The company's executives are all accomplished drummers who are musicians first, businessmen second.

"Whenever business operations get to be a little much, I go to the vault and play," Vosbein said. "I also stay quite

busy as a gigging musician. I don't want to ever let my own kit grow cold. But most of my time is spent talking to music dealers, many of whom are drummers too. We all like to talk music."

The active musicianship of the Bosphorus team is central to the company philosophy. It takes a refined ear to hear the difference in sound that comes from handcrafting. No machine lathe or hammer ever touches the cymbal and there are no coatings on the cymbals that keep them from aging properly. Bosphorus cymbals are light and flexible, responsive to the musician's

touch. Machine-made cymbals tend to be heavier, created more to withstand a beating and cut through the band with piercing high frequencies and volume. Bosphorus cymbals have a warm, mysterious sound that supports the band in a richer and more musical manner, yet are still quite durable.

"There's a dark, complex musical spread underneath the stick sound," Vosbein said. "The instrument you play has an effect on how you play. A Bosphorus cymbal causes the drummer to listen more, to find out that the cymbal is capable of so much more range of expression than they're used to. It can help to open up their own playing as well."

The Process

The only way to produce this sound is through handcrafting.

Beginning with an alloy from an ancient formula first perfected by a craftsman on those long-ago streets of Constantinople, the raw metal is molten to a liquid state.

The liquid is poured into the casting molds. From the molds, the raw cymbal moves to the oven where it is heated, rolled, and repeated many times until it has the proper thickness. The raw cymbal is thrown into a cool bath and "quick cooled." This process allows the alloys to bond and the metal itself gains its strength.

Each cymbal is hand-hammered by master cymbal crafters until the correct tone and clarity is reached. Each cymbal receives more than 5,000 hammer blows before finishing. The





craftsman hand-lathes the cymbal to give it its final tone, clarity, and projection. Every cymbal is weighed and recorded, then hand-marked under the bell.

After the cymbal is deemed acceptable, it is signed by the maker and it goes to Bosphorus Cymbals USA, where it is inspected by the accomplished musicians who run the company. If Vosbein thinks a cymbal is found wanting in any way, he sends it back to Turkey to be melted down and recast.

Bosphorus offers several series of cymbals including three artist signature models. The Traditional Series is available in five models featuring different lathing or buffing con-

figurations. The Master Series cymbals are very thin and are known for the characteristic ripple made by the cymbal's edge when played. The Artist Series includes Hammer (Jeff Hamilton), Versa (Ignacio Berroa), and the just-released Stanton Moore models.

"Making the best cymbals is all about the process," Vosbein said. "There's no mystery about the material - if you can see what's in a human cell, you can see what's in a high hat. But our master cymbal makers are true artisans. It's all tactile and about how the cymbal feels. The character of the cymbal is an extension of the character of the artisan. When you substitute that with machinery, you lose something critical. Other companies imply hand-made, but ours really are."

The Artists

The musicians who have adopted Bosphorus are an eclectic group with some of the most well-known and respected drummers in the industry, from jazz to metal to punk to pop. In addition to numerous session artists and educators, Bosphorus cymbals are used by Stanton Moore (Galatic, Garage-a-tois), Jake Hanna (jazz legend), Rikki Rockett

(Poison), Ron Welty (Steady Ground, The Offspring), Andrew Borger (Norah Jones), Dennis Mackrel (Hank Jones; Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Band), Marco Meneghin (Liz Phair), Jamey Haddad (Paul Simon), Erik Hargrove (James Brown), David Kemper (Jerry Garcia; Bob Dylan), Todd Roper (Cake), Peter Buck (Michelle Shocked), and Zack Velmer (Sound Tribe SectorNine).

Their enthusiastic reaction to Bosphorus cymbals was one of the motivating forces behind the formation of Bosphorus Cymbals USA.

"There is the feeling that industry insiders are rooting for us," Vosbein said. "We seem to be the heir apparent to the centuries old mysterious Turkish sound. We represent a genuine concern for artistry from the master cymbal-smiths to the artists that play our stuff. Also, we're personally passionate as drummers about our part in helping to keep this great tradition alive and possibly even add to it."

See <http://www.bosphoruscymbals.com> for more information and to hear sample sound files.

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