

Newsday

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MUSICALLY LITERATE PANMEN

THE recently completed training course conceptualised and sponsored by Trinidad and Tobago's governing steelband body, Pan Trinbago, to make the nation's pannists musically literate should be repeated on a continuing basis to provide all pan musicians with the opportunity to be able to read music scores. Thirty-four (34) persons graduated this month from the course.

Should Pan Trinbago be in a position to achieve this, it should set a time limit, say five years, at the end of which all pannists seeking to participate in music festivals organised by the steelband body should be expected to be musically literate. For while it is remarkable that the majority of pannists have been able to play music by ear, this has limited their ability to represent faithfully the music not only of Trinidad and Tobago, but regionally and internationally and to take pan much further.

It is unfortunate that the steelband, the only musical invention of the 20th century, is still regarded as an oddity largely due to the pan players' predisposition to play by ear. With pannists becoming more musically literate — there are a relative few who can read music — they will be better equipped to reproduce the expression intended by composers.

In turn, because of the originality of pan musical expression more music scores should be written and/or arranged specifically for steel orchestras, particularly scores with a Trinidad and Tobago and Caribbean flavour, whether they be Calypso, Chutney, Reggae, or Soca. Some emphasis should be placed on music scores which project a fusion of cultures.

The Ministry of Education can assist by arranging to provide secondary school students, who are pannists, or who wish to become pannists, with formal music training that goes beyond simply a competence in and appreciation of Caribbean music. In this way pan and the extraordinary music it provides can be internationalised, that is, made more readily appreciated by international audiences.

Pan Trinbago by its long delayed, yet clearly important move to have Trinidad and Tobago pannists read music should shortly see the pan fraternity throw away its self imposed crutch of playing by ear.

Indeed, this would obviate any need for a repeat of the somewhat odd situation, in which foreign steel orchestras, which took part in a recent World Music Festival played from music sheets, while musicians from the home of pan played by ear. Is it that foreigners take our instrument more seriously than we do?

Meanwhile, the international exposure that Trinidad and Tobago steelbands, and indeed pan itself, that will flow from local pannists playing the national anthems of participating countries at the opening ceremonies of the upcoming FIFA World Under-17 football championships should provide TT pannists with additional incentive to learn to read music scores. Hopefully, many of the orchestras will comprise members who today possess that ability.

Already, Patrick Arnold, President of Pan Trinbago, has declared that the playing of the various national anthems at the FIFA Under-17 World Cup was "the first step in the organisation's plans to go international". Frankly, we should like to see Pan Trinbago take an additional several steps as quickly as possible. It would be good for the country's image as the birthplace of pan, and an effective weapon in Trinidad and Tobago's tourism 'armoury'.

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