

Steelpan in Education

Introduction

The steelpan or pan, widely known as the steel drum, was created in Trinidad, West Indies. It is one of the few versatile acoustic instruments invented in the 20th century. Its genesis arose out of the struggle to find a musical expression to replace the restrictions on the African drum during slavery. Now the instrument has evolved into a *bona fide* instrument that can play any genre of music. It has also been accepted as an effective medium for music making in the public education system in North America, Europe, and the Caribbean.

The advantages of a group of steelpans, or steelband, in the classroom can be identified easily in three areas: a) the medium is acoustically more stimulating in terms of volume and as stimulating (in terms of tonal quality) to the Orff classroom instrumentarium of barred pitched and non-pitched percussion; b) the gross locomotor movements required make the steelpan more accessible than conventional band or string instruments which require complex finger coordination; and c) the cultural tradition of the instrument lends to its attraction as a world music instrument.

It is in the context of education that a methodology to teach pan is evolving that focuses on the indigenous musical expression (calypso and folk music)^{1[1]}; creativity through improvisation; and introducing music literacy or performing music scores. The methodology being formulated at the Centre for Creative and Festival Arts, University of the West Indies is influencing Music teacher training through Music Education courses at the Certificate and Degree level programmes in the Musical Arts and at the Postgraduate Diploma level for teachers of the Visual and Performing Arts.

Outline of Workshop

The following is an outline of the workshop on Steelpan in Education:^{2[2]}

1. Demonstration of tonal quality and physical nature one of the steelpan instruments: the tenor or soprano pan, sometimes referred to as the lead pan.
2. Demonstration of method of teaching a folk song using the traditional rote method. A video clip (DVD) will reinforce the illustration (optional).
3. Demonstration of teaching a folk song aided by a music score – an assisted rote method. A video clip (DVD) will reinforce the illustration. (optional).
4. Demonstration of teaching creativity through improvisation using the blues. A video clip (DVD) will reinforce the illustration (optional).
5. Demonstration of teaching music notation using the steelpan. A video clip (DVD) will reinforce the illustration (optional).
6. Workshop participants will be invited for a hands-on exploration of the steelpan instrument(s).

^{1[1]} The teaching of other genres including classical and pop is also facilitated through the steelband experience.

^{2[2]} Depending on the length of available time one or more segments can be omitted.

1. Tonal quality and physical nature of the instrument

The steelpan is versatile in its range of expression and volume, and possesses a unique tonal quality. This makes it an effective medium for exploring various musical styles: from classical to calypso. Its inherent acoustics allow for performances in intimate to public spaces as a solo instrument or in ensemble settings.^{3[3]}

The gross locomotor movements required exaggerate variations in pitch and rhythm that facilitate great kinaesthetic awareness of these and many more musical elements. The student must engage in much larger movements to experience relatively small shifts in pitch. These movements are much larger than those required in playing most other instruments such as piano or recorder.

The pitched percussion instruments such as marimba or classroom Orff instruments do provide this feature in a standard keyboard arrangement. The steelpan offers a contrasting arrangement of notes that are not synchronized with keyboard instruments. They therefore offer another way of experiencing the movement. Adult students often have trouble in transferring the processing of information on a score to the playing of the notes on a pan because it is so different. Others adapt more easily: children have much less difficulty. Teaching by rote, the traditional way, avoids the hand-to-eye coordination difficulties in realizing a score on the pan.

2. Learning to play the pan the traditional way: Learning by rote

Learning to play the steelpan in the most prevalent setting in Trinidad and Tobago is in the ‘panyard’ – a space in a community, be it outdoors, under a galvanized shed, a concrete enclosure – where anyone desirous of learning to play can walk in and begin to learn a tune in a full steelband arrangement. This workshop examines the methodology that has evolved out of this social activity; the advantages and disadvantages of such a method; and the approaches that are used in various group sizes. In so doing it will become evident how such a community-based, learner-centered approach in which rote learning is emphasized can inform educational practice. This is an excellent laboratory to observe Social Learning Theory at work in the context of Music teaching.

3. An assisted rote method

The assisted rote method^{4[4]} of teaching songs in a general music classroom can be adapted to teach. This methodology offers an efficient way of managing the steelband in the classroom setting, affording hands-on learning to maximise whole class involvement. Students will learn a folk song of Trinidad and Tobago and perform an arrangement of the song for the steelband.

The song is first sung; the scores distributed with or without letter names of each pitch. The whole class learns melody, harmony line or second part, like an alto part; then the

^{3[3]} Demonstrations on the instrument will illustrate various points in the presentation.

^{4[4]} Adapted from the teaching by note method presented in *Music in Childhood* 3rd ed. (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2006).

inner repeated chord patterns using an ostinato rhythm.^{5[5]} This ostinato rhythm is derived from the melody and words of the song. Finally, the whole class learns the bass line. Each part is added to the whole texture systematically after each stage or layer of the arrangement is mastered. At the end of the learning process, the students will gain insight into the traditional way to arrange a folk song or calypso. All the students are involved almost all the time.

4. Teaching creativity in the pan classroom: Blues improvisation

Teaching creativity in the pan through blues improvisation offers an approach to stimulating creativity by introducing the skill of improvisation on a twelve-bar blues progression. Students will learn a blues song, learn to improvise using basic pitches of a flat 3 pentatonic scale on G and play a pan in a full steelband arrangement of a blues composition. The methodology focuses on improvisation skill from the outset after learning a fragment of the melody of a blues composition. The full arrangement is then added in stages until the ensemble is playing melody, harmony, “strumming” patterns and bass line.

5. Introduction to reading music notation

The introduction of music literacy skills in the learning process is relatively new for steelbands in Trinidad and Tobago. It seems to be relegated to education institutions, tertiary as well as primary and secondary, to point the way to developing music reading for “pannists” and this presents a cultural revolution in many respects. It is not the norm to see music sheets or music stands in the numerous steelbands in Trinidad and Tobago, but it is evident in schools at the University of the West Indies and several institutions in North America, Europe and elsewhere.

There is continued debate as to the pros and cons of this infusion or intrusion into the steelband culture. Nevertheless, most educators embrace music literacy as a means of broadening the communication pathways for steelband music in terms of imparting, performing and archiving. It remains to see the effects this will have on the nature of music making in steelband music.

The methodology formulated involves a manual of teaching sight-reading on the pan. This workbook has been successfully implemented in a programme sponsored by Republic Bank Limited of Trinidad and Tobago for the past ten years. The programme is called the Pan Minors Programme. The materials compiled seek to address music literacy on three fronts: playing what one reads, hearing what one reads and writing what one hears.

In the material for playing what one reads – sight reading on pan - students play through exercises, melodic and rhythmic exercises, that gradually increase in complexity, with each new exercise offering practice in reading previously decoded symbols and introducing a new symbol or new symbols. The skill being developed focuses on playing four to eight bars of notation fluently in the first attempt or fewest attempts.

^{5[5]} This repeated chord pattern is called “strumming” in the steelband context.

Conclusion

It is best to understand the value of the steelpan by experiencing it for oneself. Participants of the workshop will be taught a simple melody of a folk song from Trinidad and Tobago by rote or assisted rote. It is the hope that the value of the steelpan as a remarkable medium for engaging young and old students will be realized. The steelpan, a musical creation coming out of the experience of Carnival, is spreading through schools and universities all over the world.
