

Vincent Bach: Musician, Engineer and Entrepreneur

Vincent Bach, whose original name was Vincenz Schrottenbach, was born in Baden bei Wien, literally “baths at Vienna”, in the valley SouthWest of the then imperial capital of Austro-Hungary on the 24th of March 1890. The region is sometimes known by the name of the early Roman settlement of Vindobona, which Bach would later use as a name for instruments designed to produce a sound reminiscent of the instruments of his homeland.

The sulfur and bauxite baths remained a feature of the region from Roman times through that of Bach and were a popular vacation site for many of the great composers who are associated with Vienna. Together with exposure to these celebrities and their legacy, Bach was heavily influenced by the musical household in which he was first raised at Pfarrplatz Nr. 6 in Baden. His father, Vincenz Sr., in addition to managing the family soap making operation, was an accomplished tenor and his mother, Leopoldina Kapeller, was a skilled soprano. Before age six, he was performing on violin, but rapidly developed an attraction to the trumpet. When Bach was 7, he and both of his younger brothers Hans Julius and Heinrich were given E-flat bugles, which Vincent took an immediate liking to.

In 1897, Vincenz Sr. died in a cycle accident. In 1905, bowing to the wishes of his step-father, Vincenz entered the Maschinenbauschule (which translates roughly as machine building school) in Wiener Neustadt (Vienna’s new town). The region around Vienna was undergoing rapid industrialization and, in contrast to Vincenz’s late father, his step father intended that he would make a career in the industrial world of the new century. Unlike a modern engineering program, Vincenz learned not only the math, physics, graphics and engineering skills, but also hands-on machining, casting, metal-working and other trades. Five years later he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and a one year compulsory obligation to the Austro-Hungarian military.



Entering the Imperial Navy, Vincenz was granted the rank of ensign, an engineering degree qualifying him for officer status, and assigned to engineering duties. At some point during this service stationed at the port of Pola, his ability on the rotary valve trumpet was noticed and he served that tour as a trumpeter in the Austrian Marine Band. At the end of the year, he found an engineering job in an elevator company, but was recalled to duty in 1912. Receiving much attention for his ability as a musician, the military experience and experimenting on stage in early 1912 convinced him that his only path to happiness would be to defy his step-father and follow his heart with a career in music.

Once again released from military service and armed with an Alexander cornet, Vincent Schrottenbach began touring Europe as a virtuoso cornet soloist. He performed across Austro-Hungary, Prussia, Saxony, Russia, Denmark, Sweden and England to great acclaim.

Unfortunately for his career, and for all of Europe, in April of 1914 everything changed when a Russian-backed Serbian national assassinated the Austro-Hungarian crown prince and World War One shortly followed. Being a known enemy reservist on English soil, Vincent hurriedly booked passage to the United States aboard the Lusitania and fled England, arriving in New York on the 14th of September 1914.

With virtually no money, no home and no job, Vincent immediately began seeking a job performing. He was quickly offered work by Oscar Hammerstein, but in a theater of a type Bach had not seen before – a vaudevillian burlesque. He quickly learned (the hard way) that his repertoire, which was suited to opera houses, would not go over well in such a venue. Realizing this, the theater manager moved Bach to the opening act - to cover the noise of the audience filing in. Frustrated, Bach sent a letter to Karl Muck, the director of the Boston Symphony, requesting an audition. Muck directed Bach to audition for an associate, Nathan Franko of the Metropolitan Opera, who immediately upon hearing Bach play, sent him to Boston as Muck's new associate principal trumpet for the 1914-15 season.



Bach auditioned on the only instrument he had then, a Besson cornet that, according to Roy Hempley's research, persisted in the possession of the Bach corporation until being stolen from their offices.



In Boston, he met Gustav Heim, principal trumpet and a proponent of instruments made by Frank Holton & Co. in Chicago. Bach was immediately switched to a 1914 Low Pitch model Holton trumpet. In 1915, he married Madge Cummings, a girl he had met when she was 16 in England 3 years earlier. The marriage effectively ended in just three weeks when Vincent's new mother in law informed him that he had also "married her". This event may help to explain his renewed interest in life on the road, touring the West coast in the last half of 1915. A year later however, he returned to steady employment with the Russian Ballet of the Metropolitan Opera.

Bach's official biographer stated that Bach shortened his name when he booked transit to the US in 1914, in order to elude pursuit in Britain. However, the RMS Lusitania passenger manifest for the voyage shows his full name. His 1917 draft card on line one states that he is in the process of changing his name to Vincent Bach, indicating that the change actually occurred at that later point in time.

The relationship between Bach and Holton strengthened from stable artist, to endorser, to ultimately a spokesman position for the company. Like Heim, Bach's name appeared on some Holton mouthpieces at this time. Bach might well have migrated from performing to a career at Holton given time, but World War One eventually caught up with him. Registered for the draft, as all resident aliens were in those days, Bach was called-up and served the US Army as bandmaster of the 306th Field Artillery Band and a bugle instructor.



Leaving the military for the third time in his life at the end of the war, Bach began experimenting in business. He had no-doubt been exposed to Frank Holton's transition from performer to businessman and seems to have followed the model quite closely. While still playing to cover his bills, Bach set-up a small mouthpiece making operation in the back of the H&A Selmer music store in New York. With an innovative design that was destined to become the most copied mouthpiece design of all time, Bach's business took hold at a much faster pace than Holton's resale and supply store had.

Bach soon outgrew his one-man operation and moved into a rented space across from the musician's union in New York. His location highly served as a marketing tool in itself. No-doubt recognizing that his new business might grow in value, Bach divorced in 1919. With such financial risk out of the way and the "how to become a wizard on cornet without practicing" advertising campaign bringing in ample business, Bach incorporated the Vincent Bach Corporation in 1922 with 10 employees.

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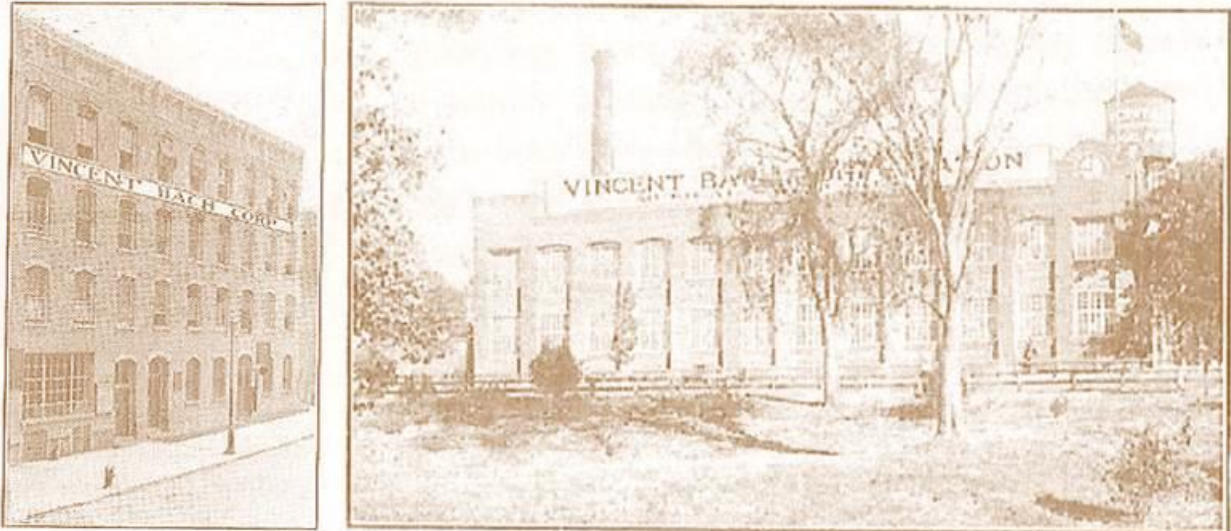
VINCENT BACH, Former Member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Successor to the **204 East 85th Street, NEW YORK CITY**

Bach's new business also sold his guide titled "The Art of Trumpet Playing" and Bach's cornet solos such as "Hungarian Melodies" and other less well known works

Between 1922 and 1924, Bach experimented with drawing designs for a new trumpet in addition to a rapidly shrinking performing schedule, and recording on the Edison label. By the end of 1924, he was ready to

begin a new phase in his life. The first step was the assembly of his first trumpet. It must not have met with his expectations as he later repurposed it and gave the new assembly a new serial number. The

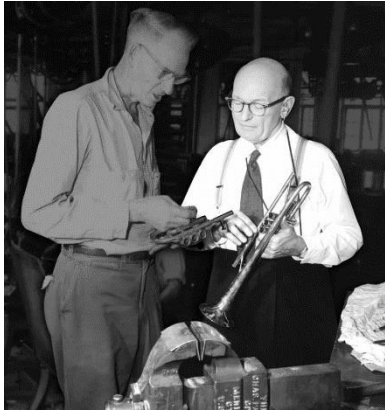
following April he took the other major step toward that new life when he married 25 year old Santa-Fe Railway telegrapher Esther Helen Staab (1900-1980). She was the daughter of an epileptic housewife, Bertha Staab, and a tyrannical bandmaster, Adam A. Staab. Notably, Bach's 45th horn, a Stradivarius model trumpet, was built in February 1925 for A.A. Staab.



Bach moved to a new factory in the Bronx in 1928 and added trombones to the product line. At the time of the move, the company had made roughly 1,000 horns. Surviving the depression through a combination of a niche market, being right-sized, and Bach's legendary frugality driving the re-use of any and every scrap or return, the company remained at that location until 1953. During that 25 year period, the company made a total of less than 10,000 horns.



In 1953, Bach relocated to Mt. Vernon New York. The reputation earned by some 15,000 trumpets produced at this location in the only eight years that followed remains excellent to the present day. In 1961 however, a 71 year old Vincent Bach decided that it was time to retire (and reduce the number of frequent entries in his wife's diary that would again note him missing or being late for an engagement). Although higher bids were received, Bach elected to sell his company to Selmer in recognition of the kindness shown him by the New York store when he was starting out.



At the request of Selmer, Bach personally produced a set of master mouthpieces to be kept as reference models, and a new design for the Stradivarius trumpet. The design Bach had been building since the mid 1950s incorporated a slightly shorter leadpipe and lower tuning slide sleeve resulting in the need to pull the tuning slide nearly an inch under normal conditions. This also made the horn “center” a little looser. Selmer requested a design that would have a normal ½” pull and Bach responded with the model 180. These were built at Mt. Vernon under Selmer from December of 1963 through December of 1964.

In January of 1965, production moved to the old Buescher plant on Main Street in Elkhart Indiana and Bach stayed on with the company for several years as a consulting engineer. Bach had also designed the Bundy trumpet as part of his initial work for Selmer, and operated a bit of a skunk works for the company doing prototyping and custom work for professional clients. This activity appears to have tapered off shortly after Mrs. Bach suffered a serious stroke in 1966 and had to be hospitalized.

In Elkhart, with Bach’s influence waning, the company continued to evolve the design of his horns with the change to a steel bell rim wire (which would be reversed in the later 1970s) and a heavier sheet stock for forming bells (the 0.020” stock standard at Mt. Vernon became the new lightweight bell stock). By 1975, they would change the valve casings to a simpler, less expensive, one-piece construction. Each of these actions may have moved away from the founder’s work, but continued his practice of constantly evolving the product.

Vincent Bach fully retired by 1971 and passed away at the age of 85 in January of 1976. Esther Bach died almost precisely 4 years later at the age of 79. They are buried in Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla New York.

