

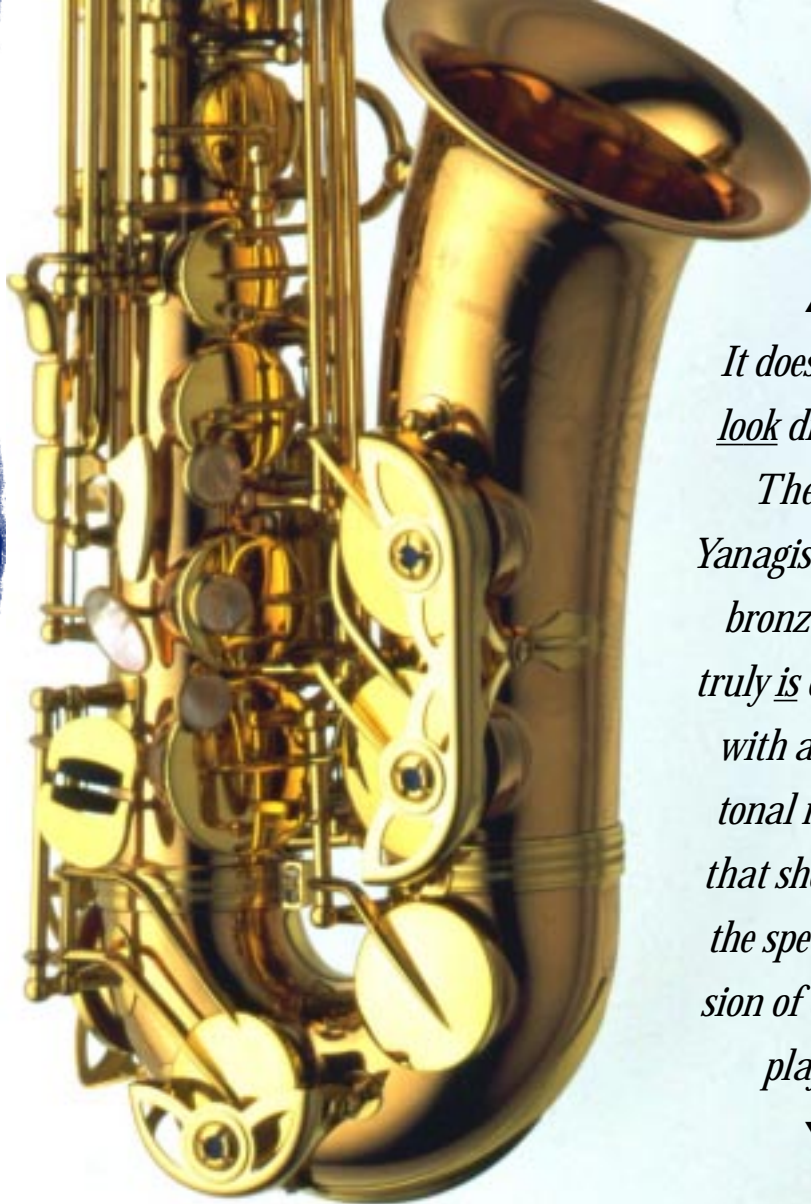
BRONZE AGE

Whether silver or brass, lacquered or plated, these new Yanagisawas sing

by Mel Martin

Mel Martin is a Yanagisawa clinician for Leblanc based in northern California. His recent activities have centered around touring and clinician work, as well as a newly formed version of his band, called *Bebop and Beyond 2000*, which features the talents of several top-name East Coast musicians. The group will be releasing a new recording in the year 2000. Mel will also be re-releasing two previous *Bebop and Beyond* recordings that were originally funded in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. He is currently working on a solo project with a group of Brazilian jazz musicians led by the legendary percussionist Helcio Millito. Mel is also working on two books, manages his own web site at www.melmartin.com and logs in a great amount of studio work and private teaching.

In January of 1999, I attended both the International Association of Jazz Educators (IAJE) and National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) conventions in the Los Angeles area, working in conjunction with G. Leblanc Corporation in displaying and demonstrating the new line of Yanagisawa saxophones.



▲
*It doesn't just
look different.*

*The new
Yanagisawa 992
bronze series
truly is different,
with a darker
tonal richness
that should stir
the special pas-
sion of classical
players.*

▼

Yanagisawa has been my personal choice for a number of years, as I was first drawn to the line by the fine curved soprano. I found that the soprano was so good that I opted to add a Yanagisawa tenor and alto and have also played the baritone on a number of occasions.

Currently, I play and endorse the Silver Series curved soprano, alto and tenor saxophones, so this was a good opportunity for me to try the newest models and accessories and work with other players as well. Yanagisawa has always produced a versatile, mechanically sound and great-playing line of saxophones. With the advent of the 901 and 991 series and the bronze 992 series, in addition to the solid silver 9930 line, Yanagisawa has become the unparalleled leader in the world of saxophone manufacturing, offering a wider selection of options than any other maker.

The 901 series, which replaces the 900 series, is a high-quality line designed for students and professionals alike. These horns play with a more focused and compact sound and the same mechanical

perfection of the 991 series. They are available in both clear-lacquered and silver-plated finishes. The silver plating adds a certain brightness to the sound, while the clear lacquer maintains the ring of pure brass.

The 991 series, which replaces the 990 models, is available in clear- and black-lacquered finishes, both with a broad, warm tone quality. Each finish has its own particular sound qualities. The black-lacquered horns seem to have a somewhat darker timbre to the sound while, again, the clear-lacquered horns have more ring.

The flagship Silver Series horns have an incredible array of tonal possibilities and a wide dynamic range.

While demonstrating different models to an assortment of players with varying approaches, I found that each individual would gravitate toward a particular concept. Players who play with a bright sound, typical for rock music, tended to gravitate toward the dark-lacquered horns, which offer a welcome tonal balance to their setups and approach. Some

players felt most comfortable on the lacquered brass models, which are closest to what many players are accustomed to. Others found that the extended tonal characteristics and dynamic range of the Silver Series horns were just what they were looking for and could not be found in any other brand of saxophone.

The newest bronze 992 models are available in soprano, alto, tenor and baritone models. Although I have not yet had an opportunity to try production models, I did try a prototype at the factory and found it to be a darker and richer variation on the line. Bronze contains more copper than yellow brass does, hence the darker coloration to the instrument finish. It has been known for many years that copper is a valued addition to the composition of the metal in any horn, as it adds a richness of tonal color not found in regular brass. Classical players tend to revere such instruments, and I am certain they will find these horns of interest.

The new 901 and 991 series offer some subtle and interesting improvements over the models they have replaced. While the older lines are outstanding and by no means obsolete, Yanagisawa has taken great instruments and made them even better.

For instance, the newly improved thumb rest and thumb hook can be purchased as a separate item and do much to improve the playability of the instruments. In 1998 I received the thumb kit and retrofitted them to my horns, and

there was a noticeable improvement. The thumb rest and hook are made with gold-plated brass, which means that there is no plastic pressing against the horn.

The hook is designed to rest on a four-point floating platform, which helps the horn vibrate in the all-important lower thumb region on the back wall of the instrument. I could literally feel the rests themselves vibrating fully. They also improve the articulation of the instruments, both tongued and legato. Notes seem to jump out with more ease and roundness. These kits are also available from Yanagisawa for the other major brands of saxophones.

Other design changes include repositioning of the tone holes, which has made for more accurate intonation and improved keystroke. There are some subtle differences in the internal taper as well, which has refined the resonance and tonal color and is especially noticeable on the more focused sound in the tenors.

The list of players switching to Yanagisawa has been rapidly expanding. The sopranos have always been quite popular, but recently, a number of prominent alto saxophonists have switched.

These include Antonio Hart, Greg Osby, Mark Gross

and Steve Slagle. Kenny Garrett currently plays the Yanagisawa Eb soprano and has a Silver Series alto. On tenor, Plas Johnson, Antoine Roney and Gary Thomas have been Yanagisawa artists for some time. Roney plays the Silver Series tenor and soprano, while Slagle plays the gold-plated brass models. Hart and Gross have also gotten into the Silver Series line, with Hart preferring the bronze neckpipe.

Greg Osby has been using the bronze model, and he told me that he felt that the sound of the bronze 992 is "wide and full-bodied," which is ultimately what he was looking for. He also feels that the engineering of Yanagisawa saxophones is superb. At the NAMM show, Nelson Rangell was very impressed with a black-lacquered alto and Gary Bias from Earth, Wind and Fire was interested in the Silver Series alto. As more professionals are exposed to the line, I believe that more will come over.

Yanagisawa offers a number of important accessories that are currently available from G. Leblanc Corporation. Aside from the gold-plated thumb rest and hook kit, Yanagisawa is among the

foremost manufacturers of quality saxophone mouthpieces. They offer mouthpieces made from silver-plated brass and what is termed "Steel Ebonite," a hard-rubber formula. They are available for Eb soprano, Bb soprano, alto, tenor and baritone saxophones. Yanagisawa also makes a full set of high-quality ligatures with both gold and silver plating.

Most important, Yanagisawa is the only saxophone manufacturer to offer a wide variety of neck options for the alto, tenor and baritone. There are three lacquered-brass models, each with a separate and useful tonal balance. In addition,

there is the solid silver neck, which is standard with the Silver Series models. Finally, there is the gold-plated brass model. Dark in tonal color yet crisp and responsive, it produces a smooth, even tone perfect for creating the most subtle musical nuances. The 991 and 9930 sopranos come stocked with both straight and curved neckpipes.

With the Yanagisawas' growing popularity and the introduction of the new Yanagisawa lines, 1999 has been a very good year indeed for the world of music in general—and for saxophonists in particular. □



Mel Martin was first drawn to the Yanagisawa line by its legendary curved soprano (above). He now plays and endorses Silver Series soprano, alto and tenor.

The new 901 series (left) offers many evolutionary changes over the 900 series, which it replaces. Tone-hole placement, the internal taper and the design of thumb rest and thumb hook have all been refined.

