

The Development of the Steel Band in Trinidad and Tobago

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In spite of its small size—less than 2000 square miles—Trinidad and Tobago gave the world a new form of music in the calypso and a new musical instrument in the steel-pan. In fact, the steel-pan is the only new acoustic instrument developed in the 20th century. This rich musical heritage is celebrated every year during the carnival celebrations, when over 100,000 people dance through the streets of Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, to calypso music played on the steel-pans. The development of the steel-pan is the result of a serendipitous combination of historical circumstance and local resources. In the next few paragraphs, we will detail the development of this remarkable instrument, and its journey from an instrument of former slaves to an accepted place in the world of orchestral music.

As was the case on his two prior voyages, Christopher Columbus was quite frustrated with the attitude of his undisciplined and unbelieving crew on his third voyage in 1498. It was quite a relief to him when on August 1st he stumbled on the southernmost island in the Caribbean archipelago. A staunch Roman Catholic, he was heartened by the sight of the three sister peaks in

the southern mountain range. In the name of the Queen of Castille, he called the island *La Ysla de la Trinidad* in honor of the Blessed Trinity. This name was eventually shortened to Trinidad, the name that is used today. Trinidad remained in Spanish hands for the next three hundred years. It seemed, though, that with its fertile soil, producing sugar cane, cocoa and coffee, and with its mineral wealth in pitch and oil, Trinidad should have been the envy of other European powers. Indeed, the presence of oil in Trinidad plays a prominent role in the discovery of the steel-pan. However, the Spaniards were primarily interested in gold and did not develop many plantations in Trinidad, given its location at the far end of the Caribbean. In a bloodless encounter in 1797, Sir Walter Raleigh seized the island from Spain, and Trinidad became and remained a British colony until Trinidad and Tobago were granted independence in 1962. Britain had acquired the island of Tobago in 1814, and joined the two islands administratively in 1888.

There were two groups of indigenous people in the Caribbean region when Columbus made his voyages. The Arawaks or Taino were a peaceful tribe and were dominated and preyed upon by the more warlike Caribs after whom the entire region is named. Both of these tribes, however, did not survive the pressure of forced labor on the Spanish plantations. When the British captured Trinidad, they allowed French planters to immigrate to Trinidad on the condition that they start plantations on that island. The slave trade had brought Africans to Trinidad to replace the Amerindian labor force that was well on its way to extinction. Today, about forty percent of the Trinidad and Tobago population is of African descent.

The French were staunch Catholics and steadfastly observed the Lenten period. However, this period, beginning on Ash Wednesday, was preceded by two days of carnival revelry involving music and masquerade. Carnival is derived from two Latin words, *carne* meaning *flesh*, and *vale* meaning *farewell*, and carnival was a celebration to purge the bodies of fleshly concerns before entering the contemplative and spiritual Lenten period. Although the slaves had participated in carnival festival, the abolition of slavery allowed these African-descended peoples to develop their own carnival traditions. However, unlike the French masters, they had no access to conventional instruments.

There were, of course, the African drums which were formerly

used in the African religious ceremonies, sending participants into a fearsome frenzy. These drums were now banned because of their association with *pagan* religions and their potential for inflaming the passions of the former slaves. In search of music for their carnival revelries, the emancipated Africans first resorted to stomping varied lengths of bamboo stalks on the ground to provide rhythmic, percussive sounds to accompany their ‘call and response’ calypsos—that is, the leader would call out a line and listeners would respond.

The former slaves lived in long buildings similar to those found in military bases of the day referred to as *barracks yards*. The buildings were divided into several two- or three-room apartments, and were built around a courtyard that was shared by all the families occupying the barracks. Strong friendship bonds developed amongst the families living in the same barracks yards, and each of these yards had their own *tamboo bamboo band and group of calypsonians*. Additionally, an unhealthy rivalry developed among the various barracks yards, which often resulted in violent clashes at carnival time.

As was mentioned earlier, Trinidad is an oil producing country. The first oil well was drilled in 1901, and an oil refinery was established in 1913. Once oil became a regular export, it was not uncommon to see discarded oil drums being used in barracks yards for a variety of purposes (e.g., as garbage cans or water containers). Purely by accident, some carnival reveler decided to add a different tonal flavor to the sounds of the tamboo bamboo by beating on the end of an oil drum with a wooden stick or a piece of metal. Regular use of the oil drums led to another discovery. In the early part of the day, the sound emanating from the drum had a bass quality; however, as the metal stretched and stretched from the constant pounding over the course of the day, the sound increased in pitch and became treble-like in quality. Thus, the first players of the oil drums or steel-pans discovered that that the surface area could produce notes of different pitch depending on how much it was stretched.

Experimentation went on apace and the pioneers came up with a two-note instrument that resulted in sounds akin to a pair of Conga Drums. Labeled the *doo doop* because of the kind of rhythm it was used to play, this early pan was used to accompany the calypsos of the day. The next development was an eight-note instrument

that could play a major scale. This instrument was developed by segmenting the pan's surface into eight smaller areas, and stretching each segment by a different amount. Labeled the *ping pong*, it was the forerunner of the modern Tenor Pan. Soon, the people who were experimenting with pans produced three more instruments that were lower in pitch, to complement the *tenor*. These pans were the *second*, the *guitar*, and the *bass pans*.

These developments in pan-making were all taking place in the barracks yards, and members of upper and middle class society viewed the people of the barracks yards and their new instrument with disdain. There were several reasons for the negative attitude, beyond the obvious one of socioeconomic status. First, violence during carnival celebrations continued to increase at the same time that the advances in the steel-pan were occurring. In fact, individual barracks yards adopted names for their groups of players (now *steel bands*) that reflected the violence that occurred when these yards met on the streets. Some of the more well-known names of early steel bands—Renegades, Desperadoes, and Invaders—speak to the nature of the clashes. Second, the pans lacked resonance, and when hit, produced a dampened, covered sound and an approximate pitch.

From the point of view of the more affluent in society, steel-pans were noise-makers rather instruments, and on carnival days, pan players were harried by the police who viewed them as trouble-makers. The Dry River, which passes through East Port-of-Spain, became the graveyard of many early pans. The pans were discarded in the river as band members fled from the pursuing policemen to the barracks yards on the far side of the river. Ironically, the police harassment contributed to the refinement of the instrument. The fact that new pans were needed each year resulted in the pan tuners becoming more adept at their task, and led to the production of better instruments every carnival season.

At that time, all instruments were single drums or pans and were carried around the neck. However, it became increasingly clear that a single drum was inadequate for the range of notes needed, particularly for the lower pitched instruments, as the segments needed for lower notes were larger. The early sixties saw the advent of two-, three-, four-, and six-drum instruments. Two of the tuners responsible for this development were Anthony Williams from the

band “North Stars,” and the late Rudolph Charles (alias ‘the Hammer’) from the band “The Desperadoes.” By this time, the tuning of these instruments was remarkably better, and with a full range of notes in all the pan voices, the standard of steel band music improved by leaps and bounds and became more acceptable by society. The addition of rubber wrapping to the end of the pan sticks used for beating resulted in a clean, resonant sound, and better tuning techniques resulted in instruments which could be tuned with accuracy.

Politics also played a role in advancing the steel band movement. In 1956, the party system brought the People’s National Movement into office. The man now regarded as the father of the nation, the late Dr. Eric Williams, led this political party. Williams encouraged steel band sponsorship by corporations, and this sponsorship resulted in steel bands gaining respectability as well as a sense of responsibility. The last major clash between rival steel bands took place in 1958. In the early 1960s, two foreign priests/musicians entered the steel band movement: Fr. Tim Corcoran, an Irish Catholic priest, and Fr. John Seawell, an Anglican priest from Scotland, became involved with individual steel bands and introduced classical music to the pan fraternity. Their involvement led to the increased involvement of members of the middle class in steel bands, which in turned heralded the birth of the modern steel orchestra.

Table 1. *From Pan to Steel Orchestra*

Original steel-pan	Single oil drum
The doo doop	Two-note steel-pan
The ping pong	Eight-note steel-pan (could play major scale)
The Steel Band	Tenors, seconds, guitars, basses
The Modern Steel Orchestra	
Tenor	A single drum
Double-Tenor	Two drums
Double-Second	Two drums
Guitar	Two drums
Cello	Three or four drums*
Tenor-Bass	Four drums
Low-Bass	Six or nine drums*

*Depending on the conductor’s preference

The increased musicality of the instrument and its unique sound has resulted in the development of several music festivals exclusively for steel-pan and has led to its export to several countries around the globe. An official carnival competition for steel bands dubbed *Panorama* began in 1963, and a Steel Band Music Festival was launched in 1967. In 1980, a biennial national competition using internationally-renowned musicians as adjudicators was introduced. This competition, titled *Pan Is Beautiful*, is another marker in the growth of the modern steel orchestra, as it was the first time that sizeable international audiences heard traditional orchestral repertoire played by many steel bands. The test piece for the 1980 festival was Handel's *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*, and the winning orchestra in 1982 played Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* as their piece of choice. In the late 1990s, the Trinidad and Tobago government established a National Steel Orchestra, whose members are paid to represent Trinidad and Tobago locally and internationally. In 2000, Trinidad and Tobago launched a biennial World Pan Festival that is open to soloists and ensembles from around the world. In the 2002 festival, steel orchestras from England, France, Switzerland, and the United States vied against orchestras from Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean countries.

Female participation in steel bands remained taboo until the late 1970s. In fact, in 1963, the Mighty Sparrow, one of Trinidad's leading calypsonians, sang the following verse commenting on the low status of the steel-pan players and the negative response of family members to a daughter of the household talking to a steel band man:

*Calypsonians really catch hell for a long time,
To associate yourself with them was a big crime.
If your sister talk to a steel-band man
The family want to break she han'
Throw she out, lick out every tooth in she mouth,
"Pass! You outcast!"*

Today, there are more women than men playing in steel orchestras, and a female soloist took first place in the 2000 World Pan Festival. Many secondary schools and several elementary schools have steel bands as an extracurricular activity, and there is now a

school steel band competition (Junior Panorama) as a regular part of annual carnival celebrations.

Although tremendous strides have been made in the development of the steel-pan, there are still issues that need to be resolved. For example, the placement of notes on the instrument needs to be standardized, as note placement on the pan is still idiosyncratic to the tuner involved. This point is particularly important, because it is possible to learn to play on a pan developed by one tuner, and then join a band that uses a different tuner with a different arrangement of notes. **Until the instrument is fully standardized, player mobility and the development of the instrument will be limited.** **Second, pan players need to learn to read music—the majority of players today have to be taught the pieces that they play, note by note.** This method of learning is quite slow and greatly extends the time that steel orchestras take to master new repertoire. The government can assist this effort by mandating basic music theory as part of the school curriculum.

These problems notwithstanding, the steel-pan has had a remarkable journey in its less than one-hundred-year history. If you have not heard it play calypso or classical music, you are missing a treat. We suggest you visit Trinidad at carnival time and listen to pan and calypso. You will also be able to see the wonderful costumes designed for each year's celebration—but that is another story.

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