

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

# Buying American

I have been renting out band and orchestra instruments for the past eight years, and like everyone else with a rental pool, I have been looking for the best, sturdiest, and least expensive instruments, with an emphasis on “least expensive.” It has never been particularly important to me where the instruments are made.

At least, that’s how I felt until I toured the Conn-Selmer factory in Elkhart, Indiana. I went to Elkhart to attend the Disney Summit sponsored by Conn-Selmer. The summit is two-and-a-half days of classes, factory tours, excellent meals and, of course, networking with colleagues.

As we walked into the Conn-Selmer factory, awaiting me was a true “Aha!” moment — one that would change the way I looked at my business.

We started the factory tour with the flutes, and the first thing that struck me was that most of the flute builders are women. They construct each part of the flute painstakingly, assembling them in what looked like 20 or 30 steps. From forming the body, to cutting the holes and smoothing the metal, making the mouthpiece parts and soldering them all together, the flute makers were taking such loving care to be sure the flutes were perfect.

I couldn’t help thinking: This is America and this is what we used to do — make things. And here are hard-working Americans still building great instruments. It’s a beautiful thing. Of course, the process has changed over time. Our guide explained that machines, especially those used in jewelry making, are streamlining the process somewhat and that helps to cut time and labor costs, in addition to making the parts stronger.

Then it was time to see clarinets being built. From the long block of wood that was fashioned into the body, to assembling the keys, the process was as painstaking and thorough as it was with the flutes.

Next we walked to the building where Bach trumpets and trombones were being made. They even let me bend part of the tubing on one of the trumpets. We were also invited to work on one of the trombones.

Although there wasn’t time to have much conversation with the instrument makers, each one described, with pride and in detail, what instrument part they were making and how long they had been working at Conn-Selmer. Most had been there 20 or more years and many were second- or third-generation instrument makers. You look at an instrument differently when you have met the people who made it. At least I do.

## GOING AMERICAN

I have to spend money on instruments anyway. Why not know where that money is going? Why not keep that money here supporting American workers? This is not a political statement. This is about a company that is making an excellent product, trying to do right for our industry and at the same time employing and nurturing American workers. I believe I have to support that effort.

Yes, I know: The instruments are a little more expensive. But you know what? I am going to spend the extra money. I have found that my customers are responding in a very positive way, especially when I tell them what I saw in Elkhart.

From now on, whenever I can, I’m buying American. Make that trip to Elkhart to and decide for yourself. **MI**

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