

Golden beauty

The harpist of the Saxon State Orchestra Dresden plays on an instrument produced by the US-American harp maker Lyon & Healy, the global market leader. This is a report on a visit to the Chicago factory.

By Carolin Wilms

On the CTA's elevated railway track, the green line heading towards Harlem drones and comes with a bloodcurdling screech to an end. At ground level, pick-up trucks with twin wheels and large vans rumble along North Ogden Avenue. Speech fades away unheard until the doors of Lyon & Healy close and the reception desk is reached by following thick red carpets with brass fringes. Warm light illuminates the tall scarlet walls of the brick building and the odor of wood fills the room.

Lyon & Healy can look back at a fairly long tradition. The 150th anniversary of the company will be celebrated this year and simultaneously 125 years of harp making will be commemorated. In 1864, the Boston businessmen George W. Lyon and Patrick J. Healy started a small shop with a stock of music in downtown Chicago.

The company quickly got a good reputation and shortly after they accepted European harps for repairs. Soon the business partners came to the conclusion that it was time to produce their own harps that were able to withstand the climate conditions of the North American continent. The sturdy wood of the forests close to the Great Lakes possesses an excellent quality not only of solidity but also for the sound of the instrument. The mechanical parts of the harp consisting of brass were optimized on the basis of the brothers Érard. In 1889, out came the "the finest harp the world has ever seen" stated Healy, who played the harp himself.

The harp factory of Lyon & Healy was expanded and is still successful today, now owned by a financial holding company.

The first production room of the world famous harps reminds the visitor of Cuban cigar manufactories. As in school's lecturing style, workbenches stand one after another, on which workers assemble some of the 1,500 movable parts that are mounted in such a harp. The back of the room is decorated by an American flag, which brings the beholder mentally back from the Caribbean to America's third largest city.

Even today the quality and the treatment of the North American lumbers, such as Sitka Spruce and Hard Maple, are the striking elements for the sound of the harp. The procedure of this complex process is time-consuming and requires a lot of know-how. The neck has to withstand 2,000 pounds of pressure because of the pulling strings. The key features of construction that ensure the quality of the instrument are the stability of the frame but also the accurate and silent interaction of the spindles with the pedals rods that, once pushed down, enable the harpist to produce half tones.

Milosz Turek from Krakow, Poland carves. The smell of wood dust and mother Earth is in the air. Turek puts the small chisel on the wood and gently nudges the knob of the tool with the mallet. A snowflake-sized splint loosens off the hard wood. Turek isn't satisfied yet. He needs seven hours to complete the cirrus. Afterwards his Mexican colleague will do the crown to finish the column. The squeak of the wheels of the green line pervades through the closed windows. It seems that the clocks are pausing in the building. The

artists are working on their pieces. Three carvers work usually 80 to 100 hours on a harp.

“The harpist hardly changes the brand”, considers Antoni Gralak, European sales representative of Lyon & Healy in Remagen, Germany. This is what happened to solo harpist of the Saxon State Orchestra, Astrid von Brueck, who played a Lyon & Healy harp during the times of cold war. “Once the sound pattern is defined, you’ll always long for it”, she says.

In order to establish the brand loyalty in an artist’s career, a high-end-manufacturer shouldn’t only be present in the price sensitive entry segment, but also offer smaller instruments, that can be handled physically by adolescents. Mrs. von Brueck appreciates the clear sound characteristics and the good definition of her Lyon & Healy harp. Steve Fritzmann, national sales manager of Lyon & Healy Chicago, doesn’t want to disclose how the special sound of his harps is generated. “That is a family secret”, he jokes and touches strings of a hundred year old harp.

Lyon & Healy sees the quality of their instruments and the distinctive sound as their success story. After production of the instrument, which can vary between three to twelve months depending on the model, the quality is checked entirely by a technician and an in house harpist. Approximately 1,000 instruments are sold per year, with Asia being the market with the highest growth.

Melanie Bauer-Ziech, the distinguished chamber virtuoso of the Saxon King Friedrich August III. and solo harpist to the royal orchestra from 1879 to 1927 wrote Lyon & Healy to praise “the successful improvements to an extremely high degree”. The Saxon State Orchestra in Dresden depends nowadays on three Lyon & Healy harps that are amended by three additional ones when it comes to perform Wagner’s Ring cycle. “With six harps in the orchestra an amazing sound carpet can be unfolded. Colors will emerge”, inspires von Brueck. From the German romanticism onwards the harp was essential as an instrument. “Wagner made the harp in the German repertoire respectable”, explains the solo harpist. So, the impact of the harp for the State Orchestra with its frequently quoted “harp synonym”, that the composer Wagner awarded it, cannot be denied. It is the caressing sound that can ring tenderly, conciliatory, softly and, shortly after, ominously, virtuously glittering, setting accents or ending, sparkling, in a glissando. Apart from the elegance of the instrument and the grace of the execution, the richness of sound enables the harp to obtain a special spot in music history.

When leaving the factory and the gods of harp making, the view wanders to an architectural highlight of Chicago: the 1,450 ft tall Willis Tower, which was until 1998 the world tallest building.