

THE FOX & THE HORN

It all began with a Fox in a chicken coop. The result was not a cacophony of squawking, however, but the strains of beautiful music from fine instruments revered around the world.

by Julianne Will
Photography by Rob Borel

One doesn't think of tiny South Whitley as a powerhouse in the international orchestral community. But it was in a former chicken coop in this small town some 20 miles west of Fort Wayne that Hugo Fox founded Fox Products, makers of bassoons, oboes, contrabassoons and English horns used in symphony orchestras worldwide.

Fox was principal bassoonist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1922 to 1949. That final year, he returned to his hometown and founded Fox Products, a venture that combined his love of music and his curiosity about how things worked.

"He always had an interest in building things ... He wired many of the houses in South Whitley," says Fox's son, Alan, who gave up his chemical engineering career in 1960 to take over the business when the elder Fox fell ill. Hugo Fox died in 1969, but his legacy has gained world prominence under the guidance of his son.

Hugo Fox's vision required a unique blend of craftsmen. Professional musicians were hired to test and tune the instruments; current and former members of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic bring their expertise to bear on the quality of the sound.

Other experts were needed to manipulate the five types of aged maples from which the pieces emerge onsite. "We start with a block of wood and end up with a finished instrument," says Jim Jeffries, who has worked in production at Fox Products for 17 years.

As the scale of Fox Products' operations has swelled, so, too, has its standing in the industry and its reputation among serious professionals.

"There are only 25 (bassoon and contrabassoon) makers in the world," Alan Fox says. "Our total volume is very close to the combined total of all the other makers."

It takes approximately three months to hand-build one bassoon. Fox



Alan Fox succeeded his father as head of the company.



Fox Products' annual production is close to the combined total of bassoon and contrabassoon makers worldwide.



Choice hardwoods are the beginnings of each instrument.



Skilled craftsmen construct the instruments.

Products' annual production is around 2,000 including its Renard line used in universities, far greater than the four made by Benson Bell in Canada or the 50-60 built by Heckel in Germany.

By no means is quality sacrificed in volume. Artistically, Heckel is considered the world standard. "We're the first company that's really given them a run for their money," Fox says. The sound and consistency of Fox bassoons have won over longtime international devotees of the European maker.

"We're a major player in the world's orchestras," Fox says.

Professional aficionados include the principle chairs of symphony orchestras in Minnesota, Detroit, San Francisco and Salt Lake City, as well as bassoonists in the National Symphony Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Fox bassoons are also the instrument of choice for musicians holding four chairs in Goya, Japan; four chairs in the Russian National Orchestra; a principle chair in Bergen, Norway; a chair in Copenhagen, the world's oldest symphony orchestra; a

chair in Parma, Italy; and others around the globe.

South Whitley has hosted many international visitors. They come from Sweden, Portugal, Iceland, Germany and other far points to try new models or to seek repairs and fine tuning of their Fox instruments. It is an investment: Professional Fox bassoons range in price from \$14,500 to \$19,000 each.

The business has long since outgrown the chicken coop, surviving a major fire in 1974. Today, the modern facility, which employs more than 100, is overseen by Alan Fox as well as his daughter and son-in-law, Karen and Larry Festa. Both Karen and Larry are attorneys and serve on the board; Karen also is a musician, following a call first sounded by her grandfather.

The musical industry is in substantial turmoil right now. "I'm not sure who the survivor will be," Alan Fox says. Fox clearly has set the bar high; the enclave of artists and craftsmen in tiny South Whitley has made a lot of noise in the highly selective world of professional musicians around the globe. ■