

**WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY**

**PAN ON THE VERGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY:  
ISSUES IN THE EVOLUTION OF  
THE TRINIDADIAN STEELBAND**

**by**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The Steelpan is a musical instrument indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago. It is a definite pitch percussion instrument in the idiophone class, traditionally made from a steel drum or steel container. The metallic playing surface is concave with a skirt attached. The playing surface is divided into convex sections by channels, grooves/or bores [sic]. Each convex section is a note tuned to a definite pitch. The convex sections are played by striking with pan sticks to produce musical tones.

--Definition of the steelpan, Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards<sup>1</sup>

### Pan on the Verge of the 21st Century

Heralded as one of the major organological inventions of the 20th century, the steelpan was birthed barely fifty years ago on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Since that time, it has developed from a modified tri-pitched dustbin embraced primarily by socio-economically marginalized Trinidadians into a family of chromatic orchestral instruments--the "steelband"<sup>2</sup>--embraced by most Trinidadians

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted in "On the tune of standardisation: How the Bureau is helping pan" (*Trinidad Guardian*, Feb. 22, 1993), by Leslie Pichery and Kenneth Roach of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards.

<sup>2</sup>To refer to the steel orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago, both the spellings "steelband" and "steel band" are currently in use. I have chosen to use the former spelling both because I have seen it used more consistently in Trinidad than the alternative (the Bureau of Standards, for example, uses "steelband"), and because I

and celebrated internationally.

The individual and organized efforts to develop pan<sup>3</sup> since its invention have become known as the "steelband movement," a powerful indicator of the social importance attached to the steelband in Trinidad and its neighboring island, Tobago. Its emergence into a time and place of transition from colonialism to independence has rendered it a unique canvass upon which the marks of cultural and political upheavals underway in Trinidad and Tobago are drawn and redrawn. As the modern nation of Trinbago<sup>4</sup> struggles to establish a post-colonial cultural identity, an internationally viable economy, and a general sense of direction toward the future, national debates about tradition, modernity, identity, and progress are played out--quite literally--on the pan.

This thesis explores major issues in the evolution of pan and the steelband movement in Trinidad<sup>5</sup> since the nation's independence from the British

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prefer the organic wholeness that the single word implies--that the steelband has evolved from the band of steel-beating revelers into a distinct new orchestral ensemble. However, I will retain the alternate spelling when quoting printed material or clearly established proper names.

<sup>3</sup>Formally referred to as the "steelpan", the steelband family of instruments are known most commonly in the Caribbean as "pan" (and often by the misnomer "steel drum" in the United States, a reference to the steel 55-gallon oil drum from which the pan is crafted).

<sup>4</sup>"Trinbago" and the corresponding "Trinbagonian" are the shorthand means by which to refer to the nation or people of Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>5</sup>Although the nation which claims pan as its national instrument is Trinidad and Tobago, all of my research was conducted with people in Trinidad or the U.S.



Commonwealth in 1962 with attention to changing characteristics, demographics, technologies, and ideologies associated with the steelband movement. Broadly grouped, important topics include:

- the increased multiplicity of race, class, and gender among pannists and pan enthusiasts in Trinidad;
- the embattled seasonality of steelband music in Trinidad;
- the increasing scope, cost, and variety of formal competitions, their role in promoting the pan movement, and their limiting impact on steelband repertoire and non-competition performance venues;
- changes in the loyalty-based relationships between steelbands and communities, individual pannists, and arrangers and the emergence of pan professionals;
- the emergence of steelband programs in secondary and university level education and the growing advocacy for increased music literacy and education among pannists;
- historical patronage of the steelband by political interests and the debated role of government in supporting steelbands and insuring Trinbago's continued international leadership of the pan movement;
- the mixed blessings of corporate sponsorships and the new management and marketing strategies employed by some steelbands to cope with onerous expenses;
- efforts by Pan Trinbago and other pan activists to protect the interests of pannists and pilot the steelband movement towards designated goals (such as pan programs in schools and further internationalization of pan);

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who consider themselves "Trinidadian". While the steelband movement has also been important in Tobago, it is the steelband among Trinidadians that is the main concern of this work. Accordingly, I will refer to things "Trinidadian" to invoke specificity about my data and use "Trinidad and Tobago" (or "Trinbago") where appropriate to denote matters which concern the nation as a whole.

- movement towards standardization in pan design and the development of technology for the industrial production of pan instruments;
- problems faced by sound engineers in amplifying and recording steelband music and the resulting lack of pan exposure through broadcast media;
- pan's increasingly important (though occasionally contested<sup>6</sup>) role as a symbol of national identity;
- the growing internationalization of pan and its psychological impact for Trinidadians;
- and the complex political economy of pan in Trinbago and abroad.

The degree to which these issues are interdependent makes it difficult to isolate them in discussion without constantly referring backwards and forwards to related points. Struggling to assign a simplifying order to such a complex set of data, I was forced to select one of numerous possible organizational strategies (each of which would privilege a different set of relationships). Although a chronological survey of change would provide a helpful source of structure, I have chosen to organize the thesis topically, in order to juxtapose points of change disparate in time but related by larger issues, including tradition, community, professionalism, and modernization.

Due to its breadth of scope, I have considered this a survey project and taken as its primary goal the documentation of empirical aspects of the recent

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<sup>6</sup>Parts of the East Indian Trinidadian community have expressed dissatisfaction with the steelband and the calypso as symbols of national culture as part of a larger protest against the monopolization by African Trinidadians of the appointment and presentation of "national" cultural expression.

steelband movement. Nevertheless, an important theoretical model is suggested by this empirical data which unites the Trinidadian steelband movement with the experiences of other cultures world-wide over the past century, especially those in recovery from past colonial domination. Many aspects of steelband development have shown a trajectory in the direction of global modernization, an increasingly transcultural socio-political phenomenon explored in the work of such theorists as John Tomlinson, Marshall Berman, Cornelius Castoriadis, Roger Wallis, and Krister Malm (among others).<sup>7</sup>

Simply put: seemingly disparate changes in the world of pan outline a pattern of movement toward a set of goals understood by most Trinidadians (with noted exceptions) as "progress"--a pattern so frequently followed over the last century that it has been seen as a natural evolutionary process. For the steelband, this familiar process gives rise not only to such tangible developments as standardized instruments and middle-class pannists, but also seeds an underlying redefinition of values, priorities, and expectations that are bound up with people's ideas about "modernization." In many ways, this paper is as much about the strategies and experiences of a music culture coping with the process of modernization as it is the empirical evolution of steelband.

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<sup>7</sup>Though not overtly concerned with modernization theory, Bruno Nettl presents a compelling series of illustrations about the global influence of "Western musical thought" on other musics of the world in *The Western Impact on World Music*.

## **Modernization as a Theoretical Model**

"Modernity" was first conceptualized in European theory as a distinctive phenomenon other than "the present condition" among such 19th century thinkers as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, who began identifying "modernity" as a set of social conditions crucially distinctive from all past circumstances (the details about which they disagreed).

In the 1950s and 1960s, so-called "modernization theory" was capitalized on by Western world powers to justify culturally-imperialistic development policies geared towards nations (like Trinidad and Tobago) emerging from colonialism into political independence (Tomlinson, 143). Broadly criticized as biased, inconsistent, and historically incoherent, this theory rested on the fallacious proposition that the progression from the third world to "development" is a strictly endogenous process (ibid), that the solution to third world poverty and political instability would be found in an inevitable internal progression to "modernity" (as reached in Western Europe), and that already-developed Western nations could help the process by disseminating modern ideas through educational and market outreach. These ideas failed to recognize external causes for the problems associated with underdevelopment (for instance, colonial exploitation), ethnocentrically assumed that the same course of modernization taken by European nations would eventually be taken by all world cultures (once they were "ready"), and paved the ideological way for spreading systems of neo-colonialist capitalism throughout the world.

More recently, John Tomlinson and other theorists have rescued a more useful, less ideologically-driven discourse of modernization from the political morass of 1950s which attempts to understand the complex behavior of global cultural practices without reducing the salience of world power structures or over-romanticizing the traditional lifestyles cultures had maintained before interacting on a global scale. Tomlinson, whose model most informs my analysis,<sup>8</sup> identifies modernism as the world condition (charged with power inequities as it is) in which people are confronted by alternatives to what they may have known before, originating from innovations of thought and technology by other people. He alternatively condemns and defends the role that modernization has played in different world circumstances, but his ideas project people as agents making choices about the matters of their lives and are steered away from abject cultural pessimism.

In general, then, participants in the recent discourse of modernization identify "modernity" as a general direction of global development (or sometimes the goal of "development" by the so-called "underdeveloped world"). Of course, the elusive aspect of this discussion lies in establishing who it is, really, that is determining the form and content of such development. To say simply that it is the already-developed world--the "West"--who has determined by its very existence

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<sup>8</sup>This aspect of Tomlinson's "modernity" is heavily indebted to Marshall Berman's ideas, as presented in *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*.

the nature of modernity for emulation by the "rest" (now scurrying to get there as fast as billions of little legs can carry it) is to deny the non-Western world due consideration of its agency in the matter, or power to make choices about what kinds of lifestyles its peoples want for themselves. Equally, to discount the major directions of influence between (what I will grossly refer to as) the West and the Rest in the dissemination of cultural values through transnational media and corporate interests is to be naive regarding the power imbalances of the current world system.

The process of modernization in Trinidad and Tobago exemplifies the paradoxical plight of former-colonial nations in their efforts to assert cultural and political self-determination while building an internationally viable economy. Particularly since independence from Britain,<sup>9</sup> Trinidadians have sought to establish a national identity and self-esteem by questioning the inherent worth of things colonial and by celebrating indigenous cultural manifestations (such as pan) and traditions from Trinidadian ethnic home-cultures.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is the

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<sup>9</sup>To briefly illustrate the complexity of Trinidad's colonial history, the island became a possession of the British Empire in 1797 after 300 years as a poorly developed colony of Spain, during which more French than Spanish colonials settled on the island with their African slaves.

<sup>10</sup>As of the 1980 census, Trinidad and Tobago was inhabited by 1.2 million citizens, of whom 45,000 (mostly of African descent) lived in Tobago. The remaining Trinidadians were composed of 41% persons of African descent (most descendants of African slaves brought to Trinidad between the 1780s and 1840s, others as "free coloureds," a property-owning class of people of African and European mixed descent, and some were indentured servants who came between

Trinidadian elite which wields the most political and economic capital in this venture of public self-discovery, and the elite has been powerfully marked by the very colonial influence from which they seek independence in that its members have been educated in a British-based school system. Through the same educations which justify their position of social dominance, they have been enculturated with a crucial set of values that provide a familiar vocabulary for progress (or the desired direction of cultural development)--one which looks an awful lot like what has been called "modernization."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Trinidadians (and other small post-colonial nations) frequently betray a distinct ambivalence in their negotiation of development and progress: one which seeks to reject the colonial past while embracing many of its ideological and material legacies.

It is therefore informative to consider the changes seen by the steelband movement in relation to this broader cultural debate about what exactly constitutes the arrow of progress in the post-colonial world.

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1845 and 1917), 41% persons of East Indian descent (most descendants of indentured servants brought from India between 1845 and 1917), 16% of mixed ancestry (Stuempfle notes that this primarily means mixed African and European ancestry), and the remaining 2% of European (mostly French creoles and English colonials), Chinese, Portuguese, Syrian, Lebanese, or other ancestry (Taylor, 62; Stuempfle, 4). By now the population is estimated at 1.3 million, and Taylor notes that due to Indo-Trinidadians' higher birth rates, it is almost certain that Trinidadians of East Indian ancestry became the largest ethnic group within the nation somewhere during the mid 1980s (62).

<sup>11</sup>Roger Wallis and Krister Malm credit the proliferation of similar patterns of musical (and cultural) change among small post-colonial nations to the influence of colonial European education systems (16).

## **Methodology and the Insider/Outsider Problem**

A discussion about the steelband in terms of the global distribution of cultural influence calls forth the inevitable problem implied by a Euro-American researcher (such as myself) taking on a project concerning the relationship between Euro-American political and cultural imperialism and Trinidadian cultural change and resistance. This situation has never been far from my mind over the course of the project, but I have been able to conduct my work in light of my conviction that this problem need not be seen as an insoluble--so long as the researcher is conscious of the larger context in which she is working, considerate of the concerns expressed by the people whose culture she takes as a subject of study, and as frank as possible about whatever limitations her own non-neutral cultural positioning will imply for her project.

I would make a rather ineffective ethnomusicologist if I did not share the belief (as I do) that it is possible for an "outsider" of a given cultural system to produce a valuable study of well-researched aspects of that culture (presuming she has permission from the people in question). This I believe as an extension of the conviction that people can--in the most basic sense--learn about one another and learn from each other. In some cases, an outsider may even be able to contribute a unique cross-cultural perspective to the understanding of an instance of cultural meaning by virtue of her unique vantage point as an outsider. Nevertheless, I would also make a poor ethnomusicologist if I did not recognize that in studying



culture, "learning about" must be rooted in the "learning from" process: a student of culture (especially someone else's culture) must allow herself to be taught by the subjects of her study, and as part of that learning discover the limitations of her never-neutral status to full appreciation of certain cultural meanings and to the kinds of contributions she is capable of making to the relevant cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup>

To enable this project, my fieldwork-oriented learning process has involved extensive interviewing, participant-observation, literature review, and library research in both Trinidad and the United States, primarily in the Port-of-Spain and New York metropolitan areas. I am fortunate to be a member of the Wesleyan-based professional Pandemonium Steel Band and to be the teaching assistant for the undergraduate steelband program at the University,<sup>13</sup> which has granted me ongoing insights into matters of pan technique, education, and arrangement, as well as an ever-deepening appreciation of the experience of playing in a steelband.

My status as a player and a teacher of steelband has proved considerably helpful in gaining interviews with and general access to pannists and pan activists both in Trinidad and New York. My luck began when Wesleyan Pandemonium

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<sup>12</sup>This is the crucial difference between successful, respectful ethnographic methodology and the methodology used by, say--entomologists, or others who operate without regard to the wishes of the subjects they study, or even to whether or not their subjects wish to be studied at all.

<sup>13</sup>The Wesleyan Pan Program is directed by Pr. Gage Averill of the Music Department and Latin American Studies Program.