

OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

Yanagisawa WO 10: Redefining Craftsmanship

BY PAUL HAAR

One of my favorite aspects of running TheSaxophonist.org magazine is testing equipment. I love learning about all the latest advancements in technology and offerings for the saxophone. Though Yanagisawa saxophones are not exactly new, I imagine there are a lot of people reading this article who have never played one or even know someone who has. With the flood of Mark VI clones on the market, it is rare to find something different. Often overshadowed by the larger and ubiquitous Yamaha brand, Yanagisawa has remained steadfast in its mission of producing quality professional saxophones.

Background

Started by Tokutaro Yanagisawa, the Yanagisawa Company began as a repair shop in 1894. To this day, it is recognized as being one of the finest shops for instrument repair. It wasn't until 1951 that the company made its first saxophone prototype. Nearly 70 years later, the company is only making professional saxophones. There are no student models, clarinets, or other instruments. All saxophones are handmade at the home factory in Toyko, Japan, and their production is not driven by corporate quotas but rather by quality control. They produce only as many instruments as they can make to their high standards.





As I was exploring the company's history, I came across this comment made by current CEO Nobushige Yanagisawa. I think it sums up the type of product they produce:

Our saxophones began to approach professionally acceptable levels of quality around 20 years back. However, we have yet to produce a line of saxophones that can completely satisfy our expectations. Our experience has been one of enduring the hardships involved in cultivating a quality product. Musical instrument-making is not about producing a given form or shape but more about producing a certain sound from that form or shape. It is this creation of a desired sound or voice that cultivates the musical instrument in turn. Although that may sound irrational, I am convinced it is true.

In a marketplace that seems to excel on how “perfect” their products are, it was refreshing to read how critical this company is with regard to their instruments.

Construction

Yanagisawa saxophones are simply the cleanest and most precisely engineered saxophones I have ever tested. The weight of the instruments is substantial but not overly heavy. Key work is precise, and the action is fluid. Upon close inspection, you will not find one bubble in the plating/lacquer, no overspray, nor excess glue. Even the resonators are perfectly centered to the tone holes.

As someone with larger hands, I was amazed at how well the key work fit my hands. Both the left-hand palms keys and the right-hand side keys felt amazing.

There is a reinforced plate below the palm key arms to handle the increased torque associated with their use. Speaking of motion, there is little wasted motion while moving from the main stack to the palm keys. The placement of the high E key is near perfect, as is the design of the key itself. The angles of the low Eb-C keys are excellent and flow seamlessly with the finger placement of the right hand. The low B to C# linkage allows for a smooth transition between the notes as well as movement to low Bb. I am still a fan of the Buffet split key system but would place the Yanagisawa linkage in a close second.

It is evident that no detail has been overlooked with these instruments. Both the thumb rest and thumb hook are constructed of brass to aid in the resonance of the instrument. The right-hand thumb hook is constructed with small bumps that limit contact with the main tube, ensuring more resonance. Even the strap ring has been designed with a purpose. It is thicker than others on the market and appears to be made of nickel-silver for added strength and durability.

The trademark double bracing on the low C and B key is present on the WO10. However, there is a new adjustable vibration-damping bar that not only stabilizes the right-hand F# key, it also eliminates sympathetic vibrations. Something I found refreshingly different was the design of the front forked F key. I not only liked the swan-shaped ergonomic design of the key, but also the fact that it can be independently adjusted to allow for the ideal operation.

THE SOUND

I know people love to have clear definitions and that when you fail to provide them it hurts your argument. I have heard some say that the sound of the Yanagisawa is somewhere between a Yamaha and a Selmer. I could see where someone might interpret it that way. These saxophones have a response that is similar to the Yamaha instruments, but the tone color is uniquely Yanagisawa. For me, the alto saxophone and soprano saxophones gave me everything that I have been looking for in a saxophone.

I found them to have a quick response and a colorful tone that was both centered and flexible. The sound was naturally larger and warmer than my Mark VI, but with a center.

Yanagisawa produces a variety of professional models including those with and without full ribbing (added brace plates found on modern saxophones), and in a variety of alloys. My test model was the WO10, which is fully ribbed and in lacquered brass. I had the opportunity to play other models, including bronze and silver variations, during a visit to the Conn-Selmer factory this past October. I have to say that I was able to move from one model to the next without losing the character, response, and tone color that identified them as Yanagisawa saxophones. The various alloys produced different colors but didn't dramatically affect the response or resistance.

In fact, I was able to swap necks from other models and experience no change of pitch or response. I enjoyed the warmth and color of the lacquered model WO10, but I also liked the same model when paired with a silver neck. This consistency of product allows the player to own different necks without sacrificing pitch, response, and feel. It was quite impressive to experience the consistency of these fine instruments.

I had the opportunity to play soprano, alto, and tenor versions of the WO10 and found them remarkably consistent between the voices.

Long recognized for making excellent sopranos, I am happy to report that they have not only maintained their high standard but have taken it to another level with the WO10. I was able to play the WO10 against a 901 model and felt the response and ease between the registers was cleaner and more brilliant in the WO10. The WO10 was the first soprano that I have played where I actually enjoyed the curved neck better than the straight. Both necks were equally responsive and in tune, offering slight changes in tone color.

The WO10 was a wonderful experience for me. It was responsive, producing a rich, expressive tone. Coming from a Mark VI, the WO10 was a bigger sound, yet still maintained a nice center that I could manipulate at will. The alto, in particular, felt like an extension of my body.

The tenor was a completely different experience. The first thing that I noticed was the heft of the tenor. It is a substantial instrument and much heavier than my beloved Esther (Mark VI). Like the soprano and alto models, the WO10 tenor was clear and responsive. Its tone was rich and centered. Coming from one of the finest examples of an early Mark VI, WO10 Yanagisawa is a completely different experience. Playing the two side by side brought about an awareness of how important it is to judge an instrument on its own merits and not in comparison to another. Too often we compare saxophones, especially tenors, to the classic Mark VI.

This instrument is nothing like a Mark VI and it's not designed to be. It has its own sound and is a truly a fine instrument.

CONCLUSION

The Yanagisawa WO10 saxophones are amazing. I found all of the models to perform with character, brilliance, and quality. Particular praise is being reserved for the soprano and alto models. The quality of construction is unlike anything I have seen on the market today, and the ergonomics made my acclimation to the instrument seamless. They produce beautifully rich tones that have flexibility and color. Pitch stability is the best I have experience without forcing the player into a singular sound. One point I would like to mention is that Yanagisawa has managed to think of everything with regard to how this instrument plays. I tried a variety of aftermarket products such as heavy mass screws and thumb hooks on these instruments and nothing seemed to improve the saxophone's performance. I kept coming back to what was original to the instrument.

The final point that makes these saxophones attractive is the price. The soprano and tenor sell around \$4,900, the alto for about \$4,500. This places the Yanagisawa in the same category as the Yamaha 875 EX and vastly cheaper than the Series II and III saxophones from Selmer.

Throughout this playtest I had one nagging question, "Why aren't more people playing these saxophones?" I asked this question of a renowned shop owner and he said, "Because their heroes/teachers don't play them." I know that influence plays a big part in a person's decision, but I hate to think that an instrument of this quality and craftsmanship is at the mercy of something so unscientific. These saxophones are worthy of inclusion with the most storied names in the field. Nevertheless, it is a reality and perhaps the only variable Yanagisawa has yet to master as they seem to have addressed everything else._PH