



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

*Elliot Mannette*

Chancellor,

*It is with profound pride and a sense of privilege that I present you this evening Elliot Mannette, perhaps the greatest innovator Trinidad has ever produced. For it is Mannette more than any other individual who not only revolutionized the nature of the steelpan as a musical instrument, but who with reluctant official sponsorship, took the instrument and globalized it into a world force on the musical stage.*

*The story of the rise of the steelpan to international fame and to the status of national instrument is the story of the changing configuration and restratification of Trinidadian society; for the historical record would show that the steelpan, carnival and calypso are all linked together in the movement and convulsions of Trinidadian society over the last two centuries.*

*It has been claimed that Carnival continues some of the traditions of the Roman festival of Saturn and that in its Greco-Roman adaptations in Catholic countries, it became*

associated with laughter, interpenetration of cultures, the celebration of the body and the senses, the inversion of hierarchies, the mixing of identities and the regeneration of life.

Carnival, like the steelpan, had also to contend with official and Establishment displeasure. Developing as a 'Creole Carnival', it was originally confined to indoors, but at night the planters would emerge to dance the slave dances, such as the kalinda or belair, in their slave costumes with their torches and drums in Canboulay processions; and when in 1838 Emancipation was celebrated by the former slaves, they attempted to appropriate carnival as their own.

This attempt at dispossession of the whites led to the suppression of the Kalindas, and a ban on the beating of skin drums and canboulay processions. The newly emancipated classes then replaced the drum with tamboo-bamboos, and the kalindas by various manoeuvres evolved into the calypso.

This was the Trinidad in 1927 into which Elliot Mannette was born. He grew up in Woodbrook at a time when the steelpan was largely confined to the depressed areas of East Port of Spain. By accident it was discovered that a dustbin cover provided a better melody than the tamboo-bamboo; and by the mid-thirties Winston 'Spree' Simon and others would also by accident discover that by pounding on the metal of a steeldrum, notes could be created.

It was unusual for Elliot Mannette, a member of the middle-class, to become interested in the steelpan, and even more suprising that he should organise a group, 'The Oval Boys' in 1940, that would later become 'The Invaders Steel Orchestra'. The steelpan and the steelband movement in the 1940s and 1950s was largely dominated by the warlords of the urban ghettos and, as governmental commissions later pointed out, was characterised by violent clashes inspired by neighbourhood,

village, gang, turf and other rivalries. Clashes between bands named after cinematic characters such as *Casablanca*, *Invaders*, *Destination Tokyo*, *Desperadoes*, *John-John*, *Bar-20* and *Hell Yard* have now passed into legend and folklore. For these and other reasons steelbandmen became the pariahs of polite society.

The innovations in the instrument, which Mannette introduced during the forties, contributed significantly towards the upliftment of the status and prospects of the steelpan and the steelband movement. Initially, he introduced the concave shape to the pan, and in 1944 replaced the conventional broom handle used to beat the pan with sticks wrapped in rubber that would enhance the quality of sound from the instrument; later, based on an experience acquired as a machinist in hammering and tempering steel, he hit upon the idea of a steelpan made from a 55-gallon oil drum, which not only achieved 14 notes but which enabled him to play 'Brahms Lullaby'.

This was certainly a turning point in the development of the instrument and established Mannette as a first-rate tuner. A concern with violence in the capital, the acceptance of the steelband by the Americans, and the formation by Mannette of a steelband 'Girl Pat Steel' comprising middle-class women, cumulatively led to a radical change in official policy towards the steelpan and the steelband.

In 1950, however, Mannette declined a scholarship to study music at the Birmingham School of Music but in 1951 made the historic tour of Europe by TASPQ as its main arranger and tuner. In 1963 he was invited to the USA to develop the US Navy Steelband by building its instruments and training its players.

In 1967, however, Elliot Mannette decided that he had had enough. He left Trinidad and fled to the United States, not

for 'the pleasures of exile' but rather because society did not reciprocate his commitment to the steelpan. There had been some encouragement by individuals such as Hugh Wooding and Beryl McBurnie but little euphoria from the wider society. It is said that the then Prime Minister's reaction was that Mannette had taken the soul of Trinidad to the United States.

Yet, it would be in the United States, that the talents of Mannette would be celebrated and developed, although in Trinidad, The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in 1974 had embarked on a research exercise designed to probe the melodic possibilities of the steelpan. In the United States he became absorbed in seminars, workshops at colleges and universities all over the United States and in 1990 was appointed Artist-in-Residence at the West Virginia University College of Creative Arts, the location of the World Music Centre, imparting to American students the intricate art of steelpan construction and tuning. The construction and tuning of the steelpan is now demanding the attention of physicists and metallurgists with the aim of achieving an early dream by Mannette of a 'symphony in steel'. He has also along with others authored technical papers on the steelpan. His most recent innovation, revolutionary in its implications for soloists, is the Quadet, which dramatically expands the range of tunes that can be played on the instrument.

For his contribution to the development of the instrument he recently (1999) received from President Clinton a National Endowment for the Arts and National Heritage Fellowship award, the highest honour that can be bestowed on the folk and traditional arts.

In honouring Elliot Mannette, we are saluting the efforts of the early pioneers but more decisively the special and decisive advances which he made to rescue the creation of a marginal

group in Trinidad which otherwise might have slipped into oblivion.

Chancellor, I request you by the authority of Senate and of Council, to confer upon Elliot Mannette the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa.

Saturday 28 October, 2000