

BY ZACH PHILLIPS

CYMBAL CRAZE



Wes Falconer

NEW PLAYERS HAVE CRASHED THE HISTORICALLY CLOSED-OFF CYMBAL INDUSTRY. HERE'S WHAT IT MEANS AT RETAIL

Dennis Ricci estimated 15 percent of his cymbal sales are now with Stagg.

“Stagg has been my home run hitter for the last year or so,” said Ricci, owner of The Original Long Island Drum Center in Plainview, N.Y. “Its product is remarkable.”

Stagg’s success would be a non-story in most any other industry. But in the closed-off cymbal market, it’s symbolic of a major shift. Once dominated by just three major players — Zildjian, Sabian and Paiste — the cymbal industry has blown up over the past five years with new importers and rising stars, such as Stagg, which manufactures its product in China.

“It happened with the drum [brands] 10 years ago,” Ricci said. “These companies came in with lower pricing and quality product, and it’s continuing now with cymbals.”

THE NEW MARKETPLACE

Eager Turkish builders and inexpensive Asian manufacturing are driving the trend, resulting in such up-and-coming brands as Stagg, TRX and Dream Cymbals. Also, some companies, namely Meinl, have grown by marketing to more specialized niches and aggressively publicizing their artist rosters.

“At one point, the cymbal industry looked and acted monopolistic; those days are gone,” said Dan Barker, president and CEO of EMD Music, which distributes Stagg.

One cymbal industry veteran estimated that these alternative brands make up only 10 percent of the marketplace. Wes Faulconer, owner of Explorers Percussion in Kansas City, Mo., guessed they add up to roughly 15 percent of his total cymbal sales. That said, he deemed this significant considering how long the market had been dominated by three companies.

“I remember going to NAMM shows, and there’d be a lot of these cymbal companies downstairs [in Hall E],” Faulconer said. “Now, they’re not downstairs — they’re upstairs. And I heard there’s going to be more coming next year. I saw at least four new companies at The NAMM Show in January.”

Consumers’ lust for personalization might also be playing a part in this development. “Like any instrument, each player has a personal sound — their touch — so that they get not only that tone they desire but so that their playing sounds like them — a signature sound,” said Saultone Cymbals Public Relations and Marketing Coordinator Daniel East. “Having options allows every drummer to discover their personal preference.”

‘CYMBALS ARE MOVING’

Faulconer admitted the marketplace is starting to get crowded, and finding shelf space for new models within his store has become a headache. Michael Vosbein, president of Bosphorus Cymbals USA, even said small, non-drum retailers “don’t need alternative brands” at all. But, he added, these brands can be critical for drum specialty retailers looking to differentiate themselves.

“Full-service drum shops and stores with dedicated percussion departments who want to appeal to serious students, baby boomer amateurs and working pros need to offer something different other than the big three or risk losing out to stores that do,” he said.

Some full-line retailers, including *Music Inc.* columnist and Alta Loma Music owner Pete Gamber, have turned to lesser-known brands. Gamber, who has two locations in Southern California, praised China-made Stagg and Dream Cymbals for their high quality and customer service. He uses Dream for his music education events, including back-

+ ALTERNATIVE CYMBALS

STAGG EX SERIES

This company has gained a reputation for producing high-quality, low-priced product. Dan Barker of EMD Music, Stagg’s U.S. distributor, said EX cymbals are the first models from China that are made from 92-percent copper and 8-percent tin alloy. staggmusic.com



SOULTONE OLD SCHOOL EDITION

Based upon the classic dry sounds from the 1950s and ’60s, these models feature a rich, dark tone, as well as the EarthStroke natural finish with deeper lathing, giving them a sweeter open sound. saultonecymbals.com

TRX LTD SERIES

These heavyweight, handcrafted crash-rides and hi-hats have a three-zone design for a brighter, more explosive crash and well-defined ride and bell sounds. They’re designed for a variety of playing situations. MSRP: \$350–\$550. trxcymbals.com



BOSPHORUS MASTER VINTAGE RIDES

Bosphorus’ Michael Vosbein said these completely hand-made models are “off-the-hook,” in terms of their popularity. The rides boast a dry, dark fundamental with precise articulation and a played-in feel. bosporuscymbals.com

AMEDIA AHMET LEGEND SERIES

The company’s flagship cymbal is ideal for jazz or funk with its medium-dark, full-bodied sound. It’s extensively lathed and hammered for a medium wash and performs well in big band and small group settings. amediacymbals-usa.com



DREAM BLISS SERIES

These hand-hammered models are the company’s flagship product and designed for most musical styles. They feature a warm, rich undertone and low, dark pitch range. Wes Faulconer of Explorers Percussion said they’re among the best-sellers at his dealership. dreamcymbals.com

+ THE NO. 4

MEINL GENERATION X FILTER CHINA

During the past five years, Meinl has established itself as a major player in the cymbal market. This Gen-X model is one of the reasons why. It bursts with an explosive attack and decays quickly via the waved edge. meinlcymbals.com





lines at jazz festivals and student showcases.

“The price point and the quality make them work — and cymbals are moving right now,” Gamber said.

That price point often includes a generous margin, too. “Even if only 5 percent of a store’s cymbal business is in a boutique line, that could be an extremely profitable 5 percent compared to their profit margins on the standard brands,” said David Levine, TRX’s marketing consultant.

MEINL RISING

As Ray Fransen, owner of Ray Fransen’s Drum Center in Kenner, La., pointed out, some alternative cymbal lines “are not so alternative” anymore.



Dennis Ricci

“Meinl, Dream and Wuhan’s S series are actually being requested by name,” he said. “Meinl, in particular, is sought after by many different types of players.”

That wasn’t the case five

years ago. At that time, Meinl had little more than a tiny footprint in the U.S. cymbal market. Nowadays, the company’s bronze is being asked for so often that most retailers no longer speak of the cymbal

market as the “big three” but the “big four.”

“Meinl Cymbals has grown by 10 times,” said Meinl President Mitch McMichen, comparing the company’s 2005 sales figures to 2009’s. “2010 is going even better than 2009, so this year will be another year of huge increases.”

“Meinl has found a niche with both jazz players and the contemporary/alternative crowd,” Fransen said.

Other cymbal brands are competing for market share by pitching quality, offering competitive dealer programs and promoting aggressively. Dream, for instance, has rolled out the Cymbal Tasting Event series. Participating retailers get to borrow 100 of the company’s cymbals for a week, so cus-



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tomers can try from the full range. Dream also runs ads in conjunction with the events. Faulconer said these ads have generated interest in his market. “They’ve had people asking for their product over the past couple of years,” he said.

TRX, which builds its cymbals in Turkey, lets customers purchase replacement models for half of what they’d originally paid when a model wears out from heavy use.

And Bosphorus, also a Turkish cymbal maker, has partnered with Shopatron to steer its Web site visitors to local dealers who carry its inventory.

“In fact, we’re seeing an increase in online ordering because drummers can sometimes find it difficult to find significant Bosphorus inven-

tory locally,” Vosbein said.

East at Souldone stressed his company’s “zero-tolerance quality control” and Turkish manufacturing as key selling points. Dominick Gagliano, owner of Amedia Cymbals, said he pitches his company’s quality and “higher-than-normal” profit margins.

BIG NAMES COMPETE

John Sorenson, marketing director for Zildjian, is unfazed by all the newcomers. His company continues to enjoy dominant market share in the cymbal industry.

“From our perspective, a major cymbal company is one that demonstrates sustained and significant sales for at least five years in all the major consumer markets around the

‘At one point, the cymbal industry looked and acted monopolistic; those days are gone.’

— Dan Barker

globe,” Sorenson said. “Given this definition, the landscape has not changed much.”

Andy Zildjian, president of Sabian, said his company is competing with its world-class customer service and the highest-quality product available. He added that quality remains an issue with many cymbals made in China.

“Copying an electronic circuit is something that can be done in a measurable way,” he said. “It works or it doesn’t. Making an instrument like a cymbal is a skilled craft and something that cannot be commoditized.

“We do research on a daily basis to find out what is needed in cymbal sounds. That research means that whatever we make is being asked for in the drumming community. I think those things are what make Sabian different from all other companies.”

But Gagliano stressed that more companies only strengthen the market.

“It’s ultimately good for the industry,” he said. “It keeps everyone on their toes and from becoming complacent.” **MI**

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