

The great days of pan

By JOHN BABB

ADJUDICATOR

ROGER NICHOLS made the most pertinent statement of the night: "We can say not just pan is rising, but pan has risen."

His words immediately threw my mind back to the very first Steelbands Festival held at the Globe cinema in Port-of-Spain in March, 1952, and the comments of another Britisher, Sydney Northcote, who was the adjudicator on that occasion.

Dr Northcote was so astonished at the mellow sounds of the pan that he commented: "We have witnessed man's ingenuity in trying to get beauty out of something that is absolutely a waste product."

Instruments

He advised that it would take patience to build technique and purity. The late Dr Northcote would have been extremely pleased to hear the panman ultimately discover the potential beauty and subtlety of his instrument.

Mr Nichols adjudicated at the 1984 festival and, like most of us, thought that the standard of performances then could not possibly be higher. Many people thought the same in 1982 after hearing that memorable performance by ISCOTT Casablanca of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. But then don't we all think so after every festival? Only to be proven wrong by the panmen at the next?

Like adjudicator Nichols, everyone at the Jean Pierre Complex two Saturdays ago would admit that the standard of

performances this year was higher than in previous festivals, save and except that in each of those previous festivals there were performances that remain indelibly in one's mind.

Just to mention a few. We had Boys Town of Point Cumana playing "You Are My Heart's Delight" in 1952; "Anna" by Southern Symphony and "The Breeze and I" by winners Katzenjammers at the Roxy cinema in 1956; "Agnus Dei" by Dixieland edging out "In a Monastery Garden" by Invaders in 1960; "Poet and Peasant" by City Syncopators, edged out in 1966 by Pan-Am North Stars' scintillating performance of "Intermezzo in E Flat". Following a lapse there was "Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna" by Catelli Trinidad All Stars in 1980, followed by Casablanca's "1812 Overture" in 1982. Those were the memorable ones.

But as the festivals continue it is getting difficult to select a performance as the best because of the excellent standard of panmanship being displayed by all eight finalist bands.

In this year's festival some would single out the performance of Witco Desperadoes, coming back after an absence of 19 years to win the title. There are others who would choose Catelli All Stars. The more musically inclined would mention the big sound of the little band, Samaroo Jets, always a threat to the big bands.

The standard generally has reached a level where any band making it to the finals is a winner in its

own right, hence each festival we are presented with eight winners.

In reviewing a few of the performances the first that comes to mind is Pamberi's tune of choice, "Excerpt from Rite of Spring" by Stravinsky. Conductor Dawn Batson, who has made a name at Music Festivals, is young and talented. But the youthful panists of Pamberi are not all that talented. The piece proved a bit too difficult for them.

Another band, Blue Diamonds, tackled the "Overture to Poet and Peasant" by von Suppe. My advice to them is — listen to the recordings of both City Syncopators and Pan-Am North Stars of 1966 and they will discern which is chalk and which is cheese.

Great Music

Jit and the Samaroo Jets did not quite pull it off as some expected. They played better at the semi-finals. Or is it that the sound of the three big bands on finals night was just too much? Maybe. But the Samaroo Jets will continue scoring high for the correctness of the band's music.

Phase Two, most popular by audience applause, is slowly getting there. But it is difficult for the band to hit the tape in a festival when it has to come up against conductors such as Jerry

Jemmott, Anthony Prospect and Pat Bishop. Phase Two needs a Jocelyn Pierre to refine and polish it. For make no bones about it, it is the conductor — in this era of pan — who calls the trumps. Despers was wise to latch on to Pat Bishop.

On the commentary side we had President Ellis Clarke saying there was a great deal we ought to be grateful for, and one of those was the remarkable God-given talent of the steelbandsman. A much better statement than the "we like it so" of 1982. He noted that the development of the steelband had been achieved in less than 45 years.

For adjudicator Merle Albino De Couteau, the performance on the night of the finals by the bands was "an overwhelming experience." For her, it was "a pleasure and privilege to be associated in so positive a manner in the event."

She also had a few words to the foreigners in the audience. "The music emanating from the drums may seem incredible," she told them, "but this only goes to show the creativity of the people of Trinidad and Tobago."

To Easley Blackwood, another of the four adjudicators, it was "a musical event of major world significance."

His colleague, Roger Nichols, was made to confess: "When I was asked to come back here so shortly, I said to myself

the standard cannot possibly be higher than in 1984. Well I was wrong."

Two factors struck him, he said. First, there was much more subtlety in playing than there was two years ago. And secondly, the panman has begun to realise that the pans can provide not only excitement, but also poetry.

Grammy Award winning trumpeter Wynton Marsalis got a taste of his own brilliance. Only the night before he had held his audience spellbound with performances on his trumpet at the Hilton in the Pan/Jazz Festival. Well at the Steelbands Festival the pans had him spellbound.

Inspiration

He also had a word for the supporters: "Support the players, support your culture all year round, not just when they have this festival, because this type of thing would be an inspiration to musicians all over the world."

And while we're on pan, shouldn't we be thinking in terms of a National Steelband? We've done it already and it was quite successful. Now that