

FOCUS ON THE STEELBANDS

By Clyde Hosein

...of steelbands and mass-production

YES, what would become of our cultural stalwart, the steelband, if the directors of technology should decide to package their chemicals and petroleum products in plastic containers?

I could just hear the answer, as plain as a ping-pong in the early morning: "Set up a plant to manufacture metal drums for the purpose at a cost of such and such million dollars.

We might do this well. But it will be uneconomical if the method of pan manufacture is not changed.

Faced with the fact of danger by the development of the non-metallic container we will have to decide between two clear alternatives: (1) Manufacture and sculpt by the traditional method of preparation and tuning, or (2) manufacture electronic masters and stereotypes and press them out, by type of pan, by the mass.

ORIGINAL INSTRUMENT

Now, we have preciously little say in the direction of technology; and that is very bad. We have no challenge to be creative. And every design or idea is born of curiosity.

But, no matter how we decide, we will have to face up to the problem when it arises with a manner of leadership, for we are the steelband people of the world.

If the metal container becomes redundant the former method of production would guarantee the preservation of the original instrument; for, as it is now, every single steel pan in the world is an original.

The instruments today each has its own quality in musical capacity and artistic value, and each pan has its own value in terms of music technology and metalcraft. Doing it the other way

would destroy that value of originality, and, most probably, alter the structure of the steelbands as we know them today.

The mass-produced pan would certainly alter the sensory impressions of the accepted sounds; the laws of physics and mathematics (thermal heat, molecular structure, exactitude of triangulation in grooving, and so on) would not be dismissed in the exercise.

The second choice also raises the question of standardisation of pan instruments, which, in itself, reduces the amount of creativity in making pan music, and stands to lead the movement into lesser and lesser band individuality.

While I do not wish to dwell upon my first sentence (for this is not a paper on economics) I think the very question of the life of the steel pan being dictated from outside our will points to the industrial development policy of our country.

When we finally decide to shake off our bloated sense of self-importance and link up with peoples at the similar backward stage with those of a higher industrial stage, who would have us as real friends, then perhaps we would feel that we have a destiny and a purpose.

We have to move up in the world to have some say in the direction of technology which is progress and the fate of our kind. If we decide to adopt the second method of production it will be economically profitable, for mass production would cry for its function in mass sales, a mass market.

The electronically produced pan for the mass market would mean the furtherance of art, one contribution to world progress by Trinidad and Tobago. We would

give the world something that is really ours, something of our history.

And it would be a gift from that history where suffering without the pleasure of entertainment and creative release had to find expression, and a means of making music to rest the soul in the times of troubles. It would be a gift of blood and sweat.

Are we prepared to sacrifice the originality and the tonal quality we know now for the furtherance of art, the international knowledge of our country's contribution to music, the distilling of friendships and freedoms by the understanding such things make between men, and the very economy of the thing.

SHAKY FUTURE

Whether the steelpan is destined for change by the dictates of technology outside of our will or not, it is clear that we must consider it and the alternatives open to us in the event of its occurrence.

But to go a point further, it can be argued that Trinidad's steelpan music cannot be really tested to its very mettle for excellence without the approval of the rest of the world.

We cannot sit down here on a "two by two" island and exclaim with any honesty that steelpan is great and "a wonder of the world."

This would be arrogance to an excess. One and three tenths of a million people of the world's billions could never decide what is a wonder of the world.

Our people have separate histories and perhaps that separatedness constricts our vision of our shaky future. We play mandolins and tablas, pianos violins and saxophones. We know ex-

cellence when we hear it and we embrace it.

What we need to examine now is whether our product, like the violin, and the quality of the craftsmanship, like the craft and technology of making violins, would be acceptable in a home in Vienna, or in Bogota, or in Santa Fe, or in Kiev, or in Shanghai or in Kampala.

The profitable industry of the electronically produced mass steelpan also develops the arts, which is the pleasure and the understanding. The United Nations would, without doubt, subscribe to this.

It seems to me that we need to take advantage of the exuberance of men like Superintendent Tony Prospect, Tony Williams and Neville Jules and make the choice we will have to make right now.

Let us not wait for the future; let us seize it somewhere for the first time. And this is a wonderful opportunity for Trinidad and Tobago.

The opportunity for world involvement of some kind; steelpan music for the world is a wonderful way to begin smashing into the seat of action where all the decisions of the world are made.

I am of the opinion that mass production of steelbands is the better of the choices for two reasons: One, it will contribute greatly to the economic development of the country.

Two, it would demand the improvement of skills in such an industry and the creation of new ones (or new fields of endeavour; or jobs) while promoting Trinidad and Tobago educationally and commercially in the furtherance of our art and fusing it to world art.

We would not be the first people to make this kind of a decision. The "folk" musical instruments of hundreds of social environments have graciously withdrawn for their commercial

mass produced stereotypes to hold away.

Simply for the reason that the mass violin, the mass guitar, the mass horn have been allowed to supersede the crafted instruments.

You see, no one with a conscience would want to hold back joy and understanding. No one would want to deny another the pleasure of music for selfish reasons.

An original instrument would take a long time to produce; marketing systems development, over widely scattered points of manufacture might be problematic.

The value of the instrument would be much higher (if the laws of pricing do not change) and, by economic laws, when the market is researched and developed and the orders come flowing in, crafted instruments might never be able to satisfy international demand.

SOCIAL SKILL

In just the same way as the traditional musical instrument is still crafted, say like the wind instruments, e.g. the flute, of ancient European civilisations which still persist in all the valleys of Europe, the steelpan can be crafted.

Like elsewhere, these originals could have their own market, among the collectors, the souvenir hunters, the seekers of the original, Trinidad and Tobago's Tourist Board and all our promotions agencies; and last, but not least, our people.

But, besides, the making of a pan by a Trinidadian could be a particular Trinidad industrial and social skill, and individual pan-making, as art and as cottage industry, could be that valuable missing asset to development of the personality of the Trinidadian.

Teaching pan in school

might be extremely necessary and desirable.

Mass steelpan raises the fundamental issues of production: One, the creation and execution of strategic skills for what amounts to an international new product launched by Trinidad and Tobago:

Two, the first chance of divesting of the traditional industrial planning pattern of external direction:

Three, the development of skills to create a new kind of music writing which would demand the teaching of music theory, writing, book and sheet printing of music, publishing and copy-right functions.

Then further demands might be for: Mass teaching of craft and industrial skills-

I think we should ask ourselves the question: "Is the survival of the steelband at the mercy of forces outside our control?"

Seeing that this might be so, should we not give immediate attention to the strategy for its survival and world promotion?

Should we not do this (without any kind of survival threat) because it is the right thing to do for ourselves and our country and for the world which waits for such better things in its days of the worst?

Is this not the opportunity to exercise a willing duty and a challenge to our place in the history of the world?

Are there still men with money in this country?