

British sound and tradition backed by German technology

by Niki Bland

The demise of Besson Musical Instruments Ltd. has spawned another manufacturer purporting linkage to the pedigree of the instrument range once manufactured in Britain by the Company

Make no mistake, the bid to win the lion's share of the brass instrumental market is becoming fiercely competitive and, for the consumer, a confusing affair. In all likelihood, financial blood will be spilt in this important, albeit diminished niche business, in which competitive forces have constantly eroded margins. The stakes are becoming ever higher, not only for the companies themselves, but also for those iconic individuals and brands that become attached to them.

After Besson went into administration, consumers learned that Buffet Crampon SAS had brought the Company's market leading brand and certain of its assets. What was not commonly appreciated was that the Company responsible for The Music Group's manufacturing operation, Schreiber Keilwerth, remained within the Music Group fold, the main shareholders of which are Rutland Partners LLP, which sold the Besson brand to Buffet Crampon in 2006. It was commonly assumed that Buffet Crampon would continue using Schreiber Keilwerth's manufacturing base to sustain part, or all of the production of its new Besson brand. Not so! Although Buffet Crampon has contracted Schreiber Keilwerth to make some brass instruments, no long-term contract has been signed for brass instrument production. Schreiber Keilwerth continues to manufacture French-system clarinets and oboes for the world market leader in that field, Buffet Crampon, and Buffet has sourced alternative production capability for its Besson brand.

This development presumably forced Schreiber Keilwerth to exercise its corporate mind about how to utilise its brass instrument production capacity. The solution was obvious and the transition from manufacturing components for the Besson branded instruments of over a year ago to becoming a fully-fledged manufacturer of its own brass line was but a hop, skip and a jump away. It already possessed all the requisite tooling, experience, production capability, craftsmen, financial strength and marketing expertise to produce a pukka range of background brass instruments with the traditional and, as the Company's

brochure claims, legendary British sound.

The Schreiber Company was founded in 1946 and has two factories in Germany, one in Nauheim and a state-of-the-art one in Markneukirchen, Vogtland – both regions enjoying a long tradition of musical instrument making. The Company also has a similarly long tradition of making woodwind instruments including bassoons, clarinets, oboes and flutes, and is one of the leading makers of German clarinets with a worldwide reputation for its bassoons. Schreiber has always perfectly combined traditional craftsmanship with precision manufacturing methods to guarantee the high quality standard of its clarinets, bassoons and, in 2005, it introduced a new series of flutes. The company, Julius Keilwerth, was established in 1925 and the subsequent 80 years have seen it become one of the leading saxophone makers worldwide. Keilwerth merged with Schreiber in 1996 and the passion of musical instrument making that unites the two companies is now also reflected in the new company name: Schreiber & Keilwerth Musical Instruments. Effectively, this is one company with two strong brands, which has pinned its success in wind instrument manufacture on high levels of quality control combined with traditional craftsmanship, dedication and innovative production processes. Now launching its York range of brass instruments under the slogan 'Brass at its Best' and employing additional sales messages like 'The heart of the brass band sound', perhaps the most important aspect of the new York range is Schreiber Keilwerth's blanket claim (which it attributes to all its brands) that it combines innovative production processes with the dimensionally correct tooling to influence the characteristic sound of its instruments. Literature for the Company's new brass range claims: 'All these qualities are contained in each York instrument and guarantee their traditional sound.' Whilst not stated, the implication is loud and



John Rogers (centre) with David Childs and Angelo Bearpark

clear – a new line of instruments is being produced on the same tooling previously used to manufacture components for the Besson range.

The York range was unveiled last Sunday evening in a swish restaurant in the Oper Frankfurt area. The sleek Frankfurt skyline, framed by the eatery's futuristic glass design, was the perfect backdrop for Schreiber's stable of gleaming new York background brass instruments before an audience of well over 50 dealers and media representatives, flown in from the length and breadth of Northern and Southern Europe at Schreiber Keilwerth's not inconsiderable expense.

The surprising aspect of this unexpected but established competitor in the brass instrument manufacturing market is the speed with which it seems to have mustered its proto-type background brass range, particularly since the range featured a raft of well-conceived modifications.

Although not articulated, Schreiber's decision to brand its new brass beasts 'York' is a nod in the direction of Boosey & Hawkes' lineage of brass instruments, which featured models bearing the same identity some decades ago.

With a polished presentation from the impressively extensive Schreiber Keilwerth team that augured well for the success of its venture, those at the sharp end of selling the range to consumers were able to see, feel and hear the new York range in action before deciding whether to invest in stock. Helping them to authenticate the pedigree of the range's sound were performers and endorsees, British-born and Swiss-based Angelo Bearpark on cornet, Swiss-born Roland

Schreiber Keilwerth's factory in Markneukirchen



Froscher on euphonium and British-based but internationally renowned David Childs, also playing euphonium. Schreiber Keilwerth's signing of the latter as its brand bearer is yet another smart move and may be compared to a sports manufacturing giant signing a young Tiger Woods or David Beckham. David Childs is young, with lashings of charm, good looks, star quality and is undeniably in the ascendant. Because of musical prowess, David Childs' reputation would be fairly said to hang in some large part on the strength of any instrument that he chooses to play, so the chances of him agreeing to endorse a brand that he was in any way unhappy with are non-existent. Notwithstanding this assumption, I asked him what had prompted him to accept Schreiber Keilwerth's invitation to endorse its 'Preference' and 'Eminence' York euphoniums as opposed to another brand. "They were what I was used to playing," said the young superstar, adding, "I'd been looking for an instrument to replace my Prestige for the past year and the York versions have the same characteristics as my instrument, so I felt very at home with them." Other musicians not present that evening are Switzerland's Daniel Schadel (tuba), who has agreed to become an endorsee and Britain's Alan Morrison (cornet), who has been working with the Company. All-in-all, a very pleasant and talented bunch of musicians.

Joining this impressive cast on the sales front are John Rogers, formerly MD of Besson Musical Instruments Ltd., and Alan Hughes, who headed export sales for the old Besson Company, plus a large pan European sales team.

The York product range comprises two model types – the Preference and the Eminence. The Eminence Cornet has a large bore and its Preference counterpart comes in two varieties - large bore as well as a medium bore option, for a more focused, full sound. There are also Preference and Eminence euphoniums,

whilst all other instruments – flugel horn, tenor horn, baritone and tuba – are Preference models. All models are offered in lacquer and silver plate options.

Features of the new designs include refinements to the mouth-pipe ferrule, the brace, valve bottom caps fitted with an internal screw thread, valve top caps, finger hooks, button tops, water keys, connecting rings, valve casings and slides.

More specifically, the Preference Cornet has a first and third valve slide trigger plus a rose brass bell, whilst its Eminence version has a main tuning slide trigger, other gold plated triggers, valve caps and touch piece. The Preference Flugel Horn has a third valve trigger and the Preference Tenor Horn presents perhaps one of the biggest milestones in the latter day development of brass instruments – the York trigger system – a trigger on the main tuning slide to assist in the accuracy of intonation throughout the entire range. Next, we move to the York Preference Baritone, offered in three and four valve options. The four-valve Preference model is said to have improved intonation in the lower register, whilst the diameter of the bell reportedly guarantees an optimum sound projection and a wide dynamic range. York's Eminence and Preference euphoniums have been developed with 'the finest musicians in the world, with the highest expectations,' and Schreiber claims that they possess improved intonation in the lower register. Finally, the Preference EEb and BBb tubas feature an optimised lead-pipe position and, again, Schreiber Keilwerth claims that both have improved intonation in the lower register. The York range is competitively priced from £1,304.75 for a Preference Cornet to £5,687.32 for a Preference Tuba and the general consensus of those attending was that the York prototypes on show were imbued with a traditional and superior build quality and sound. Asked if he would stock the range, Ronnie Tennant, who has run the successful Band Supplies (Glasgow)

instrument outlet for more than two decades and knows quality when he espies it, muttered his characteristically concise "Aye."

Aside from the all-important quality of the York range, Schreiber Keilwerth's polished presentation to the convivial gathering in Frankfurt on Sunday had a sincere homespun humanity about it. Despite the obvious German efficiency and engineering quality that underpins the range, the Company's top management paid tribute several times to the employees responsible for crafting the instruments.

The launch of the York range against the backdrop of one of Europe's two premier financial centres may well turn out to have prophetic overtones because, in the final analysis, any company attempting to conquer the brass instrument manufacture market needs deep pockets. It is also true that the company able to carry prototype quality forward on to a production line will have a better chance of winning market share. Although Schreiber Keilwerth still has to win the minds and hearts of dealers and consumers on the issue of quality, a historical perspective of the Company suggests that when it enjoys complete control of an instrument production line from start to finish, it does not struggle to achieve tip-top quality.

In Audi's marketing-speak, early signs are that Schreiber Keilwerth will deliver instruments with a traditional British sound and build backed by the characteristic German 'vorsprung durch technik' – translated literally, a leap forward through technology. The other positive is that York instruments are in production as we speak and are being launched to the American market this week. They will also be displayed at the Norwegian Brass Band Championships in Bergen, Norway, in early February, the Frankfurt Music Fair in Germany in March, the European Brass Band Championships at Symphony Hall, Birmingham in May, and at the Shanghai Music Fair in October.