

# HANDMADE IN GERMANY

By David Payne

**C**radled in a narrow, mountain valley along the Czech border, the Saxony town of Klingenthal has produced harmonicas longer than any place on earth. It is not only the home of C.A. Seydel Soehne, the world's oldest harmonica company (founded in 1847), but boasts a local tradition of musical expression that goes back for centuries.

As early as the 1600s, Klingenthal and the surrounding area was known not only for the wealth extracted from its silver mines, but as a center for building violins and other musical instruments and a place where budding luthiers gathered to be trained by renowned masters of the art. Among Saxony's numerous musical contributions are its revolutionary composers, such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Richard Wagner. From the early 19th century, harmonicas have played a major role in Saxony's legacy of sound, which continues today. Those who play Seydel harmonicas, still handmade in Klingenthal, reflect back to the origins of modern harmonica blues with James Cotton, to play-



*Collection of historical coverplates.*

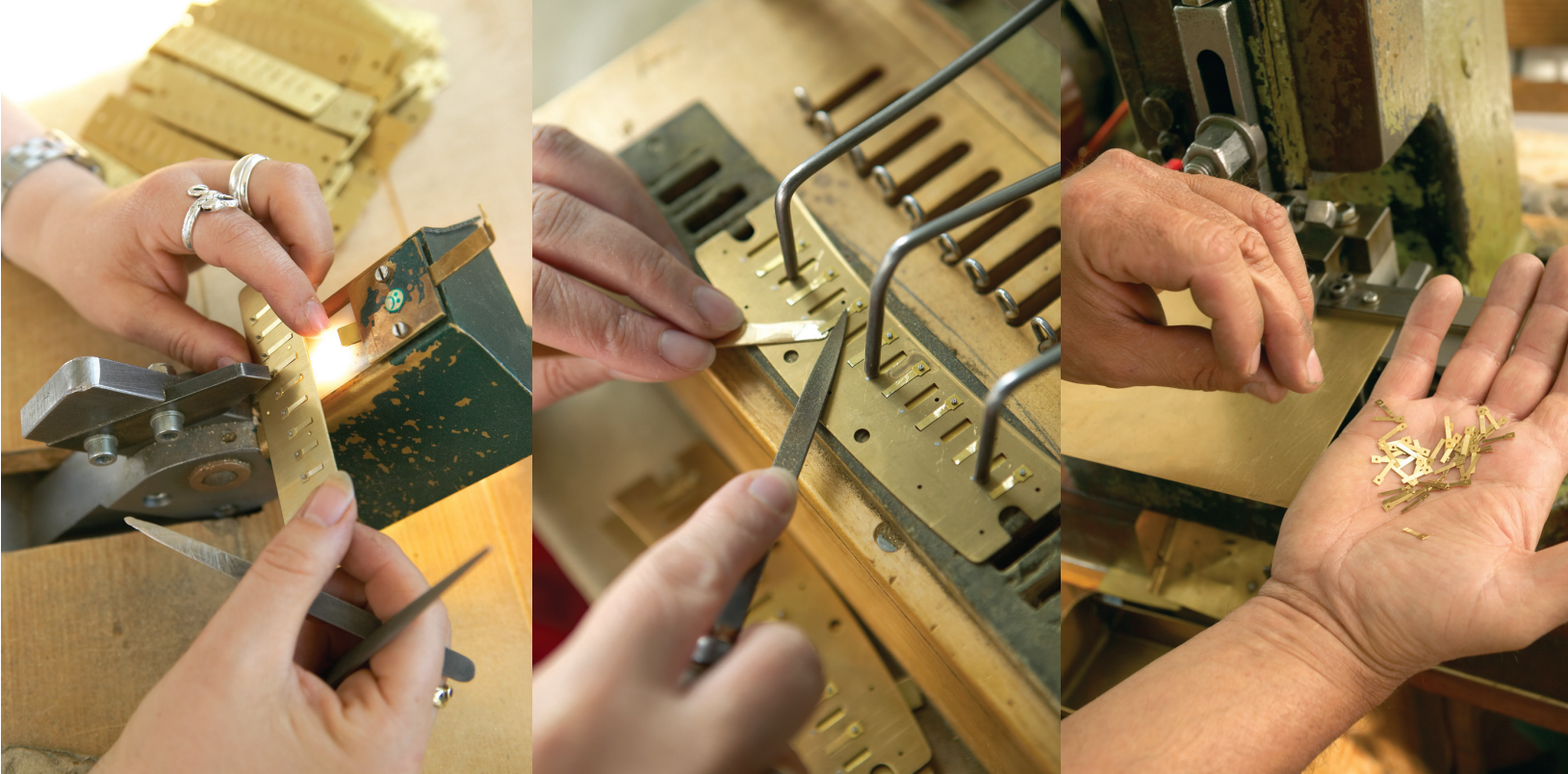
ers who later revolutionized the instrument, such as Howard Levy and Charlie Musselwhite and look to the future with promising, young virtuosos like L.D. Miller. Seydel has led the way to a new generation of harmonica innovation with the first mass-produced harmonicas with stainless-steel reeds, the 1847 diatonic line and the Saxony chro-

matic, all cutting edge instruments with the deepest of roots.

In the 1600s, the Seydels were a mining family, but over the next two centuries, the local ore reserves were exhausted. Just as the ore ran out, however, harmonicas made their way to Klingenthal, which rapidly became one of the first centers of harmonica production. Early in the harmonica's history, brothers Johann Christian and Christian August Seydel applied the work ethic the family had honed from generations of toiling in the bowels of the earth to producing this new instrument.

Johann Christian Seydel founded the J.C. Seydel company in 1838 and the two brothers worked together for several years, but C.A. Seydel left to found his own company on Oct. 27, 1847. The J.C. Seydel company stayed in business until World War II, while C.A. Seydel's firm still makes handmade instruments today.

Even early on, the emphasis was on craftsmanship. While other firms had switched to more mechanized means of production in the second half of the 19th century, C.A. Seydel



*photos courtesy of C.A. Seydel*

continued to operate the company with old-school craftsmanship and continued to work on the line for the rest of his life. While C.A. Seydel was content with producing smaller quantities for distribution by local suppliers, his sons, Richard Seydel Sr. and Moritz Seydel, saw considerable promise outside of Germany. After C.A. Seydel's death in 1882, the sons soon began establishing a share of the global market.

A company history, published in a 1937 edition of the *Klingenthal* newspaper, and reprinted in the Dec. 2009 issue of *Trumpet Call* magazine, says workers (in 1937) were still telling "stories about what a great moment it was when they prepared the first case of harmonicas to be sent to America."

Meeting that demand, however, would require more than enthusiasm—Seydel needed more modern production techniques. By the 1890s, the company developed cutting-edge machines to increase production and make it more efficient. Remaining true to the founder's creed, they designed their machinery to enhance, not replace, hand-made German craftsmanship.

But the advances of the 1890s weren't just in production technology. Seydel was also developing a revolution in tone with new designs. In 1898, Richard Seydel Sr.'s legendary Bandmaster was released. Funnel-shaped covers and an open back and sides created a new sound that became the company's flagship for the next several decades.

By the 1890s, Seydel harmonicas were sold on every inhabited continent, but the first World War put an end to that with the British blockade that stopped virtually all German merchant shipping.

Seydel had to rebuild its global outreach from scratch after the war ended in 1918, but the company quickly took advantage of the global harmonica boom in the 1920s. Seydel developed an even closer relationship (which began in the 1890s) with Frank Albert of the Albert's Music Store chain in Australia after the war. In 1924, Albert added the soon-iconic, Seydel-made Boomerang harmonica to his successful "Boomerang" line of music products. Thanks to the quality of the instruments and Albert's keen marketing skills, the Boomerang

harmonica was a resounding success for both companies. There were many versions of the Boomerang (Albert sent numerous design sketches to Germany for production) from the well-known boomerang-shaped model to standard-looking diatonics to double-reed instruments similar to the Bandmaster, only these featured boomerang-shaped side vents. There was even a Boomerang chromatic.

The new designs of the 1920s, however, were anything but limited to Australia. Besides numerous offerings for more serious players, there were a number of designs to attract those who had never played a harmonica before (especially children). Among those was the USA Coin Harp, which not only kept one's coins from jingling around in the pocket, but contained a "game of patience" to pass time away. Another noteworthy 1920s model was the Glee Club Harp, which was a harmonica built into the shape of a pistol (the harmonica was built into the barrel) and had a rest for an itchy trigger finger. Not only could children calm a stampeding herd of imaginary cattle with the harmoni-



ca, they could also use it to fight off bands of imaginary cattle rustlers.

When the Great Depression was in full swing during the early 1930s, sales in Australia helped keep the company afloat, but times were anything but easy. Seydel, like other manufacturers, struggled to survive. It merged with other Klingenthal producers, Boehm and Rauner, but that arrangement was dissolved in 1933. By 1939 the draft left two women, Margarete Seydel and Hedwig Bischoffberger, in charge of the company. They handled the company well and Seydel continued to manufacture harmonicas during the war, but were powerless to thwart the disastrous influence politics would again play on the company.

Seydel's 100th anniversary was in 1947, but there was little to celebrate. Klingenthal just happened to be in the Soviet zone of the post-war divided Germany. That fact would shape the company's next 40 years.

In 1946, Seydel was one of the first East German manufacturers to be nationalized. Under Russian occupation, ownership of the company was stripped from the families and taken over by the government. The diversification once embraced by the family was cast aside by the new owners. Only a few models were produced, but in mind-boggling quantities (actually sold by weight, not individual units) in the former Soviet-bloc countries and the Soviet Union itself, one exception being Boomerang models, which were produced for Australia until Albert's death in 1962. By 1950, state harmonica production was concentrated in the Seydel factory (accordions were made there also), now named VEB Vereinigte Mundharmonikawerke (VERMONA).

After the collapse of European communism and German reunification in the early 1990s, ownership was returned to the family, but

the company was in poor shape for prospering. It hadn't participated in a free-market system for decades and had none of the trading connections

## “WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO MAKE THE BEST HARMONICA ON EARTH?”

a company needs to survive, nor did it have marketing experience. Under communism, it merely supplied orders in quantities demanded by the state, and did not market its products directly to consumers. To make matters worse, Western companies had cornered the global market, from which Seydel had been absent since the late 1930s.

But factory manager Karl Pucholt realized the company's only hope lay in niche products other firms weren't supplying. He developed a new plastic comb, ergonomic coverplates and started what is today one of Seydel's signature products: low-octave harmonicas. Creativity wasn't enough. By the fall of 2004, what employees remained hadn't been paid in months. Nor was that degree of dedication enough to carry the company forever. In November of 2004, the company became insolvent and the world's oldest harmonica company was set to pass into the annals of history.

At literally the last minute—the kind of dramatic, unlikely reversal one typically only sees in the movies—music enthusiasts from Niama Media paid the company a visit. They were looking for a harmonica to include with a planned compact-disc offering. That search eas-

ily could have led them elsewhere, but it didn't and they liked what they found. The owners of Niama Media are two lifelong friends and business partners with a vast and successful business history, honed through owning and developing many diverse companies. They also share a love of music. They were quite impressed with the dedication of the employees and saw a future for the company and with their investment, the company was reborn. For them it was much more than a business investment, and their intention has been to provide all the financial nurturing, support and the time to allow Seydel to grow back organically from its deep roots.

“They saw a great deal of promise,” said Rupert Oysler, president of Seydel USA. “But there was also national pride involved. They weren't about to let the last German-owned harmonica firm go under.” They found an ideal chairman for the company with management expert Lars Seifert, an energetic man, former competitive skier and a young native of Klingenthal.

“They all sat down,” Oysler said “and the investors asked ‘what do we need to do to make the best harmonica on earth?’ Karl (Pucholt) said ‘we make it with stainless steel reeds.’ They replied ‘OK, then. We'll do that.’ That's how the 1847 was born.”

The idea for a stainless-steel reed harmonica had long been one in a plethora of ideas floating around in Pucholt's brain. Ask anyone at Seydel to describe Pucholt and the word “genius” is sure to pop up. Probably more than once.

“He is this unbelievable genius,” Oysler said. “When I first met him, I'd ask ‘hey have you done this,’ or ‘have you done that.’ Then, he'd root around in a drawer and pull out the very things I was asking about. I don't care what it was, whatever I asked about, he'd already done it.”



*Rupert Oysler (left), Karl Pucholt, Arnd Pucholt, Dr. Bertram Becher, Lars Seifert, Klaus Kretzschmar and James Dolan.*

When Pucholt started working at the Seydel factory – then known as VEB Vermona – in 1960, the factory was also producing accordions, many of which had steel reeds. For Pucholt, harmonicas were a logical progression for that idea.

But there was a reason harmonicas weren't being made of steel at the time, Oysler said. "When you take those steel reeds from accordions and start thinking about putting them into harmonicas, you run into all these problems. There are a lot of good reasons nobody was doing it. First, steel accordion reeds are big and you have to find a way to apply that to a tiny harmonica and then there's these problems with attaching these reeds to the reedplate and nobody blows into accordions, so they don't have these issues with moisture that you have in harmonicas, so you have to do all this with a steel that is actually stainless," he said.

As Pucholt worked out those problems to make a viable reedplate, the company needed a harmonica to put them on for its 160th anniversary in 2007. As they created a model that looked forward to a revolutionary future in steel reeds, Seydel officials made a conscious decision to merge revolutionary harmonica design with age-old aesthetics—giving it a sealed wood

comb and coverplates with elegant curves and an open back, a new look to capture the essence and spirit of Richard Seydel Sr.'s Bandmaster and other earlier models. It was followed by an 1847 in miniature, the Big Six, a short-slot, six-hole harmonica with stainless steel reeds.

The next step forged in steel was to be the 1847 Silver, which debuted last year. Only this time, they would make a harmonica that was dishwasher safe. "For all these years," Oysler said, "harmonica makers have been telling people 'never put harmonicas in water.' They were determined to make one that could not only be soaked in water, but could actually survive a dishwasher." Virtually everything had to be changed from traditional construction to make that possible. Non-corrosive rivets were used. Brass reedplates were replaced by German Silver.

The brass reedplate screws had to go as well, but that wasn't so easy. The company needed a stainless steel, self-tapping reedplate screw, but "no such screw existed," Oysler said. "They actually had to partner with a screw manufacturer to design a new screw to make that dishwasher safe. That screw situation held the 1847 Silver project up for months – that says a lot to me

about the dedication at Seydel to do things right," he said.

Around the same time the Silver debuted, Seydel launched its Harp Configurator, which allowed customers to create their own harmonica tunings and have them custom-built at the Seydel factory. This year, it launched the 1847 Silver Plus, a stainless-steel reed harmonica with recessed reedplates and a plastic comb, and the Saxony, the world's first commercially-produced chromatic harmonica with stainless-steel reeds. Besides its stainless steel reeds, the Saxony boasts tight reed tolerances, a new windsaver valve designed to minimize sticking, as well as an aluminum comb, which is precision-machined using cutting edge techniques.

Seydel's is a story of innovation, perseverance and dedication that continues today with a blend of old-school craftsmanship and forward thinking. "We are the most innovative even today with our stainless reeds," Seifert said. "We still are a small manufacturer and we really are 'handmade in GERMANY.' We do not only write that on the box, we aim for highest quality and we listen to players in order to meet their needs as best as possible." 🎵

*This article was produced with the help of Rupert Oysler.*