Yamaha YX330 Xylophone

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

The YX330 is a 3/4 octave xylophone with a range from F1 to C5 (at almost universal standard). The bars are slightly graduated from about 1/4" to about 1/2" wide (fairly normal). And, the instrument is collapsible for easy transportation (just about every other xylophone). But while the features I’ve mentioned just aren’t 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! Making this instrument from one location to another a dream. The wheels are at high, feature steel hubs and grey rubber covering, and allow the YX330 to easily glide across a tile floor or carpeting. The front two wheels are equipped with locks that have a larger-than-life control. Trust me, when in this 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 framework, while serving as a very basic foundation, is full of nice little features. Rubber bumpers on the underside 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 wobbling around during transport. The support arms that help keep the frame’s side rails stationary are solid and serve their purpose well. Once assembled, the YX330 is practically unmovable, helping to meet 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 including 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 holes 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” hazards.

The resonators of the YX330 are metal and 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 3 1/8" from the end of each pipe. While this calls for extra metal (and extra cost), the instrument looks more “professional” and adds an extra degree of the longer resonations.

The bars on the YX330 are made of a composite material. Yamaha calls Acoustalon, which is created by cross-crossing fiberglass and plastic. The first thing 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, 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 Acoustalon produces bars in a sound with “the characteristics of 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), this rosewood offers a little more “livelier and smoother.” The Acoustalon bars come close—very close. The first partials offer a little stronger than they do on other xylophones. But then, again, this is the overlap that is most responsible for coming the classic synthetic xylophone timbre.

Rosewood bars are much drier than any synthetic bars available. While not quite as dry as real wood, this Acoustalon bars are not as “swet” as the standard synthetic. In fact, they may offer a happier medium for those musical situations where you’re looking for a resonance somewhere between rosewood and the other synthetic bars. Overall, I think the balance of the keyboard was quite good. The tonal qualities were consistent from the low end to the higher pitches.
the upper register, and I didn’t find any “dead” bars on the review instrument. The tuning was “right-on” (at C=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 YX730 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 YX730 is a Porsche at the price of a Ford.

If an individual player, school band, or orchestra is considering a new xylophone, the YX730 needs to be heard and played before a final purchase decision is made. This is a great instrument, and it deserves serious consideration.