Renold Schilke

Biography

Renold Otto Schilke, Sr., was born in Green Bay , Wisconsin on June 30, 1910 , to a musical family. His father was a singer and his mother an organist, and Renold began studying cornet at age eight. He was a soloist with the Holton factory band, otherwise a band made up of adults, in 1921 at the age of eleven. Notwithstanding his actual age, he was billed at that time, vaudeville style, as a 7 year old "boy wonder" because of his small size. He told a former employee that as a youth he had the run of the Holton factory and observed the science and art of musical instrument design and manufacturing first hand. The old German workmen at the plant insisted that "if you play the instrument, you should know how to make it," and, with their help, Schilke made his first instrument at age 11.

In addition to his interest in music, Schilke was also greatly interested in guns. He began working part-time at a Green Bay gun shop when he was 14 in 1924. The interest he had in machine work that was nurtured at the Holton factory, intensified here. By the time he was 17 he knew enough of tool and die making that he was able to make trumpet mouthpieces on the gun shop machinery and to make custom mouthpieces for brass instruments for others.

In 1927, Schilke went to Brussels , Belgium , to study at the Brussels Conservatory. While there he became familiar with the work of Victor Mahillon, the 18th century Belgian acoustician and brass instrument designer, who Schilke attributed to having the greatest influence on Schilke's own design work. Mahillon's theories included the idea that one could control the intonation of brass instruments by making changes in the rate of taper in the in the tubing. Schilke claimed that such theories were mostly ignored by the other manufacturer of trumpets.

In 1928, when Renold Schilke came to Chicago from Brussels to study trumpet with Edward Llewellyn, the principal trumpet player in the Chicago Symphony, he took a part time job working for a small mouthpiece maker in Chicago who made the mouthpiece that Llewellyn played. Schilke also played the same mouthpiece during his career with the Chicago Symphony. The current Schilke exterior is a variation of this mouthpiece.

During the early 30's, Schilke earned a steady income by his playing and was able to take technical school courses in tool and die making. He also took courses in metallurgy and music at Northwestern University in Evanston and the University of Chicago . He and Llewellyn would often visit the Holton factory in Elkhorn , Wisconsin ,

during this time so that Holton could perform custom work on Llewellyn's instruments. Holton recognized Schilke's studies and expertise in the field even while in his younger 20's and they asked him to help solve tooling problems at the factory while providing him the opportunity to make and test his own design ideas using Holton facilities. His original design for the tuning bell trumpet was made during this time (around 1929) mostly as a way to switch bells easily while experimenting.

Schilke was a member of the US Olympic team in 1932 and 1936 in pistol shooting. He continued his interest in guns and in competitive shooting till the end of his life. During the early 40's, to assist in the war effort, he worked as a civilian employee for Douglas Tool and Die, assisting in the development the M-1 rifle during the day and working as a symphony trumpet player at night.

At Llewellyn's death in 1936, Schilke became a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It was at this time that he decided to supplement the income of Mrs. Llewellyn by manufacturing and selling the mouthpiece known as the E. B. Llewellyn Personal Model (which eventually became the Schilke 9) and he and Mrs. Llewellyn shared the income in some fashion from the sales.

When Schilke started with the Chicago Symphony he became involved in trumpet design with Elden Benge who had been with the Symphony since 1932. The two were also neighbors and would carry on their experiments in Schilke's home workshop. When Benge became serious about manufacturing trumpets in 1938, Schilke did most of the tooling for the production and many in the industry attributed much of the success of Benge's instruments to Schilke's tool development.

Schilke's association with the Chicago Symphony began in 1937, and he served as principal trumpet from 1939 to 1941, succeeding Benge. His formal association with the Chicago Symphony ended in 1951, although he continued in an auxiliary role when needed through 1962. Schilke also continued to perform with the Chicago Symphony Brass Ensemble, a brass quintet throughout the 50's. They recorded, gave recitals, clinics and instrument demonstrations sponsored by Holton. Adolph Herseth played first trumpet, Schilke second. Schilke also performed with the Grant Park Symphony and the WGN Radio Orchestra. He remained active as a performer as a member of the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra from 1954 until 1964. He was also featured in a print advertisement for Scott Radios.

Philip Farkas returned as principle horn in the Chicago Symphony in 1947 and, in the early 50s. together with Schilke, the two formed the company known as Music Catalog, Inc. Their original goal was to make one mouthpiece for each instrument: one trumpet, one French horn, one trombone and one tuba (already in development with the help of Arnold Jacobs). As things progressed, the demand for other models increased and the line was somewhat expanded and Schilke's time was becoming increasingly spent in areas other than trumpet performance.

In around 1956, Schilke bought out Farkas's half of the business and the enterprise then known as "The Schilke Company" was formed and later incorporated as Schilke Music Catalog, Inc. The company initially retailed Holton Catalog, and, for one early year, manufactured and sold music stands. He had presented his various trumpet designs to numerous instrument companies but he reported (proudly) that each told him that "if we built those horns, we'd go broke." No other manufacturer felt that they could cost effectively build horns to his specifications and tolerances, so he decided to manufacture them himself and experienced workers were hired to make the horns. Schilke's break came when the William Franke Company, an instrument manufacturer in Chicago , was suddenly dissolved and Schilke was able to bid on and purchase the Franke equipment at thirty cents on the dollar. Originally there were four employees, Schilke, Ben Adowski, Bill Biehl, and Will Scarlett, who ran the office until he secured his position playing trumpet with the Chicago Symphony in 1966. When Schilke decided to build his trumpet designs, one of his first things he did was to fly to Los Angeles and tell his Elden Benge of his intentions.

Most of the horns in the Schilke catalog were developed from between 1956 and 1965 with many prototypes of each design slowly giving way to the final designs. In only one instance, an E flat trumpet which was first used by Armando Ghitalla in the Boston Symphony was the first prototype a successful design. At the other extreme, the piccolo and G/F trumpets required many times the number of prototypes than all his other instruments combined.

In 1959, Schilke moved his workshop from his home in Evanston to 183 west Washington in Chicago , where it stayed until a move back to Evanston at 222 West Lake Street in 1963. In 1967, the company operations were moved to Chicago 's loop area at 529 South Wabash Avenue . From 1974 to 1981, the company also operated a factory on Beecher Street in Winfield , Illinois , where the horns were manufactured, with the finishing work taking place at the Wabash building. The move to the present location in Melrose Park was in August 1989, after Renold O. Schilke's death. At each location, the shop was a clubhouse for Brass Legends who came by to talk to Mr. Schilke and his employees, play horns, and seek advice.

Renold Schilke taught trumpet from the late 30's until the mid 60's at various universities in the Chicago area, including Northwestern, DePaul, and Roosevelt . Among his notable students were Vincent Cichowicz, Will Scarlett, and Thomas Crown.

Scott Laskey, former long-time Schilke employee, who studied with Mr. Schilke for four years, described Schilke's teaching philosophy as follows:

I think Mr. Schilke's greatest value as a teacher was that he taught trumpet. He did not teach classical trumpet, he did not teach Jazz trumpet, he did not teach lead trumpet or any style of trumpet. He taught trumpet. He presented you with the studies needed to develop the skills and techniques needed to play trumpet. He then allowed you to apply those skills and techniques to what ever style of music you were playing.

While not personally a master craftsman at all phases of the manufacturing process, Schilke was a great innovator in trumpet design, applying nodal theories of Victor Mahillon and Dr. Willi Aebi, an amateur horn player and physicist from Burgdorph , Switzerland . Schilke's design improvements first employed mathematical formulas for locating nodal points and possible disturbances. He then began using a contact microphone to locate points of turbulence. Adjustments were then made to the taper of the tubing to correct the intonation or turbulence. A fair amount of trial and error was also employed, the results of which were, for example, a B flat leadpipe with 14 such adjustments to correct faulty pitches, and a clearly improved intonation pattern. His designs significantly upgraded the intonation and response of trumpets, especially the previously neglected smaller trumpets, concerning which Schilke remains unchallenged as the industry leader and has historically sold more than any other manufacturer even though the prices are often double those offered by the competition.

Over the years, the company has consistently produced trumpets and cornets and mouthpieces for all brass instruments. From time to time Schilke has manufactured other instruments including flugelhorns, bass trumpets, French horns and tubas. Renold Schilke was an innovator who frequently would tackle challenges that others might resist.

In the late 60's, Yamaha renewed its efforts to market quality musical instruments in the United States . As part of that effort, Yamaha hired Renold Schilke in 1966 as a consultant to assist in the design both of the brass instruments and in the manufacturing facility. This began a relationship between Yamaha and Schilke which continued until Mr. Schilke's death in 1982. In 1970, Schilke wrote:

One of the main things that attracts me to Yamaha, in spite of criticism from home for sharing trade secrets, is the fact that the company shares my philosophy of pushing ahead with development of improvements even though the market does not demand them. From a strictly business point of view, such research and development outlays may appear wasteful, but the great progress made by Yamaha in developing their present piano line from its early very ordinary stages, suggested that we shared the same artistic considerations. And in truth, no real development of brass instruments had been seen since 1884 when Victor Mahillon designed them in the shape and style still in use.

Nearly all of the early Yamaha trumpets had clear Schilke design influence and, though that relationship has been over for almost twenty years, the Yamaha professional lightweight trumpets still bear very clear relationship with their Schilke forebears. For example, The Yamaha YTR 6310Z began its life as a copy of the Schilke B6, a medium step-bore design. Though the Yamaha has been through several models (the YTR 732, YTR 636, 736, 6310, 6310B and the 6310Z) it remains visually identical to the Schilke with the exception, of course, of Schilke's trademark hexagonal valve caps, buttons, and braces. Yamaha mouthpieces share the Schilke labeling system. The Yamaha trumpet line also included copies of the B5 and X3 for almost 30 years.

Mr. Schilke's old friend Philip Farkas assisted him with the development of the Yamaha french horns, often traveling with him to Japan, and other artists, including Chicago Symphony members Arnold Jacobs and Frank Crisafulli, assisted him in the development of the low brass line for Yamaha.

During this time, Schilke, on behalf of Yamaha, applied for and was granted U.S. Patent 3,257,135 for his tunable bell design on September 8, 1970. He transferred it to Yamaha because he felt that only a company with the financial resources of Yamaha could defend it adequately. Yamaha had the design patented also in France, Japan, and Germany. Schilke was proven correct when shortly after the patent was received, Yamaha was forced to sue the F. E. Olds & Sons company over infringement of the design.

It was a time of merger and consolidation in the music industry which was reflected, if not initiated, by the Selmer purchase of Vincent Bach's brass manufacturing shop in 1962. Originally a small limited production facility similar to the current Schilke operation, Bach's production grew astoundingly (from under 3000 trumpets per year to over 16,000) after Selmer capitalized the Bach operation and moved the manufacturing from Mt Vernon, New York, to Elkhart, Indiana, where Selmer had purchased a Conn factory in which to manufacture Bach's designs. In a similar move, in 1971, King had purchased the small limited production trumpet shop of Elden Benge in Burbank, California, infused it with capital, set up production in a new facility in Anaheim, and production of Benge designs skyrocketed. Yamaha, it appears at least to me, hoped to bring Schilke horns to a much wider audience in the same fashion Selmer was succeeding with Bach. It would fit. The two companies worked together on a number of projects. Schilke began to "out source" valve casing manufacturing to Yamaha, resulting in the Yamalloy problem, the Schilke shop began to assemble some of the Yamaha pro line horns. In addition, Schilke started to market the M series, a number of horns which were made of primarily Yamaha components which Schilke could assemble and sell for a lower price than the Schilke custom trumpets. The relationship between Yamaha and Schilke was not, however, always a harmonious one and terminated at Mr. Schilke's death.

During Mr. Schilke's life, the company was at the forefront of innovation in brass design with Mr. Schilke bravely tackling problems and ideas that most would not.

In 1980, Schilke's health began to decline and he moved to Arizona for parts of each year. After a five week trip to Japan in late 1981, he stayed in Arizona until his death, of kidney failure, on September 5, 1982 , at the age of 72 years.

Though not involved at the time of his father's death, Renold E. Schilke, who had previously been in the family business for many years, assumed the role of president of the company. Since that time, the S series horns were introduced and the company moved its shop from downtown Chicago to their current location in Melrose Park , originally built as a MacGregor Golf research and testing facility.

Prior to Renold O. Schilke's retirement and death, his designs were preserved through scale drawings and the retention of all the prototypes thus providing a means of producing new tools should any of the existing tooling be damaged or destroyed. The primary emphasis of the company since then, at least in my opinion, has been to eliminate some of the more obscure Catalog and focus on maintaining the extremely high manufacturing standards established previously. This has been done successfully and, unlike with Bach and Benge, where the horns made during the earlier periods are more highly sought after than current production, nearly all agree that the quality and playability of Schilke instruments remained unchanged through both generations of Schilke family managment.

On October 31, 2002 , a new era began at Schilke Musical Catalog, Inc., as the remaining members of the Schilke family sold the company to Andrew Naumann, a baroque trumpet maker and a member of the design team of the Edwards Division of the Getzen Company.

The new owners of the Schilke Co. (2003) are Andrew Naumann, Julie Naumann from the Naumann Musical Instruments

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