



# Steelman

## Introduction

Also known as a steel drum or pan, the steelpan played by pannist (steelpan musician) or a collective of pannists (steelband) is a chromatically tuned instrument that originated from Trinidad. The term 'drum' refers to the steel oil drum containers (55 gallons) from which the pan is made.

Africans enslaved in Trinidad brought the evolution of the steelpan through their musical traditions. They used drumming as a form of communication and the beating of skin drums was an integral part of Carnival celebrations between 1838 and 1883.

When a ban on all drum beating was imposed in 1884, carnivalists had to look for an alternative to the skin drum. They turned to bamboo after discovering that dried bamboo produced different sounds when struck with wooden sticks. Bands that used bamboo to produce music were called Tamboo Bamboo bands and the first report of such a band taking part in Carnival was in 1891. With the passage of time, Tamboo Bamboo bands were integrated into Carnival and flourished until the 1930s.

Steelpan was introduced to carnival around 1935 replacing both the tamboo bands and the Calypso string bands. Trinidad & Tobago, Antigua and St. Kitts Nevis were the islands most active in using this innovative approach to the music. In the early 1930s, bands used metal, biscuit tins and dustbins for rhythm until steel drums became the main instrument of choice in the mid to late 1930s. Bands used redundant 55-gallon steel oil drums discarded by the U.S. military during the 1940s to make their pans.

Tamboo-Bamboo bands started using steel drums in their participation in Trinidad Carnival during World War II. In order to advance their instruments they developed techniques to tune pans so melodies could be played. Ellie Mannette is credited as an early pioneer of the oil drum and pan-tuner Anthony Williams designed a pan in the 1960s that is still used today. The first record of a pan band in the press was in the Trinidad Guardian's coverage of Trinidad Carnival dated February 6, 1940.

In the 1950's, on Jouvert Morning of Carnival, the music for the street parades came from the Pan Roun'De Neck marching steelbands. This music became known as Road Marches.



The steelpan is now the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. Steelbands are to be found in rapidly increasing numbers in many parts of the world and music educators have accepted the instrument as an ideal tool for music instruction for beginners.

## Pan Construction

Traditionally, steelpans have been built from used oil barrels and are made using sheet metal with a thickness between 0.8mm and 1.5mm. Nowadays steelpan makers do not rely on used steel oil barrels and get the resonance bodies manufactured according to their preferences and technical specifications. First, the flat sheet metal is drawn into a bowl-like shape. This process is usually done with several hammers, manually or with the help of air pressure. The note pattern is then marked onto the surface, and the notes of different sizes are shaped and moulded into the surface. After the tempering, the notes have to be softened and tuned (initial tuning). The softening is part of this 'initial tuning' process.

The note's size corresponds to the pitch—the larger the oval, the lower the tone. The size of the instrument varies from one pan to another. It may have almost all of the "skirt" (the cylindrical part of the oil drum) cut off and around 30 soprano-range notes. The shorter the pan is cut the higher the note. It may use the entire drum with only three bass notes per pan, in which case one person may play six such pans. The length of the skirt generally corresponds to the tessitura (high or low range) of the drum. The pans may either be painted or chromed.

## The instruments

There were four main pans developed during the 1940s to the early 60s: the Ping-Pong, Alto, Tenor and Bass. The Ping-Pong and Tenor pans carried the melody, the Kettle (tune boom/guitar pan) provided the harmony and timing and the bass set the rhythm. Pan players also found that wrapping their drumsticks with the rubber from a bicycle inner tube created a softer, smoother tone.

The following are instruments now found in the pan family:

Cello—typically made of three to four barrels	Six bass (and numerical variations)
Double guitar	Six pan
Double second	Soprano, lead, or tenor
Double tenor	Tenor bass (three and four pan variations)
Nine bass (with numerical variations up to twelve)	Triple guitar
Quadraphonic (four pans)	Twelve bass
Seven bass	



## **Pan Making and Tuning**

During the 70s and 80s, Trinidadian pan-makers and tuners worked to develop the benchmark for today's steelpan. One of the main innovations was the introduction of standardisation: the 4ths and 5ths tenor; tenors from C, from D and some from low A, plus variations in making and tuning techniques.

There are several ways in which a steelpan can go out-of-tune and it is quite common that steelbands arrange to have their instruments tuned once or twice a year. A tuner must have a great skill in his work to make the notes sound good and at the correct pitch. Much of the tuning work is performed using hammers. Unfortunately there is a lack of qualified tuners in the UK and bands have to fly pan tuners in from Trinidad.

## **Steelband Competitions**

The National Steelband Orchestra competition held during carnival features the cream of Trinidad players. This competition is called Panorama and in the UK the British Association of Steelbands maintains this tradition at Notting Hill Carnival. It recently moved to a bigger space in Hyde Park and presents the best steel bands who take part in Notting Hill Carnival.

## **History of steelpan in the UK**

The Trinidad All-Star Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) brought steelpan to the UK for the first time in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain. Within a few years, steelpan music started to grow in the UK.

The first steelband to participate in the Notting Hill Carnival was the Russ Henderson Steelband in 1965. By 1969 more bands starting to emerge and a number of London state-run schools started steelpan classes.

There are now many ensembles throughout the UK using steelpans, ranging from solo pannists, all-steel trios, quartets to large conventional steel orchestras, pan round the neck bands and groups that incorporate pans with other instruments. Carnivals around the country feature steelpan music played by local schools, steelpans or visiting ensembles.

Further information on UK steelbands can be found from the British Association of Steelbands, <http://www.panpodium.com/>