

Examining ethnomusicology through 60 years of steel bands in the UK, and almost 50 years of steel bands in British schools

Lionel McCalman, University of East London

ABSTRACT

Sixty years ago, a steel band played to an audience in the UK for the first time. Forty years ago, steel pans were introduced into British schools for two different but interrelated reasons. The first was to give credence to the cultural heritage of the black child (Caribbean or African), in a multicultural environment, and to provide opportunities for black children to explore this culture/musical traditions through their own competent performances. The second was to introduce the Caribbean's musical tradition to the wider school population as a way of valuing other cultures. This model suggested that steel pans were solely for the benefit of black children, and the technological experts (steel pan tuners/teacher) were also to be black, or born in the Caribbean. This paper examines how far we have come in the last 40 years, in forging a music curriculum in schools under a truly multicultural umbrella.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of steel bands in the British school system. In 1969, Gerald Forsyth, a pan pioneer, introduced steel pans at Islington Green School in north London, and soon afterwards the expansion within inner cities began. There was a sense among British school music teachers of what would 'work' for their pupils and what would not. Steel pans were seen as a 'valuable' experience for children – but only for children of Caribbean background. Today, children of diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to learn and play the steel pan. However,

most early experiments of introducing steel pans into schools were based on trial and error, rather than knowledge of precisely how and why it would work. Schneider (1993) considered the impact of teacher beliefs in relation to a child's perceived potential and how this might correlate with the teacher's perception of the home background. Opportunities for developing skills associated with sociability and incorporation into the school ethos are no longer sufficient. Steel pan music as an aspect of the Caribbean cultural heritage has much more to offer schools (McCalman 2013).

KEYWORDS

SCHOOL STEEL BAND
SECONDARY SCHOOL MUSIC
CURRICULUM
CARIBBEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE
STEEL PAN MUSICIANS
MULTICULTURALISM

The behavioural patterns, practices and language that an immigrant group bring with them when they arrive in a new country can assist in generating some form of cultural advantage that may be deemed important. The Caribbean diaspora has often quantified this 'community cultural wealth' (ie carnival, calypso, steel pan, limbo) as valuable resources for everyone, particularly people from socially marginalised groups (ie the white working classes). Culture is often narrowly equated with race and ethnicity, but in retrospect and through a broader lens the characteristics and forms of social histories, identities and

immigration status are brought into the debate (Hayward 2015).

As a result, pupils (black and white) may have particular personality traits that strike an affinity with the steel pan. Kemp (1996) identifies a set of personality traits (eg attitudes) which seem to be subject-related and which are evident in individuals who are attracted to particular musical genres. The outcomes, of course, would depend largely on the quality and dedication of the music teachers (usually peripatetic), the broad understanding they have of musicians' language and the motivation they give to the pupils (Ross 1995; Goble 2011). Most peripatetic music teachers of steel pan bring to the classroom a strong musical background, as many are musicians performing regularly in the community, and some are even at the top of their field. Most pan players/musicians and steel pan teachers in the UK have helpful opinions which would be of value to those interested in and working within this genre. Their judgement is heavily relied on by schools in selecting the kinds and types of instruments they need for their school projects, and they take the lead in almost all school celebrations and musical performances.

CARIBBEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL

In 1951, the first steel band ever to leave the Caribbean – TASPO (the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra) – arrived in the UK for the Festival of Britain, reflecting an aspect of the Caribbean diaspora (Gardner 2006). They brought with them their cultural traditions (eg limbo; calypso; the template of the Caribbean carnival with its youthful energies, distinctive social dance customs and colourful expressions). In making the move towards greater cultural diversity, some elements of this immigrant culture have embedded themselves in the racial binaries of the host culture. In 2006, the Notting Hill Carnival (Europe's biggest street party and a celebration of

the African Caribbean experience) was symbolically acknowledged as an 'Icon of England' by English Heritage, alongside the flag of St George, Hadrian's Wall, Pride and Prejudice, Blackpool Tower, the Globe theatre and the miniskirt. This should not be mistaken as a call to harmonious cultural acceptance, for as Dudley (2001) again pointed out, Britishness is often perceived as 'the empty signifier, the norm, against which "difference" (ethnicity) is measured' (Dudley 2001:21). The steel band, the Caribbean's gift to the UK, is a potent symbol of Creole cultural ingenuity. Indigenous more than African, its earliest performances were based upon the European 'classics' –rather than Caribbean compositions, their true pioneering expressions. All these aspects of colonial social structures have changed over time, and the steel band has today reclaimed its true identity in the UK. The historical cultural and technical innovations of the Caribbean have impacted on the lives of British people, and it is highly possible that, in Europe today, more ethnic Europeans are practising steel pan musicians than their Caribbean counterparts (McCalman 2013).

THE HISTORY OF STEEL BANDS IN UK SCHOOLS



The steel pan is a musical instrument invented in the 1940s in Trinidad and Tobago and around 1950-1 made its way to the United Kingdom. The forging of this instrument is completely labour-intensive, involving the manual sinking of an oil drum in a concave (inverted dome), then involving a series of processes (eg grooving, tempering and tuning) to finally emerge as a fully chromatic instrument. From 1969, the steel pan, or the steel

band, found its way into the London school system through the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), and its popularity was validated by its spread throughout the London area and into most inner city areas. By 1975, there were steel band classes in over 50 schools in London and other major cities where Caribbean migrants resided. Schools around the UK were being required to be more accountable to the local community, and their curriculum to reflect the social make-up of the local environment (Federation of Music Services 2002). As the educational debate emerged from the assimilation agenda to multicultural policies, and with the lack of consistency of black achievement of subject standards in secondary schools, the way forward seemed to be to establish the nature and importance of a diverse curriculum, including quality assurance in the teaching of steel pan music.

CREATING NEW MUSICAL GENRES

Creating artistic genres requires substantial investment of time, effort and artistic commitment (Dalladay 2014). Artists, even collectively, do not possess the wherewithal or infrastructure to develop or maintain a cultural art form (DiMaggio 1987). Though Di Maggio may be to some extent correct, we must not lose sight of the fact that the expansion and popularisation of steel pan in schools began with the appointment of Gerald Forsyth, in 1978, to the post of ILEA's steel band organiser for schools. With an office within the Greater London Council's head office from 1980, he quickly established steel pan as part of the music curriculum at over 160 schools. His job included maintaining steel band quality in the music curriculum, and this he set out to do as comprehensively and as objectively as possible by interviewing and appointing qualified school steel pan tutors. The underlying motive of the schools' senior management was to provide some cultural links with their countries of origin for working-class black children,

thus operating at the grinding edge of macropolitical realities (multiculturalism).

To this end, a full programme of continuous professional development was put in place for the employed peripatetic steel pan tutors. All steel pan tutors were expected to have a minimum knowledge requirement of the steel pan and teaching skills necessary to motivate children. Forsyth's approach to music education incorporated rhythmic movement, improvisation and aimed at developing musicianship in a very broad sense. Gerald Forsyth was joined by Frank Rollock (another steel pan development officer within the ILEA), and together they founded the Pan Teachers' Association in 1978 to advance the musical knowledge of pan tutors, and encourage new recruits to enter tertiary music studies at higher education or tertiary level. Forsyth explained that steel pan musicians were more sensitive to criticism of their performing ability than of any other aspect of their personal lives (La Rose and McCalman 2001). After the abolition of the ILEA in 1990, Forsyth's post of steel band organiser for London schools also ended and, with it, any attempt at enforcing quality assurance in the teaching of steel pan.

THE FACTORS AFFECTING SCHOOLS' STEEL PAN PROGRAMME

It is still a matter of speculation how many schools in the United Kingdom provide music tuition in steel pan. For this reason the challenges facing any quality assurance agenda would be to successfully maintain a standard across the board in both technical and social skills of the participating pupils and the music teachers working within the music programmes. The GCSE examination results, in 2013, of an east London secondary school, in the Isle of Dogs, present an interesting picture. The school, described by Ofsted as showing significant shortcomings, after a disappointing school performance of 30% GCSE passes

at A* to C grades, nonetheless achieved 67% GCSE passes at A* to C grades in music. Steel pans are offered in the school music curriculum.

Research (Blandford and Duarte 2004) evaluating musical communities has shown that individuals identified as having a variety of music abilities and experiences range from highly trained musical practitioners and teachers to self-taught individuals and enthusiastic amateurs. In an oral presentation on steel bands in schools, Scaife (2007) identified a number of factors, which will be expanded here, characterising steel bands within the school curriculum.

1 Mixed ability teaching

Mixed ability steel pan classes are the norm, with no necessity for streaming children on musical ability and experience. It is also suggested that limited access to ensemble musical experience, and the nature of the music curriculum, provide key opportunities for pupils to participate in steel pan classes. The steel pan fraternity sees this as one of the strengths of the genre, enabling pan teachers to reach out to all within an inclusive environment.

2 Generally no instrument at home

Unlike most other instrumental tuition (eg guitar or trombone) pupils do not as a rule have their own steel pan at home, which would have provided maximum opportunities for pupils to extend their musical skills outside the classroom. As such, daily practice is rare. It is generally accepted that if pupils have their own instruments at home, parents and guardians could play an important role in assisting in efforts to master the instrument. Steel pan teachers as a rule have a 35-minute to a one-hour weekly music session with each group. The musical experience in such short sessions therefore has to be a strong motivator.

3 Standardisation of instruments

Steel pans in schools are not standardised.

It is not uncommon to find three neighbouring schools using different patterns/styles of tenor/soprano pans: 'Despers', 'Invaders' and the 'Cycle of Fifths'. The prevailing wisdom among steel pan teachers has been to regard the 'Cycle of Fifths' as the 'preferred pattern' for all school steel bands. However, despite two decades of debate, the standardisation of instruments is still a long way off, as the old pan teachers with a preference for a particular pattern still occupy the music classroom. Regrettably, some pan tuners collaborate with these individuals to scupper the standardisation agenda.

4 Building proper technique given less emphasis in classroom steel pan lessons

There is some belief that the acquisition of correct technique is given less emphasis in steel pan lessons than is the case in a traditional instrumental lesson (eg trombone or violin). The most important single factor influencing this is the pressures on steel pan teachers for early performance.

5 Rote learning is the norm, with little reliance on notation

Steel pan music tuition in schools is generally based on rote learning, and very little attention is given to music notation. The absence of a notation system is sometimes seen as one of the factors that negate a conceptual musical framework among learners and practitioners. The low status of steel pan musicians (among other traditional musicians) has often been linked to the absence of a systemic notation system. The musical genre has traditionally been regarded as a suitable subject area for academically low-achieving children and less suitable for the academically gifted.

6 No elaborate pedagogy

It is a well-known fact that the steel pan fraternity has a history of less than 100 years, and as such, no elaborate pedagogy of the musical genre exists. This would include established methods of teaching, choice of assessment

techniques, methods of administration, techniques of styles of mastery of the instrument, including clear instructions to improve reliability and validity, etc. Though some materials do exist, these are not readily available to all pan teachers as an established pedagogy. Most steel pan tutors are untrained in general music craftsmanship. They are motivated as a community by their shared enthusiasm and love of the musical art form. Most are active performers with a range of skills, and a desire to pass on these skills to individuals from a variety of musical backgrounds.

7 Early public steel-pan performance

It is not unusual for steel pan school bands to give their first public performance three months after formal tuition starts. Some headteachers expect their school steel bands to perform at school assemblies and parents' evenings four to five weeks after their first steel pan class, placing huge pressures on steel pan teachers. It is widely believed that schools need to move away from the expectation of early performances if steel bands are to have an important role in the music curriculum. For most steel pan teachers it is quite awkward for steel pan music programmes when early performances take priority over a structured programme of study, including the acquisition of correct techniques and mastery of the instrument.

8 Repertoire largely lively dance-based music

The steel pan lends itself all types of music, from ballads to classical music. However, the preferred repertoire is generally lively dance music of the calypso or reggae genre. There is also an expectation by school managers that the repertoire should remain largely Caribbean, with very little variation. A steel pan music teacher's memoirs told the story of a headteacher's disapproval at hearing the school steel band playing 'The Blue Danube' at a school assembly. She complained that the band should

not be playing European music, and that the repertoire should be 'Caribbean' (La Rose & McCalman 2001). However, the norm is for steel pan teachers to select their own repertoire that works for them, rather than following a standardised/set syllabus of recommended tunes for school steel bands.

(9) Few tutor books – either teacher resources or pupil books

Very few steel pan tutor books, providing support and guidance to schools, exist. With future steel pan music education initiatives moving towards more formative methods of assessment (steel pan is not offered as the instrument of choice for the GCSE and GCE A-level music syllabi), more tutor books and resources are needed (Cox and Stevens 2010). This would, however, be dependent on a high level of personal enthusiasm among steel pan teachers for the literature and the acceptance of a standard repertoire for the purpose of accreditation/grading. This may be to the advantage of the genre. Dominant groups within the musical hierarchical structure are not able to enforce their rules and maintain power simply by prescribing learning strategies for the steel pan. Hence the use of these forms as social capital for social mobility within the musical educational structure is a long way off.

10 Limited standard repertoire and notation

Some music observers believe that, unlike other music instrumental tuition, no standard repertoire exists for the steel pan. Most steel pan teachers teach the instrument the way they were themselves taught, through an oral tradition. There has been little need for a standard repertoire or for a system of notation. Most teachers teach the melodies they feel comfortable with (Dalladay 2014). Moreover, a child with disabilities would have little difficulty following the oral tradition, as against a body of written music scripts.

It is generally believed that educational issues would be more effectively addressed by the establishment of a governing body (like the British Association of Steel Bands), with respected individuals within the genre addressing verified needs, reinforced by education, training and consultation. The criteria for standards would then be owned by the members themselves and not imposed by external national bodies.

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE STEEL PAN

In the early 1980s, a variety of policies and measures were introduced in schools, and Section 11 resources accounted for the majority of ethnic minority improvement programmes. Steel bands were financed with Section 11 funds and placed into many inner city schools, with an emphasis on providing positive educational experiences for black children (DfE 2001). There was also the view that black children in the British education system performed consistently below the national average in all country-wide school examinations. In essence, in relation to school underachievement, efforts were being made to redress a sense of community failure in the face of enduring structures of race and class inequality.

The view held by headteachers at that time was that steel pan should only be taught to black children – harking back to a previous education era when the policies pursued ranged from assimilation to integration to multiculturalism. It has been argued that these policy failures stem from a need to (a) satisfactorily assimilate ethnic minority groups into the way of life in British society, (b) identify the need for a pluralist orientation in a multicultural society, (c) identify the reasons why some ethnic minority groups were failing in the British education system and (d) explore aspects of ethnic minority culture (ethnocentric curriculum) in order to raise the levels of self-concept/self-esteem of some ethnic minority groups. The vagueness and generality of many

of these policies within the education context prompted some observers to dismiss their ideological, political and moral justification as being only tokenistic – in essence, ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ – in content, lacking an understanding of the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in the practices (Sivanandan 1976). Today, the steel pan is taught to all pupils and there is no selection on the basis of academic ability.

Multiculturalism brought to the fore many assumptions and often blurred practices around the issue of race. The concern with inequality led some to believe that, to redress the fortunes of black children in the education system, cultural accessibility and entitlements needed to be carefully defined. Giving black children the opportunity to learn the steel pan was seen as a movement towards advocating change within the system, equality of opportunity, and the

inevitable movement towards positive interrelationships between the ‘host’ society and the new immigrant culture. Some policy-makers saw the introduction of the steel pan into schools as a means of bringing together the different groups in the schools under a truly multicultural umbrella (Finney & Harrison 2010). For them, issues of access, representation and changing stereotypical images could all be addressed if different groups were given the opportunity to understand the contradictions and to accept the cultural norms of different ethnic and religious groups. It seems that, to a larger extent, the distinctions between the two groups in terms of policies were blurred, and they often formed a common ideological working format to overcome practical situations (Troyna & Carrington 1990).

CONCLUSION

The Caribbean’s musical tradition has something for everyone. It can be

empowering and transforming, for nationalists and internationalists, a cultural conduit for discourse and the sharing of ideas, for the musically adept and the beginner. It engages a language where both conflict and consensus can emerge. It has been suggested that the teaching of music and the perceptions for the engagement of music in the real world are totally divorced from reality, as pupils progress through their compulsory years of schooling (Georgii-Hemming & Westval 2010). One of the aims for today’s curriculum planners should be to encourage an application of real ‘world music’ by providing a way of viewing and making sense of the world. We have no doubt of the usefulness and importance of involving children in performances that raise their level of confidence in their instrument of choice, and to enforce this there has been a long history of pleas for closer links between classroom music tuition and everyday life experience. ■

REFERENCES

- Blandford, S. & Duarte, S. (2004). ‘Inclusion in the community: a study of community music centres in England and Portugal, focusing on development of musical and social skills within each centre’. *Westminster Studies in Education*, 27(1), 7-25.
- Cox, G. & Stevens, R. (eds.) (2010). *The origins and foundations of music education*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Dalladay, C. (2014). ‘The biography of music teachers, their understanding of musicality, and the implications for secondary school music’. *Unpublished PhD thesis*, University of East London.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2001). *The importance of music: a national plan for music education*. London: Department for Education.
- DiMaggio, P. (1987). ‘Classification in art’. *American Sociological Review*, 52(4), 440-55.
- Dudley, S (2001). Ray Holman and the changing role of the steelband, 1957-72’. *Latin American Music Review*, 22(2), 1-17.
- Federation of Music Services (2002). *A common approach: percussion*. London: The Federation of Music Services, The National Association of Music Educators and The Royal College of Music.
- Finney, J. & Harrison, C. (eds.) (2010). *Whose music education is it? The role of the student voice*. Knowle, Solihull: National Association of Music Educators.
- Gardner, R. (2006). ‘Steel bands: current practices and requirements for sector development’. Report commissioned by The Arts Council London and the British Association of Steel Bands.
- Georgii-Hemming, E. & Westvall, M. (2010). ‘Teaching music in our time: student music teachers’ reflections on music education, teacher education and becoming a teacher’. *Music Education Research*, 12(4), 353-67.
- Goble, S. (2011). *What’s so important about music education*. London: Routledge.
- Kemp, A (1996). *The musical temperament: psychology and personality of musicians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- La Rose, M. and McCalman, L. (2001). *The Gerald Forsyth story: the lifetime journey of a pan legend in the steelband movement*. London: Caribbean Art and Musical Expression Publishing.
- Ross, M. (1995). ‘What’s wrong with school music?’ *British Journal of Music Education*, 12, 185-201.
- Scaife, N. (2007). ‘Steel Pan Day’. Keynote speech to the Steel Pan Accreditation Working Party, Associated Board of the Royal School of Music, London.
- Schneider, B. (1993). *Children’s social competence in context*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Contact: L.McCalman@uel.ac.uk