

Playing with A Different Beat: The Whitening of American Steelband

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Abstract

Although academic discussions of whiteness in music education have been prevalent for over a decade, critical examinations of whiteness in world music education have been disproportionately lacking. One specific world music ensemble that warrants examination is the steelband within American schools. The steelpan was introduced in the United States in the 1940s–1950s, and currently there are over 750 known school steelbands in the US. Many of these school ensembles have unintentionally distanced themselves from West Indian community ensembles and Afro-Trinidadian traditions. In this paper, I explore the “whitening” of American steelband through ethnographic research conducted as a participant-observer. Through analysis of fieldnotes, interviews with participants, and current steelband resources, I examine approaches to pedagogy, membership, and performance. The article concludes with implications and recommendations for US-based steelpan ensemble directors and other world music ensemble directors.

Keywords

Whiteness, world music, steelband, ethnomusicology, race, music education

I think the spirit of steelband is the spirit of steelband, but I think the tone of the music, and the presentation of the music is going to be totally different. ... There's nothing wrong with that, but it's different. It's going to have a different sound, a different quality. ... So when you hear [these kids] play, and you hear some of the other bands play, you hear a difference, because they play with a different beat. (Personal Interview, September 19, 2017)

At the end of a lengthy interview about her experience as a Trinidadian immigrant playing in a US-based community steelband, an older bass pan player began to critique local, primarily white, school steelbands of which both she and I were aware. Throughout the interview, the participant discussed her own ensemble, comprised solely of West Indian immigrants, their performance practices, and their relationship with Afro-Trinidadian cultural practices. She and I also discussed a steelband festival in which her band was the only community-based group in attendance and the only group that was primarily comprised of Black members. When I questioned her on the school ensembles at this festival, she immediately distanced these ensembles from her own Afro-Trinidadian heritage, emphasizing their differences. When I first heard such comments from her and others, I naively focused on the challenges I had observed from moving a community-based music into a formalized curriculum rather than analyzing the nuances of the racial issues at play. As I finished this initial ethnographic fieldwork and transitioned back into the space of a performer in both school and community bands, I began to notice the ways in which race was subtly, and not so subtly, affecting ensemble culture in the different contexts.

Although discussions of race and whiteness are prevalent within music education (Hess 2017; Bradley 2015, 2007, 2006; Gustafson 2009), few publications have extended these discussions to examine such issues within world music ensembles (Solís 2004; Locke 2004). The purpose of this article is to examine how steelband directors in the United States have shifted steelpan pedagogy towards a system of whiteness. Further, I seek to provide practical guidelines for the development of a critical approach to race in steelpan pedagogy. To subvert the developing hegemony of whiteness in K–12 United States steelband culture, I draw explicit attention to the existence, effects, and impacts of whiteness within these spaces and advocate for an antiracist pedagogy that is more racially inclusive and equitable.

Background

The research for this paper began with my master's thesis, in which I examined the similarities and differences between school steelbands and community steelbands (Espie 2018). For that research, I spent four months in 2017 observing and interviewing members of both community and school steelbands in Florida, USA. During this time, I observed 18 rehearsals across two field sites and completed 33 interviews. In my original thesis, I asked the following research questions:

- Do different steelband ensemble contexts create differences in perception for its members?
- How do varying steelband contexts engage with and react to notions of musicality, authenticity, tradition, and transmission?
- How do these similarities and differences affect identity within a US-based steelband tradition?

Initially, in my master's thesis, I did not examine the role of race within these ensembles; however, as I continued to perform in different steelband spaces after my degree, and as institutions of higher education began to reckon with issues of systemic oppression following the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, I reevaluated my prior research and the role race played within steelband spaces. For this article, I have reexamined the interviews conducted in my 2017 fieldwork as well as steelband pedagogical resources to identify explicit and coded discussions of race. Further, I conducted follow up interviews via email in Fall of 2019 that asked more direct questions regarding race in these contexts.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on my own positionality within this research and the development of this specific article. I recognize that I am a White woman navigating discussions of race within the United States. In this light, I am not attempting to present or analyze the Black experience within the US-based steelband community; rather, I hope to provide insight into the effects of whiteness in these spaces. Further, I recognize that my own whiteness has led me to profit off the very system that I critique here. I first began playing steelpan during my undergraduate degree at a primarily White institution. Since I began playing, I have been involved with three university ensembles, all at primarily White institutions, and all led by White directors. Participating in these ensembles has given me access to numerous performance and research opportunities that have helped me further my career. While I cannot disassociate my own background and development in

steelpan, it is important to recognize that I have profited explicitly from the white supremacy implicit in the US-based educational system. Part of the work of this article has been to critically examine my actions within this community and confront my own unintentional, but potentially dangerous, understandings of whiteness and race. In looking to confront my own biases as a White scholar, I have looked to expand my work and relationships with West Indian communities and have sought to prioritize their voices in my methodologies, analyses, and writings. I acknowledge that the process of confronting my own biases is ongoing and will continue beyond this research project.

Race and Music Education

Discussions around issues of race and racism in music education have existed for well over a decade, and more recent publications have looked at the historical and systemic issues within the field. In “Equity and Music Education: Euphemisms, Terminal Naivety, and Whiteness,” Juliet Hess (2017) sought to trace K–12 music education’s historical roots in whiteness and “offer practical suggestions for rupturing the dominant ideology of white supremacy, defined as the system of domination that systemically and structurally privileges White people and subjugates Others both discursively and materially” (16). Throughout this article, Hess was interested in how music educators address and discuss race both in and out of the music classroom. Accentuated by her historical analysis of music education, Hess argued that music education “operates through an ideology of white supremacy” that is still affecting contemporary trends in the field (20). Hess noted that when non-Western musics are incorporated into curricula, they are often presented in the “Western classical paradigm, utilizing notation and Western elements” such as melodic and harmonic structure, tonality, and rhythm (22).

Hess’s argument echoes earlier critiques of multicultural music education (Castagno 2014; Wasiak 2009; Bradley 2006). Multicultural education is often understood as “educational efforts that have attempted to inculcate more positive values about human pluralism and improve the learning potential for all students” (Mitchell and Salsbury 1999, 151). According to Volk (1998), music educators in the 1990s advocated for multiculturalism in the music classroom for three primary reasons: 1) as a social rationale based on the changing demographics within the United States, and as an acknowledgment of the diverse student populations of the American classroom; 2) for the purpose of having students study the various

cultures around the world, so that they may develop a better understanding of international relationships; and 3) as a global rationale that emphasizes ecological interrelationships between people and the earth on which they live (5). In reality, though, multicultural education often only provides a superficial and overly romanticized perspective of other cultures. Hess critiqued multiculturalism by arguing that “the multicultural movement in education is often complicit in failing to name issues of race, racism, and meaningful difference” (23). She sought to expand the anti-racist work done by Bradley (2006), and while her work continued to expand discussions of race-related silences in the field of music education, more work must be done to expand and nuance issues of whiteness within various components of music education curriculum.

For example, additional work must be done to discuss whiteness and world music ensembles. Much of the research on race and music education focuses on issues of race in spaces such as general music, choir, band, orchestra, etc. World music ensembles often exist outside these traditional contexts and therefore may be excluded from discussions of whiteness and music education. However, the simple act of creating a separate space outside the traditional curriculum does not clear world music ensembles of their mimicry of the Western-based multicultural framework. If world music ensembles are not actively confronting issues of race, racism, and whiteness, they can be potentially more dangerous than traditional music education settings, as they often replicate systems of whiteness under the guise of musical equality.

The growing discussion of decolonization within music education relates to discussions of race. Decolonial education is an international movement that seeks to challenge Eurocentric models of learning. Scholars working within this framework often look to name Eurocentric influences within a range of educational systems (Burcet 2017; Shifres and Rosabal-Coto 2017) and provide models to subvert these structures (Attas 2019; Stimeling and Enriquez 2019). Although this article is not working within an explicitly decolonial theoretical framework, my scrutiny of whiteness within steelband classrooms echoes many of the aims of decolonial education.

Theoretical Understandings of Whiteness

Whiteness may be conceived of as a “set of practices that organize the structural hierarchy of racial categories” to which anybody, regardless of race, can contribute

(Cooks 2017, 161). In his work on whiteness, Steve Garner (2007) outlined a series of arguments including the following:

- “White” is a marked racialized identity whose precise meanings derive from national racial regimes.
- Whiteness has been conceptualized over the century or so since it was first used as terror, systemic supremacy, absence/invisibility, norms, cultural capital, and contingent hierarchies.
- The invocation of White identities may suspend other social divisions and link people who share whiteness to dominant social locations, even though the actors are themselves in positions of relative powerlessness. (2–3)

Garner underscored that whiteness is frequently intertwined within discussions of power and privilege. Another central emphasis of discussions of whiteness highlights the sense of normalcy around whiteness. With this normalcy, whiteness can be invisible—“everywhere but also nowhere because it is not identified with the power of a cultural group or its practices, except in cases of individual or collective excess” (Cooks 2017, 205). Whiteness then can often become unintentionally relabeled as the “objective superiority” (Cooks 2017, 205). Because whiteness is often misunderstood as objective, many White people who directly profit from societal whiteness do not fully understand how it affects their day-to-day being.

While whiteness may manifest as normal or invisible within White communities, it is conceived and recognized differently in non-White communities. bell hooks’ (1997) “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” articulated the historical understandings of whiteness within Black American communities. Over time, systems of imperialism, colonialism, and racism have actively reinforced negative perceptions of Blackness, causing Black communities to face whiteness with “suspicion, fear, and even hatred” (338). Continuing with this argument, hooks emphasized that

to name that whiteness in the black imagination is often a representation of terror: one must face a palimpsest of written histories that erase and deny, that reinvent the past to make the present vision of racial harmony and pluralism more plausible. (342)

In discussions of whiteness then, White scholars must come to terms with the reality that whiteness is neither invisible nor objective, but rather carries a violent past, and a violent present, within Black spaces. Further, White scholars must also recognize that it is impossible for White scholars, myself included, to completely

separate ourselves from the influence of whiteness and the violence of whiteness (Bradley 2015, 195). To examine the ways in which these systems of whiteness are replicated in world music spaces, I now turn to the development of steelband ensembles within US-based K–12 music curriculums.

A Brief History of Steelpan

The steelpan developed in the Caribbean island nation of Trinidad and Tobago out of the percussive *tambo bamboo* musical tradition that had gained popularity surrounding Trinidadian Carnival events in the 19th century. At the height of its popularity, though, the British colonial government placed a restriction on stick playing that completely curbed *tambo bamboo* musicking (Bartholomew and Laade 1980, 15). In response to this restriction, the initial *tambo bamboo* bands started to innovate with other street items, including brake hubs and various biscuit drums. Winston “Spree” Simon began to introduce discernable pitches to biscuit drums in the mid-1930s, marking one of the first iterations of the contemporary steelpan (Aho 1987, 30). Shortly after this innovation, the British colonial government placed a ban on all Carnival activities during World War II, moving these early innovations off the streets and into private pan yards. While the development of steelpan was slow during the war, the end of the WWII ban in 1945 marked the beginning of an intense time of steelpan development. It was during this post-war era that the contemporary instrumentation of the steelband came into development, and the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) became the first steelband to travel abroad in 1951. The development of TASPO was a critical moment in steelband history, as TASPO was the first steel orchestra “whose tonal range encompassed the entire, evenly tempered chromatic scale” (Johnson 2011, 160). Further, TASPO became the first steelband to receive governmental support, marking the beginning of national funding for the instrument.

The steelpan has become known as the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago after governmental support of the instrument leading up the country’s independence in 1962. A year after independence, in 1963, Panorama was established and has been understood as an important symbol of national culture since its inception (Dudley 2008). Panorama is a multi-day steelband competition held at the beginning of Carnival. There are multiple categories within the competition, including single-pan bands, Junior Panorama, and small, medium, and large bands; however, “Panorama” often colloquially refers to the large steelband

competition held the Saturday before Carnival. These large bands include 90 members or more and often perform 10-minute arrangements of popular calypso or soca tunes. Today, Panorama remains the largest steelpan performance outlet globally, and hundreds of international performers travel to Trinidad to compete annually. The steelpan and Panorama continue to be sources of great national pride for the people of Trinidad.

The United States has been seen as the “new frontier for pan” as steelbands continue to spread rapidly across varying contexts, most notably in K–12 schools and universities (Tiffe 2015, 166). Trinidadian immigrants brought the steelpan to the United States in the 1940s–1950s via New York City. While some research exists on the early days of steelpan and the influence of these Trinidadian immigrants (Allen 2019, 1999), most research on the history of steelpan in the United States prioritizes the roles Pete Seeger and Ellie Mannette had in distributing the pan into educational spaces (Martin 2017, Boyce 2015, Tiffe 2015, Martin 2011). Pete Seeger played an important role in the dissemination of the steelpan in the United States by distributing numerous ethnographic films featuring the steelpan through his television show *Rainbow Question*. Seeger was also actively involved with the U.S. Navy Steel Band, which frequently toured and performed on college campuses. While Seeger is notable in his circulation of steelpan media in larger social contexts, Ellie Mannette is important in the diffusion of steelpan in K–12 school contexts. As an immigrant living in NYC, the late Mannette was one of the first individuals to introduce steelpan into US school settings and continuously worked with various school programs throughout his life (Tiffe 2015, 3). Mannette spent the later years of his life as an artist-in-residence at West Virginia University, working as an instrument builder and tuner. While at West Virginia University, Mannette worked tirelessly to implement programs at other colleges and universities because he believed that “college students [were] going to teach pan to the next generation” (Tiffe 2015, 43). In her dissertation, Tiffe tracked the dissemination of steelbands among universities in the United States, focusing on the relationships Mannette fostered. While no researcher has researched the development of steelbands in schools beyond Mannette’s initial introduction, over the past few years, Haskett has created an extensive list of over 800 university and K–12 steelbands in the United States and Canada (Haskett n.d.). In comparison to the work done to document US school steelbands, no researcher has looked to document community steelbands outside New York City. In my experience working with these

ensembles, there are two types of community ensembles—those that were founded by West Indian immigrants and those that are extensions of an already existing school steelband. Although I integrate performance practices of West Indian community ensembles into this article, more research is needed to truly study musical practices in community ensembles.

Understandings of Whiteness within Trinidadian Community Steelbands
Members of Trinidadian based community steelbands frequently point out differences between their ensembles and predominantly White school-based ensembles. Throughout my research, members of these ensembles frequently discussed their connections to the culture, the importance of tradition, and their relationships with White pannists. For example, in a larger discussion on the similarities and differences between school steelbands, an older community ensemble player who emigrated from Trinidad noted that at the heart of these differences is a sense of pride:

It's a part of who we are, it's a part of our lifestyle, as compared to someone who learned within a school. They appreciate it, but it's a different kind of appreciation. When we see steelband, or we hear steelband, it feels like home. (Personal interview, October 19, 2017)

This member also emphasized that a sense of pride and appreciation was evident in the body language and energy of performers. In a similar argument, another older community member expanded on how the core understanding of the tradition differed in varying ensembles:

I guess there are similarities because they play the same instrument, but as far as the culture of Trinidad, and their roots, Trinidad has their own set of vibes. Over here, things are small, strict with the theory. They play by their notes, back home guys play from their heads. They have this vibe, and they play it from the inside, and they learn it that way. You don't play with sheet music. Now they probably do in the schools, but now they just play what they want, and they play what they hear, and it comes together like a big jam session. That's the big difference between here and Trinidad. Over here it's more organized; you have a musical score, but you don't get that roots feeling that they're playing from the heart. (Personal interview, September 19, 2017)

In this second example, the main argument is directly connected to notions of Western notation and literacy, on which I will expand in the next section. While there are examples of notation being used in Trinidad and in Trinidadian ensembles, it is still a point of contention for many Trinidadian immigrants in the United

States. In these two examples, both members reflected on their experiences in Trinidad and the performance expectations there. This reflection was common across my interviews in community ensembles. For these pannists, performing in the United States is an extension of performing in Trinidad.

Other Trinidadian immigrants shared similar perspectives to those above, in that school steelbands just simply were not the same. However, this is not to say that all of those I interviewed viewed US-based school steelbands in a negative light or felt the need to distance themselves from these ensembles. Many recognized the work being done in school steelbands and appreciated that many of these students were participating in community-based ensembles after graduation.

Differences between community ensembles and school steelbands are not new. In a reflection piece on the 2008 Brooklyn J'Ouvert celebration, an anonymous contributor to "When Steel Talks," a blog site that discusses steelpan across the West Indian diaspora, argued that the New York's J'Ouvert celebration is one of the only performance opportunities for Trinidadian immigrants to embrace authentic traditions within North America.¹ Further, the author called out school directors and their disconnect from the West Indian community:

New York J'Ouvert is the only live performing arts theater—by the people, for the people—left that allows the panman and pan woman to connect to the African traditions that stretch back over centuries. Maybe it is time for the academically educated percussion professors to step down from their ivory towers, step out of their lab settings, to experience the "hows" and "whys" this music operates on this uniquely high and spiritual level—right here in urban New York. (When Steel Talks 2008)

While the blog post did not explicitly label the professors here as White, like some of the other participants I have worked with, race is understood to be a part of these conversations, especially when school ensembles and directors are juxtaposed against the Afro-Trinidadian history of the steelband tradition.

In a more recent conversation, I explicitly asked a pannist who moves between ensembles of varying racial makeups how race has been discussed in the various contexts. They highlighted an example of a Trinidadian band "opening up" the ensemble to "outside" players:

The issues of race, national origin, and cultural affiliation often get blurred in the pan world, because pan is such a potent symbol of Trini Nationality, West Indian Identity, and global black art. [Our ensemble] had a very frank discussion with our members about the potential consequences of inviting "outside" players into the band in order to have the number of players we'd need to have an impact in

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competition. Ultimately, the band decided that the growth of the band and the preservation of the tradition was more important than keeping it as “we own ting” ... particularly as we were faced with the fact that the band members were getting older, and we were not attracting young players from the Caribbean diaspora. (Email communication, December 10, 2019).

It’s important to highlight here this participant’s opening statement that race, national origin, and culture are often blurred within Trinidadian steelband spaces. This blurring of sociocultural concepts was frequent in my research and highlights the codified understandings of race and culture within Trinidadian communities (Escayg 2020, 2014, England 2008). This ensemble is not the only Trinidadian affiliated ensemble that has recently recruited White university-based pan players in order to grow, particularly for Brooklyn and Miami Panorama performances. A conversation with another pannist about a similar situation highlighted tensions:

I do hear some talk and grumbles about how much of the band is white. The grumbling stops when the talent is shown by the ethnically different player, in the steel orchestras in which I’ve performed. The end goal is to win. (Email communication, December 11, 2019)

For this pannist and his ensemble, winning competitions such as Brooklyn and Miami Panorama carries cultural capital within Afro-Caribbean communities. There is an interesting contradiction here that some members of these ensembles are willing to open their traditions to players who are White if it means potentially gaining more cultural capital within Afro-Caribbean communities. Although the decision to open these spaces to White pannists complicates racial understandings of steelband spaces in the United States, it is important to note that in these community-based ensembles, Trinidadian immigrants are actively involved in the decisions dictating the future of their culture. In many school contexts, however, these voices are noticeably missing.

Examples of Whiteness within Contemporary US-Based Steelband Pedagogy
In examining and critiquing whiteness within the US-based steelband, it is critical to discuss racial understandings of the steelpan in both Trinidad and the United States. In a Trinidadian context, the history of steelpan is frequently racialized (Ramcharitar 2021; Dudley 2008; Nathaniel 2006; Tarradath 1991). In contemporary Trinidad, the steelpan is understood as an Afro-Trinidadian instrument and is often discussed in regard to the debate of Afro-Trinidadian vs. Indo-Trinidadian understandings of culture and national identity.² In the United States though,

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discussions of race often center around whiteness, leaving Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian immigrants to renegotiate their racial understandings (Jelly-Schapiro 2005). Afro-Trinidadians become incorporated into larger understandings of Blackness in the United States, and in this new racial structure, the steelpan's Afro-Trinidadian history is further emphasized within West Indian spaces.

Although contemporary understandings of race in Trinidad focus around the dichotomy between Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian identities, the steelpan's history is also heavily saturated with White violence. In fact, the common narrative around the development of the steelpan highlights the oppression of British colonial rule. In the early 20th century, the British placed strict regulations on both Carnival and percussive instruments, leading to early pannists using their ingenuity to create and develop the steelpan. For many US-based pan teachers, this narrative becomes highly romanticized, and the creation of the steelpan comes to metaphorically signify the end of colonial oppression. For instance, in Smith's (2012) *Steel Drums and Steelbands: A History*, a popular resource used in many middle school and high school ensembles, the history of the steelpan is presented in a manner that highlights the tensions of colonialism but ends in 1963 with the creation of Panorama a year after independence. Further, this story, combined with a contemporary viewing of a celebratory Panorama performance, is often the only cultural context that many US-based pan students receive. As mentioned earlier, Panorama is the predominant international steelband competition, and while it is important for students to watch Panorama, it should not be their only exposure to Trinidadian pan performance. The decision to end the narrative of struggle and tension with the introduction of independence creates an unintended myth that racism within the pan community has been eradicated, a myth that as bell hooks noted, "diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black imagination" (1997, 345). Discussions of White violence are evident throughout the history of the steelpan, but racism in Trinidad did not end with independence. Further, when West Indian immigrants moved to the United States, they had to navigate new understandings of race and racism in a country that by and large prioritizes whiteness. In *Unheard Voices: The Rise of Steelband and Calypso in the Caribbean and North America*, Nurse (2007) explored these complexities in a series of vignettes focused on pan players in both Trinidad and the United States. Many of the vignettes could be incorporated into the classroom as an example of how these themes continued throughout steelpan's ongoing history. Incorporating

discussions of race and racism into the steelband classroom allows for a more complete and complex understanding of the racialized context of this musical practice and the musicians who have developed the tradition transnationally.

Genre and New Music

In addition to the erasure of discussions of race and racism, steelband directors also inadvertently contribute to issues of whiteness within their classrooms with the music they program and their pedagogical strategies. Although the large majority of steelband directors still look to incorporate indigenous genres for steelpan such as calypso/soca music into their programs, a growing number of US-based pannists are looking to move beyond these initial genres (Edwards 2019; Tanner 2010; Kurasz 2007). The growing call for “new” music within US-based steelpan communities accentuates questions of cultural understanding and appropriation.

Today, many steelband directors still emphasize playing calypso/soca music in their programs. In Tiffe’s (2015) dissertation research, she asked both publishers and directors to name the most popular genres of music for these ensembles. Both groups agreed that calypso/soca was the most popular genre, followed by Latin jazz and pop/rock. Tiffe’s findings are supported by Haskett’s (2016) study, in which 91.67% of directors surveyed claimed to program calypsos and socas for their ensembles (10). Both Tiffe and Haskett emphasized the roles that calypso and soca music still play in US-based steelbands; however, other musical genres are also frequently played. The use of calypso and soca in these school ensembles is consistent with the performance practices of West Indian steelbands in both Trinidad and the United States.

Tanner (2010) argued that steelbands need to move beyond calypso and soca and begin to compose new music for the steelband discipline. Tanner argued that the success of the steelband is dependent on these original compositions:

Those in the steel band art form who expect it to someday achieve a similar standing [to the American wind band tradition] must advocate strongly for the development and expansion of the repertoire through original composition. To not do so is to risk the stagnation of the art form, perpetually relegating the steel band to a position of mere novelty entertainment. (63)

Tanner’s analysis posits that without new compositions, the steelband cannot hold the same worth as other US-based musical traditions such as the wind band. Yet, new compositions, or “own tunes” within the Trinidadian steelband tradition,

actually date back to 1972, with Ray Holman’s original composition “Pan on the Move.” Such compositions have become a central part of Trinidadian performance contexts (Dudley 2008). Further, new calypsos and socas are written every year for the Calypso Monarch and Soca Monarch competitions as part of Trinidad’s Carnival. Tanner (2010) argues that without new compositions, the steelband repertoire “lags behind” other musical traditions in the United States (58). It is not clear, however, how Tanner defines new compositions in this article, particularly because he did not discuss composition by Trinidadian composers.

Although Tanner’s 2010 article explicitly discusses the need for new repertoire, he had previously touched on this subject in his 2007 book, *The Steel Band Game Plan: Strategies for Starting, Building, and Maintaining your Pan Program*. In a review of the book published on the blog site PanGEA (2019), Trinidadian pannists Malika Green, Vanessa Headley, and Kim Johnson critiqued Tanner’s argument that “all calypso and soca makes Jack a dull pan player” (Tanner 2007, 52). In response to this comment, the review contends that

if we can attend an orchestra concert without saying “Can’t they play more than classical music?” then a steelband CAN solely perform calypso. Instead of trying to compare, state that unlike many other conventional ensembles, the steelband can, and has traditionally performed, a variety of styles, even if they are all Caribbean. After all it is one of the main selling points. (Green, Headley, and Johnson 2019)

The review continues to critique Tanner’s avoidance of words such as African, Afro-Trinidadian, and Black. In excluding Trinidadian modes of composition from his perception of repertoire, Tanner erases Trinidadian artistic contributions from the larger steelband movement. Further, Tanner’s comparison of the steelband to the US wind band tradition posits an important question: Who determines the value of the steelpan as a musical tradition? In her work on race and music education, Hess (2017) argued that

the continued focus in music education on Eurocentric musical traditions and Western classical ensemble-based learning, with other musics and musical structures situated around the periphery of the curriculum, reinscribes these same notions of white supremacy presently. (20)

In his positioning of the US wind band tradition, Tanner prioritized Western educational values over indigenous Trinidadian educational values in the same way that Hess argued upholds white supremacy in the music classroom.

To advocate for the development of original compositions, Tanner (2010) strongly recommended student compositions and notes that some steelbands across the country actually require their band members to compose or arrange music (61). Tanner is not alone in advocating for student compositions in ensembles; Harris (2008) also argued that because the music of steelpan may be perceived as relatively simplistic, it is accessible for students attempting to compose or arrange for the instrument (2). While encouraging student compositions seems well meaning, there are issues with this prioritization, particularly when the compositions utilize Western notation. Composition within a Western idiom requires a deep understanding of notation that moves beyond simply reading and reiterating. In a context where a dependency on Western notation already marginalizes students of color (Hess 2017, Gustafson 2009, Bradley 2007), composition within a Western paradigm exacerbates an already serious issue. To clarify, composition should not be avoided in a steelband classroom. As I have mentioned, composition has a strong history within Trinidad. The practice of composition can be an incredible learning moment if students are taught the history of composition and arranging in Trinidad and encouraged to compose in a process that decentralizes notation.

Transmission

While calypso and soca are still the emphasis of the majority of US-based steelbands, there has been a notable shift in the transmission of these musical genres. Although historically, steelpan has been considered an oral tradition, Haskett (2016) noted 67.13% of surveyed US-based steelband directors either agreed or strongly agreed that students should learn primarily through written notation (9). This statistic largely parallels themes within the recent steelband literature, as many steelband directors have advocated for the use of written notation because it allows students to learn substantially more music in a shorter amount of time (Tanner 2007). However, many authors have argued that music education's dependency on Western notation over oral transmission perpetuates a system of whiteness in United States education (Hess 2017, Bradley 2015, Gustafson 2009).

During the fieldwork I completed while pursuing my master's degree, musical literacy was a clear priority across the high school ensembles; however, it was not assumed that students be proficient on the first day. The director spent significant time with the beginning ensembles reviewing the foundations of musical literacy. While this commitment is commendable, particularly in a program that used solely

written notation, it was also assumed that to be accepted into one of the auditioned advance bands, students needed a fairly high level of musical literacy. This difference between the beginning and advanced bands is important to highlight because some studies have found a substantial attrition rate of African American students enrolled in school music classes, especially those that prioritize Western notation (Gustafson 2009). While I am not suggesting that US-based school steelbands use of musical notation is contributing to a higher attrition rate of Black students, I am highlighting that musical notation can be used as a tool for exclusion in specific contexts.

Although steelbands in the West Indian community still primarily utilize rote techniques, there are examples of ensembles that have begun to incorporate notation into their ensembles. In this discussion of transmission and notation, I do not intend to discredit the phenomenal Black pannists or primarily Black ensembles that prioritize musical literacy; however, I wish to call attention to the ways systems of whiteness in educational contexts prioritize certain ways of representing and processing knowledge. Bradley (2015) noted that “Western music learners infer from notation many non-written aspects of music that have been learned through their enculturation into Western society” and further that “notation itself conveys cultural information that may confuse and distort the music of cultures not dependent on notation” (198). In my prior fieldwork, many of the participants within community ensembles noted critical aspects of steelpan performance beyond the music including choreography and vocals. The director of a community ensemble noted that

School bands focus a lot more on reading and writing music, and with this focus a lot of the intricacies get lost. That’s why you have some of these players who play in school bands come join our community band because they want that challenge. I’m not saying they’re not good, but I guess when it comes to putting on a Panorama performance, it’s a little different (Personal Interview, October 19, 2017)

This director believed that his band was able to focus on things such as expression and creativity because the band chose not to use musical notation. Within these performances is a high level of movement, whether formalized choreography or an undiscussed consistent motion created by stepping and swaying. With this consistent movement, complex rhythms align more with the body than Western notation can articulate. In my experience working with school steelbands, school ensembles that prioritize notation struggle with having their students move while

playing steelpan. In this light, school steelpan directors should question the non-written narratives embedded in their emphasis on Western notation within pan instruction and come to terms with who they may be excluding from their classrooms and ensembles through these unspoken narratives.

As stated, one of the primary reasons why school directors choose to emphasize notation over rote learning is simply because it may enable students to learn larger amounts of music in a shorter amount of time. Many steelband directors prioritize short-term goals in order to accommodate their school's concert schedule. In my prior ethnographic work, even the beginning ensembles were expected to perform in four concerts per year, with new repertoire at each concert. This model of concerts common within Western music education settings does not align with the model common with community-based steelband ensembles. Community ensembles often have an ongoing repertoire that the band pulls from for performances. Bands will learn new music, especially if they are participating in the Brooklyn or Miami Panorama competitions; however, these new tunes are balanced with songs the band has known for years and consistently revisit. When preparing for performances, then, the band discusses the songs that current members know and adapt and modify those selections rather than consistently learning music to be performed for only one gig. If school bands moved away from the perception that concerts are the primary goal of an ensemble and the expectation that ensembles need to prepare brand new music for every concert, directors would have significantly more time in their rehearsals to adjust their pedagogical methods and teach the necessary cultural understandings surrounding steelband history.

Suggestions for a Critical Approach to Race in Steelband Pedagogy

Moving forward, I believe that there are specific actions that steelband educators, as well as other world music ensemble directors, could incorporate into their programs. I see these suggestions as extensions of the work done by Hess (2017 and 2015) and Solís (2004) and their propositions for addressing racialized practices in music education and world music spaces. The first of these is to avoid comparing steelbands alongside other Western-based ensembles in both formal and informal settings and recognize that their ensembles can have different goals than their Western counterparts. By consistently equating steelbands to other Western ensembles, directors de-emphasize the cultural importance of the steelband and its

Afro-Caribbean history. I recognize that many K–12 steelband directors feel obligated to utilize music education standards that were written with Western ensembles in mind. In this light, I also suggest that music educators, administrators, and researchers working with world music ensembles, begin to question standards' emphasis on neoliberal reforms, neoconservative values, and their inherent exclusion of non-Western values (Mullen 2019).

Also, within this purview, steelband educators could de-emphasize the importance of Western notation in their classrooms. To create ensembles that are welcoming to students of the original culture, modes of transmission in a Western classroom should reflect the modes of transmission of the culture as it exists outside the classroom. As I noted earlier, many directors feel pressured to learn a large amount of music because of an established concert schedule, and notation often helps students learn more music more quickly. In this light, directors perhaps should question the pedagogical role of these concerts and whether it is necessary for students to learn new music for each concert. Community ensembles frequently reuse repertoire in public performances, relieving the pressure to consistently learn new repertoire. Changing the paradigm of concerts would allow more room in the curriculum for directors to incorporate both more rote learning strategies and cultural discussions.

Steelband educators can also actively create space in their ensembles for a diverse group of students. This space is particularly important for schools with a substantial Caribbean population. Creating this space requires steelband directors to reflect on their recruitment practices. Steelband directors can interrogate who they are recruiting and how potential students could, and should, best be reached.

Finally, steelband directors could have honest and frank discussions on the history of steelband and race both in Trinidad and the United States and highlight some of the challenges within this history. Like other examples of multicultural music, steelband's history can easily be romanticized, erasing the stories of those who have experienced hardships associated with the instrument. As I mentioned earlier, the vignettes from Nurse's *Unheard Voices* (2007) may provide a resource to begin these conversations. Further, if in an area with local West-Indian community ensembles, steelband directors could bring in community members to share their own experiences. By prioritizing Afro-Caribbean voices in their classrooms, steelband directors can enrich students' cultural and racial understandings of the instrument.

One model that steelband directors can use to guide their pedagogical decisions is World Music Pedagogy. Stemming out of multiculturalism, World Music Pedagogy (WMP) is a specific pedagogical practice developed by Patricia Shehan Campbell (2004). In her work, Campbell defines WMP as a study in “how music is taught/transmitted and received/learned within cultures, and how best the processes that are included in significant ways within these cultures can be preserved or at least partially retained in classroom and rehearsal halls” (66). Working with various music educators and ethnomusicologists, Campbell established the Routledge *World Music Pedagogy Series* that approaches the basic WMP philosophies within various music education contexts. At the heart of this approach is a five-part pathway focused on 1) attentive listening, 2) engaged listening, 3) enactive listening, 4) creating world music, and 5) integrating world music (Campbell 2020, 10). In their seven-part series, Campbell and other contributors have sought to apply this five-part pathway to a wide range of educational contexts, including early childhood education, elementary music education, secondary school innovations, instrumental music education, choral music education, school-community intersections, and world music in higher education. Particularly relevant for steelband directors are the volumes on secondary school innovations (Howard and Kelley 2018) and school-community intersections (Campbell and Lum 2019). Since its inception, WMP has sought to build a pedagogical model that addresses and critiques cultural insensitivities and racial bias (Campbell and Lum 2019, 11). In the volume on secondary school innovations, authors Howard and Kelley (2018) explicitly discussed the pedagogical rationale for incorporating race and racism into the WMP framework:

Secondary music classes can investigate the ways in which we think about race as historians and create an understanding of the motivations, choices, and resulting actions around racialization in distinct periods from history and how those understandings are exhibited within musical traditions. Beyond the formation of race, secondary music students that explore the intersection of race and music can seek understanding of the ways that people on the margins of political and economic power exercise agency over their lives and find their voices in a region’s historical narrative. (146)

Although this model is not meant to explicitly discuss race, the emphasis on cultural integration at every stage of the pathway creates moments for instructors to parallel discussions of race alongside musicality.

After being deeply involved in the US-based steelband community, both as a performer and as a researcher, I have no doubt that the directors, administrators, and performers working within school contexts are acting with good intentions rather than maliciously trying to manipulate understandings of the Afro-Trinidadian steelband performance practice. However, as Hess argued in her 2017 article, intent and impact can be two very different actualities (18). When educators prioritize meaning well or good intentions over the effect of erasing race from discourse in these instances, they miss opportunities to consider the realities of education for students of color. Steelband directors in the United States, particularly steelband directors who operate within school contexts, must realize the unintended effects of their pedagogical decisions.

Throughout this article, I have argued that systems of whiteness are perpetuated through the curricular and pedagogical practices of steelbands in the United States. Although inadvertently, steelband directors are maintaining music education practices that are affiliated with a history fraught with racial issues. Steelband directors, then, must develop a critical approach to developing race within their pedagogy. Without this critical approach to race in steelpan pedagogy steelpan educators, myself included, may inadvertently continue to perpetuate systems of oppression and re-emphasize “playing with a different beat.”

About the Author

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Notes

¹ J’Ouvert has historically marked the opening of Carnival in Trinidad, and Trinidadian immigrants have their own J’Ouvert celebrations annually on Labor Day Weekend in Brooklyn. For more on Brooklyn J’Ouvert, see Ray Allen’s *Jump Up! Caribbean Carnival Music in New York* (2019) and Allen’s “J’Ouvert in Brooklyn Carnival: Revitalizing Steel Pan and Ole Mas Traditions” (1999).

² In Trinidad, the prefixes Afro- and Indo- are understood as racial identifiers rather than ethnic identifies. For more on understandings on race and ethnicity in Trinidad see Escayg (2020), England (2008), Allahar (2005), and Abraham (2001).