Cultural Implications of the American Steelband

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MUAC 3503: Black Music and Abolition

November 20, 2024

Abstract

After originating in the Caribbean island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, steel pan bands have grown immensely in popularity, especially after being introduced in the United States. In the United States specifically, there is much discourse around how to approach steel pan music and how to continue teaching a tradition that is culturally so far from the same culture of American universities. In my research around this topic, I have come across many musicologists and steel pannists who highlight the importance of "multicultural" music education and the importance of educating music students on the cultural background of the steel pan. Many steel pan educators also share the importance of not being bound only to traditional pan music and embracing new compositions and an Americanized style of steel pan music. In this paper, I aim to identify the ways in which music played in American steel pan ensembles changes the culture of steel pan music through analysis of existing research and interviews conducted by previous researchers.

Introduction

The steel pan is a relatively young instrument, only dating back to the mid-twentieth century. Being created and developed as a part of street and gang culture in the Caribbean island nation of Trinidad and Tobago has given it a complicated history with race, gender, and class. Steelbands emerged from neighborhood gangs in Trinidad, made up almost entirely of descendants of former Trinidadian slaves. These bands were made up of men of low social class, and only men were steel pannists in the early days, as no parents wanted their daughters affiliated with these gangs. This paper does not go into any further depth regarding gender and class, but it discusses race, and specifically, the impact that bringing steelbands to the United States has had

on the culture of steelbands. This is relevant to race because most steelbands in the United States are found in universities, and many universities and university music programs tend to have a majority white population. As a white musician in an American steelband, I would like to provide a disclaimer that my experience as a white American who has never been a racial minority or had to face issues of cultural erasure may be present.

A Brief History

The history and invention of early steel drums has largely been an oral history until recent years. Due to this oral tradition, some facts about the history of steel drums are uncertain and will differ depending on who tells the story. Formerly enslaved Africans living in the colony that would become the nation of Trinidad and Tobago were denied the use of drums in 1883 because of the fear by colonists that enslaved Africans would use drums as a rallying point to rise against the colonists. Determined to maintain their cultural and religious ties to the drum beats, the tradition of drumming never quite disappeared, but it emerged back into the public eye in a different way. Tamboo bamboo bands were formed across Trinidad after the discovery that hollowed out bamboo tubes of different lengths and widths would produce different pitches. These now freed Africans in Trinidad organized into bands based on the neighborhood gangs that they were associated with. These bands consisted of a range of pitches, with some bamboo rods serving the same purpose as a bass instrument in a Western ensemble, and some much smaller bamboo rods serving the same purpose as a treble or melody instrument in Western ensembles. Since these instruments were more similar in timbre to pitched drums than an instrument like a violin, these bands primarily set rhythms for events like fights, weddings, and Christmas celebrations. Carnival season, a significant period of celebration in Trinidad and Tobagao, was

also a time in which tamboo bamboo bands would perform for the public and celebrate alongside their traditional instrumentalist counterparts.

As the story goes, during one Carnival performance in 1934, one man broke the glass bottle he was beating on to keep time for his tamboo bamboo bands. As part of the culture of these bands, if something happens to their instrument, these musicians didn't feel the need to stop playing, they simply picked up whatever trash he found on the street as a substitute. In the story of this particular man, he is said to have picked up a paint can and his bandmates found its tone and timbre to be superior to the bamboo sounds. This is not the only story about how the transition from bamboo to metal occurred, but each story shares the common thread of a man picking up a paint can and the tamboo bamboo musicians around him finding that to be a superior sound to what they were doing.[1] This started the first "iron band."[2] The first panmen were descendants of former slaves and these men were the ones who transitioned to bands with instruments made up entirely of varying kinds of scrap metal. The culture around these iron bands emerged in the creation of panyards, which were places in each neighborhood where bands gathered to practice as well as to experiment with different timbres. In one of these panyards is where one man supposedly found a metal can with dents in it, and discovered that the different dents create different pitches. Ellie Mannette, a famous Trinidadian pan inventor, tuner, and performer, is the person credited with experimenting with adding different pitches to discarded oil barrels, creating the modern steel drum (standardization has led to all steel drums, no matter what size, to be made of old oil barrels today).

Jumping forward in time, standardized steel drums were used in all of the neighborhood bands and the government would eventually come to support and encourage the competition and

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[1] Angela Smith, *Steel Drums and Steelbands* (Scarecrow Press, 2012), 32
[2] Ibid.

rivalry between these bands through musical outlets because it helped to diffuse gang violence that had historically occurred between the bands. When Trinidad and Tobago gained their independence from Great Britain in 1962, the new government saw the economic benefits of the steelbands, which had begun to gain international recognition from a few tours by Trinidadian bands, and the following year the Panorama competition was founded. This competition, which is still immensely popular today, consists of all the best steelbands of Trinidad and Tobago competing against each other playing eight minute calypso tunes. It is a very high energy event that takes place right in the center of all the other Carnival festivities in Trinidad and Tobago, and multiple other countries have their own version of Panorama today, including England, the United States, and Canada.[3]

Steel Pan Brought to the United States

Steel pan came to the United States from immigrants moving from Trinidad to New York in the early 1950's and Rudolph "Rudy" King is credited as the single person who initially brought steel pan music to the US[4]. The public became curious and fascinated about steel pan and calypso music, which also originated in Trinidad and Tobago, from the rise in popularity of calypso artists, namely Harry Belafonte[5]. Pannists that toured with Belafonte "solidif[ied] the association between pan and calypso for U.S. audiences and consumers"[6]. This association came to include associated pan and calypso music with any sort of island aesthetic. Janine Tiffe mentions that the island aesthetic became passed down to early pannists from Trinidad that

[3] Ibid.
[4] Doris Green, "Rudolph 'Rudy' King - the Father of the Steelband in America," Panonthenet.com, accessed November 18, 2024, https://www.panonthenet.com/upclose/steelbands-of-newyork/rudy-king.htm.
[5] Janine Tiffe, "Tropicalism and the Struggle for Legitimacy: A History of the Steel Band Movement in American Universities" (Dissertation, 2015), https://repository.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:253049/datastream/PDF/view.
[6] Ibid.

immigrated to the United States. While this stereotyping was recognized by the pannists, they were more or less content with leaving the stereotypes alone in order to be able to make money and "a desire to spread their culture no matter how cliché."[7] The identity of early American pannists did become rooted in this aesthetic of tropicalism, because of the importance of making a living and the general American public had built this association of pan music and any sort of tropical image, whether Caribbean or not.

It would be ineffectual to discuss the introduction of steel pan in the United States without discussing Ellie Mannette and his contributions to the development and standardizing of the steel pan. Mannette was already very well established in the pan community of Trinidad for experimenting with different shapes and sizes of steel pan and being the "master pan tuner"[8] of Trinidad once standardized notes and sizes became more commonplace. Notably, he invented the concave steel pan shape that is used on all steel pans today[9]. Upon coming to the United States, Mannette established himself as a tuner and builder of steel pan, living and working with other Trinidad pannists that had previously come to the United States, as well as Murray Narrell and his family, who helped establish steelbands in New York.

A final pair of significant figures in the introduction of steel pan to the United States is Kim Loy Wong and Pete Seeger. Seeger was an advocate of Trinidadian music and culture and spent time advocating for public awareness of the steel drum. Wong was a pannist originally from Trinidad who came to the United States with the help of Seeger and the Smithsonian Folkways record label. Upon arriving in New York, Wong began founding steel drum programs for low-income children in New York and would later take a job at the Wiltwyck School for

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Angela Smith, *Steel Drums and Steelbands*, 104
[9] Ibid., 39

Boys, which is widely accepted as the first steel band program in American schools[10]. The work that Kim Loy Wong and Ellie Mannette did in New York in the 1960's and 1970's allowed for work to be done in creating tuning techniques and standard note patterns on steel drums.

World Music in American Education

In the late 60's and early 70's there was a push for musical education in American schools to include more than just Western music and employ a "multiculturalist" approach. In the 70's, this took shape as music appreciation courses, but later into the 80's, there was an idea to bring "multicultural" ensembles into American schools in an effort to not only teach American students to appreciate non-Western music, but to immerse them in these non-Western ensembles[11]. Steel drum ensembles, coming from the nearby country of Trinidad and Tobago, began to grow in American universities in this time period. Kenyon Williams cites that there were only three steel bands in American universities in 1980. In 2001, there were around 650 steel bands affiliated with American universities. C. Victor Fung cites the Civil Rights Movement in the latter half of the 20th century as a catalyst for promoting the education and awareness of non-Western music in music education. There was an uptick in the American "melting pot ideology"[12] and encouraging the younger generation to embrace the culture diversity present in the United States.

For the intent of clarification, world music is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "Traditional local or ethnic music, especially from the developing world."[13] In this case, it will be

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[10] Ibid., 102

[11] Kenyon Williams, "Steel Bands in American Schools: What They Are, What They Do, and Why They're Growing!," Music Educators Journal 94, no. 4 (March 2008): 52–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321080940040107.

[12] C. Victor Fung, "Rationales for Teaching World Musics," Music Educators Journal 82, no. 1 (July 1995): 36–40, https://doi.org/10.2307/3398884.

[13] Oxford English Dictionary, "World Music, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," Oed.com, September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093//OED//1179748999.

used to mean music that is not from the developed world of modern Western Europe, North America, or Australia. Fung claims that, socially, teaching world music helps facilitate open-mindedness, eliminates racial discrimination, and can better teach American children about the diverse cultures that are present in their country. Musically, Fung writes that the understanding of world music can reinforce elements of musical training such as aural skills and can help "develop more sensitive perceptions of familiar music"[14]. Finally, Fung claims that there is a global understanding that studying world music facilitates. Every culture exists with some sort of music as a part of its identity and to really understand and learn about humans different from one's own cultural group, knowing of their music is integral.

In the context of steel drum ensembles specifically, it is important to understand the introduction of world music into the American education system because the introduction into the education system is one of the ways in which steel drum music gained a national image and reputation the quickest. In understanding Fung's points about why world music is important in the United States, one can see the appeal of introducing a steel band to American students. This also provides employment opportunities for steel pan musicians immigrating to the US, whether as teachers, tuners, or pan makers. The discussion that steel pan ensembles in American schools face today is around "whiteness" and how, or if, steel drum ensembles have been tailored to the primarily white students that are in programs that have the financial means to support the needs of a steelband.

[14] C. Victor Fung, "Rationales for Teaching World Musics"

Race and Steelbands

"Whiteness" is a concept of racial perception that is understood in which the white group is the dominant or majority group and has a perceived social power over the minority group[15]. Historically, this has stemmed from the oppression of the colonial powers of Europe in their conquest of nearly all other regions of the world. Today, this has led to divisions between racial groups and there is an understanding, especially in the United States, that being white is equivalent to being in a higher, more privileged position on the social hierarchy pyramid.

Dr. Stephanie Espie, professor at the University of Delaware, discusses the role of race in steelbands through interviews with Trinidadian community ensembles as well as American academic ensembles. Her original research was regarding the differences between community and academic ensembles. She later used her interview notes as well as follow up interviews to call into question the role of race in a steelband. A point that is beneficial to understand in this context is that, despite the original steelbands of Trinidad being made up of poor Trinidadians who were black, steelbands in the United States are primarily made up of white people. This is because many steelbands are part of universities, and many university music programs are primarily white, due to the financial lack of accessibility of becoming a professional musician. The Trinidadian participants in Dr Espie's interviews state that they do feel that white pannists truly appreciate what they are doing, as well as the original culture that steelbands come from, but they can never connect with it in the same way because "It's a part of who [they] are, it's a part of [their] lifestyle … when [they] see steelband, or [they] hear steelband, it feels like home."[16] Playing in an ensemble in an academic setting also creates a disconnect from the music.

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[15] Stephanie Espie, "Playing with a Different Beat: The Whitening of American Steelband – ACT," Maydaygroup.org, September 2022, https://act.maydaygroup.org/volume-21-issue-2/playing-with-a-different-beat-the-whitening-of-american-steelband/.

[16] Stephanie Espie, "Playing with a Different Beat: The Whitening of American Steelband"

Even if one is truly connected to the music emotionally, a student in a university ensemble is still going to bring their classical training into a steelband rehearsal. Strict, metronomical rhythms, reading from sheet music, and understanding based on chord structure and progressions are all things that a university trained musician will bring to a rehearsal that a pannist from a community band in Trinidad doesn't have. Especially in the early days, many pannists couldn't even read music[17], much less have any academic understanding of things like chord progressions. Dr. Espie does point out that this is not to say that Trinidadian pannists don't frown upon or see American university steelbands in a negative light, just that American pannists can't understand steel pan music the way Trinidadians can. Ultimately, while Trinidadians want to see more black people getting involved and enthusiastic about the steel pan, some of them do accept that it's also important to let the tradition of steel pan continue in whatever way they can, and, right now, the increase of white people in the pan community is how the tradition continues to thrive.

As described in the history of steel drum, these instruments were invented out of the culture of former slaves in Trinidad. Emancipated slaves were finally able to use drums that had been denied to them during their time in slavery, this evolved to the tamboo bamboo bands with their percussive sounds, and this further evolved into steelbands as Trinidadians experimented with old cans found on the street for different percussive sounds[18]. Dr. Espie discusses how Smith's book on the history of steel drums doesn't account for the racial tension that would continue after steel drums became established. She claims that Smith's book treats racial tension as if it just goes away once the Panorama competition gains traction and is recognized by the government of Trinidad and Tobago. This creates an illusion, she says, that " racism within the pan community has been eradicated"[19]. Without directly speaking to a black or Trinidadian

[17] Angela Smith, *Steel Drums and Steelbands*, 102
[18] Ibid., 32
[19] Stephanie Espie, "Playing with a Different Beat: The Whitening of American Steelband"

pannist, it is difficult to truly understand the racial dynamics of steelbands today, especially in the United States in which many participants only play for fun while in school, not for competitions like Panorama where there is a lot more value on how good a pannist is.

Repertoire of Steelbands

A part of the discussion within the steelpan community about identity centers around what music American steelbands are playing. Many American steelpan educators do emphasize and understand the importance of programming traditional music genres like soca or calypso in order to teach students about these genres, how the steel pan is important within these genres, and how this is a part of the identity of the instrument and where it came from. Some educators, however, also highlight the importance of programming new music composed by American composers in the steelpan community. According to professionals programming steelband repertoire as well as steelpan publishing companies, calypso and soca is the most popular genre being programmed, followed by Latin jazz, pop and rock, original compositions, and classical music, with the latter two genres being interchangeable, depending on who is providing this data[20]. According to these same sources, Trindadian composers like famous Panorama composers Ray Holman and Lennox Sharpe are the most popular composers being performed in American steelbands, with American composers like Tom Miller and Andy Narrell following. Tiffe mentions how this demonstrates the reverence for Trinidadian tradition in steelpan music while still making room for new compositions. In his article "Steel Band Repertoire: The Case for Original Music," American pannist Chris Tanner highlights the lack of resources, especially in the early days of American steelbands, as a source of the problem regarding music.

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[20] Janine Tiffe, "Tropicalism and the Struggle for Legitimacy: A History of the Steel Band Movement in American Universities," 125

Tanner first talks about how when pan was first invented, of course there was no steelpan music. These early bands relied on making their own arrangements of Western classical music as well as local folk tunes. This highlights the significance of arranging music in the original culture of steelbands. Once pan arrived in the United States, original pan compositions still didn't exist in a space where they could be mass produced and shared. Steelband directors had to exchange music that they each personally had with each other in order to share it across multiple groups. This limits the ability of steelbands to learn many different original pan tunes from Trinidad. This problem has since been eased with the founding of publishing companies dedicated exclusively to publishing pan music, such as Panyard, Inc., Two Trees Music, and Pan Ramajay Productions,[21] meaning steelbands directors no longer have to rely on making or finding their own arrangements. Arrangements, in Tanner's opinion, will continue to be an important part of steelband repertoire because a director can arrange a piece tailored to the skill level of their ensemble, as well as arrange tunes that are popular and familiar to the audiences ear, creating a more accessible listening environment to those unfamiliar with existing pan repertoire.

The final point that Tanner makes is the significance of new compositions to the steel drum repertoire. This point is one that has received mixed reviews. Tanner points out that one cannot think of a group like a symphony orchestra or a wind ensemble without thinking of compositions for those ensembles that are significant or iconic. One might think of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony when they think of an orchestra, or the "Stars and Stripes Forever" by John Philip Sousa when they think of a wind ensemble. Tanner points out that if the pan community wants the steel pan to continue to grow and reach for the same status in the public eye as the above mentioned ensembles, pannists have to be open to embracing original compositions,

[21] Chris Tanner, "Steel Band Repertoire: The Case for Original Music," Music Educators Journal 97, no. 1 (September 2010): 58–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432110380549.

whether by American composers or otherwise, rather than relying on old Trinidadian music and arrangements, so as to not "risk the stagnation of the art form"[22]. Contrary to Tanner's opinion, Dr. Espie and a number of Trinidadian pannists have expressed that there is no problem with performing solely calypsos and other Caribbean genres of music. To use the same analogy as Tanner, they claim that one will not question an orchestra that only plays classics and never new music, so why should they question a steelband doing the same?[23] While there are benefits to arranging and encouraging students to arrange and compose, this can further demonstrate a racial bias or hierarchy towards Western styles of music as well as Western practices of notation and harmonies. Relying on written notation further cements a Western teaching style in comparison to the oral tradition and auditory learning that Trinidadian pan players rely on so heavily.

Conclusions

It is not an easy task to decide what is most beneficial for the future of steelbands and for preserving the culture of steelbands. As a white American student of a steel pan ensemble, my opinion will not carry the same weight as a Trinidadian's opinion, or even as a black American. I connect with the music I play in my steel pan ensemble because of my enjoyment of the music and the positive emotions that it gives me, as well as the musical knowledge that I have gained from learning to play something beyond my primary instrument. While I think this connection is as valid as any other person's own connection to any genre of music, it is important to recognize that I cannot connect with this music from a sense of home and belonging. The instructor of my steel pan ensemble, Tom Miller, is highly recognized and respected within the steelpan community, but even he falls into the same shortcomings of whitewashing that Dr. Espie

[22] Ibid.
[23] Stephanie Espie, "Playing with a Different Beat: The Whitening of American Steelband"

mentions, by relying on Western notation to teach our ensemble music. This is something that is not likely to be escaped by American steelpan ensembles because, while not impossible, it is a difficult task to teach classically trained musicians to learn music by ear or with non-Western notation in the short timespan of a semester or a quarter that students have to prepare music and put on a concert.

As far as repertoire goes, there is value in embracing the old as well as encouraging the new. In my personal opinion, it is hard to truly compare a steelband to a wind ensemble or a symphony orchestra. Orchestras have been around for hundreds of years longer and have hundreds of years worth of repertoire to choose from. Orchestras can get away with not playing new music much easier because it takes so much longer to cycle through playing all that there is written for an orchestra. Wind ensembles, while they have not been around nearly as long, have gained lots of traction because it is the same instruments seen in an orchestra so no new techniques need to be learned to play in both types of ensembles, making this easy to teach young musicians. These both use Western music traditions of rhythm, notation, and timbres, making this easy and digestible to the Western listener.

In my opinion, I do think it is important that American steel pannists learn Trinidadian repertoire because there is so much value in learning the culture of your instrument and learning music of other cultures, as cited in Fung's article. Outside of educational benefits, it helps foster connections between musicians who may be different in genre and culture but are united in what they love. I do, however, agree with Chris Tanner's sentiment that the steel pan community will remain limited without embracing change. Encouraging new steel pan composers is what will spark more interest in the instrument in the future. I think that teaching aspiring pan composers how to write in styles like soca and calypso is one way in which pannists can encourage change

while also remaining rooted in the original pan culture. As the steel pan community continues to grow and gain popularity, making room for new pannists to share their enthusiasm will only help expand the culture of the steel pan, while still staying rooted in its Caribbean heritage.

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