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Today

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Swiss pannists gearing to take on world's best

By CELIA SANKAR

WILBERT GILL bowed and peered beyond his shades at the pannists who smiled and cast guilty glances at each other.

It was the third time he had had to interrupt their run through the Steelband Festival test piece. They had not got beyond the first half-dozen bars in any of their attempts.

"Let's be cool," Gill said, waving his baton gently. "You're trying too hard. Don't try so hard."

Tension is high in panyards in these final days before Friday's start to the eighth festival. But at Starlift's panyard, where the Swiss National Steel Orchestra is gearing up for their first appearance in the home of steelband, there is understandably a certain air of anxiety.

"People in Switzerland thought we were crazy to be going to Trinidad," said Gill, director, arranger, conductor and leader of the band. "They asked how we could go to Trinidad for a competition, Trinidad where the best pan players in the world are?"

Gill felt no trepidation about coming to

Pan is Beautiful VIII...

Trinidad.

"We have much respect for the bands here," Barbados-born Gill said. "I felt they must come here and see how the bands perform. That will make my job easier. After being here, they will know what they have to do."

Forty-five players of the 60-member band arrived in Trinidad last weekend for the festival. They are the only foreign band participating this year and the first from outside the region to perform at the festival. In 1988 steelbands from Guyana and Venezuela participated in Pan is Beautiful V and reached the semi-finals.

"All that we're concentrating on is to play and not to win," Priska Kropf, a telecommunications administrator said. "Of course we want to be as good as possible. But we have no expectations of winning."

There are about 150 steelbands in

Switzerland. They range in size from 10 to 40 members.

"Like in Trinidad, there are bands and those bands break up and form other bands, so that's how there are 150 steelbands in Switzerland," Gill said.

Most people play as a hobby.

"It's very therapeutic," Gill said. "People work long and hard and have a lot of stress. They have this instrument to relieve stress, to have fun, to socialise. They think it is exotic."

Consequently the standards are not high. "Switzerland has the good and the not so good players," Gill said. "People are playing for fun. They don't want to stress themselves with Festival standards. People are hanging on to the traditional steelband thing, playing Harry Belafonte."

Gill formed the Swiss National Orchestra in March last year to raise standards. The

orchestra draws "some of the best" players from bands across Switzerland. Every week the various sections meet on different days to practise. The entire band meets one Sunday every month in the home towns of the members to practise.

The orchestra, which plays calypso, classics, jazz, reggae, and techno, has had four gigs so far. Twice they had sold-out performances at Zurich's Congress House (which has a capacity of about 1,000). They played at a steelband festival in the small Swiss town of Zug.

They reached their widest audience when they performed in May this year on national television for the Swiss lottery draw.

Gill, a jazz musician by profession, grew up in London and played and arranged for a steelband for the Notting Hill Carnival. He moved to Switzerland almost a decade ago and got the idea to bring a Swiss steelband to Trinidad after competing in the last Festival. As a soloist he placed tenth in the finals.

"At the finals I listened to the bands and I had this feeling, like, wow, the world should see this," Gill said. "Somebody, it may have been a Pan Trinbago official, said they wanted it to be a world festival but that bands don't come. They don't come because it's expensive. The only way we came was because we paid our way to come here. It's a holiday for the members. They took their vacation to come."

The members of the band have a commitment to the steelband as they have fallen in love with the instrument.

"The first time I heard the steelband I was so fascinated by the sound of the music I joined a steelband workshop," Kropf said.

It was love at first hearing for most other members of the band. But not everyone in Switzerland takes to the steelband, orchestra member Meike Ott said.

"There are a lot of people who think it's just a lot of noise," the housewife said.

The band brought their own pans and their own music for the competition. Their calypso is called "Take That" and their classical piece is "Matterhorn Shuffle", both written specially for the band.

"It's different," said Bjorn Jorgensen, a systems analyst. "It's European type music, the type of music we know and like. I like it for the steelband. It's like our challenge. We've come to show you guys what we have done with your instrument."



SWISS pannists are all eyes (and ears) at Amoco Renegades panyard on Monday night. Photo: ANDREA DE SILVA.