

Tribute to a musical genius

Marshall was a giant among men, whose place of honour in T&T's cultural evolution is well earned. Now that he is gone, there can be no better tribute to the memory of Bertie Marshall than to ensure his musical legacy is preserved, not only for generations to come but for all in T&T.

Today, Trinidad and Tobago bids a final farewell to one of the true geniuses of the steelband movement. Bertie Marshall was a national treasure whose contribution to the development of T&T's national instrument over five decades put him head and shoulders above most in the steelband fraternity.

A man ahead of his time in many respects, Marshall was on the cutting edge of many of the technological advances in the art form. He was much more than a pan tuner. He was also a musician, an inventor and an innovator, who channelled his exceptional musical abilities and technical skills into revolutionising the tuning and amplification of pans, often merging his extensive knowledge of science and the arts to refine the sounds of the instrument.

In the 1940s, when Marshall first came into contact with the pan, it was a crude and not very musical instrument, with a limited range of notes and poor tonal quality. Many of his peers could not understand why Marshall, who started to work on the instrument when he was just 14 years old, was so obsessed with harmonics. In fact, he was accused of damaging many "good" pans with his early efforts at harmonic tuning.

Marshall's persistence paid off in 1956. By tuning the notes by octaves and introducing complex tuning techniques, he produced harmonics, giving the pan its complex sound.

But that was just the first step in his lifelong pursuit of greater control over the sound of the steel orchestra. Marshall studied the composition of the metal used to make pans and came up with the idea of stretching the belly of a tenor pan, creating the high tenor or soprano pan, an instrument with a greater range.

For a more complete orchestral sound to fill the musical gaps between bass and tenor pans, Marshall invented the double tenor, an instrument with a range of 31 notes. Later, in collaboration with legendary Desperadoes captain Rudolph Charles, he developed other pans that are now staples in every successful orchestra—the chariot pan, quadraphonic and 12 bass.

In addition, he improved on Anthony Williams' spider pan and the double seconds, invented by Ellie Mannette, increasing the pans' depths and allowing more space between the notes.

Marshall also revolutionised the range of possibilities for musical arrangements on the

road, inventing canopies for steelbands to protect the instruments and give greater control of the sound of the orchestra.

This cursory look at Marshall's many landmark inventions and innovations suggest that this was a man who wielded great influence and power in his field.

However, Marshall, who was known throughout his life simply as Bertie, would have none of that. Although he was an inspiration to and motivator of many, Marshall never sought after or achieved the trimmings and trappings of wealth and fame for his priceless contributions to steelband development.

Instead, he stayed faithful to his humble East Port-of-Spain roots throughout his life, producing one success after another from a geographic space that is proffered by so many as an excuse for failure. Despite his diminutive stature and self-deprecating style, Marshall was a giant among men, whose place of honour in T&T's cultural evolution is well earned.

The Chaconia Medal (Gold) in 1992 and the Order of the Republic of T&T in 2008 were just two of the many deserved accolades conferred on a man who blessed this country and the world with instruments capable of producing soul-lifting harmonies and melodies.

Now that he is gone, there can be no better tribute to the memory of Bertie Marshall than to ensure his musical legacy is preserved, not only for generations of panmen and women to come but for all in T&T.