Pros and cons of standardisation

By **SELWYN TARRADATH**, EDUCATION OFFICER OF PANTRINBAGO

STANDARDISATION of pan is a topic that evokes many different responses and arguments. The most popular trend of thought by both practitioners and laymen alike is that this must be implemented at all costs if the instrument is to be accepted internationally.

The logic behind this line of reasoning is that most popular instruments are standardised, and that a musician can arrive in any part of the world without his instrument, and obtain one to the exact specifications to what he is familiar with.

This does not hold true of the steelpan, as even the most experienced and versatile players have some degree of difficulty in moving from one band to another and playing the instruments comfortably.

The argument is further strengthened by the prohibitive cost of moving around a complete steel orchestra. Standardisation would mean that bands could rent instruments in the countries of their performances, or could even store them conveniently in areas like North America or Europe to be moved overland and avoid the excessive air freight charges.

The other side of the coin is represented mainly by the craftsmen, the pan tuners, some of whom fear that standardisation would mean a loss of identity for them.

Still others point out that to rush blindly into the process could mean stunting the development of the instrument which is still in a fairly early stage of evolution.

The steelband is one of the most recent additions to the family of musical instruments, having a history of a little over half-century.

It would be illogical to assume that it has reached its final stage of development.

Most instruments have reached the stage of standardisation through a natural process of evolution; the fear, however, is that if we do not speed up the process, or arrive at some standard, we would lose out in the final analysis.

Main Problem

We may look at the comparison with the development of the keyboard, which is the most popular and complete musical instrument we have presently. The mighty piano took almost two thousand years to evolve into the instrument as we know it today.

Carvings found in ancient Egyptian caves show an instrument with keys like the piano. The psaltery and dulcimer were two instruments developed in Asia, and brought to Europe which influenced the development of the piano. The clavichord and harpsichord were further developments between the 14th and 16th centuries.



SELWYN TARRADATH ...arguments

The main problem with these instruments was the tuning of the strings, which when tuned to any scale did not sound right in another scale. The Greek mathematician Pythagoras had worked out a method of tuning strings as early as 500 BC, and this method was used to arrive at a formula for tuning based on the frequency of a vibrating note and its mathematical relationship to other notes.

This is called a tempered scale.

The famous 17th century musician, Johann Sebastian Bach advocated the use of this method of tuning, and wrote a collection of 48 pieces based on every single scale. These pieces would have been unplayable before tempered tuning. He called the collection *The Well Tempered Clavier*.

The first piano as we know it was conceived by Bartolemmeo Cristofori in 1709, and he called it a harpsichord with soft and loud. The name piano comes from this description as the Italian for soft and loud is piano *e forte*.

The long period of development did not stop the music from been composed and expressed, for we have huge volumes of music composed before the piano was established that are played on the keyboard today.

The steelband, though only taking 50 years to reach a stage of acceptance has many similarities in its evolution.

The early panmen, having discovered that changes of pitch occurred where the metal of the pans was thinly stretched, lost no time in creating these areas of stress which would result in the formation of a simple instrument where different tones were created entirely at the whim of the tuner.

As more instruments were created the tuners strived to get clearer notes without paying too much attention to the rudiments of music. Thus it was that the same note on a differently tuned pan would have differences of pitch.

Certain Notes

The arrangement of the notes was also haphazard, and an instrument could miss out certain notes if these were not needed for the tunes been played.

The formation of TASPO in 1950 brought these problems to light, and Lt Griffith sought to rectify the situation which was already been addressed through the efforts of Lennox Pierre. The notes of the instruments were chromaticised so that there was a logical sequence of notes.

Over the years the participation in music festivals and the integration of the instruments of the steel orchestra with conventional musical instruments forced the steelband instruments to be standardised in terms of pitch.

Most steelbands now tune their instruments in concert C or standard pitch using the A 440 standard. This way the panman can play with most instrumentalists without having the problem of transposition.

The main areas where standardisation is needed are in the placement of notes and the selection of the proper types of metal for tuning the pans.

Next week we would take an indepth look at these two areas.