by Norman Weinberg

Yamaha YX330 Xylophone

Xylophones have been around for several hundred years, and let's face it: They're pretty simple instruments. Slabs of wood (or a synthetic substitute) are laid out on a frame in standard keyboard fashion. Stick some resonators under the bars to increase the tone and body of the sound, mount the whole affair on a frame, and you've got a xylophone.

The *YX330* is a 3 1/2-octave xylophone with a range from F1 to C5 (an almost universal standard). The bars are slightly graduated from about 1 3/4" to about 1 1/2" wide (also pretty normal). And, the instrument is collapsible for easy transportation (like just about every other xylophone). But while the features I've just mentioned may not be very distinctive or special, almost every other aspect of the *YX330 is* unique, well-planned-out, and well-executed.

Let's start by taking a look at the supporting frame. Wheels (and I mean real wheels) make rolling this instrument from one location to another a dream. The wheels are 4" high, feature steel hubs and grey rubber covering, and allow the *YX330* to virtually glide across a tile floor or carpeting. The front two wheels are equipped with locks that have a larger-than-normal foot control. Trust me, when in the locked position, the *YX330* isn't going anywhere!

Moving up from the wheels is a sturdy frame that is made from 1" metal pipe. This frame, while serving a very basic function, is full of nice little features. Rubber bumpers on the audience side ensure that the instrument won't be scratched or damaged if pushed up against a wall. When broken down for travel, the legs can be attached (by means of a wing nut) to the bottom of the frame. This way, the legs won't be wiggling around during transport. The supporting arms that help keep the frame's side rails stationary are solid and serve their purpose well. Once assembled, the *YX330* feels stable and secure under the most demanding playing conditions.

The frame has an additional metal bar that serves double duty. When assembled, this lower crossbar support adds even more stability to the two ends of the frame. When broken down, it acts as an extra-long carrying handle. Xylophones are heavy instruments, and this one is especially heavy (99 pounds, to be exact). The long handle makes it possible to use two hands—or even two people—during transportation. And while the bar is located in a position that shouldn't interfere with one's playing, it can be easily detached if it seems in the way.

Even the pins that support the bars were looked at in a new light. The bars can be easily removed from the frame, but since the pin hooks face different directions, the bars won't fall off when the instrument is being carried. This is a much more convenient design than having the suspension cord pass through holes in the pins. While there are many other little features that make the frame unique, by these examples I think you can see that the *YX330* is an instrument that was designed for the "real world" of performance—including all of the "real world" hassles.

The resonators of the *YX330* are metal too. The pipes have a brushed gold finish, which adds a lot of visual class to the instrument. Like most other xylophones, the resonators can be mounted at two different heights to accommodate changes in temperature and humidity. Being made of a heavy-gauge metal, these resonators remind me of those on the classic xylophones produced in the 1920s. One last item: The resonators are a little longer than those found on most other xylophones, with the internal caps located between 3" and 5" from the end of each pipe. While this calls for extra metal (and extra cost), the instrument looks more "professional" with the longer resonators.

The bars on the *YX330* are made of a composite material Yamaha calls *Acoustalon*, which is created by cross-weaving fiberglass and plastic. The first thing that you notice about the bars is a series of small holes bored from end to end. The holes (24 of them on each bar) produce some interesting visual effects when looking at the tuning-cuts on the underside of the bar. My guess would be that the holes in the bars emulate the inconsistencies found in natural wood. Genuine rosewood, having been a living organism at one time, is not a flawless material. The cells, fibers, and internal structure of each rosewood bar are unique. While drilling holes in the *Acoustalon* bars wouldn't alter the internal characteristics of the synthetic material, it would make some parts of the bar more or less dense than others.

One early advertising claim stated that an *Acoustalon* bar produces a sound "with the characteristic warmth and resonance of its rosewood equivalent." While no synthetic material is ever going to sound just like rosewood, overall I tend to agree with Yamaha's claim. The warmth of rosewood is here. The instrument sounds less brittle than other synthetic materials I've heard. While some players have become accustomed to the color of synthetic xylophone bars (and have even come to expect it in some situations), true rosewood sounds a little mellower and "smoother." The *Acoustalon* bars come close—very close. The first partial (the twelfth) comes out a little stronger than it does on other xylophones. But, then again, this is the overtone that is most responsible for creating the characteristic xylophone timbre.

Rosewood bars are much dryer than any synthetic bars available. While not quite as dry as real wood, the *Acoustalon* bars are not as "wet" as the standard synthetics. In fact, they may offer a happy medium for those musical situations where you're looking for a resonance somewhere between rosewood and the other synthetic bars.

Overall, I felt that the balance of the keyboard was quite good. The tonal qualities were consistent from the low end to

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the upper register, and I didn't find any "dead" bars on the review instrument. The tuning was "right-on" (at A=440), and the purity of the harmonics was excellent.

Suggestions? There is no doubt that Yamaha did its homework before releasing this xylophone to the percussion public. But how about offering height adjustment for the frame (similar to the company's *YV2600* vibraphone)?

The final verdict? In an era when construction, design, and material costs continue to skyrocket, most of the larger percussion manufacturers are walking down two different paths. One road involves cutting costs, corners, and quality, in order to bring instruments to the market at affordable prices. The other avenue produces a top-notch instrument at a top-notch price. (Remember, this is the decade of the $1,000-plus snare drum.) In terms of quality, the *YX330* makes its home on the latter street, but the $2,100 price tag puts it right in the ballpark of other synthetic xylophones. In other words, the *YX330* is a Porsche at the price of a Ford.

If an individual player, school, band, or orchestra is considering a new xylophone, the *YX330* needs to be heard and played before a final purchase decision is made. This is a great instrument, and it deserves serious consideration.