

# Mapex Drums

## Challenging The Champions

by Rick Van Horn

**Y**ou have to hand it to Mapex. In 1989 they literally came out of nowhere to enter a market already crowded with very successful brands. Less than a decade later they had established themselves as one of the “majors.” They accomplished this feat in the face of several significant obstacles, not the least of which was, well, that *name*.

### What's In A Name?

Back in 1989, there were those who said that a drum company with a name like “Mapex” would never get off the ground. When the drums first appeared in ads, drummers tried to figure out what kind of musical connotation the name could have. It doesn't have one. Nor does it sound high-tech, like “Zoomatic” or “Dyna-Sonic.” To be honest, many drummers thought “Mapex” sounded like a lawn chemical. So where *did* the name come from?

“We don't know,” laughs Mapex USA vice-president and general manager Chuck Turk. “And I'll be the first to admit to you that I don't ask. It was selected by our parent company. And while it was the subject of some confusion—and some jokes—today, in retrospect, it has

become a non-issue. I used to be a buyer for a major retail chain. At that time I was a big customer of Mapex, and I kind of questioned the name too. But those questions went away as Mapex became a very successful drum line. What it boils down to is, a rose by any other name still smells sweet.”

### Family Lineage

Mapex drums are made by KHS, one of the world's largest manufacturers of musical instruments. (They also make Jupiter band instruments, and they own Ross Mallet Instruments.) The KHS factory is located in Tianjin, in the northern part of Mainland China. In the summer of 2003 the factory received ISO9001 certification, indicating that it operates at the highest possible standards of manufacturing quality and efficiency.

Prior to 1996, Mapex drums were sold in the US by a series of independent distributors. In that year, Mapex USA was established in Nashville as a wholly owned subsidiary of the parent corporation. The US operation maintains a symbiotic relationship with the KHS factory.

“Our job here is primarily sales and distribution,” says Chuck Turk. “But when we're called upon for input in the area of R&D—and we are, because of our direct connection to artists and consumers—we jump in and are able to contribute. Responding to the needs of customers here in the States has a far-reaching impact elsewhere around the world. Since we are owned by KHS, what benefits them benefits us, and vice versa. So we try to feed them as much information as possible about product development, as well as about what we're doing marketing-wise.”

Jeff Ivester holds the position of marketing director, as well as artist relations director as it applies to marketing. (Industry veteran Joe Hibbs joined the Mapex staff as key accounts/artist relations manager just as this story went to press. He'll share artist relations responsibilities with Jeff.) Says Jeff, “Artist feedback is our primary source of input into product



Vice president and general manager Chuck Turk



Marketing/artist relations director Jeff Ivester

# The Mapex Mix

## Orion Classic



Mapex's top-of-the-line series features 6-ply, 5.1-mm maple shells for traditional warmth, beauty, and tuning range, along with a balance between focus and resonance. Features include 950 series extra-heavy-duty stands, ITS (Isolated Tom System) tom mounts and bass drum spurs, and low-mass lugs with single-point contact. Drum hardware is available in chrome, with 24-carat gold-plated lugs. Ten lacquer colors are available.

## Orion Classic Deep Forest



Deep Forest kits are identical to Orion Classic kits in appointments, but feature 100% walnut or cherry shells. The two different wood types offer distinctly different tonal qualities. Each drum is rotary-cut from the same log to ensure the consistency of color and grain, then given a clear matte finish to maximize the beauty of the wood.

## Saturn Pro



Saturn Pro kits are designed for the touring professional; consequently they're used by nine out of ten of Mapex's endorsing artists. The series features 6-ply, maple/walnut/maple shells said to be exceptionally strong and resonant. Kits are equipped with 550 and 750 series heavy-duty hardware and Mapex Powerhoops. Ten lacquer finishes are available.

## Pro M

The mid-priced Pro M kit is designed to be "a true player's kit with remarkable value." Shells feature seven alternating maple and basswood plies for strength and resonance. The kits are supplied with 550 and 750 hardware, including the 750 bass drum pedal, which features an adjustable, tri-tonal beater and a floating bass drum hoop clamp. The nine available lacquer finishes include three Crystal Fade versions.



## M-Series

The M-Series is intended as a high-performance second kit for a pro, or as a first drumset for the aspiring amateur. The kits feature basswood and maple shells, including a matching wood snare drum, available in seven lacquer finishes. High-quality telescoping bass drum spurs, double-braced 550 hardware, and Remo heads add value and performance capability.



## V-Series

Mapex's entry-level kit features all-basswood shells, including the snare drum and the bass-drum hoops. The shells are said to offer a wide tuning range, while the hoops enhance the bass drum's low frequencies without brittleness. Medium-duty double-braced 320 series stands and pedals provide durability while maintaining affordability. The kits are available in seven covered finishes.



## Chopper

This budget series is designed to offer a quality kit to the beginning drummer. The kits feature 9-ply basswood bass drums and toms, with steel-shell snare drums. Hardware highlights include a pro-quality ball-adjustment tom holder, telescoping bass drum spurs, and double-braced stands. Four- and five-piece drum packs are available, with a variety of hardware package options ranging from the 300 to the 550 series. Kits are available in silver, black, and burgundy covered finishes.

Chopper kits are available with Chin-Dal cymbals, which are cast cymbals made in China. They are offered in two series—130 and 150—as affordable add-ons in order to create a ready-to-play package.



## Black Panther Snare Drums

Black Panther is now a stand-alone brand line, offering snare drums in four series and a total of forty models.

Premium snares feature ultra-thin brass, steel, or maple shells with laser-cut 45° bearing edges said to allow maximum sensitivity, clarity, and resonance. Drums feature low-mass lugs, easy-to-operate throw-offs, and 2.3-mm Powerhoops or 3-mm die-cast hoops.

Precious Metal drums are made from phosphor bronze (said to offer the widest tonal range of any Black Panther snare) and solid bronze (said to generate a dense sound capable of driving the heaviest musical styles).

The Hammered series includes brass, bronze, and steel drums that offer distinctly different sonic characteristics from those of the smooth-shell versions.

Deep Forest snare drums feature 6-ply cherry or walnut shells, each featuring an individually hand-rubbed finish. The walnut drum is said to possess a deep, rich voice, while the cherry's tonality is suggested for live or studio use.



## Mapex Pro Series Snare Drums

Pro Series snares are said to be excellent auxiliary drums. They are targeted at budget-conscious drummers who desire more than one snare sound. Ten models in maple/basswood, steel, and brass range in size from 5½x10 to 6½x14.

## Janus Series Hardware

The Janus series includes Ergo bass drum pedals and the Transmission hi-hat system. The single and double bass drum pedals feature interchangeable Ergo Plates to fine-tune foot position for maximum power and impact. The Transmission hi-hat system features a "shoe-wing" bicycle-style derailleur system that allows the player to shift the footboard from standard double bass mode to integrated hi-hat/bass drum functionality, thus allowing the "slave" pedal to operate either the bass drum beater or the hi-hat stand.



## Performing Artist Series Hardware

Mapex's drumkit stands and holders range from the lightweight 320 series to the ultra-heavy-duty 950 series, which features ball-and-socket adjustments for tom holders and snare-drum baskets.

The company also offers a wide range of thrones, including Big Cat models that offer tiger- or leopard-skin print seats. Also available is a selection of multi-clamps designed with sliding bars to make them extra flexible in terms of positioning.

As we went to press, Mapex announced the development of a new hardware design called ForgeXL, to be introduced in winter of 2004.

# Tianjin Tour

The KHS factory is located in Tianjin, in the north of Mainland China. The facility is large, modern, and amazingly pristine. Here's a look at some of the operations that take place in the factory as part of the creation of Mapex drums.



New products are designed with the aid of computer engineering.



After the shells have been formed, they receive their bearing edges.



Some stained finishes are hand-rubbed for extra depth.



Newly painted shells are compared to master examples to ensure proper color matching.



Veneers of maple, cherry, mahogany, and other woods are trimmed to exact sizes prior to being molded into drumshells.



Every shell is carefully sanded, inside and out.



Hand buffing is also used on several models.



This machine buffs the painted shells in two directions simultaneously to achieve a smooth, glossy finish.



Each veneer must be of precise thickness, so frequent quality-control checks are made.



Skilled painters apply lacquered finishes in a hand-spraying process.

development. Our artists are enthusiastic about their equipment, and they don't hold back when they want to tell us something—good, bad, or otherwise. For example, we gave prototypes of the Janus pedal system to ten artists to try on stage and in the studio. They told us about the things they loved, and the things they weren't crazy about. Because of that response, we got the product right, and it's beautiful now.

"Beyond the input we get from our artists," adds Jeff, "we get lots of comments from people who *aren't* currently endorsing artists but want to be. I can't tell you how many artists have come to us in just the past several months to discuss an endorsement deal, with comments like, 'I've looked at all the drum companies—but I don't want to be like everybody else. I want to be different, and you guys *are* different.' That's exciting for me, because I didn't have to tell them that we were the alternative—they told *me*. That means whatever we're doing is getting out there and working. 'Buzz' is what sells, and it's a byproduct of what you do as a company. You can't buy it; you have to make it happen."

Artists aren't the company's only source of input. Says Jeff, "We also listen careful-

ly to dealers. They get comments directly from their customers, so they can tell us what works and what doesn't, and where we have holes in our product offerings. We poll certain dealers who we deem very credible, and who respond with great candor. They tell us what they believe the market will support. We then pass that information on to the factory. It's not a scientific process, but I think it is a very good way to do business."

## The Value Of Endorsements

Mapex relies on their artist endorsers for more than R&D input. Once new products are available, the company relies on their artists to help sell them. Says Chuck Turk, "People who buy drums don't necessarily believe what the manufacturer says about them. They'd rather hear from somebody who's been lugging them around, banging on them, and beating them up every night. Advertising and the way we package and promote the products helps a little bit. But honest feedback from a real drummer who's out there every day with the product is much more convincing to a working player."

Jeff Ivester adds, "We get new artists as

a result of our marketing efforts, and the artists we have help us *in* our marketing efforts. The two kind of feed off of one another. As a result, we look for artists who are very much like our company—up and coming...alternative...non-mainstream. And we look for relationships, as opposed to some guy going on tour wanting a free drumkit. We like to work with people, and so far we've been pretty lucky. We've had success with drummers who really believe in the brand and in the company. We do our best to support them in return."

## Down In Music City

The headquarters of Mapex USA is a large building in an industrial area just outside Nashville. Most of the building is devoted to warehouse space. The operation receives containers full of boxed merchandise from the factory in China, which is then sorted and shipped out to meet the orders of dealers across the US. More than 90% of sales involves packaged drumkits. But the warehouse stocks individual drums as well. Says Chuck Turk, "No matter how many package configurations we offer, somebody still wants to add an 8" tom or swap a suspended floor tom for



Shells that have received their covered or lacquered finishes are drilled to receive their hardware.



The finished drums come together on an efficient assembly line.

## Drums, Drums, Drums

An overview of Mapex's drumkit offerings is presented in the "Mapex Mix" sidebar at the beginning of this story. But Chuck and Jeff are keen to point out features that they feel may be of special interest.

"In July of 2003 we introduced the Chopper budget series," says Chuck. "It has a wrapped finish over a very good basswood shell, with the same tom holders and spurs as on the V-series, a slightly different tension casing with minimum-contact lugs, and a very simple, sleek badge. This series offers three different shell kits: a four-piece rock-size version, a fusion-sized five-piece, and a traditional-size five piece, each with a metal-shell snare drum. Each shell kit can be configured with one of eight different hardware packages, from something as affordable as a tom holder-mounted cymbal arm, very basic hi-hat and snare stands, and

a decent bass drum pedal, to a package that includes our heavy-duty, double-braced 550 series.

"Also available with the Chopper kits are packs of affordable cymbals from a brand called Chin-Dal," Chuck continues. "That's not to confuse anybody, because we're not a cymbal company. But we did see a need to package affordable cymbals with drumsets in order to give folks who are buying kits for beginning players an easy buying decision. Chin-Dals are cast cymbals that look and sound good. They're made in China, and there's quite a heritage to cymbalmaking there. It's not just a product that has the appearance of a cymbal; it's a musical instrument. And we feel it offers very good added value for our drums."

According to Jeff Ivester, Mapex's basswood-shell V-series is a great kit for week-end warriors. "We pared it down to the most viable and popular setups to keep things simple for buyers and dealers alike," says Jeff. "But that doesn't stop people from configuring their own kits. We've found that drummers in certain parts of the country tend to lean toward certain sizes and shell depths. So we make our component offerings flexible in order to accommodate those sorts of preferences. If a cus-

a 16" floor with legs. So we sell a lot of individual drums."

Chuck is especially proud of his ability to service Mapex drummers with spare parts. "We make all of our own parts," he says. "Nothing is outsourced. As a result, we can service and support every single product we offer. Whether you're a pro making money playing drums or the parent of a ten-year-old beginner, there's nothing worse than having a piece of equipment break and having to jump through hoops to get it fixed. You can call us here at Mapex USA, and we're going to have the part you need in stock. And we can ship it *today*. We think that's very important."

The Nashville facility also maintains what Chuck calls his "artist depot." This is a special stock of drumkits, with every possible model and size within a given finish. "We try to make sure we have stuff available so that we can support our artists if they're in a logistics bind," says Chuck. "If a drummer is on tour in Cincinnati but needs a kit for a special appearance somewhere else, it's no problem. Sometimes it's just a matter of a couple of extra toms or a different bass drum. Because I have all the sizes, I can provide whatever is needed."



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tommer says, "I love this five-piece kit, but I'd like a 10" tom with it," it's no problem. We'll add in the tom, the clamp, and the tom arm, and still sell the kit at a package price instead of charging the a la carte price for those extra items."

Mapex's lowest-price lacquered series is the M-series. Offering seven colors over a maple and basswood shell, the kits come with heavy-duty 550 hardware and the ITS suspension mounting system on the toms. According to Chuck, "We find that The M series transacts at the same price for which our competitors are offering wrapped shells. So it's an exceptionally good value."

"We then go to Pro M," Chuck continues, "on which we start to do fades and even more sexy lacquer finishes. It's another good value. It's priced well below \$1,400 for a complete kit, yet we have some pros playing it out on the road."

Jeff Ivester believes that Mapex's Saturn Pro has been the company's best-kept secret—and one that they want everybody to know about it. Its maple outer ply, walnut middle plies, and maple inner ply give it a special sonic character with tremendous projection. "Drummers playing arenas

are loving this kit," says Jeff. "Engineers also give it rave reviews. It's priced well below the top of our offerings, with features including ITS tom mounts and 950 hardware. And the lacquered finishes are terrific."

Mapex's top-of-the-line Orion Classic series offers three different shell choices: all-maple, all-walnut, or all-cherry. The maple drums feature high-gloss colors over bird's-eye maple veneers. The walnut and cherry Deep Forest kits feature matte finishes over the natural wood. Says Jeff Ivester, "The walnut kit is particularly special. It has a depth and resonance that's very different from anything else."

## A New Cat In Town

Mapex has recently restructured its Black Panther line of snare drums as a stand-alone brand. Says Chuck Turk, "The Black Panther line includes our Precious Metal, Hammered, and Maple offerings, along with satellite snares. It's a comprehensive lineup that offers an incredible selection of voices that can be added to a kit. Our lower-end kits will be packaged with their own snares, and we'll still make

matching snare drums available to those who want them for their Saturn Pro or Orion kits. But overall, we believe that our snare drum business in the mid to upper price ranges will be in Black Panther snare drums."

## Hardware

When it comes to hardware, Mapex offers all the heavy-duty stands that drummers would expect from a major manufacturer. "However," says Chuck, "weekenders and club-date drummers—especially those who date back to the flush-base stands of the '60s—have been screaming for decent lightweight hardware with contemporary functional features. For them we offer our single-braced 300 series. They're entry-level stands that are more than acceptable for professionals. The tilters are decent, the fittings are correct, the collars are good, and the single-braced legs keep the weight manageable."

"Even when it comes to a heavier-duty item," Chuck continues, "our 750 boom stand is single-braced, and there's no counterweight on the boom arm. It's a lightweight, sensible boom stand that makes life



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easier. So we cover a lot of ground in terms of hardware offerings.”

A special feature found on all Mapex cymbal stands and holders is the company's OS Cymbal Accentuators. Explains Chuck, “They're special rubber fittings that do more than just hold the cymbals on the stand. They actually offer a sonic advantage. You get more mid and upper frequencies from the cymbal because you don't have felts binding down on the bell and preventing it from breathing properly. I had a session and touring drummer tell me, ‘I heard tones and frequencies from my cymbals that I'd never heard before until I started using these stands.’”

A unique element of Mapex's hardware line is the Janus series, which includes the Transmission Hat System. It's a double bass pedal/hi-hat combination that was introduced a few years ago. New to the series are Ergo single and double bass drum pedals. While the pedals offer several features, the most conspicuous is the interchangeable Ergo plate built into the footboard. “The Ergo plate makes the pedal look a little weird at first glance,” admits Chuck. “But it's designed to give the player more power with less fatigue and greater control. Several of our artists tested the prototypes, and they all raved about them.”

“Progress never stops around here,” Chuck continues. “We have some things on the horizon to further expand the Janus line. At the same time, we're also developing ForgeXL hardware for debut in winter of 2004. It's being billed as ‘extreme drum hardware,’ but it won't fly in the face of our previous conversations about lighter gear. It will encompass everything from very portable, easy-to-pack, single-braced items to something you can use to hold that big China crash way up in the air. We want to create acceptance for the line on its own, so that someone playing another brand of drums would still want to consider a ForgeXL stand or pedal because of its affordability and quality engineering.”

### A New Logo Look

Whatever Mapex gear you might be considering, you'll soon be seeing it sporting a new logo. As Jeff Ivester explains, “We're calling the new one our ‘oval’ or ‘swirl’ logo. The previous logo was a rather blocky image of the word ‘Mapex’ without the swirl. We had no problems with it aes-

thetically, but it bore some resemblance to the logo of another brand. We simply wanted to avoid any confusion. The new one will transition in over a period of time in order to avoid obsolescence with product that's already out there.”

### A Two-Catalog Concept

In his role as marketing director, Jeff recently supervised the creation of Mapex's full-color catalog. It's an impressive booklet that effectively illustrates and explains the company's products. But it's slated to

be augmented shortly by a second catalog, for drummers with even more esoteric tastes.

“Our ‘regular offerings’ catalog is for all consumers in the US market,” says Chuck Turk. “But we're also in the process of creating our ‘custom concepts’ catalog. It will feature special setup configurations, such as the Micro Pro M, which was a popular compact kit we offered a few years back. There'll be lots of other options too, like Black Panther snare drums, auxiliary snares, and special hardware. You'll be able

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Of course, custom items lose their appeal if it takes forever to get them. That’s an issue near and dear to Chuck’s heart. “If we take too long on an order,” he says, “dealers and consumers get really impatient—and they lose confidence in us as a company. And that’s very understandable. Why should an item *not* be available in a reasonable time? Since January of 2003 I’ve worked on this problem with the folks overseas. Together we’ve reduced the special-order delivery window from 120 days or more to no more than 75 days.”

And what if there’s a problem with an item once it does arrive? “Our factory has pretty stringent quality controls to avoid that,” replies Chuck. “But it still can happen, and that’s where our warranty pro-

gram comes in. Shells are warranted for life to the original owner, hardware is warranted for five years, and finishes and hoops are warranted for one year. We can’t warrant against abuse or misuse, but we take a pretty liberal approach when evaluating other problems.”

### Maintaining Value

When Mapex drums were first introduced, the company deliberately set their prices a little lower on a drum-by-drum basis than those of most of the major manufacturers. That was a savvy move for a newcomer in the marketplace. But it’s fourteen years later, and the Mapex brand is well established. What’s the pricing policy these days?

Chuck Turk responds, “I think you’ll continue to see Mapex as a leader in that area. Again, Mapex USA is not a customer of the manufacturer that makes the product. We work together with our factory, so we’re going to be able to maintain that attractive combination of price and value—along with continual innovation. We think that’s a winning combination.”



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