

JEREMY TAYLOR
Express Drama critic
finds the real break-
through in steelband
has been made by the
"Samaroo Jets."

WHATEVER "break-through" there has been this year on the "classics-on-steel" scene - and there's certainly been a lot of activity there - it has come from the Samaroo Jets, who gave a full classical programme at the Queen's Hall.

It was substantially the same programme as the one they gave for the Recital Club at St Joseph's Convent in October, except that the Overture to Handel's "Messiah" was replaced by a group of three songs sung by June Nathaniel to the band's accompaniment.

There are precise reasons why the Samaroo's achievement does mark a major advance. First and

most important, the programme consisted of complete works.

That may seem a trivial point, but any classical musician will recognise that the determination to play a work complete, as the composer wrote it, is the first and essential sign of serious musicianship.

The time is past for praising an athlete just for finishing the course, or panmen for playing bits and pieces from the rag-

bag of popular classics.

The performance of classical music involves the acceptance of its conventions, which is what the Samaroo's have done; and their programme is the first to be given in this country comprising complete classical works.

Secondly, playing the classics means giving attention to classical style, which the Samaroo's have also been careful to do.

It means understanding the conventions of different periods in speed, rhythm, phrasing, "feel"; it means a careful dynamic control, a sense of climax, an understanding of how different parts weave in and out of each other, of how in a concerto "full orchestra"

effects contrast with solo textures, and so on.

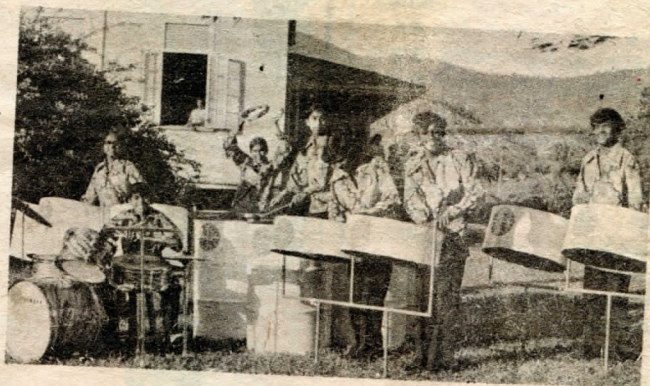
The Samaroo's are by no means the first group to blink of all this, and could be faulted on several points - the Bach Double Violin Concerto could have done with a clearer definition of the solo parts, a steadier pace in the first movement, and so on.

But whatever argument there may be over detail, a lot of thought has clearly gone into their performance, which was remarkable for musical sensitivity and restraint, and a softness of tone often very appropriate for the chamber music selections.

Thirdly, the fact that the

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THE SAMAROO JETS BREAKTHROUGH IN THE CLASSICS



Samaroo Jets in action

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THE JETS GIVE A GOOD SHOW

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Samaroos are so few — one player to a part — means they can achieve more clarity of texture and variety of tone than is possible for much larger groups, and can thus do more to avoid the sameness of tone which is inevitable when a lot of players are using the same kind of instrument.

A string quartet compared with a 60-piece string orchestra is a parallel case: the quartet is flexible and capable of much variety, while the mass of strings is bound to be a bit unwieldy and turgid.

There is a fruitless argument going on in some quarters about this, about exactly what pans are capable of, what music suits them and what doesn't, how and whether they should be blended with other instruments, and so on.

Fruitless, because even asking the questions is often considered, even by certain sociological persons as heretical, even though the same questions have had to be answered about every other instrument under the sun.

Learned gentlemen have even been on television to defend the steelband from imaginary accusations which then proceeded innocently from their own mouths.

Sooner or later these questions will have to be faced, but not on ideological grounds.

Flair

The Samaroo's concert, in spite of a go-slow (or, to be more precise, a stop) by the lighting man, went well, and much of the playing was even better than in October. There were certain infelicities of tuning apparent from time to time, the very top notes of the tenor being particularly unsatisfactory; the bass often needed a firmer definition, and several movements ended in a sense of anti-climax.

But there was a great deal to enjoy in each item. June Nathaniel, joining the group for the first time, sang as sweetly as ever, and it was good to hear an adventurous choice in the second song.

Fr. John Sewell was the soloist in Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, playing with much flair and confidence, with a fine clarity and rhythmic firmness, even if all the notes were not exactly as Schubert intended them.

But the real significance of the concert, for which the Samaroos must take credit, lies in the recognition that classical music has its own style, conventions and criteria, and the performances of it in the future will have to take them at least as seriously as the Samaroos have done.