

# First ever national steelband in Japan

By SEAN NERO

WHILE Trinidad and Tobago is yet to get to first base, Japan has formed a national steel orchestra. The last national steel orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago bit the dust more than two decades ago.

Through the assistance of tuner Bertram Kellman, Jit Samaroo and the members of Amoco Renegades, the Japanese have also formed a national junior orchestra.

The *Sukiyaki Meets the World Festival '95* saw the debut performance of the first-ever Japan National Steel Orchestra in the city of Toyama, Japan.

The 23 members of the Sukiyaki Junior Steel Orchestra opened the Festival, dressed in black t-shirts, with the group's name emblazoned on the front, and white trousers. The lone non-Japanese player was tutor Brian Brumant who played drums, maintaining a simple rhythm for the three pieces performed.

The young pannists opened with an item from the *Song of Music* soundtrack ("My Favourite Things"), followed by two Japanese numbers, "Cherry Blossom" and "Tabanata." The performance by the pan minors belied their ages and gave one the impression they had been together for more than a year.

The senior members of Sukiyaki, also numbering 23, opened their set with Ronnie McIntosh's "On the Road." Although the Calypso rhythm proved challenging, assistance from Renegades "engine room" guided them through this selection. Other pieces by the senior members were "Hey Jude" and the "Blue Danube Waltz."

The response of the Japanese audience can only be described as euphoric as they watched their family members, friends and fellow citizens of the Toyama perfectly execute musical magic on the national musical instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. During its rendition of

"On the Road," the members of Sukiyaki's senior band danced with hands "in de air" executing rehearsed spinning moves.

Renegades headlined the evening's performances with 20 minutes of non-stop, pulsating Calypso selections. Renegades previously performed in Toyama in 1992 and 1993.

After Renegades' initial Japanese visit, courtesy the Conversation Company, the Tokyo-based promotions outfit was so impressed that its management purchased all the band's instruments, as a long-term investment. Now, when Renegades travels to Japan, there is no need to ship instruments from Trinidad. Now the property of Conversation, these are the instruments used by Sukiyaki.

Renegades also made a similar arrangement with European agent Run Production, which purchased the band's instruments in 1993, making it possible for a 22-member ensemble to travel to Europe with free hands. The Japanese have instruments for a 20-member aggregation.

Both Run Production and Conversation promote Renegades yearly tours to Japan.

The pioneering pan project undertaken by Conversation, and Helios (the *Sukiyaki Meets the World* organising committee), is assisted by the Japan Foundation.

The historic formation of the first ever national steel orchestra of Japan didn't come about by curious pannists simply wishing to enlist. Each member was required to pay a membership fee of 4,000 Japanese Yen, plus purchase a t-shirt to perform at the Festival.

Conversation representative on tour with Renegades Yuko Fukunaga said her organisation is very excited about the formation of this first ever Japanese steel orchestra. Although this was not the set objective, Fukunaga said this breakthrough is welcomed.

Brumant, director of the pilot pan apprentice-

ship programme, is seeking other opportunities for pannists in the future. His workshop, which Fukunaga said was initially intended to be merely a recreational summer project, developed into something beyond everyone's wildest imagination.

Fukunaga said: "I have been conversing with many people in Toyama, where this pioneering project commenced in mid-June this year. Their response is one which is welcomed toward this new culture from Trinidad and Tobago, the steelpan, and would like to continue it again next year."

Fukunaga said she would like to receive even more financial support from the Japan Foundation in order to embark upon another pan project, and to invite Brumant and Kellman for an even longer period. She urged other Japanese corporate citizens and organisations to follow Conversation's example, and be part of this cultural and musical experience.

When asked if Conversation and Helios would pioneer another project next year, Fukunaga replied that she was optimistic as, "Renegades has established an excellent working relationship with Conversation over the years," plus many other steel orchestras have also toured Japan. With greater financial assistance, Fukunaga envisions even greater opportunities for Renegades and pan in Japan.

With Brumant and Kellman back in Trinidad, Fukunaga's biggest concern is about the blending and upkeep of the instruments. She said: "We did not consider this, and it has left us in a dilemma. I have requested the members to continue rehearsing but, without the guidance of Brian or any of the Renegades members, there is little room for success, until they return." Fukunaga has asked Brumant and Kellman to return as soon as possible.

"The thought of forming this first ever Japanese steel orchestra came as a surprise during such

a relatively short period," said Fukunaga. "We had not perceived the programme would have been so well directed. Therefore, another programme is imperative. The group should not become dormant. Everyone should unite to ensure the group's survival. The members enjoyed themselves and neither Brian nor the people in Toyama would want to see all this hard work and effort come to an abrupt end."

The success of this group has been marked by its ability to secure a contract to perform around mid-November at a prestigious hotel.

Now back home, Renegades is in the process of co-ordinating educational pan seminars to comprehensively educate its members on the history of pan. Also primary, intermediate and advanced courses in music are scheduled to begin soon.