

# ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY IN OUR MUSIC FOR THE STEELBAND

## SECURING OUR STEELBAND TRADITIONS

**D**uring the past 15 years of composing music for the national and international pan community, I have benefited from interaction with many and diverse contributors to our pan culture, including musicians, studio producers, performing artistes, local and foreign steelbands, arrangers, universities, schools, students, parents, teachers, scorers, transcribers, conventional orchestras, communities and indeed icons, such as the late Dr Pat Bishop and Jit Samaroo and others of like stature. Together with Dr Pat Bishop, I conceptualised and founded the Music Literacy Trust in 2004 to help preserve the indigenous pan music of our land and to provide financial assistance to talented pannists who wanted to pursue music education. The Trust has since assisted many scholars including Amrit Samaroo, Seion Gomez, Attiba Williams, Sophia Subero, and rolled out workshops, vacation and after-school programmes teaching the performance of musical instruments and music theory to children in southeast Port of Spain: the City Angels Programme. Feedback from teachers, students, principals, parents and the community has been very encouraging and extremely positive.

What I continue to see are opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago to strive towards sustainability in its approach to its own culture, certainly from a preservation and educational perspective. In countries that take pride in preserving their cultural history and identity, there are museums and initiatives to chronicle and record every facet of life and lifestyle, with culture taking centre stage. Unfortunately, with each year passing, some of our very own masters are lost, and with them their valuable knowledge and experience, so important to informing our culture and keeping it alive.

In Trinidad and Tobago there is little respect for local music and we witness airwaves neglecting pan songs and local music edged out

to foreign music, except at Carnival time. At the moment there are no true museums fitting enough to showcase our cultural history, and there is no systematic interaction between our pool of talent and our students in the education system. Our master tuners are also dwindling, and chroming pans remains a constraint at home, so it begs the question, where will we be in the future, and how can Trinidad and Tobago achieve sustainability in our pan culture? One of the great shapers of our national instrument, Ellie Mannette, is working in Virginia, and the likes of Liam Teague and Cliff Alexis in Northern Illinois University. Why cannot such resources be utilised to support the development of this relatively young instrument and the pan industry as a whole?

The proliferation of steelbands across the globe confirms that the world has seen and heard what Trinidad and Tobago has created and envisioned, and has openly embraced the



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national instrument. Trinidad and Tobago is the mecca of pan, but the truth is from year to year great pan arrangements are lost, symptomatic of a culture unconcerned about preserving for the future. From my own perspective, while working outside of Trinidad for some years, I recognised that being a Trini is not about the academic education I received but being able to portray more of my cultural background.

This lack of focus on the future and recording for posterity is exacerbated by social changes and a pan community which no longer comprises loyal players staying with one band through thick and thin, though there are some exceptions, but a more mobile and disparate group of players. Thus it is easier to have a great piece of music fall by the wayside, because: a) the arrangement was not captured in score; b) players are no longer around or have forgotten how to play a part; c) the focus on capturing our own music for use in the education system; d)



Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge

music literacy is at a relatively early but growing stage in the psyche of the steelbands.

I have personally participated in the unproductivity of waiting many hours to learn a single piece of music for Panorama only to realise that it is forgotten and cannot be performed mere weeks afterwards. Contrast this to the many overseas steelbands in the schools and universities abroad, who show up to rehearse with their music, learning many songs in a very limited timeframe.

In 2003, Yara Trinidad Ltd (then Hydro Agri Trinidad) the company for which I worked, supported the documentation of music composed by our steelband icons, starting with:

-Dr Jit Samaroo (2003) with 6 of his test pieces, in a CD called *Original Notes* and continuing with:

-Ray Holman, documenting 6 of his pieces on a double CD, called *Changing Time* with the University of the West Indies (UWI) in 2006;

-Yara Trinidad Ltd/Music Literacy Trust/UWI with Edwin and Junior Pouchet in 2008 at Silver Stars 60th Anniversary.

The Music Literacy Trust donated pieces to several educational institutions of arrangements by Bobby Mohammed and Ken "Professor" Philmore in 2010. What all these various activities have in common is preservation, with a return of that music to the education system.

One positive trend is that there is an upsurge in recognising the importance of music literacy, promoted by various programmes such as the Republic Bank Pan Minors, Birdsong Academy and a host of others. The government has also recently launched a Music School in the Panyard initiative in 2012. There are several laudable initiatives at work in addition to the staple events such as the Music Festival and Junior Panorama. Yet despite all the initiatives, we are not documenting our music for preservation and utilising it in our education to learn and evolve.

I respectfully suggest if we truly wish to have

some level of sustainability of our national instrument and our music, we should implement some of the following elements starting with our education of our youth, in the schools and in the panyard communities:

- Document the history and contributions of our icons and systematically teach the material in schools and universities.

- Utilise the many talented performers, artistes, arrangers, scorers, transcribers, teachers, locally and abroad, in a systematic way to impart knowledge to the younger generation.

- Update our cultural and pan history via an interactive encyclopaedia (started by the late Dr Pat Bishop) updated continuously via a website, or by a virtual museum. A lot of knowledge has already been lost.

- Preserve all the repertoires of the various steelbands and any new music performed in the Panorama, Pan Festivals, or any steelband event.

- Utilise ICT in the schools and panyards, such as computer applications. Finale and Sibelius, to capture our music at various events and utilise them in the education system and CXC exams, among others. This allows pieces to be slowed down to whatever speed, individual parts to be isolated, and gives the ability to see how the arranger has structured the piece (learning from our masters).

- Appreciate the value of preserving what it is that makes us uniquely Trinbagonian, and demonstrating it tangibly in how we treat our icons, buildings, art, culture and what we impart in schools.

- Examine what programmes exist in the country and build on them without reinventing the wheel and finding the synergies involved, including resources such as teachers, instruments, among others.

- Encourage new music to be composed specifically for the national instrument through the music festival and various school and national events. The Music Literacy Trust has

started a new category for such.

- Focus and highlight the up and coming youth, by making the Junior Panorama an event that signals to the world how we value the youth. At the moment, there is very little coverage to showcase the culmination of many children and teachers at work to showcase talent for the future and for the world.

- Integrate the Pan in the Classroom with pan in the community steelbands, with synergies in the communities. Use the teaching capability coming out from the Valsayn Teachers College, to enhance the knowledge of teachers of music programmes which should be reviewed and the talent used wherever they may be found locally and abroad.

- Develop a science of music programme at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, with focus on the science of acoustics, material science, sounds of various instruments and tuning among others which would open another avenue of possibilities for the pan community, but this is another subject. ■

**We need to appreciate the value of preserving what it is that makes us uniquely Trinbagonian, and demonstrate it tangibly in how we treat our icons, buildings, art & culture**



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