

Sweet pan made in Croydon



STERLING BETANCOURT just before he left for England with TASPO.

TRINIDAD and Tobago, where the steelband was born and developed into a world musical phenomenon, may soon find itself in the ironical position of importing instrumental pans.

Two factors are operating to make this so. The first is the fact that steelbands are still entirely dependent on the oil industry for their continued supply of pans. But this supply is becoming more uncertain with rumours that oil may sooner or later find a less expensive package in plastic containers.

The second factor is the export trade in steelband instruments which is being launched in — above all places — the bustling London suburb of Croydon.

Musical pans will soon be rolling off the assembly line of a Croydon light engineering firm, making it the first in the world to mass produce the traditional West Indian instruments, according to a report in the Croydon Advertiser earlier this month.

And one of the men playing a key role in this venture is Trinidad's Sterling Betancourt, the pioneering pan-man and tuner who went to England with TASPO in the early '50s.

Its treasurer is Mrs. E. M. French, headmistress of the school, and Mr. James Cummings, the borough's community relations officer, is the secretary.

Then the search began to find a firm which would undertake the production of the instruments and trials began at A. G. Major.

Their new technique eliminates the use of oil drums and substitutes a purpose-made instrument which only has to be tuned. It involves hand spinning flattened circles of steel into shape, rather like moulding pottery and then welding them together.

The drums are then tuned by Sterling Betancourt to make the welded instrument capable of producing the sounds of the steelband.

Possible export markets for the instruments include Belgium, West Germany and Sweden as well as the West Indies.

GROWING DEMAND

The first drum to come off the assembly line of A. G. Major, the firm of metal spinners in Croydon was presented to the Mayor, Alderman S. E. Littlechild.

According to the Advertiser, the drum was a miniature pan, specially made for the occasion and decorated with the borough's coat of arms.

The Mayor accepted the drum after hearing the steelband of the Elmwood Junior School playing similar instruments at an intercultural concert held at the Fairfield Halls and organised by Croydon Schools Music Association.

It was the Elmwood steelband which set off a tidal wave of interest among schools throughout the country.

They wanted to start their own groups and the demand of the steel band instruments grew rapidly.

To answer this demand Steel Band Promotions, a voluntary body for steel band enthusiasts, closely linked with Elmwood's pioneering band, was formed.