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Not just 14 ensembles in semis, but... A to in Ramajay

PATRONS attending the finals of Pan Ramajay will not miss Ato Boldon's much anticipated run in the finals of the men's 100 metres race at the Olympics next Saturday, as organisers moved swiftly to accommodate pan fans torn between their desires to witness both events.

Ainsworth Mohammed, manager of the Exodus Steel Orchestra which produces Pan Ramajay, told the *Express* that arrangements to mount two massive screens at the truck-yard of the National Flour Mills had been finalised.

Mohammed confirmed the decision on Saturday night, even as 23 bands, playing two songs each, produced an entertaining but punishingly tiresome evening to mark the start of the seventh edition of Pan Ramajay.

Starting at 6 p.m., Saturday's preliminary round stretched the tolerance of the pan faithful into the wee hours of Sunday morning, with Tobago's Mello Harps Steel Ensemble, the final band on the programme, completing their second song shortly before 2 a.m.

Even diehard pan fans were heard protesting the length of the show, which was this year crushed into a one-night stand with 24 bands in the competition. In years previous, the preliminary round took place over two nights, including last year when 22 bands participated.

The Ramajay, a contest conceptualised by the Exodus Steel Orchestra, is a jazz-oriented steelband competition. Ensembles of not more than ten players each perform two tunes which, in the sum, must not exceed 12 minutes. Curiously enough, in the land that has made its name from steelband and calypso, one of the tunes played must expressly be a non-calypso.

But faithful to the concept from which the Ramajay gets its name, each band member is allowed the facility of doing an attention-getting solo, not unlike the male bird's whistling of elaborate musical patterns as a way of attracting and seducing the females of its species.

But in far too many cases, the solos on Saturday night were little more than high speed journeys up and down chromatic scales, with a few adventures into the tonic. It was clear to the astute listener which bands contained the greatest number of accomplished musicians; so easy was it to separate the trained performers from those soloists who depended largely on flash, but were betrayed by the abject puerility of their patterns.

But even the predictable passages of clichéd cadences

coming from the competition stage were punctuated by some beautiful moments, not least of which was the aurally and visually pleasing virtuosity of seven-year-old wunderkind Atiba Williams. Working in the frontline of the Gasparillo Highlighters, this pan prodigy (he has been a source of marvel since age three) came up with two solos during the band's performance of Denyse Plummer's "Bad Boys" that caused some members of the audience to spring to their legs in ensuing applause.

The absence of the Flabej Ensemble (whom many thought may well have replaced the now retired three-time champions, Panazz Players) was never explained, perhaps because the show's producers were themselves flabbergasted by the group's non-appearance. The *Express* learnt, however, that Flabej considered the contest an unwanted distraction at this time, what with a demanding schedule of nightly rehearsals for an imminent overseas tour. The Cordettes, who were also originally registered, also failed to show.

Other absences also caused much murmuring. There was an expectation that Liam Teague, who arranged for Hillside Symphony, would have been onstage to lead the band again this year. But his fan club had to settle for the skills of his younger sister. Nor was Earl Brooks present to lead Earl Brooks and Friends.

Showing then what Friends are for, the group managed to snatch second place even without its leader, putting now a greater weight on the man (who is expected back home this week) to improve their standings in the semi-finals.

The Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF) Ensemble, which topped the preliminary round, demonstrated winning ability from early in their performance of Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water".

There was that absolute mastery of both mood and moment evident in the execution of the piece. Because of the continuing appeal of the song, the average listener may be lulled into thinking that it is nothing more than a simple expression of deep emotion. What the song does sometimes is to regularly preface some of its most commanding moments with inordinately softer passages. To deliver both feelings on pan is not as easy as would be the lot of, say, a concert pianist, who has the facility of foot pedals to reduce or enhance the instrument's volume and tone.

In pan playing, these variations of intensity are determined only by touch. The tenor (or first) pan



SEVEN-YEAR-OLD Atiba Williams is flanked by fellow pannists as the Highlighters Steel Ensemble performs Denyse Plummer's "Bad Boys" at the preliminaries of Pan Ramajay on Saturday. Photo: STEPHENSON WESTFIELD

offers the player the additional challenge of having its highest notes ganged in the middle of the instrument, with the highest of them not much larger than the playing end of the panstick. Those notes are also most delinquent in their faithfulness to tone.

In delivering the work, the TTDF players demonstrated a level of control and discipline that one associates with the world's finest ensembles or, for that matter, armies.

On the distinctly other hand were that night's major musical casualties, the Court's Laventille Classic Connection and Tunapuna Nocturne Fascinators, the latter of which seemed

to go into abject confusion from as early as their first tune. The Classic Connection clearly should have sought some more technical advice about the placement of their pans, which would have spared us having to listen exclusively to the chords and harmony of Sonny Rollins' "St Thomas Gyal"; patrons never once heard a full eight bars of the melody which, from all appearances, may well have been played on a row of badly positioned tenor pans.

This Saturday, the show should be appreciably shorter, what with the field having been cut to 14 semi-finalists. And the following Saturday, Ato runs.