The Steel Times

Vol. 1, No. 3 November 2018

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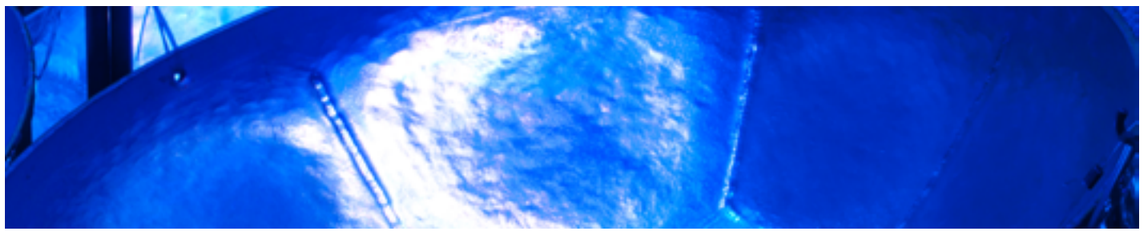
FEATURES



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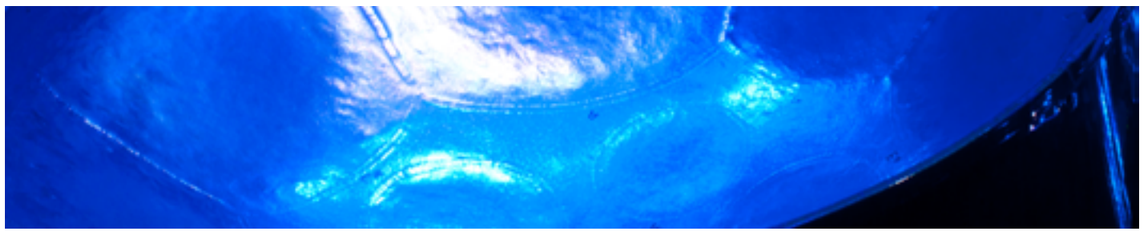


FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Eugene Novotney


Photo—Kelly Jo Brown

EUGENE NOVOTNEY *is a percussionist, composer, and scholar who has been involved in the steelpan movement in the United States since 1982. He is Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, where he directs the Humboldt State Calypso Band. He has received the Humboldt State University Outstanding Professor Award and the California State University Wang Family Excellence Award for his lifetime commitment to music education.*

I am pleased to welcome you to the third edition of The Steel Times. We received some excellent feedback on our second edition, and we appreciate all of your positive comments. Certainly, Ray Funk and Andrew Martin's article detailing the contributions of Murray Narell to the steelpan world was superlative. This landmark article on Murray Narell will now become part of the permanent archive on the NSSBE website so that it can be read and enjoyed by future generations of steelpan scholars and enthusiasts.

And it is extremely fitting that this third issue begins with Andy Narell's column, We Kinda Pan. In this issue, Andy shares his thoughts about the passing of the legendary steelpan builder and tuner, Ellie Mannette, whom Andy had an unbelievably close bond with throughout his life. I could not imagine a more eloquent or fitting tribute than the one that Andy provides for us. It is both genuine and touching, and I cannot thank Andy enough for his profound contribution.

The goal of The Steel Times is to create a resource of practical and useful information for steelpan educators, and our third edition consists of several articles that do just that. Pan Rocks guru, Tracy Thorton, and Northern Illinois University steelpan artist, Yuko Asada, have both contributed articles that present their personal takes on how they do what they do. The information they present is very insightful, and written with great sincerity.

Percussionist Tyler Hunt writes about his experience recording the steelpan tracks for *The Last Jedi*, and working in the studios of Los Angeles with the composer, John Williams. This article provides the reader with an inside look at that studio experience, and shares some valuable insights into the commercial steelpan recording world today. Also in this edition, Ian Meiman contributes an article exploring chamber music for the steelpan ensemble. As Ian's article details, this is an area of steelpan performance that is often overlooked, but that has tremendous potential future development.

On a technical level, Liam Teague contributes a very useful article that details his everyday warm-up exercises, and offers suggestions for practicing them and keeping them interesting. After my first reading of them, I plan to make those exercises a daily part of my warm-up too. In staying with the theme for this third edition, Liam's exercises are both useful and practical, and as an added bonus, they are also very fun to learn and play.

And finally, this edition ends with a brief interview with Clifford Alexis regarding his thoughts on steelpan education in the United States. Very appropriately, Cliff was recently awarded the Hummingbird Medal from his homeland, Trinidad & Tobago, for his lifelong contributions to the steelpan artform worldwide. The Hummingbird Medal stands as one of the highest honors that any citizen of Trinidad & Tobago can receive, and certainly, the award was both well earned and well deserved.

In closing, it is my privilege to serve as the editor of The Steel Times, and I welcome your feedback and your suggestions for the future. If you have something that you would like to contribute, you can contact us through the NSSBE website.

Please enjoy this third edition of The Steel Times.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Chris Tanner

CHRIS TANNER *is the founder and Director of the Miami University Steel Band in Oxford, Ohio, and the Chair of the Miami University Music Department. He is the author of The Steel Band Game Plan, and serves as President and founding member of the National Society of Steel Band Educators (NSSBE).*

The third edition of the Steel Times arrives as 2018 approaches its conclusion. A year's end is often a time of reflection: we pause and take stock, recalling the moments that hold special meaning in our lives, and in those of our loved ones. Any given year may bring joy or sadness, triumph or loss, achievement or setback. For most, it is undoubtedly a mixture of these; much can happen in a year's time.

This year, we lost three notable and important figures, Kim Loy Wong, Ken "Professor" Philmore, and Ellie Mannette. In particular, the death of Mannette in August at the age of 90 resonated throughout the pan community, and it is likely that we will not fully comprehend his absence for some years to come. His stature among his contemporaries was immense, and his impact among generations of builders, tuners, composer-arrangers, and performers has been deep and lasting. In modern parlance, Ellie Mannette "moved the needle," and to many, he is peerless when considering his many accomplishments, and his longevity in the art form.

Our current issue of The Steel Times includes a remembrance of Ellie Mannette from regular columnist Andy Narell, whose own personal story is inextricably tied to Ellie's. The piece is rich in detail, and even readers who are familiar with Ellie's life and work will be enlightened, and will come away with a new appreciation for him. On behalf of everyone in NSSBE, I express our heartfelt thanks to Andy for providing this wonderful tribute.

We also have excellent contributions from authors Yuko Asada, Tyler Hunt, Ian Meiman, and Tracy Thornton. Further, pannist extraordinaire Liam Teague gives us a window into his daily warmup routine. Readers should keep in mind that Liam will appear as a featured speaker and performer at the second annual NSSBE Professional Conference. Make your plans accordingly to see "The Paganini of the Steelpan" up close and personal on March 9, 2019, on the campus of Miami University.

Our organization remains young, and so at this stage, each article, column and feature in The Steel Times, along with those on our website, represents an important contribution to the knowledge base. Steel band educators have much to share with one another, and we at NSSBE hope that our organization is providing an appropriate forum for doing so. I encourage you to share this newsletter with others, helping us to grow the community of pan educators in the United States.

Thank you for your time, and for your support.

WE KINDA PAN

Andy Narell

ANDY NARELL *is one of the best known and most recorded steelpan artists in the world. He is internationally recognized as a world class performer, composer, arranger, and scholar, and he was recently inducted into the Percussive Arts Society's Hall of Fame for his lifetime of contributions to the steelpan artform.*

PART 1

Ellie Mannette passed away on Wednesday (August 29, 2018). Mathematically I knew that I'd probably live to see that day, but somehow, I didn't believe it. Ellie seemed to age without losing his strength or his drive. I guess I started to think of him as immortal. I heard he went peacefully. He was 90 years old. At 89 he was tuning better than ever, and still flipping bass pans over to tune from both the top and the inside. His solo triple guitar pan playing was exquisite and I swear he was still getting better.

By any measure, Ellie was an extraordinary artist. I've never known anyone who was so completely obsessed with his work. His favorite activity was tuning pans, and his second favorite was talking about it. He was one of my heroes, along with the great jazz musicians who played five sets a night for months on end, went to after-hours jam sessions, and practiced or composed during the day—literally living the music. That was Ellie. He lived it day and night.

How can we measure his accomplishments? He was there at the beginning—I have a photo he gave me of the Oval Boys beating on paint cans with wooden sticks, with no notes or melodies yet. Three years later they had twelve note ping pong pans playing melody, two and four note background pans, and a one note bass. Without formal musical training, he came to the conclusion that harmonically based designs would sound better, and he created the double second, triple guitar, and tenor bass patterns that remain standards to this day. But his greatest strength was his drive for perfection. He had a vision for the pan that was always one step beyond what he could already do, and he spent nearly every day of his life reaching for it. He was also driven to be the best and to be known as such, a quality that I often felt must be a heavy burden to bear, but which undoubtedly motivated him.

Ellie mastered the building and tuning of every voice of the steel band, including new designs by other tuners. He pored over miniscule details, constantly experimenting, making small adjustments, searching for the perfect sound. He came up with precise measurements and tuning strategies for every note of every voice in the orchestra. His instruments set standards for balance, warmth, and accuracy that put him in a class by himself. They are a record of the evolution of the steel pan and his legacy will live on in those instruments, like the violins of Stradivarius.

Perhaps his final and most lasting achievement was the transmission of virtually everything he had learned in 70 plus years of pan tuning. He was determined to pass on his knowledge so that his sound could live on into the future, and so that the art form would continue to develop, and he spent much of the last 27 years teaching in Morgantown, West Virginia. There is now a group of pan builders and tuners who have spent anywhere from five to fifteen years studying with him, working alongside him and being constantly criticized by him, spending their off hours discussing every aspect of pan tuning with him, living the obsession with him.

We're going to miss you Ellie—miss your talent, your drive, your stories. But your gift to the world remains with us and wherever you are you can rest assured that you have touched the lives of everyone that has ever appreciated the beauty of the steel pan, and that the fire that burned in you has inspired thousands of others who will keep it alive. Thank you for everything. *(August 31, 2018)*

Andy Narell (left) and Ellie Mannette (right)
Sete, France 2002

"He was one of my heroes, along with the great jazz musicians who played five sets a night for months on end, went to after-hours jam sessions, and practiced or composed during the day—literally living the music. That was Ellie. He lived it day and night."

PART TWO

There is a lot dispute over the details of who did what in the early days of pan, but we have some photos and videos, many personal accounts, and there are some things which everybody agrees on. One was that Ellie played a tune on the radio in the 40's on a ping pong he made from a 55-gallon oil barrel and put the pan on the map as a melodic instrument. Throughout the 40's and 50's he was instrumental, though not alone, in developing the individual voices of the steel band, creating instruments to play melody, harmony, and bass lines.

In 1951 TASPO (Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra) was organized and sent to England and France to perform. It was an all-star band, with players coming from all over the island. According to Ellie there were 5 tenor pan players, and their pans were made by 5 different tuners. Lt. Joseph Griffith, whose experience was in big bands with horns, was their musical director. He was frustrated by the lack of notes in the low pans and urged the band to create more complete instruments. Ellie and Anthony Williams were in the band. Ellie made a 3-bass and Tony made a double guitar/cello, the first instruments of their kind. It was a major step

in the evolution of the pan—the first time that the goal was set to make complete instruments across the entire frequency range of the band.

The development of the pan in the first 20 years was so radical and rapid that looking back it's hard to comprehend. In that short space of time the steel band evolved from a bunch of paint cans to a symphonic orchestra. Ellie was a driving force, creating new instruments and designs which became standards for the voices of the steel band. He was known for the quality of tone his pans produced, and he became an icon. I've seen album covers of steel band music from the 50's and 60's where they put a picture of Ellie tuning a pan on the back cover, even though he wasn't involved with the band or the recording. The recognition was well deserved, but there were some in Trinidad who felt that Ellie was getting all the credit and attention and resented him for it. He started to feel that he would be held back in his work if he stayed in Trinidad.

I met Ellie in Trinidad in 1966, but don't remember much about him from that day. The Steel Bandits were playing as a warm up act to the National Music Festival semifinals and finals at Queens Hall. We went to Invaders yard, and there was hardly anybody around—they had been knocked out of the competition. We played their pans, which were far superior to ours. I remember that much. At the time, all of our pans had been tuned to an old tenor from Antigua that we got from Rupert Sterling—he said it was made by a guy called Slow—and the whole band was playing a minor third higher than concert pitch.

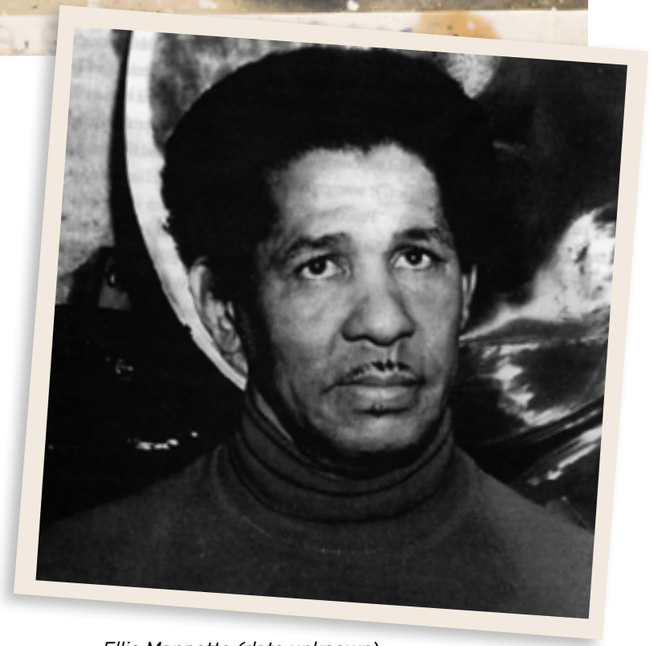
My dad (Murray Narell) convinced Ellie to come to New York, got him a visa, and found him work making pans for schools and community center programs. Ellie arrived in New York in the middle of February 1967—the weather was cold as hell. He said it felt like something grabbed him by the cheek. He went directly to CBS Studios in Manhattan. We (The Steel Bandits) were appearing on Ed Sullivan that night and were rehearsing during the day. Ellie hung out with us—it was quite a scene backstage. We saw Nancy Sinatra in a black mini skirt and boots singing These Boots Are Made for Walking. One of the guitarists from The Romeros was late getting onstage—the show was broadcast live—and the stage manager went totally ballistic. Henny Youngman was on for the umpteenth time.

Ellie slept on the couch in our living room for a while—then he got a place in Jamaica (Queens) and his wife Jackie came to live with him. He worked in our basement at first. That was also where we rehearsed. The noise was constant and drove my mother crazy—she thought my dad had totally lost his mind. Ellie built us a whole new set of pans, and we were finally playing at A=440. After a while my dad found a place a few blocks from our house where Ellie could work without bothering anyone and we moved the band over there too.

"We moved to California in January 1970, and I passed by the shop to say goodbye to Ellie. He gave me a tiny tattered old photo of the Oval Boys as I was leaving. The importance of that photo would hit me years later. It is the oldest photo of Ellie beating pan—the pans were literally paint cans, beaten with wooden sticks. It is a document of the beginning of his journey, one that lasted more than seventy years."

Ellie took us under his wing. He showed us how to strum so we could play calypso the way they were playing in Trinidad. He treated us like we were his adopted kids. Our whole band went to Montreal to see Expo 67 and Ellie came with us. We stayed together in one big room in a hostel. There was so much stupid stuff going on in that room—I don't know how Ellie put up with it. In my own defense, I was 13 and was just trying to stay out of the line of fire. Trinidad Tripoli Orchestra was playing at the Expo and we spent most of our time there listening to them play.

"Oval Boys" photo given to Andy Narell by Ellie Mannette, circa 1944



Ellie Mannette (date unknown)

Ellie was in his prime—not quite 40, handsome and fit, with the strongest forearms of anyone I knew. He'd been known to fight in Trinidad when he was young, and he had a reputation as a lady's man. Some days he would stop by the shop in a three-piece suit, on his way to a night out. He looked sharp.

I used to watch Ellie work. He used a pitch pipe for reference, and had a tuning fork as well. My dad tried to get him to use a Conn Strobotuner but Ellie wasn't interested at first. He preferred tuning by ear. I have a theory about all that. I'm pretty sure Ellie knew about octave harmonics before he left Trinidad, but he hadn't pursued it to any serious degree. Anthony Williams made the breakthrough with Pan Am North Stars and changed the sound of the steel band. You can hear it on their second RCA album (ex: Mama Dis is Mas), and the recording of the 1966 Music Festival (Intermezzo in Eb). Ellie started working on tuning octave harmonics in New York in the late sixties, and that's when the strobe became his friend. He never looked back.

A note about Murray Narell—In the early 1960's my dad became so obsessed with pan that he decided to become a tuner. He didn't have the ear for it though, so he made me sit with him and tell him whether to take the note up or down. I was 9 years old and I hated it. Then he bought a Conn Strobotuner and I just had to steer him close enough

to the right pitch so he could see it on the strobe. He never became a good tuner, but he was probably the first pan tuner to use the strobe, and he was definitely the person who showed it to Ellie Mannette.

We moved to California in January 1970, and I passed by the shop to say goodbye to Ellie. He gave me a tiny tattered old photo of the Oval Boys as I was leaving. The importance of that photo would hit me years later. It is the oldest photo of Ellie beating pan—the pans were literally paint cans, beaten with wooden sticks. It is a document of the beginning of his journey, one that lasted more than seventy years.

Ellie realized that controlling upper harmonics was the key to a higher quality sound, and he set himself a goal of learning how to control multiple harmonics on each note. He turned pan tuning into a science, learning how to control at least three upper harmonics on every note, everything lined up on the strobe. He learned how to stretch harmonics for more brilliance, and flatten them to keep the bass pans from

"Watching Ellie tune I always sensed the accumulated knowledge and skill that went into each hit of the hammer. There were too many subtle movements for the rest of us to understand how he knew exactly what to do to make the steel do what he wanted, but now he had to slow down and explain it, and in the process, he became more precise in his own thinking."

Ellie Mannette speaking at a steelpan workshop in Cannon Beach, OR. Circa 1988

ringing too much. From the beginning he was known for having a sweet sound, and as the pans became brighter and more precise he worked to maintain warmth in the tone of his pans, searching for the perfect balance of fundamental and harmonics in each voice of the orchestra.

In the 70's I used to visit Ellie at his house in Jamaica, Queens. It was the only way I could get him to finish a pan for me and actually walk out the door with it. I usually stayed for a couple of days—Jackie let me sleep on the couch in the living room. Timing was everything. You had to be there when the pan got finished or somebody else might show up, give Ellie pressure about how long he'd been promising them a pan, and you'd be out of luck.

Pan people would drop by and Ellie's basement was a hub of pan talk. Tuners like Vincent Hernandez, Mikey Enoch, Cliff Alexis, and Patrick Arnold came around, and Victor Brady (pan player) was there a lot. I remember Victor going on for hours at a time, talking about getting more respect for pan, and campaigning to change the name of the instrument to the Steel Piano. Ellie seemed interested but not enthusiastic. Victor was also obsessed with how the pans looked, before people started chroming the pans, and he got Ellie to pay more attention to making them clean and beautiful, which had a lasting influence.

Ellie also started working with Jimmy Leyden at that time. Jimmy's background was in vocal music and he had a high school steel band program. They tried some ill-fated experiments, like the tri-tone bass pans, but Ellie had a lot of respect for Jimmy, who had a sharp ear and challenged him to see just how precisely he could tune the pans. They remained friends long after they stopped working together.

Ellie met Kaethe George and his home base moved to Georgia and the big van that they drove all over the country. The life of an itinerant tuner was hard work and grueling travel, but he could make better money tuning bands on the road than making pans at home. He started teaching building and tuning workshops. Teaching made him refine his own understanding of what he knew. Watching Ellie tune I always sensed the accumulated knowledge and skill that went into each hit of the hammer. There were too many subtle movements for the rest of us to understand how he knew exactly what to do to make the steel do what he wanted, but now

Ellie Mannette playing the triple guitar steelpans

he had to slow down and explain it, and in the process, he became more precise in his own thinking.

Ellie's life changed dramatically thanks to Phil Faini, the visionary professor of percussion at the University of West Virginia. Phil was building a world music program and saw the enormous potential of having Ellie teaching there—a one of a kind building and tuning program taught by a master. Despite Ellie not having a degree, Phil got him a position on the WVU faculty and Ellie settled in Morgantown, where he lived for the final 27 years of his life. Finally, people who wanted to study with Ellie could actually go somewhere and learn from him and not have to chase him all over the country. It wasn't easy for them—it takes a long time to learn the art of pan building and tuning. The apprenticeship is akin to going to college and graduate school. But Ellie was determined to pass on what he had learned so it wouldn't be lost and the art of tuning could continue to develop, and Morgantown became the center of pan tuning education. By all accounts he was a hard task master, very critical of his students' work, constantly pushing them to work at his level. His own work became more scientific. Every detail—every millimeter change in the slope of the pan, the size and shape of the notes, the techniques needed to control multiple harmonics on each note, how to get more control over sympathetic vibrations from the other notes and the

"The instruments made by Ellie and his team in the last two decades of his life are today the standard by which we measure quality in pan tuning, a reference for anyone playing pan."

“It’s yet another example of Ellie’s vision and modernism that he embraced the idea. Rather than fearing a digital technology that he couldn’t control, he saw the project as a final piece of his legacy, that the sound of his instruments could be made accessible to musicians and composers all over the world.”

skirt—was discussed, experimented with, obsessed over with the help of his personally trained team. The result was another leap forward in the sound of the pans. The instruments made by Ellie and his team in the last two decades of his life are today the standard by which we measure quality in pan tuning, a reference for anyone playing pan.

Accolades came as well. In 1999 he received the NEA National Heritage Fellowship Award, in 2000 an honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies, and in 2003 he was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame. His work is exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. He got more and more invitations to speak about his work, and he became comfortable with a microphone—he could discuss pan tuning and tell stories for hours on end.

Ellie played pan his entire life. In Trinidad he was primarily a tenor pan player, and I heard he was a serious iron man at carnival time as well. In his later years he focused his energies on the triple guitar. He created solo arrangements where both melody and harmony were clear, and he composed his own music for the pan. He continued practicing and composing into his 90th year. Sometimes he sang as well, mostly his own lyrics.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention our working relationship, as it directly affected Ellie’s work. Over time Ellie became very interested in how his pans sounded on recordings, and my albums became a kind of feedback loop for him. He listened to the records for sound quality and to see how his pans sounded on record. A few times he came to the studio when I was working on an album so he could hear them on professional speaker systems. Later on, I also did a lot of recording in Morgantown and besides tuning the pans he would stop by and listen on headphones to see how things were progressing. He was fascinated by the recording process, how 25 of his pans could be overdubbed to create an orchestral sound that was brilliant and warm at the same time, and he tuned the pans with that in mind.

Our last recording project together is due for release in January 2019. It’s a digital collection of Ellie’s finest instruments—a computer plug-in that will make Ellie’s sound accessible to anyone with a computer. It’s yet another example of Ellie’s vision and modernism that he embraced the idea. Rather than fearing a digital technology that he couldn’t control, he saw the project as a final piece of his legacy, that the sound of his instruments could be made accessible to musicians and composers all over the world.

I remember one time when Ellie asked me to play at one of his speaking engagements. It was a materials research conference, attended by engineers and physicists. The physicists walked in, took one look at the pan and what it could do and quickly made the assessment—‘that’s impossible’—knowing full well that they had just seen that it was in fact possible. I understand better now what they meant, because the pan remains the only tuned percussion instrument where multiple notes are tuned out of one solid piece, and I’ve often wondered what would have happened if Ellie and the others had had experts telling them in the early days that it couldn’t be done. But having seized upon a crazy idea that defied all logic, they succeeded in making it work and Ellie dedicated his entire life to taking it as far as he could. For more than 70 years he never let up, never settling for what he could already do, relentlessly seeking a level of perfection that was just beyond his grasp, and challenging everyone else to try to keep up with him. His legacy will live through his instruments, through the next generation of tuners that he trained, and literally through all of the tens of thousands of pan players in the world and millions of people who love the beautiful sound of steel pan.
(September 25, 2018) ■

Ellie Mannette

“...Ellie dedicated his entire life to taking it as far as he could. For more than 70 years he never let up, never settling for what he could already do, relentlessly seeking a level of perfection that was just beyond his grasp, and challenging everyone else to try to keep up with him.”

MY TAKE ON ARRANGING ROCK AND POP MUSIC FOR STEELBANDS

Tracy Thorton

TRACY THORTON *has been a professional steelpannist, performer, composer, recording artist, clinician and producer for over the past 25 years. He is best known for and internationally recognized as the founder and creator of "Pan Rocks...the Ultimate Steel Drum Rock Show".*

Arranging Rock and Pop music for the steelband, or arranging any kind of music for steelband that is not considered to be "traditional" to the steelpan artform, is not a new development in the steelband world. In fact, during the past few years, with the compounding growth of the steelpan artform here in the U.S. and throughout the globe, popular music that is more indigenous to the western world has become a lot more common for steelbands to play. It makes perfect sense when you think about it. It is familiar to the audiences, and it can be less complex for beginning and intermediate bands to learn and perform. Plus, playing music that is already familiar to those who are playing it can be very exciting and less intimidating. This is especially true when players perform a tune in a steelband setting that they already know. I am in the camp, like many of you, that any type of music played in a steelband setting can make that music even better than the original, because I just love the pan.

For me, because I am known as the "Pan Rocks" guy (or being typecast with that identity), I have been asked on numerous occasions about my approach to arranging rock, pop, punk, and heavy metal music for steelbands. I have never really thought of myself as an "Arranger" per se. Even so, I can present my take on what I do, and actually, it is not that complicated.

Most often, I try to keep my cover tune arrangements as close to the original as possible. I try not to indulge too much and over arrange the music. I might exaggerate a hook or a part of the song that stands out, but ultimately, I want the audience to really connect with what they are hearing. I believe that it is very important to take the audience into consideration. When hearing an arrangement of a tune that they are already familiar with, I like people to be able to sing along. Usually for the audience, it is already a new and an exciting experience just to hear songs that they already know played by a large steelband, so over-the-top acrobatic pan lines and overly complicated arrangements usually are not my focus. I am not saying that all of those things can't be viable—I just prefer to keep it close to the original most of the time.

When arranging, I try to come up with cool parts for everyone in the band, no matter what level they are on. I try to have something interesting for each voice, keeping each section happy with their part as well as being challenged, and of course having fun, while at the same time staying true to the tune. For me, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. With the rock stuff, I love to arrange BIG, even if it's for a small group. I cut my teeth arranging for a 6-piece steelband, and I always strived to make us sound five-times bigger than we were. That's where my tunes "Dain Brammage" and "In the Groove of Things" were written and arranged. I love big, loud, and powerful. I always wanted to achieve a Panorama vibe but with rock music, no matter what size the band. To me they have the same spirit and energy so it's really not that much of a stretch.

I also like to take into consideration the live performance. For instance, in my tune ***In The Groove of Things****, there are breaks in the parts for spins and jumps. In ***Dain Brammage****, the first part of the verses is just the low pans jamming the main riff so the rest of the band can jump and get the audience excited. This also helps in bringing the band together and gets them more excited and engaged as a unit. It is a win-win.

All that being said, I try to arrange in a way that is best for the song itself. When I am invited to teach a steelband a tune, I try and arrange something that I think would fit the level of that group. For instance, if I know I am working with a beginning group, I will try to get the point of the song across in the most concise and simple way. I do like to push bands and get the most out of them, but I also try not to go too far outside their comfort level. This helps to ensure that the performance is confident and strong. The better and more experienced the band, the more you can embellish things. For instance, I have arranged Led Zeppelin's "D'yer Maker" at least 10 different times, and most likely 10 different ways. This is why I love to teach by rote. I can get the basics of the arrangement down with the band and then build on it accordingly. To start a new tune from scratch, and see it come to life is the most thrilling thing for me. As a bonus, the band gets to experience the creative process in real time, so they can feel a part of it as well. It's a very cool way to learn music. In the United States, very few school bands get to experience learning music by rote. I learned by rote with my friends in rock bands when I was younger, and later, in Trinidad while learning a Panorama tune. It's a beautiful learning experience like no other, and for a non-reader like me, it was very welcome. On the flip side, if you arrange a tune and chart it out for the band to read, I suggest that you have them try to memorize the part to get their eyes off the page. Encourage them to own the music, so to speak, so they can play it expressively and with feeling. If not, there is potential that the band will sound mechanical, like a band in the box, and be devoid of feeling and spirit.

"But the vibes and spirit of your kids having a great time is what the audience connects with, and that is also what they feel. And that's what we all want—right? Giving people that feeling of being alive."

A critical factor, that I see often gets looked over, is... drum roll please...THE DRUMMER. I am a drummer at heart and I am of the opinion that a band is only as good as its drummer. Like it or not, a bad drummer can make a great band sound terrible, and a great drummer can make a mediocre band sound amazing. The drummer has to be in command of the band and the driving force. So please don't skimp on a drummer for your band. Sometimes I see them, as well as the entire engine room, treated as an after-thought. When I work with bands, I might be in charge of the class/session as the teacher, but as soon as I count off the tune, I no longer am in charge—the drummer is. I suggest you work with them, put in the time, encourage them, and strive to instill confidence in them. You have to have belief, trust, and confidence in your drummers as they do in you. The drummer also needs to understand that he/she has to earn that trust.

All that being said, I believe that capturing the spirit of the tune is just as, or even more important than, the execution of it. I always tell people to play to the best of their ability, but not to stress on every little detail. "It's only rock n' roll." Sometimes, not being perfect is your friend in this realm of music. But the vibes and spirit of your kids having a great time is what the audience connects with, and that is also what they feel. And that's what we all want—right? Giving people that feeling of being alive.

So, go out there and arrange any tune you want. Even one you think might not work. Be creative, think outside the box, be fearless, try things that you may even think people would hate or would be just "wrong". If I listened to that kind of background chatter, I would have quit this business a long time ago. Just be you, be as great as you can be, and introduce the world to your take on music. The world is a better place when we can all be our best selves, while inspiring others to be their best too. ■

***click these links to watch performances by Tracy Thorton**

MY APPROACH TO TEACHING A COMMUNITY STEELBAND

Yuko Asada

Yuko Asada *is an internationally known steelpan artist who is widely recognized for her work as a transcriber, arranger, builder, tuner, and director. Originally from Japan, she holds a Bachelors degree from West Virginia University, and a Masters degree in steelpan performance from Northern Illinois University, where she is currently on the steelpan faculty.*

I first started directing the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Community School of the Arts (CSA) Steelband in 2012. The steelband typically consists of people of all ages, and currently, we have players that range from middle-school aged students to people who are in their 60s. Some students have a music degree, others have some musical background, and the rest have little or no musical background at all. You may wonder why I accept students with little or no musical experience? The reason is because I have witnessed the positive effect that people can receive from playing in a steelband. Rather than turning the inexperienced people away, I decided that I needed to figure out a way to make the steelband available for everyone. How do you create a healthy ensemble with students at various musical skill levels? I will present my approach to leading the community steelband that I currently teach, and perhaps it could also be useful as a model for other community steelbands.

I begin by finding out if any of the students have had any musical experience—such as if they have played the steelpan before, or if they have played any other instrument. I also ask them if they read music, and if they do, I ask them what clef they are most familiar with reading. In my ensembles, I include five different sections: tenor (lead), double second-1, double seconds-2, cello, and bass. After explaining the functions and challenges of each pan, I assign students with the most musical experience on tenor (lead) and double seconds-1, which mostly play the melody. I arrange the double second-2 parts for beginners so that the least experienced players in my steelband play double seconds-2. The double seconds-2 play the least number of notes, and have simple rhythms that allow for students to get used to reading music and playing at the same time. If there are students who are comfortable reading bass clef, I assign them on cello or bass. My cello section often plays strum patterns or counter melody. On bass pans, I assign someone who is comfortable reading and playing at the same time. In addition, having one strong player in each section will help strengthen the entire band, and the strongest person can take a leadership role and assist others in the section. Once each student is assigned to a pan, I demonstrate the proper playing technique by beginning with how to properly hold the sticks, strike the notes, and move the arms, wrists, and fingers. For instance, I instruct the students that the tenor sticks, which are the shortest, are held between the thumb, first joint of the index finger, and second joint of middle finger, with the other fingers wrapped around the end of the stick or into the palm. As sticks get larger for other steelpans, additional fingers are used to hold the sticks for support. I explain that the key to getting a nice timbre with good resonance from the steelpan is to have your shoulder, arm, wrists and hands relaxed, and use gentle touch to strike.

"I have found that selecting familiar songs allow students to connect instantly to the music, and in turn, the students learn faster, because they already know how the song sounds."

Once the proper technique is shown, I ask the students to raise their hands with sticks to display if they are holding them properly. I then have the students play on the same note alternately with right and left hands, focusing on their technique and sound. After students are comfortable playing with the right technique and sound, I have them play faster to achieve an evenly sustained roll. Without changing the height of my hands and arms much, I demonstrate rolls with various dynamics, and then have students try to implement the same technique in their rolls.

Unlike piano or marimba, learning the pattern on steelpans can be a big challenge because each pan has a unique layout. I first have students find notes in the C Major scale just by looking at the instrument. Then, I have them roll on the lowest C on the pan, and once everyone is playing it, I move on to D, E, and so on. Most often, the first songs that I choose are in the key of C for easy reading. For beginning ensembles, I try to stay within keys that only have up to 2 sharps or flats. I also highly recommend practicing the appropriate scale of the piece before actually attempting to play the piece itself.

So, what kind of pieces work best for a beginning steelband? My programs include various styles of music such as calypso, soca, rock, pop, R&B, classical, and jazz. I first develop an arrangement that is very easy, with only a few notes, simple rhythms, and recognizable forms. For this first arrangement, I often choose a popular song that most of the students will know and recognize. Some songs may contain more complex rhythms, but repetition of the same rhythms will make it easier to manage, even for beginning students. I wait to decide which other songs to arrange until after the first rehearsal is concluded, because I use the first rehearsal and the first arrangement to help me identify the level of students that I have in my group. I check both their reading abilities and their playing abilities during that first rehearsal, which then helps to guide me in choosing the other pieces that I will add.

I have found that selecting familiar songs allow students to connect instantly to the music, and in turn, the students learn faster, because they already know how the song sounds. Arranging a piece as close to the original version as possible will help students to identify whether they are playing their part correctly or not. Additionally, students can usually connect emotionally to music that they know, which enables them to perform it with greater musicality.

In terms of the steelband as a whole, I have always tried to build a healthy, warm, and welcoming community where every person can learn, perform, enjoy, and appreciate the music of steelpan. Gestures such as being thoughtful to everyone's needs, allotting extra time for assistance, and getting to know each member of the group as an individual goes a long way in bringing people together. And I have witnessed in my community steelband that being surrounded by a supportive and strong unit can be a tremendous advantage for those players who have little or no experience performing on stage. Through creating a positive environment, I have shared many joyous times with people who are truly willing to help and support one another. ■

STEELPAN IN THE STUDIO: RECORDING *THE LAST JEDI*

Tyler Hunt

John WIlliams (left) and Tyler Hunt (right)

Tyler Hunt *is a Long Beach-based percussionist, educator, and producer who works with a wide variety of groups and projects in Southern California. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Percussion from Humboldt State University, and a Master of Music degree in Percussion Performance from California State University Long Beach.*

The opportunity to work with John Williams and perform on the soundtrack for *The Last Jedi* was undoubtedly one of the greatest privileges of my musical career. I am very happy to share an inside view into my experiences performing steelpan in that studio environment, and to offer some of the most valuable insights that I was able to take away from the experience.

I owe LA timpanist and percussionist Greg Goodall all of the credit for making me a part of *The Last Jedi* soundtrack. I had worked previously with Greg at Cal State Long Beach when he was coaching chamber percussion ensembles, and he had seen me perform Liam Teague's, *Impressions*, on steelpan at one of those percussion concerts. Greg had initially recommended me for the project when John Williams was considering writing a steelpan part for *The Force Awakens*, given that none of the percussionists working on that score played steelpan. John Williams didn't end up writing a steelpan part for that film, but when it came time for him to compose the soundtrack for the *The Last Jedi*, he decided to write a steelpan part, and I got the call.

The first opportunity I had to meet John Williams was on April 7, 2017 during one of the recording sessions with the full orchestra. He was conducting that day, and afterward, he wanted to meet with me to see my steelpan and talk about the part. He generally knew what he wanted as far as the melody, but wanted to talk to me about the steelpan instrument and the playability of something like a fast Gm arpeggio. It wasn't clear to me what the depth of his knowledge of steelpans was, but he conveyed to me that he wanted a distinct sort of 'off' sound. He actually commented on how beautiful he thought my tenor pan sounded, and that it might not be the right sound for this project. After describing to him the various types and ranges of steelpans, including their fully chromatic capability, I encouraged him to write exactly what he wanted and told him I would find the correct instruments and make it work.

I knew the part was likely going to require a range lower than my tenor pan, and I contacted LA percussionist, Chris Wabich, to borrow his double seconds and so that I could spend a few days getting oriented to his instruments. Only four days before the recording session was scheduled to take place, I received the actual steelpan part that I needed to play, and I realized that it required a higher range than Chris' double seconds were capable of. I then called another LA steelpan colleague, Ted Goslin, because I knew that he owned a nice set of double seconds which had the perfect range for the part, which was low G up to D above the staff. Because of the required high notes, I ended up deciding to use double seconds mallets with tenor tips, and I found that the sharp articulation and the overtones they created seemed to fit the vibe of the part very well.

There were two cues that I recorded on *The Last Jedi*—the first was a Latin-style cue and the second was a swing-style cue. The Latin-style cue was very manageable. It had an exact indicated tempo, and was more like the sort of part you might typically hear arranged for the steelpan. It did however contain some double stops that included low notes outside the double seconds register. Before the recording session I spoke with long time studio percussionist Allen Estes, who was also on the soundtrack. Allen basically told me not to worry about it, and he reassured me that unplayable things come up from time to time in studio percussion settings, and that players just adapt to them.

The swing-style cue was written more like up-tempo bebop lines, and proved to be much more challenging. The only verbal notes for the cue was "1930s swing gone wrong,"

"Versatilely is crucial in a studio environment. I found that some of my experiences playing in jazz big bands and in salsa bands was very helpful to me, because that instrumentation was very similar to the configuration of the ensemble that I recorded with for *The Last Jedi*. In addition to making me familiar to the styles, those previous experiences also taught me how to manage and play a vast array of different percussion instruments."

Tyler Hunt's set-up during a studio recording session for the Last Jedi.

and for the part itself, it said, "cum Artie Shaw". The steelpan part was basically a doubling of the same melodies that Williams had written for the woodwinds and keyboard instruments. When it came time to record, I found that some of the stickings that I had chosen were difficult to execute at the required tempo, but thankfully I had enough adrenaline at the time (and a few takes) to lay down a good recording. In hindsight, I wish I had spent more time working on alternative stickings for the difficult passages that would have allowed me to play the part accurately and comfortably at any tempo required.

Aside from my initial terror while recording the first couple takes, I found the overall experience to be extremely interesting and thoroughly enjoyable. There were a wide variety of unconventional instruments being played throughout the score, and many unique sound effects were being created, so interacting with the other musicians on the soundtrack was highly informative. I found them to be very friendly and extremely supportive, which helped to create a positive environment that evoked good performances from everyone.

In reflecting on the recording process for *The Last Jedi*, I found that there were several key experiences I've had over the years that prepared me for it. First and foremost, my time as an undergraduate in the Humboldt State Calypso Band was essential to my development as a pannist. It was there that I learned to play and become proficient on both the double seconds and the tenor pan, and learning to read and perform complex music while being held to a high musical standard was highly formative to me. Later during my graduate studies, that experience allowed me to take full advantage of my participation in the California State University Long Beach Steel Orchestra, and ultimately, to becoming a professional performer in Southern California.

I have also found, through the years, that working on the kinds of technical exercises needed to be a versatile improviser has greatly improved my facility on the instrument and my confidence in playing it. The work I have done recording steelpan in my own home studio has also been extremely valuable, as it helped get me more familiar with working with fixed time, and to understanding how steelpans translate when recording. I have also learned that you will almost always be required to have a greater control of your tone and dynamic range in a studio situation than in a live performance setting.

"Being able to play multiple types of steelpan instruments, as well as being able to play the full range of percussion instruments, could be very useful in studio situations. But most of all, developing strong reading abilities, having versatile improvisation skills, being able to adapt to unusual playing techniques, and being able to adapt to varied musical styles are all essential and necessary skills for any steelpan musician hoping to develop a successful recording career."

Versatilily is crucial in a studio environment. I found that some of my experiences playing in jazz big bands and in salsa bands was very helpful to me, because that instrumentation was very similar to the configuration of the ensemble that I recorded with for *The Last Jedi*. In addition to making me familiar to the styles, those previous experiences also taught me how to manage and play a vast array of different percussion instruments.

Perhaps my greatest shortcoming for *The Last Jedi* recording was the fact that I didn't have a set of double seconds of my own that I felt as equally comfortable playing as I do when I play my low D tenor pan. To remedy this for the future, I have personally chosen to invest in a low G oversized tenor pan, similar to the instrument currently used by Victor Provost in his recordings and in concert. This seems like the perfect instrument for a studio environment, as the range is very close to the range of the double seconds, but the instrument has the playability of the tenor pan. I have ordered an extended range instrument with a low G and a custom high D, which would have been the ideal instrument to use for *The Last Jed*i tracks and cues, as it would have covered the entire range of the written part.

While there is certainly no one-way to prepare for everything that one may encounter in a film and television studio session, being versatile seems to be the best approach. Being able to play multiple types of steelpan instruments, as well as being able to play the full range of percussion instruments, could be very useful in studio situations. But most of all, developing strong reading abilities, having versatile improvisation skills, being able to adapt to unusual playing techniques, and being able to adapt to varied musical styles are all essential and necessary skills for any steelpan musician hoping to develop a successful recording career. ■

STEEL PAN IN CHAMBER MUSIC: A PERSPECTIVE IN REPERTOIRE

Ian J. Meiman

IAN J. MEIMAN *is a percussionist, educator, and composer currently based in Greater Cincinnati. He is pursuing a Doctorate in Music from The University of Southern Mississippi, and holds degrees in music from The University of British Columbia and Eastern Kentucky University. At Southern Miss, Ian was co-director of the Fresh Pans of Bel Air steel band and founder/director of the USM Chamber Percussion Ensemble.*

Steelpan music has grown as a staple in the percussion community throughout the world. In North America alone, steelpan programs have grown in a substantial rate in the past few decades and the addition of new music pushes the capability of the instruments. Though steelpan repertoire continues to span a vast array of genres, those who have enjoyed performing the music have done so through an ensemble, band, or orchestra. So as steelpans continue to influence our culture, what new setting can broaden the scope of steelpan literature? One idea is the exploration and promotion of steelpan chamber music. This article will discuss how chamber music can be artistically and educationally beneficial for steelpan programs. Through extensive research and a survey compiled from over 60 steelpan educators, it is evident that chamber music can have a positive impact on the future of the steelpan.

Although the steelpan is a relatively new instrument its acceptance in North America has been substantial. The popularity of the steelpan has grown substantially from over a dozen steelpan programs in the early1980's to the present day where there are over 750 programs in the United States and Canada. With so many new steelpan programs forming in schools, what is the repertoire that is available?

As steelpan programs continue to grow in North America so has the publication of steelpan repertoire. There are several companies that publish either partially or exclusively steelpan music. From compiling catalogues of 16 publishers of steelpan music, the repertoire is vastly written for one particular arrangement (Figure 1). Of over 1,100 published works in these publishers, 94% are written for traditional steel band, that is of the orchestration of steelpans and engine room. 5% of works are written for solo steelpan instruments and 3% are for chamber settings, typically duet and trio with instrumentation varying between steelpan and non-steelpan instruments. The remaining 1% is reserved for works written for percussion ensemble including steelpan instruments and combo groups. Noting that steelpan repertoire has mostly been written or arranged for ensembles, it is interesting how other arrangements for steelpan have been mostly ignored. *(see figure 1)*

Steelpan programs continue to establish themselves in music schools, and because of this, it is important to note that not all programs will have panorama sized ensembles. From a survey conducted for steelpan educators (61 responses) in early 2018, 55% of programs contain 20 or less students (Figure 2). There can be several factors that contribute to the small compliment of participants in programs, one notable reason is the limited inventory of instruments. Since steelpans are handcrafted and their cost varies on each instrument, many new programs are limited to a few

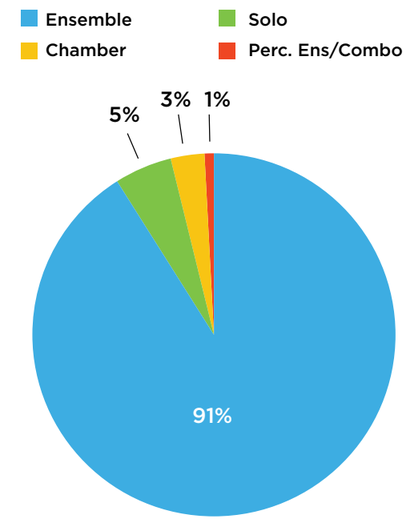


Figure 1.
Compilation of Pan Repertoire from 16 Music Publications

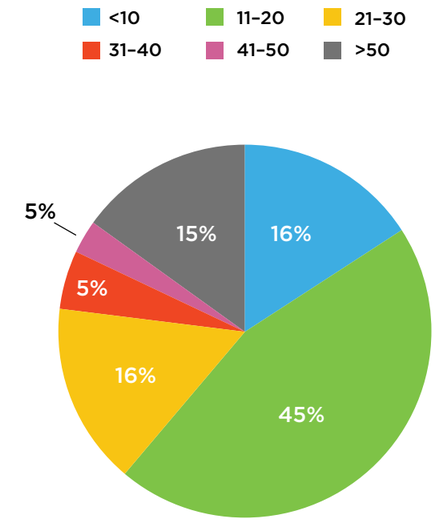


Figure 2.
Survey Results from 61 Pan Educators on Program Size

steelpans. Of the educators surveyed as having programs of 20 or less students, 50% of these programs have been in operation for 10 years or less. With so many steel programs with limited resources and personnel, performing chamber music can be an excellent programing option. However, including chamber music in steelpan is not exclusive to just the smaller programs. Large programs can use chamber music to expand their concert programing options, even forming chamber groups within the larger ensemble. The benefits of chamber music in steelpan programs can reach beyond programing issues. *(see figure 2)*

Incorporating chamber music repertoire broadens performance opportunities for students. Since the scope of the typical instruments in a steelpan ensemble are graduated in range, chamber music can be adapted to suit the instruments in a fashion similar to typical western music chamber settings. Because of this, steelpan musicians can perform an array of works, from classical adaptations to original pieces. Steelpan chamber music can aide in the development of work skills as the students must cooperate in organizing rehearsal progress in order to perform the music successfully as professional musicians must achieve. Another benefit in steelpan chamber music is logistical based. Directors who have had performances away from the studio know the hassle of moving and transporting instruments. This stress can be eased if the program was chamber music based, and as a result, they would only have to move a few instruments. With so many benefits, chamber music can be a positive influence in the education of steelpan students. So, what is the next course of action to bring chamber music more into steelpan literature?

Steelpan chamber music can become a solid expansion in the repertoire if it is promoted by the members of the steelpan community. In the survey, 94% of respondents said that they compose and/or arrange music for steelpan. With such a majority of educators writing music, a contribution to chamber music would greatly expand the repertoire. Directors can also encourage students to participate in their own creative output in arranging and composing steelpan chamber music. Along with the expansion of repertoire, steelpan chamber music can thrive with the support from our music societies such as the Percussive Arts Society, the National Association for Music Education, and NSSBE. These and other organizations can help promote steelpan chamber music by showcasing performances, establishing competitions, and creating awareness of this relatively overlooked genre. These are of course merely suggestions but nonetheless, if steelpan chamber music is ever to expand, it must be developed by steelpan programs, music societies, and most importantly, the steelpan musicians.

We as steelpan educators and musicians need to consider the potential of the instruments' capability. Steelpan chamber music should not be viewed as a replacement for standard steelpan ensemble music. Instead, it is a means to create new possibilities of music with these beautiful instruments, and as a result, to enrich the next generation of musicians who cherish the steelpan. ■

MY DAILY WARM-UP ROUTINE

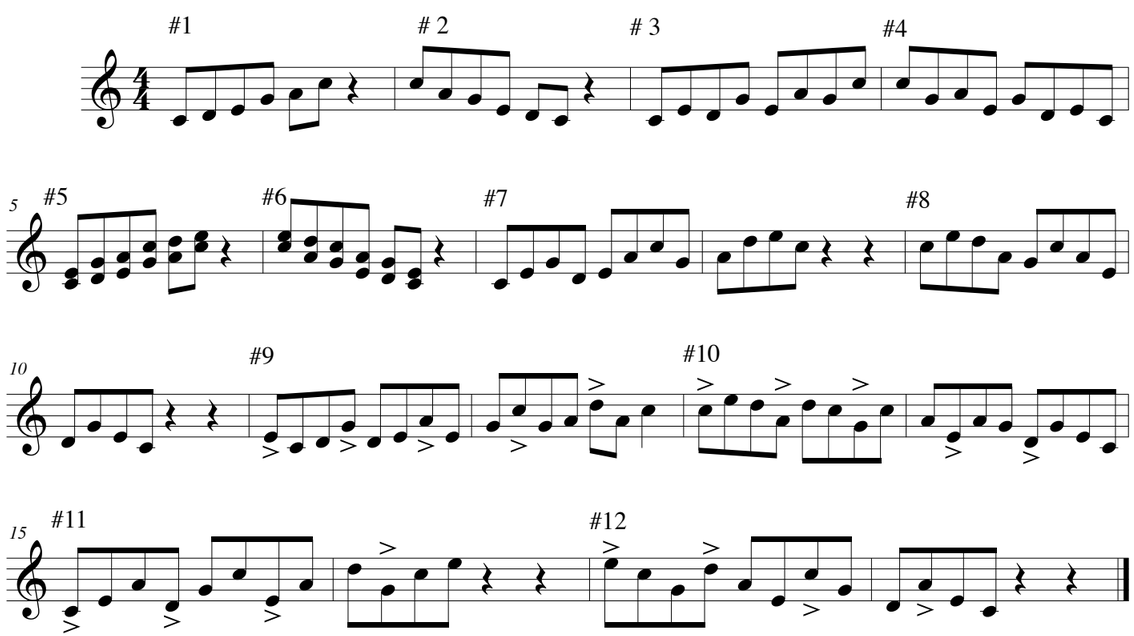
Liam Teague

LIAM TEAGUE *is a Trinidadian composer, arranger, and performing artists who is internationally recognized as a leader in the steelpan movement worldwide. Hailed as the "Paganini of the Steelpan", he has received many awards from his homeland of Trinidad and Tobago, including the Humming Bird National Award and the Anthony N. Sabga Caribbean Award for Excellence. He is Professor of Music and Head of Steelpan studies at Northern Illinois University, and a recent recipient of the NIU PresidentialResearch, Scholarship and Artistry Professor Award.*

My daily warm up routine often employs the manipulation of scales, chords and exercises. These examples are based on the C major Pentatonic Scale (scale degrees 1,2,3,5 & 6)

C Major Pentatonic Scale

#1	Ascending	#7	Ascending/Descending
#2	Descending	#8	Descending/Ascending
#3	Skips in an ascending fashion	#9	3 note ascending pattern
#4	Skips in a descending fashion	#10	3 note descending pattern
#5	Double stops ascending	#11	3 note ascending pattern
#6	Double stops descending	#12	3 note descending pattern

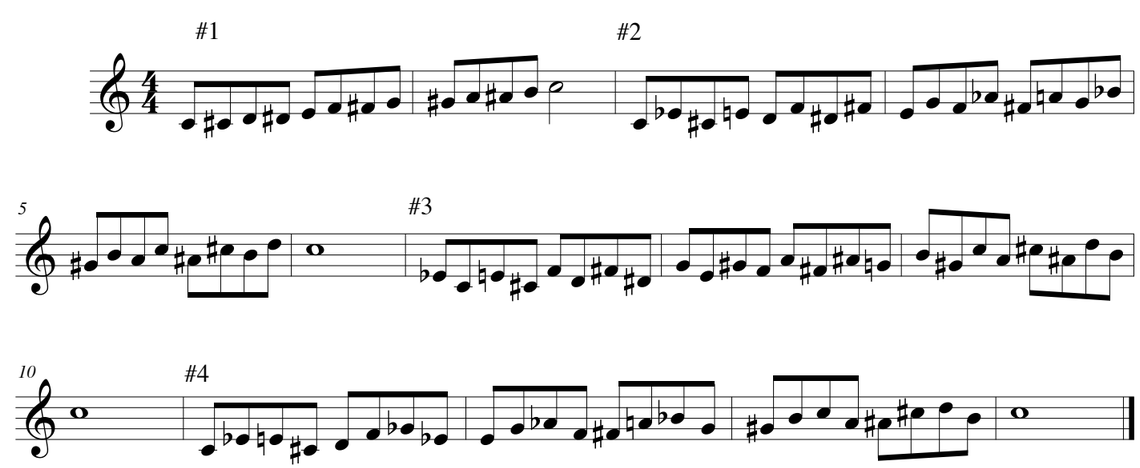


While I use the pentatonic scale in my daily practice routine to develop technique, it is often integrated into my creative work (arrangements, compositions and improvisations).

For example, I frequently play the pentatonic scale when improvising over major and minor chords, as well as the ii7 - V7- I chord progression which can be found in many musical styles, including Calypso, Jazz and Bossa Nova. While one can opt to play it exclusively in a stepwise direction (ascending and descending), over reliance on that approach can lead to predictability. This is where it would be instructive to use permutations of the pentatonic scale that I have included, and to also find other variations of it.

It is also important to note that these permutations can be adapted to other scales—chromatic, blues, diminished, whole tone, etc. Here are a few examples of the permutations using the chromatic scale:

#1 Ascending
#2 Ascending in minor 3rds
#3 Descending in minor 3rds
#4 Combination of ascending and descending minor 3rds



FOUR QUESTIONS WITH CLIFFORD ALEXIS

Eugene Novotney

1

Eugene Novotney: When was your first experience with steelpan education in the USA, and what struck you most about that experience?

Clifford Alexis: Somewhere around 1967–1968, I was approached by a Jewish music teacher to make steelpans at Meyer Levin HS in Brooklyn. I didn't make pans back then, so I referred them to Patrick Arnold who was a steelpan builder/tuner living in New York. The steelband is still in existence today. My first experience teaching a steelband in the US was through Murray Narell who was a social worker from New York City. He, of course, happens to be the father of Andy and Jeff Narell. He had a steelpan program in lower east side in New York City, that was sponsored by Pepsi-Cola. The program was dedicated to serve underprivileged children of mixed racial backgrounds who lived in the area. I taught popular music of the day, mixed with some easy traditional calypsos by rote. I was paid $30 every time I taught. I was very much interested in uplifting their daily lives, and pan was one of the things that turn them on to help them.

2

EN: From your perspective, what has changed the most in steelband education in the USA since that first experience to now in the present day?

CA: Today, there's a lot of interest and improvement in steelpan education in the USA, where you see numerous steelbands in schools from elementary schools to universities. At Northern Illinois University (NIU) where I worked for 30 years, seeing the first steelpan degree program established in the US is a very rewarding experience, especially coming from where my fellow panmen and I were treated very badly at one time in Trinidad and Tobago. Seeing students from all over the world getting their degrees in pan and becoming successful in the field is also very rewarding. Professor Liam Teague is a fulltime tenured professor at NIU, and such a position was something unthinkable many decades ago.

3

EN: What are the most significant differences between steelband education in the USA and steelband education in Trinidad today?

CA: In my view, the approach is much more serious in the US as opposed to Trinidad, which is the home of the steelpans. Some people in Trinidad look at it and say, "it's our thing. What's the big deal." Back in the day, there was no such a thing as in music literacy or pan in schools in Trinidad, as opposed to today. That part has changed for the better in my opinion. More people can gain employment in steelpan in the US.

4

EN: Where do you see steelband education in the USA headed in the future?

CA: To use a loose term, the sky is the limit. More and more people in the US are not only getting interested in performing the steelpan, but also building and tuning of the steelpan as well. I'd like to believe that sometime in the future, building and tuning of steelpans will be implemented in schools. Some NIU alumni such as Dr. Mia Gormandy and Dr. David Aarons received their PhDs in ethnomusicology after graduating from NIU, which will widen the scope of other people becoming interested in pursuing postgraduate degrees as well. And now, they're both professors at universities. I'd like to see more universities in the US creating a steelpan program where students can major in the instrument like how it's been done at NIU. ■

Clifford Alexis *is recognized internationally for his contributions to the steelpan artform, and has established a legacy as one of the founding fathers of the steelpan movement in the United States. He is known world-wide as a skilled performer, a creative composer and arranger, and a steelpan builder & tuner of the highest echelon. He is a member of the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame, and was recently presented with the Humming Bird National Award from his homeland of Trinidad and Tobago for his lifelong dedication to the art form of steelpan.*