

# Music Trades

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## THE GLOBAL ISSUE

### KANSTUL

FAMILY-OWNED BRASSWINDS MAKER CARRIES ON  
TRADITION OF CRAFTSMANSHIP





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Family-owned brasswinds maker carries on tradition of craftsmanship



WITH THE 1981 CLOSURE of the Benge brass instruments factory, a crew of skilled craftsmen were set to lose their jobs while several million dollars in machinery would be sold as scrap. Fortunately, Zigmant Kanstul knew an opportunity when he saw one. An instrument maker and technician since 1950, Zig was already a kind of brasswinds renaissance man who'd done standout work for manufacturers including F.E. Olds and King Musical Instruments, which was then the owner of the Benge operation. But when King shut down the Benge plant in Anaheim, California to consolidate its business in Cleveland, Zig picked up the pieces and converted the shuttered factory, along with its best workers, into the newly founded Kanstul Musical Instruments. The new company became official with a contract from U.K.-based Boosey & Hawkes to re-create the famed Besson trumpet. Since then, KMI has developed its own top-to-bottom line of brass instruments while building on an OEM basis for some of the industry's most highly respected brands. It's now the only family-owned

brasswinds company manufacturing entirely in the United States. Although Zig Kanstul died in 2016—after 66 years at the workbench—his tradition has been carried on by his sons Mark, now CEO of Kanstul Musical Instruments, and Jack, vice president. “We’re a musical family, and we build for musicians,” says Jack Kanstul. “This is our continuing history and the legacy my father has left us and the music products industry.”

Still based in Anaheim, the KMI factory is only about a mile from Disneyland and not much farther from the annual site of the winter NAMM show—which means, as Jack says, “Dealers come from all over the world right to our front door.” Between its proprietary Kanstul line and OEM products built at one time or another for Besson, Cannonballi, King, Conn, and more, there isn’t much in the brasswinds world that KMI doesn’t do. One of its hallmarks: using only high-quality brass and copper sourced within the U.S. “The brass coming out of China is very brittle due to lack of quality control at the brass foundries,” says Jack, “and the metal is very important in pro-

ducing a quality sound.”

Trumpets have been arguably KMI’s highest-profile segment since that first contract to build the Besson line, yet many of its other entries have found their own place in musical lore. KMI’s Model 1531 cornet was used by Doc Severinsen to record his famous *Trumpet Spectacular* album, while its flagship 1525 copper-bell flugelhorn was used on the album *Flight To Freedom* by Arturo Sandoval, who called it “the most incredible instrument I’ve ever played.” Three Kanstul contrabass trombones were used in Disney’s *Alice In Wonderland*. And as for tubas: the last major project of Zig Kanstul’s career was bringing back the York line sometimes known as the “Great American Tuba.” KMI even developed an Eb tenor horn, used mostly in the U.K., so it could supply British-style brass bands with all their instruments. In one of its newest projects, KMI has re-created the iconic “Committee” trumpet played by greats including Wallace Roney, who plays a custom version of the instrument. In another new entry, it’s developed travel tubas in the key of C or Bb, both sized for modern airline requirements but drawing on the DNA of classic models from the Kanstul line.

“Nothing *resonates* like a Kanstul,” says Jack. “That doesn’t come by chance. It’s the art of instrument making that’s been passed down from generation to generation.”

Zig Kanstul was just 21 years old in 1950 when he started working as an instrument repairman in Kansas City, and not much older when he got his first job assembling horns for F.E. Olds. The hands-down prodigy of the department, he was known to turn out nearly 40 trumpets—all of them perfect—on days when other workers stopped at 12. Understandably impressed, plant manager Foster Reynolds taught him the technique behind the “tapered tube” that’s among the most exacting tasks in brasswind manufacturing. (Later, Zig would pass down that knowledge to instrument builders working under him, including Troy Emmons, KMI’s top craftsman today.) Zig went on to run the Olds operation from Reynolds’ death in 1960 through the end of the decade. From there he left to take a job at King where he was vice presi-



*Founder Zig Kanstul's son Jack carries on the company's unique tradition.*

dent in charge of the Benge division through the '70s, culminating in its closure and the start of KMI in 1981.

Meanwhile, Zig's children were growing up in the industry. When Mark, Jack, and their brother Ziggy played in the Anaheim Scouts and Velvet Knights drum and bugle corps, Zig outfitted them with quality instruments, once saying, "It's hard enough to play a musical instrument, without giving a kid a poor instrument to play on." Thus inspired, Zig developed a series of instruments, including the Olds 1st G/F/F# bugles and Bb/F marching brass, that are credited with raising the bar in the marching segment. He later brought many of the same techniques over to KMI's marching line. By their early 20s, both Mark and Jack had started careers in brass-making.



*Although Kanstul is not the largest brasswind manufacturer, its team of craftsmen can produce an unrivaled variety of instruments.*

Today, the brothers have 80 years of musical instrument making experience between them, and Mark's 16-year-old son Alex is learning the family tradition. Their instruments are sold widely across North America, Asia, and both Western and Eastern Europe, as well as Australia, South Africa, and Brazil. Globally speaking, it's not the same industry as their father came up in, or even the same one KMI emerged into in 1981: Costs are tighter, and competition is stiffer, if you're determined to manufacture in the U.S. without outsourcing even a piece of your operation. For Kanstul, though, that part is non-negotiable. "My father was an old school craftsman," says Jack. "He concentrated on what should really count: the sound and making the finest



*Kanstul horns have become the favorites of leading performers including Wallace Roney.*

musical instruments attainable. That was his world. My brother Mark and I realize some things have changed, but what does not change is the musician's desire to have a quality instrument to make music on. The strategy that sets us apart is we are the real deal: family-owned and making the full line, all in our factory, like we always have."

[www.kanstul.com](http://www.kanstul.com)