

The Column



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Pan and pannists making strides

A steelband performing at prestigious Carnegie Hall? A music reading course for pannists?

That's right. These two historic events took place within the past seven weeks. While the WITCO Desperadoes steelband was receiving two standing ovations for the first ever performance by a steelband at Carnegie Hall, New York, pannists were learning to sight-read music at the Creative Arts Centre of the St Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies.

Now, it seems, at last pan is being taken seriously and the dream of a pan factory may yet become a reality.

As a first step towards having steelband music accepted as a conventional form of music, the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Culture and Creative Arts sponsored a six-week music sight reading course, as a pilot project.

Conducted by Steelband Development Officer, Mr Leon Edwards, who is also an arranger for Catelli All Stars, the course catered for players in the treble range — double seconds to tenors — who had a minimum of two years' stageside experience.

Approximately 50 players responded when the programme was first an-

nounced, of whom 20 were chosen, not only on the basis of their experience but also on their potential ability to impart knowledge gained.

Why a music course for pannists who have been playing the steelpan for decades without being able to read music and have been lauded worldwide for their ability to reproduce, from memory, the intricacies of the music masters?

Musical Literacy

Pan Trinidad's Public Relations Officer, Mr Selwyn Taradath, believes that musical literacy is a pre-requisite to good steelband music.

Edwards agrees, saying that the course will help liberate panmen from learning music by rote. With the ability to read music, he adds, "The panman will be able to play any piece he wishes — not just what the tutor has taught him."

This independence is supported by course participants Edward Yearwood, a panman for some two decades. Yearwood, who has been playing the instrument from age 13, says the course has taught him the value of the various

musical notes and he is better able now to understand and appreciate the moods intended by composers.

Like his colleagues on the Pan Triinbago executive, Yearwood feels that to broaden the acceptance of pan, it should be taught in schools alongside conventional instruments such as the piano and the recorder.

"Then" says Michelle Dennis, lone female course participant, "the negative attitude towards pan would be removed." Added to the negative attitude towards pannists, it is no surprise to find that they feel they are being treated like second class citizens.

San Fernando arranger, Denzil James, believes that "what we really need is an official position on pan."

"Government should establish a patent," he adds, "but they can't do everything. We (the citizens) need to change our mindset." James is convinced that unless we patent and standardise our pan, we would lose financially.

He is sure that "there is a market out there" and standardisation is necessary before we think of export.

To keep up the enthusiasm for improvements in pan music, course participants plan to continue as a group to



Despers entertaining large crowd during free concert at New York's City Hall on May 28. Photo by ROGER HAYDEN CELESTIN.

"create a forum for pannists and help them expose their wares." There is even talk of a pan tuners convention.

Having benefitted from the music course and considered the question of exporting pan, the next step seems to be a pan factory. Standardisation of pan and a factory are just the smallest steps towards making the steelband a viable industry.

For too long, we have taken for granted what the world acknowledges to be the only musical invention for this century.

Future music courses will enable pannists to write their own scores thereby producing a total export package of local

music for an indigenous instrument.

In order to make an impact on the world market, Trinidad and Tobago needs to be consistent with the quality and quantity of the steelpan as a musical product.

Forming co-operatives and utilising the services of talented musicians and such bodies as the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards, will put Trinidad and Tobago well on the way to self-sufficiency.

Then, when "the boys from the hill" possibly return to New York in 1991, they will be able to put on a full concert. That is the fervent hope of Ms Pat Bishop, well-known artist, musician and WITCO Desperadoes conductor.