

Recreating The Renowned French Besson Trumpet

How B-H/Bufet Established A U.S. Plant To Re-Introduce The Celebrated French Besson Line of Brasswinds



AN F. BESSON TRUMPET is examined by Zig Kanstul (left), Besson plant manager, musician Jean-Pierre Michelou (center), and Jonathan Crist, chief executive officer of Boosey & Hawkes Buffet. Each Besson trumpet is play-tested by Michelou prior to shipping.

For nearly 50 years, brasswind players have conducted a treasure hunt for French Besson trumpets made before World War II, particularly those bearing serial numbers from 83000 to 85000. Some of these people want the horns for playing, others for collecting.

But two musicians who rounded up 50 of the precious instruments last year had a different purpose. They planned to recreate the unique sound and playing qualities of the early F. Besson trumpet,

acclaimed the finest trumpet in the world during the 19th century.

At the Winter Market NAMM show in January, the F. Besson trumpet, American-style, made its official debut at the exhibit of Boosey & Hawkes Buffet Crampon Inc. The new F. Besson comes in four models: two B-flats, one with a medium-large bore and one with a large bore; and two C-trumpets with the same choice of bore. Eventually, the line will be expanded to include a fluegelhorn, a piccolo trumpet,

and several cornets.

This is the story of why the F. Besson is back on the market and what it took to get it there.

The story starts in 1981 with Jonathan Crist, president of B-H/Bufet, and plant manager Zig Kanstul, a brasswind maker for many years and an alumnus of Olds and Benge brasswinds. Friends for some time, they had often thought about the re-birth of the F. Besson trumpet, an idea that seemed remote.

But when Crist became chief executive officer of B-H/Bufet in January 1982, the F. Besson restoration was one of the first proposals he made to the company management. The English company had purchased the French Besson Company many years ago and promptly applied the brand name English Besson to its own successful line of brasses and background instruments. The original French instrument disappeared into quiet oblivion, and as years went on, the existing F. Besson trumpets became prizes cherished by musicians. B-H/Bufet, determined to carry on the F. Besson tradition, set out to recreate the famous trumpet.

Finding The "Real" Besson

It might seem easy to duplicate a musical instrument. You take a few measurements, study the metallurgical formula, examine the bends, tapers, valves, and lead pipe, and voila! An F. Besson replica is born.

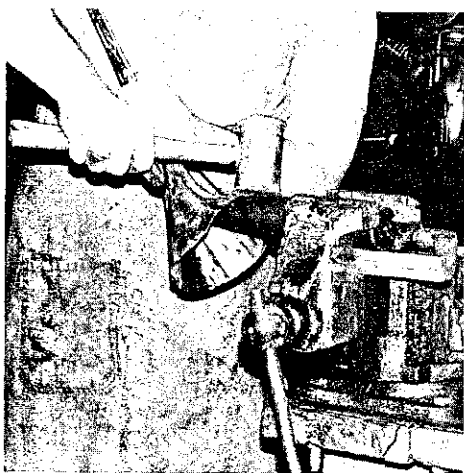
Not so. The F. Besson trumpets made in the 1930s and early 1940s were not all alike. There is no such thing as *the* F. Besson. They were handmade by six craftsmen at the Paris plant, so differences occurred from horn to horn. In fact, it was the custom for Paris opera musicians to spend an afternoon matching mouthpieces and bells to create the instruments they desired.

"We couldn't produce the American F. Besson that way," says Crist. "American dealers and musicians expect consistency. Furthermore, we knew we would have limited production. No dealer could stock enough F. Bessons to provide a mix-and-match selection. So we had to find the typical F. Besson, the one with the sound and playing characteristics musicians are looking for today."

It was a long, tedious job. During early 1982, Crist and Kanstul collected horns. Some musicians offered to loan their instruments; others had to be cajoled; some brought their horns in and waited for them. As the word of the F. Besson search got out, some collectors called and offered their horns for study.

"We soon learned the original F. Besson was a real challenge to make," Crist says. "It wasn't any one thing that made the Besson exceptional; it was a combination of things. But our goal was to cap-

Recreating The French Besson



The bell of each French Besson trumpet is hand hammered. Proper bell taper dimensions are crucial to capture the unique tonal characteristics of the Besson.

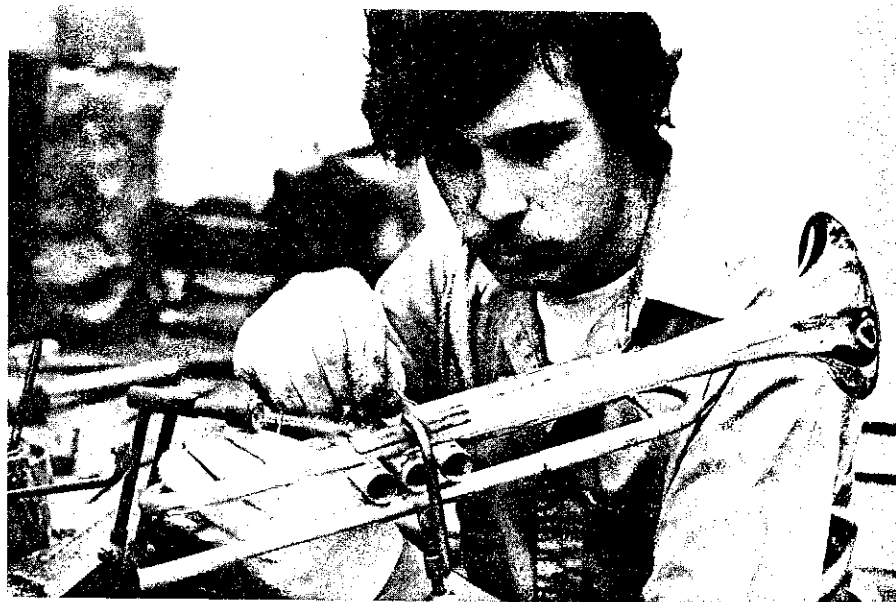
ture the notable characteristics."

After producing several prototypes, the F. Besson was ready to go on the road. The instrument was taken to critical brass-wind players, who responded with great enthusiasm.

B-H/Bufet held a sneak preview at the summer NAMM show in Atlanta last year and sold a prototype there, although that was not its intention. One musician wouldn't leave the B-H/Bufet exhibit until he made the purchase.

Discovering the F. Besson secrets was a fascinating process, but the practicalities of manufacturing were every bit as challenging, according to Kanstul. A 45-year veteran of the industry, Kanstul had learned the instrument-making trade as a protege of F. A. Reynolds, founder of Olds Band Instrument Company. (Norlin liquidated Olds Band Instrument Co. in 1979. Significant portions of the Olds tooling were acquired by Selmer.) Although Reynolds mainly produced student horns, his knowledge of quality manufacturing and his ideals of excellence were acknowledged by the industry.

While B-H/Bufet was preparing the resurrection of the F. Besson late in 1981, Kanstul was in Los Angeles pondering his next move in the music business. As manager of the Benge Division of the King Musical Instrument Co., he was facing relocation because the plant was moving out of town. When Crist offered him the challenge of helping to produce the new F. Besson, he couldn't refuse. Kanstul joined B-H/Bufet early in 1982 and set up the manufacturing operation in one room with five former Benge craftsmen. The company owned the old French tooling, but it was hopelessly worn out. New tooling had to be designed, and American machinery was installed.



The actual assembly of the Besson trumpet is performed entirely by hand. All workers in the Besson plant in California are skilled in the handcrafting techniques required to produce the trumpets.



In final assembly, the Besson's pistons are lapped to assure proper clearance and the lightest, most responsive action.

Now located in a newly constructed factory, the plant is somewhat reminiscent of the early instrument-making days, before production-line methods were introduced. Workers are well trained hand-hammering bells, spinning, braising, and the other required hand techniques. Each instrument is put through a rigorous performance test, and each reflects the care and fine craftsmanship that have distinguished the F. Besson trumpet throughout the centuries.

Jean-Pierre Michelou, a musician who took the testing job for love, not money, drives from Long Beach, California, to Anaheim daily to play each newly finished trumpet. Even though he is manager



The engraving on each Besson Bell involves 11 stamps. The stamps list the trumpet's historic honors: 66 Hautes Recompense, 6 Grand Prix, Hors Concours, Membre Du Jury. These acknowledge the international distinction the original F. Besson gained during the 19th century.

and first trumpet player of the Long Beach Municipal Band, plays clubs and parties, and does studio work, testing those Bessons has become his daily recreation.

In the past year, production has steadily increased and, according to B-H/Bufet, will continue to step up gradually during 1983 to better satisfy the demand that is already rising fast. Crist is quick to point out that maintaining the superior quality level of the F. Bessons is the top priority, even if it means limited production.

"The music business constantly progresses in its manufacturing techniques, and that's good," Crist says. "In the case of the F. Besson, we've intentionally stepped back a half-century, and we think trumpet perfectionists will agree that that's progress, too."