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Unifying the pan

TWO announcements yesterday show that persons in Government have decided to take concrete steps to do something about promotion of steelband. We sincerely hope there is enough time and willing minds to do the job before it is too late.

From the Standards Bureau comes the news that it will be co-ordinating moves to create acceptable standards for all aspects of pan. This includes size, quality, placing of notes, and other steps needed to get internationally accepted definitions.

While the Bureau deals with the physical side, the Ministry of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs is seeking to develop a policy for the development of pan as an art form. We read this as a move to ensure that pan gets proper copyright protection, that Trinidad and Tobago gets recognition as the home of pan, and for a long term, well-thought-out programme to anchor it locally and take it to the world.

We like to say that pan is an instrument which has swept the world, but strictly speaking that is not really true. Indeed, the steelband's potential on a global scale is still a long way from being realised.

World of Jazz

But the basis is being laid in the successful international tours being undertaken by our leading bands — still too infrequent for our liking — and the number of schools in North America and Europe which have steelbands as part of their student activity, on our off the curriculum.

Also in the world of jazz, some of our virtuoso players have succeeded in acquiring a recognised place for pan in harmony with and alongside the well established instruments.

However, one knowledgeable writer who recently came back from a long stay in North America has found to his dismay that the

countries. Nobody says that the audience is mostly immigrant West Indians. Nobody says that steelband records do not sell very well in record shops abroad.

That does not mean that certain individuals are not doing well from pan in foreign countries. Ray Holman, for instance, has just returned from teaching a course in Canada's University of Manitoba, which was attended by the conductor of the symphony orchestra. Rudy Smith is playing with some of the world's top jazz musicians.

Many of our talented pannists are making their living abroad, some teaching in universities, others organising steel orchestras, others just playing. Still, at best it is no more than a collection of individual efforts, not a co-ordinated assault. Reasons are not hard to find.

Track Record

This country, and nobody else either, has as yet developed a standard system of producing, tuning and delivering steelbands at a decent price. A musician cannot enter a music shop in Tokyo and be able to buy a tenor pan, books on how to play it, sheet music for practice, and relatively simple instructions for tuning an instrument which can go out of tune very quickly.

Will that same Tokyo music enthusiast have a problem if he wishes to play a tenor saxophone, or a bass guitar or a violin? We all know the answer to that, and such is the challenge to pan.

To win global recognition as a musical instrument, pan must be marketed in such a way as to place it alongside other popular instruments.

Here is where a realistic and well funded promotion programme can make all the difference. Another two decades of unfulfilled dreams will go by unless we push pan to the world in the same way the Jamaicans did with their reggae.

Pan must be well founded locally and moved away from the handout era. It must be made by people who know what they are doing, managed by experts, and promoted internationally by those with a track record of