World's Leading Cymbal Maker: Avedis Zildjian Company

In New England, as nowhere else in the country, petty capitalism is showing its great abiding strength. The region's large industrial establishments may close their doors and move to other parts of the country, but its small firms stand ready to take over where the larger ones have given way. Today, New England is dotted with manufacturing plants that were once the property of great industrial enterprises but that are now the honeycombed homes of countless small shops and foundries.

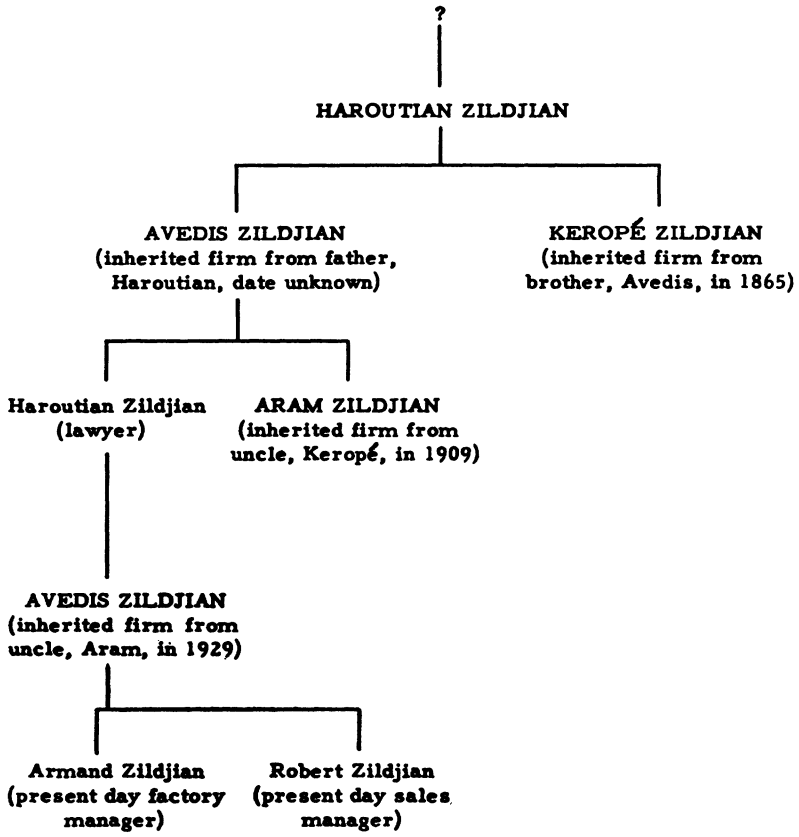
Many of the petty capitalist concerns in New England distribute their output nationally and even internationally. Not infrequently they are able to turn out goods so distinctive and so well-made that their products are able to hold a virtual monopoly in their narrow and special field. So it is with the products of the Avedis Zildjian Company, of North Quincy, Massachusetts. The Avedis Zildjian Company estimates that its fourteen or fifteen employees produce more than 90 per cent of the musical cymbals made in the world.

The company's owner, Avedis Zildjian (he pronounces his name AH-vidis ZILLjun), traces his lineage back three and a quarter centuries to another cymbal-maker, also named Avedis Zildjian, living in Constantinople, Turkey. There may have been still earlier cymbal-makers in the Zildjian family (in Turkish the name Zildjian means cymbal-maker), but if so, no record of the fact has been preserved. Family tradition dates the first manufacture of Zildjian cymbals from the year 1623—the year when, in New England, the Pilgrim Fathers were abandoning their communal manner of living in favor of private enterprise. In the year 1623 the original Avedis Zildjian, being apparently a metal-worker of considerable skill, discovered an ingenious method of treating alloys in the cymbal-casting process. The details of his secret were kept closely guarded and were handed down in the Zildjian family from generation to generation, always, like the crown in France and Spain under the law of the Salic land, to the senior male member next in line. And, by a remarkable run of good fortune, a male by the name of Zildjian was always avail-

able to carry on the family tradition when the proper time arrived.

With such a background, it is not surprising to find that the Avedis Zildjian Company of today is a strange mixture of the old and the new, of the foreign and the native. The company's plant in North

ZILDJIAN CORPORATE GENEALOGY



Quincy is a completely modern building even to the use of glass blocks in its construction. Its equipment is of late design. And the copy in its dance-band advertisements is full of the curious jargon of jive. Yet its trademark still carries the Turkish inscription that has appeared on the company's products for generations. And on the door of the casting room is still a double lock used by the company's owner when, with all the mystery of the Near East, he repairs to

seclusion and mixes a compound of copper, tin, and silver according to the special Zildjian formula.

The early history of the Zildjian firm is shrouded in mystery, even to the Zildjian family itself. Early records are few. What little information has been kept is preserved in a family Bible which is still in Istanbul in the possession of Avedis Zildjian's mother. Consequently, much of the company's history borders on the legendary, as, for instance, the story of how a male member of the family, not fortunate enough to be in the direct line of inheritance, attempted to simulate the Zildjian formula only to have his head blown off by an explosion of chemicals. Scientists have endeavored to probe the Zildjian mystery, but in vain. No other competitor—and there have been many, including an offshoot of the Zildjian family in Turkey, a group of cymbal-makers in Italy, and most of the percussion-instrument makers in this country—has ever succeeded in producing cymbals that could compare in the minds of instrumentalists with the cymbals made by the Zildjian process.

Cymbals are among the most ancient musical instruments known to man. Small cymbals have been found enclosed with mummies in excavated Egyptian tombs. And in the Holy Scriptures one of the most frequently quoted passages reads, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." But why the manufacture of cymbals should have come to be as distinctly Turkish as the manufacture of gongs has been Chinese is difficult to explain. Perhaps it is sufficient to recall that the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches customarily used cymbals in their religious services and that the Turkish armies used percussion instruments, including cymbals, in their battle maneuvers, much as the armies of the western world used bugles.

Because of the heavy local demand for cymbals and because cymbals did not come to be used by peoples outside of the eastern Mediterranean area until the seventeenth century, most of the early Zildjian cymbals were marketed at home. The Zildjians believe that the first European composer to write a score calling for "Turkish cymbals" was the German musician Strungk, writing in 1680. But it was not until the era of the nineteenth-century romantic composers, such as Berlioz and Wagner with their colorful and exotic scores, that cymbals became acceptable as musical instruments in Europe.

From the first, the Zildjians, who were the leading Turkish manu-

facturers of cymbals, obtained most of the European cymbal business. Fortunately, the family leader of that period, still another Avedis Zildjian, grandfather of the present Avedis Zildjian (see chart), was extremely sales-minded and was aware of the monetary value of the Zildjian name. Before his time, the family had followed the practice of signing each cymbal with pen and ink, a gesture intended to give Zildjian cymbals the kind of individuality that is imparted to a painting by the signature of the artist. But Avedis saw that a signature alone was not enough, since the ink soon wore off and the Zildjian name became lost. Therefore, he adopted the practice of stamping all Zildjian cymbals with a special trademark. This stamp permanently impressed on every family-made cymbal not only the company's name in Turkish but also its equivalent in French, the universal language of commerce in nineteenth-century Europe. (Incidentally, the company still adheres to the practice, signing each cymbal in addition to stamping it.) Avedis also took full advantage of the mid-century enthusiasm for international exhibitions and personally attended the great displays in London and Paris, where he made certain that Zildjian cymbals received the recognition due them for their outstanding quality.

In 1865 Avedis died leaving two sons, neither of them of age. The business therefore passed to Keropé Zildjian, a younger brother of Avedis (again see chart). From 1865 to 1910, Keropé managed the business with competence if not with distinction. Following the course laid down by his older brother, he entered cymbals in appropriate exhibitions, but he did not make personal trips to stimulate business as his brother had done. In general he contended himself with filling orders as they came in.

Throughout Keropé's time, and even in the following generation, cymbal-making remained a custom trade in which cymbals were manufactured only to order. It mattered little if cymbals had to be aged for a minimum of six months before they could be shipped; customers simply had to wait; and since most Zildjian customers were dealers in musical instruments, they accustomed themselves to placing orders well in advance of their needs. In other words, inventory risks were pushed by the manufacturer onto the wholesaler.

Because of the fact that Keropé had no sons, it became necessary for him to train as his successor one of the sons of his late brother, Avedis. Meanwhile, however, the older of Avedis' sons, Haroutian, being personally ambitious and seeing no immediate prospects of advancement in the family firm, had turned to the practice of law and

had risen to a post equivalent to the attorney generalship of the European portion of Turkey, a territory which in those days extended as far as Serbia. Being well established in political circles, Haroutian decided to pass over the opportunity of inheriting the firm from his uncle and instead allowed his birthright to descend to his younger brother, Aram.

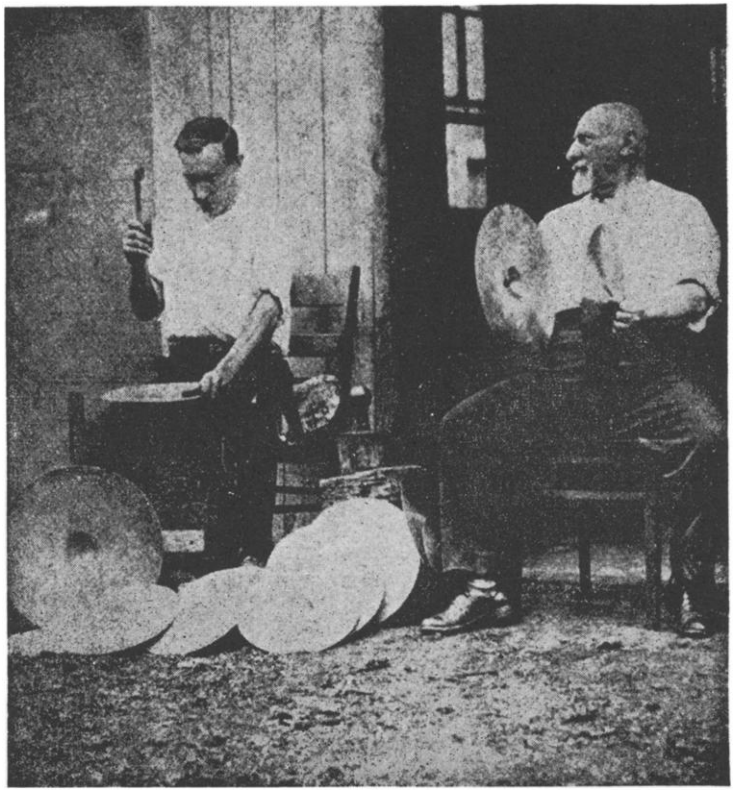
Aram seems to have been by no means as talented a businessman as his salesman father. Among other weaknesses was a predilection for politics and a participation in the Armenian underground movement. As a result of political intrigues, he became involved in an unsuccessful plot to assassinate the sultan and was rewarded for his troubles by being forced to fly from the country. Thereafter, and for most of his active career as head of the company, Aram maintained a cymbal foundry in Bucharest, Rumania, although later on, after the sultan's deposition, he returned to his native city and carried on the manufacture of cymbals in both locations.

During Aram's time the market for Zildjian cymbals shifted its center from continental Europe to the United States. The Civil War had stirred in Americans an appreciation of martial music and had led directly to the formation of marching bands and drum and bugle corps. Nearly every city and hamlet, and sometimes even retail and manufacturing establishments, had their military bands. Then with the widespread introduction of musical training in high schools—and finally with the advent of the jazz era—Americans became the largest "consumers" of musical instruments in the world.

Still, the American market for cymbals was not really tapped in an effective way during Aram's time. Aram could speak no English and had no business contacts in this country. Therefore, it was with a sense of relief that he agreed to a proposal suggested to him in 1926 by the Fred Gretsch Manufacturing Company, of Brooklyn, New York. The Gretsch company manufactured percussion instruments and had contact with the musical instrument dealers of America; but it had no cymbal line of its own and so was anxious to serve as the exclusive agent for Zildjian cymbals in this country. Feeling that the Gretsch proposal would solve his problem of marketing cymbals in America, Aram consented to a contract arrangement.

Two years later, however, Aram decided to retire. Having never married, he left no children to carry on the Zildjian name. Title to the firm, therefore, was destined to pass to Avedis Zildjian, the eldest son of Aram's brother, Haroutian. Avedis, like his father before him, had reached maturity without realizing that some day the responsi-

bility of the firm would come his way. In the year 1909 he had decided while still a young man to try his fortune in one of the cities of Western Europe where the Zildjians had many relatives, but a



REPRODUCED THROUGH COURTESY OF THE BOSTON POST

ARAM ZILDJIAN
(on the right)
Matching a pair of cymbals for tonal quality.

chance incident altered his course. A wealthy family of Armenians in Constantinople had a young son who was not yet of age but who wished to visit America. His parents agreed that he might go if he could induce Avedis Zildjian to accompany him as guardian. Avedis readily agreed, and the two traveled to Boston, where Avedis, through Armenian friends, established a confectionery firm.

With what seems to have been native business talent, Avedis prospered during his years in the candy business and soon made himself a full-fledged American by taking out naturalization papers and by marrying the daughter of a Yankee family in Dorchester, a part of Boston. Thus, when Aram offered Avedis the cymbal company in 1928, Avedis was unwilling to return to Constantinople to claim his inheritance. Furthermore, it seemed illogical to him that he should return to his former home to carry on the manufacture of products destined primarily for the American market. In 1929, therefore, a dramatic break in family tradition took place; Aram, the family patriarch, knowing no English and having never traveled abroad, undertook in the last years of his life the trip to America to carry to his young nephew the secret formula and the skilled craft of cymbal manufacture.

For a year Aram Zildjian labored in North Quincy, retraining his nephew in the art of cymbal-making, an art which Avedis had been taught as a child, but which he had not practiced for twenty years. The accompanying illustration taken by a photographer of the Boston *Sunday Post* during that important year shows Aram matching a pair of cymbals for tonal quality. The training process involved mind, muscle, and ear. Avedis not only had to memorize the family formula and learn the skilled technique of hammering and turning each variety of cymbal, but he had also to train his ear to a point where he could distinguish if a cymbal had been properly formed and aged.

While Aram was still in America, Avedis began the manufacture of cymbals in a plant located near his home. It was natural that he should choose a spot nearby to begin operations, for both he and his uncle agreed that it would be weli to locate the foundry near salt water. Neither man was certain that salt air was necessary to the successful operation of the Zildjian formula, but it seemed best not to vary the conditions of manufacture any more than was necessary, and since Zildjian cymbals had always been made near the sea, it was logical and convenient to continue as before. In businesslike manner, Avedis incorporated the firm under Massachusetts statutes. As a nucleus work force, he brought into his company a fellow countryman who had been employed in the candy business with him and two craftsmen who had newly arrived in America. These three men are still with the company and form its key personnel.

At first the cymbals made by the Avedis Zildjian Company encountered strong sales resistance. American musicians were reluctant

to believe that cymbals produced in this country could possibly match the high quality of Turkish products. Indeed, even today there are musicians who cherish cymbals that were made before 1929 by the old Zildjian firm in Constantinople. Furthermore, there arose in the trade a confusion over tradenames that was destined to plague Avedis for many years.

When Aram Zildjian decided to retire and to abandon his business in Turkey, he left the Gretsch company without its source of cymbals. However, an Armenian, Vahan Yuzbashian, a worker at the Zildjian foundry, was willing to keep the old Zildjian plant in Constantinople operating to produce cymbals for Gretsch customers. Through the workings of international copyright laws, Vahan tried to perpetuate the Zildjian name by turning out cymbals with the old Zildjian trademark. But he did not have the precious Zildjian formula. Nevertheless, he was able to confound the American musical trade by putting his competing "authentic" product on the market.

The Zildjians of North Quincy will tell you that Vahan lost out in the competition because he lacked the basic formula. But one wonders how much the business sagacity of Avedis Zildjian contributed to the defeat. Until about 1900 the plant in Constantinople was still being operated on a pre-industrial revolution level. Power for the foundry bellows was provided by horsepower, the horse being located in a basement room beneath the foundry where, blindfolded, he was led round and round a vertical shaft, creating power in precisely the manner used by Richard Arkwright when he set up his first power-driven cotton mill in England 130 years earlier.

Avedis saw the need for mechanizing as much of the cymbal-manufacturing process as was possible without at the same time detracting from the precision work required in turning out a high-quality cymbal. Realizing that the American market called for a wide range of cymbals running in quality from the exacting demands of the Boston Symphony cymbalist to the less discriminating requirements of the cost-conscious father buying a cymbal for his young son, Avedis produced a subordinate line of cymbals that was largely machine-made. He also established intimate contact with the dance band market which in contrast to the "legitimate" market—the country's symphony orchestras, concert bands, and studio ensembles —was a heavy consumer of cymbals. (A symphony player may be called upon to clash his cymbals only a few dozen times in an entire season of concerts, but the dance-band player typically gives his cymbals such constant punishment that they soon crack under the

strain.) By thus catering to each segment of his market, Avedis rapidly built his small business into a dominant position in its field.[1]

In the early 1930's the Zildjian company felt the full effect of the world-wide depression. Only the high school line of cymbals continued at anything like its normal rate. Desiring to keep his small band of skilled employees occupied, Avedis adopted the bold policy of manufacturing for stock. Never before in its history had the company followed such a policy, but there were certain natural advantages that compensated for the high attendant inventory risk. Since in any event the cymbals had to spend a certain amount of time in the Zildjian curing vaults, manufacturing to stock helped smooth out the production process. It also enabled the Zildjian company to carry a wide line of products available for instant sale. Knowing this fact, the discriminating cymbal players of the country adopted the practice of traveling to North Quincy to purchase their cymbals from the fine stock there on hand.

In 1939 a laundry building located next to the Zildjian foundry caught fire and burned to the ground. Unavoidably, the fire spread and destroyed more than half the Zildjian foundry, although, providentially, it spared the cymbals in their curing vaults. Since the Zildjians were renters and not owners of the building, they suffered no financial loss. But immediately they bought the blackened wreckage and set about clearing space for a new foundry.

During World War II the Zildjian workforce was reduced in number to three. But the company continued in operation as the chief supplier of cymbals to the United States government for use in military bands and USO dance bands. In tribute to the quality of Zildjian's products, the government specifications called for cymbals rated as "Avedis Zildjian or equal."

Because of the continuing shortage of tin, a critical ingredient in the Zildjian formula, the company failed somewhat to participate in the tremendous postwar boom in manufacturing. But still it man-

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[1] At the present time the company makes no less than fourteen individual types of cymbals—fast, fast-crash, crash, splash, swish, bounce, bebop, hi-hat, flange hi-hat, ride, finger, concert band, brass band, and symphony—and all of these come in variations in size and thickness. The price range is roughly $5 to $100 per cymbal. A typical dance band set of cymbals costs around $150. Today's market is divided roughly 60% American, 10% Canadian, 30% the rest of the world. Abroad the company sells through agents; domestically it sells either to musical instrument dealers or else to manufacturers of musical instruments who wish to round out their selling lines.

aged to do well. Its credit rating by Dun & Bradstreet places it at the present time in the highest category of the $50,000-$75,000 range. Furthermore, one aspect of the postwar world aided the company. The destruction of the Chinese economy cut off America from its chief source of musical gongs and allowed the Zildjian company to step in and take over that market. However, the gong market is necessarily limited by the fact that the life of a gong is extremely long.

Since the end of the war Avedis Zildjian has been joined in the company by his two sons—Armand, who will eventually inherit the firm, and Robert, who has become sales manager of the company. Both are college men, Armand having attended Colgate and Robert having attended Dartmouth. Both have been taught the secret process, and both participate in the casting operation. Armand is gradually taking over the shop, and Robert is taking over the front office. Like his great-grandfather, Robert is sales-minded. Through an advertising agency in New York he sees to it that the company is advertised in *Downbeat* and *Metronome*, the two most important publications in the dance band trade. He also sees to it that the school children of the country are well aware of the Zildjian name. One of the company's most effective promotional schemes has been its leaflet illustrating the "setup" used by such famous dance-band drummers as Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, and Lionel Hampton. Every young drummer wants to have a drum "setup" exactly like the one his idol has.

Because of the company's uniqueness, it has had considerable unsolicited publicity. The issue of *Newsweek* dated October 30, 1939, carried a full page of pictures showing the work in the Avedis Zildjian foundry, and in the issue of *Life* magazine dated October 23, 1944, a pictorial article on the cymbal player of the Metropolitan Opera Company gave considerable attention to the Zildjian story. In April, 1945, *Magazine Digest* carried an entire article on the Zildjian firm, and more recently the *New Yorker* in its "Talk of the Town" column (August 13, 1949) carried an article on the Zildjians on the occasion of their display at the National Association of Music Merchants in New York. Sunday supplement articles have also appeared in the Boston *Globe* (April 15, 1945) and in the Montreal *Standard* (December 16, 1944), and Hal Boyle has written a syndicated article on the company, entitling it, "We Never Tell the Women," as part-explanation of how the family has been able to keep its process a secret for so many generations.

As might be expected, larger firms, especially drum manufacturing

concerns, have frequently tried to induce the Zildjians to sell their company. But being well established in the industry and having a great deal of family pride, the Zildjians have steadfastly refused all such offers. For the time being at least, the continuance of the firm as a family concern seems certain. With two sons already at work in the firm, the company's existence for another generation seems fairly sure. Beyond that, however, there can be no certainty. Armand Zildjian's wife has recently presented him with his third daughter. Robert Zildjian is not married.

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