

**GRADED EXAMINATIONS IN
SOLO STEELPAN PERFORMANCE
A Caribbean Innovation in Music Education**

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The syllabus for graded examinations in solo steelpan performance was developed in 1994 as a collaborative effort among four lecturers at the Centre for Creative and Festival Arts (formerly the Creative Arts Centre), The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine. These pioneering examinations were first held in 1995, and they fill a gap in the existing British system of graded instrumental examinations that have been available in Trinidad and Tobago for all instruments, except the pan, for more than 80 years. To date, almost 2,000 persons, most of them children, have been examined, with approximately 95% obtaining certificates. Although designed for national use, pan examinations have been held in St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, and extra-regionally in Maryland, USA.

Background

The *Graded Examinations in Solo Steelpan Performance* (hereafter referred to as pan exams) were developed to fill a need for practical music certification of pannists attending primary and secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The syllabus was publicly launched on August 25, 1994 during Steelband Week, and the first exams took place in April 1995. From its inception, the pan exams were designed for the most commonly used solo instruments—the tenor pan, double tenor, and double second pans.

The family of instruments ranging from the highest (tenor pan) to the lowest (bass pans) is known collectively as the steelband. The steelpan, or pan as it is known in Trinidad and Tobago, emerged from disadvantaged areas of Trinidad's capital city, Port of Spain, in the late 1930s. Some years later, for performances at the 1951 Festival of Britain held on London's South Bank, new pans were created and existing ones were chromaticized. Still, it was not until 1992 that certain events

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hastened the rate at which the instrument was gaining recognition in the land of its birth. Firstly, the steelpan was declared the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago on August 31, 1992 (30th anniversary of Independence). Secondly, and unrelated to this announcement, the Trinidad campus of The University of the West Indies (UWI) admitted students to its first accredited music programme with the steelpan as the principal instrument in October 1992 (Osborne, 2000, p. 59).

When the pan exams syllabus was launched in 1994, learning to play the instrument did not include reading and writing music notation as a norm. Whether as a result of, or resulting from, this practice, there was little notated repertoire transcribed, adapted, or composed specifically for solo pan. While arrangers created complex music for national pan competitions, all the music was in their heads and in the memory of the players, and even then it was for a group of performers (steelband) rather than for soloists. Many arrangers of the older generation still follow this traditional practice of creating music aurally, without notation. However, the younger generation is different, and an interest in learning to read and write music is evident, with some scoring their music before entering the panyard. Now, music literacy programmes for children are being offered, especially as part of vacation camps at panyards and at other venues.

This article examines the extent to which the syllabus has impacted on steelpan teaching practices in Trinidad and Tobago since the inception of the exams 10 years ago. After an outline of the syllabus' general structure, specific features are explained. A discussion about outcomes growing out of research data collected from a small sample of teachers follows, and the article ends with comments on ramifications arising from this innovation of graded examinations in solo steelpan performance.

General Structure of the Syllabus

Four lecturers in the music unit developed the syllabus for pan exams at the Creative Arts Centre (now Centre for Creative and Festival Arts), UWI, Trinidad, during the academic year 1993-94. The basic format of two established British music examination boards--Trinity College of Music, London and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of

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Music—was adopted. These boards have been honing their syllabus structure for more than 100 years.

Four objectives are stated in the syllabus. The first objective is “to provide pan students with an opportunity to be systematically assessed in a non-competitive setting” (The University of the West Indies [UWI], 2003, p. 1). The second and third objectives focus on music notation. The second objective, “to encourage pannists to become musically literate” (p. 1), results from the instrument’s history. While it is taken for granted by the British music examination boards that students of the various instruments being examined are musically literate, this skill is not acquired as a matter of course in the case of pan students. The third objective, “to widen the scope of instruction in pan playing to include music reading in addition to rote learning” (p. 1), suggests a methodology for teaching the pan whether students are learning in preparation for a future career or merely as a leisure activity.

The fourth objective, “to encourage composers to write for solo pan so that the repertoire of original pan compositions can be enlarged” (p. 1), is a long-term goal that is slowly being fulfilled through the set pieces. For example, the present syllabus includes a piece written by a student of the BA Musical Arts composition course. Reasons for the slow pace of fulfilling this fourth objective include: 1) the formal study of pan is still in a relatively early stage while the tradition of oral/aural transmission is common; 2) as is the case with famous European composers who were also performers, pieces of music for solo pan are created for the use of pan virtuosos themselves. Thus, original works by outstanding pannists are found as set pieces only in the higher grades of the examination; and 3) the choice of contemporary music is restricted by copyright concerns.

The current syllabus (2003-2005) of the pan exams provides opportunities for assessment from Preliminary (pre Grade 1) to Grade 8 on the tenor pan, and from Preliminary to Grade 6 on double second and double tenor pans. The syllabus has five components:

1. Scales/arpeggios subdivided into traditional and calypscales
2. Pieces—three are to be played from six set pieces, one chosen from each list A, B, and C
3. Reading at Sight (sight-reading)
4. General Musicianship

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5. *Viva Voce*, where the examiner asks questions relating to the pieces played.

The pass mark is 65%, 75% is a pass with merit, and 85% is a pass with distinction. In Grade 8, candidates choose any three of five set pieces. In the Preliminary grade, scales are replaced by technical exercises and there are no tests of sight-reading or *viva voce* questions.

Specific Features of the Examination

Calypscalcs

Calypscalcs (and in higher grades, calypsevenths) are compositions of Orville Wright (Berklee School of Music, Boston), who serves as a consultant to the Centre for Creative and Festival Arts on the pan exams. They were added to the traditional scale and arpeggio requirements with the second edition of the syllabus in 1998 (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Calypscale in F major.

The syllabus explains the benefits: “in addition to the obvious relevance of the rhythm, practice of these patterns provides a system of gaining facility in moving from key to key, a pre-requisite for improvisation” (UWI, 2003, p. 18). Eleven different connecting passages provide a natural transition for the modulations. Teachers have found that the calypscalcs are attractive to their students who immediately identify

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with the Caribbean-type rhythm. Some candidates in the practical component of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) music examinations also use the calypscases as technical studies.

Set Pieces

Set Pieces for the pan exams present a challenge that is peculiar to the pan as a solo instrument. Unlike instruments such as the piano where there is a standard repertoire from which pieces can be drawn, no such material exists for the pan due to the instrument's origins in the oral/aural tradition.

Two members of the original team are responsible for choosing suitable repertoire and adapting the music for solo pan. They are both experienced pannists and music educators, having majored at undergraduate level in music education before pursuing graduate work. Sources of pieces in lists A and B include music originally written for solo voice, piano, strings, and wind instruments. A great deal of effort is expended to ensure that music composed for other instruments is playable on the pan. One technique of adaptation is transposition for a variety of reasons:

- limitations of the pan's range may necessitate transposition to a new key
- the change to a new key may also be necessary where music that is easily playable on the instrument for which it is written is awkward to play on the pan because the placement of notes on this instrument does not follow a scalar pattern. Instead, notes on a standard tenor pan are arranged in a circle of fifths (in an anti-clockwise motion)
- the manipulation of a melody to disguise octave transposition of a few notes or entire phrase is more challenging than moving to another key altogether. The melody line with octave displacements must flow so naturally that listeners are hardly aware of differences from the original.

Other common adaptations are addition of marks for legato playing (rolling), dynamic markings, and omission of embellishments and non-harmonic tones to simplify passages in the lower grades (1-4). Choosing and adapting set pieces for pan exams and arranging them in order of difficulty is pioneering work as far as can be determined.

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Most of the set pieces in lists A and B come from a repertoire of European Art Music composed for other instruments. However, it is in list C that the pan exams differ radically. The pieces in this category are either arrangements of Caribbean folk songs, adaptations of calypsoes, or original pieces for pan written by Caribbean composers. Teachers have commented on the pride they experience as list C pieces are considered on par with those chosen for lists A and B. This comment suggests that the struggle for credibility and recognition of the pan locally is ongoing.

Reading at Sight (sight-reading)

Reading at sight is a skill that can be developed and should form part of any examination in music, no matter the instrument. In the case of the pan, the ability to read music, rather than relying on learning by rote, hastens the acquisition of new repertoire and facilitates the recall of music learned some time ago.

General Musicianship Tests

General Musicianship Tests incorporate two sides of aural skills – that of aurally recognizing musical features (commonly known as Ear Tests) and tests requiring a practical response, for example, candidates are asked to reproduce what they hear by playing it back on the pan.

There are four tests in each grade. Requirements range from aural recognition of musical features such as tonality, quality of triads, and intervals to those that include practical responses such as improvisation on specific tone sets, rhythm, or as an answering phrase. One set of tests in Grades 1 to 4 is meant to develop a skill that is important for pannists – that of playing a phrase on pan after hearing it once or twice. This practice is known as “playing by ear.”

It is important to explain why playing by ear is important for pannists. It is still a misconception that this skill of playing by ear is practised by thousands of pannists across Trinidad and Tobago as they learn an arrangement for Panorama. Instead, what actually occurs is the development of a phenomenal memory for music, which is retained in the short-term by “drill” – playing a passage of music hundreds of times at each rehearsal. This process of learning repertoire is a laborious one in

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which the musical director or section leader calls out pitch names and then taps out the rhythm pattern for those pitches, phrase by phrase. Another practice is for the director to physically show the placement of notes (hand position) to section leaders, who in turn teach other members phrase by phrase. If more band members truly learn to play by ear (play a phrase on their instruments after hearing it once or twice), a greater amount of repertoire could be learned during rehearsals.

Another practical component in General Musicianship Tests is the transposition of a melody up or down a tone or semitone in Grades 5 and 6. This skill is required when the pan has the role of an accompanying instrument. For example, a pannist accompanying singers transpose the accompaniment if the singers' vocal range is outside that of the original key of the music. Similarly, if a pan replaces the part of another instrument such as a trumpet or clarinet (transposing instruments in which the notated pitch is different from the sounding pitch), pannists are required to transpose their part in order to harmonize with the other instruments. Transposing at sight takes the ability to sight read one step further, as it is impossible to make musical sense of this test if one has not mastered the most efficient skill in sight-reading—the ability to read by grasping rhythmic and melodic patterns (contour and intervals) instead of reading by naming individual notes in isolation.

Viva Voce

Viva Voce, in which questions are asked on pieces chosen for the exam, involves another facet of musical literacy. Answering these questions ensures that the student has not learned to perform the music by rote and emphasizes the second objective of the syllabus, “to encourage pannists to become musically literate” (UWI, 2003, p. 1). Questions increase in difficulty according to grade. They range from basic information such as names and values of notes and rests, explanation of key and time signatures, and advance to questions about the structure of a piece, information about the life of the composer, and awareness of the work's technical and musical demands (see Figure 2).

Grade 6
1. Indicate where the main modulations occur.
2. Explain the form of the piece.
Grade 8
1. In your opinion, what is the most difficult technical feature of this piece?
2. How did you go about learning to master difficult passages?

Figure 2. Examples of *Viva Voce* questions.

Outcomes of the Pan Exams

Ten teachers were surveyed in order to determine the benefits of these exams. They were selected because they had consistently entered a number of candidates for the examinations in the preceding six years. All were experienced music teachers who had been teaching the pan for a number of years before the advent of the graded pan exams. Nine of them responded and their comments are summarized in this section of the paper.

A questionnaire was used to collect data during the period mid-June to early August 2004, largely by e-mail. With one exception, the sample of teachers was drawn from Northern Trinidad (the so-called East-West Corridor, specifically Diego Martin to Sangre Grande). The exception was a teacher located in San Fernando.

Before the questionnaire was sent out, a face-to-face interview was held with the most senior teacher (67 years of age) on June 17 at the music building of the Centre for Creative and Festival Arts. This teacher did not have Internet access. The questionnaire consisted of six items, which were couched in an open-ended format (see Figure 3).

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What were your thoughts on first hearing about pan examinations?2. How have these examinations influenced your teaching? |
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Figure 3. Examples of questionnaire items.

The following provides a summary of teacher responses.

Benefits to students who register for the exams

All teachers mentioned overall motivation. This is in keeping with the acknowledged perception that “the prospect of an examination provides extra motivation for pupils to undertake the hard work that is needed to do well in an examination” (Salaman, 1994, p. 210). Some respondents pointed out that it is not only motivation for students who need an event for which to prepare, but even for the teacher. A music teacher at an inner-city secondary school went as far as to state that the pan exams give her a reason for teaching pan. One primary school music teacher said that her students now have a better sense of purpose and have been able to set annual goals towards which they can work. It was especially encouraging to hear about a secondary school where successful students are recognized at the school’s Merit Awards Day. At that school, too, it has been reported that some students borrow sheet music from the library to teach themselves pieces they find attractive. Another teacher relates a different type of motivation—these exams are the only impetus for some pannists to learn to read and write music. She traced the music literacy journey of a student, already an experienced performer at age 21, who gained confidence to continue his studies in the USA after passing an intermediate pan exam. Today, he is a graduate with a BA in music education and has made a career in that field in his adopted homeland.

To summarize, the benefits to pan students according to their teachers include the opportunity to:

- gain self-confidence that they can perform as soloists (playing pan is a group [steelband] rather than solo activity)
- extend their technique (e.g., hand positions in calypsevenths and in set pieces)
- acquire a repertoire of musically challenging pieces from which to choose

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- gain self-sufficiency in music reading. A student of one teacher credits the requirements of the pan exams for the development of her ability to analyze pieces and to study them on her own. She was the only one of her year group to pass the CXC music examination at her school and credits the pan exams for her success.

The influence of pan exams on the teaching of the instrument

It was found that either directly (6 responses) or indirectly (3 responses), the sample treated the syllabus as a teacher's guide for the content of their pan lessons. Responses included the following:

- the requirements of the syllabus have expanded their teaching to include aural training and sight-reading
- the *viva voce* component has forced them to cover a bit more theory than would have been done ordinarily
- these exams have provided a good framework for practical teaching and all solo work is done with the syllabus in mind
- [her] teaching has become more structured because the students are required to develop their auditory skills, build their reading competence, and improve their playing technique
- the *viva voce* questions have helped the concepts learned in music theory to come alive for the students.

A British researcher has found this influence of a syllabus being used as a curriculum. She gives the reason for this dual function: "Although instrumental teaching does not always involve an explicit curriculum, the ... influence of the graded exams means that a great deal of teaching occurs with reference to a syllabus" (Green, 2002, p. 128).

Summary

The pan exams have influenced teachers and students to go beyond the traditions learned in an informal setting. The exams are a systematic assessment for those learning the instrument in a formal setting where music notation is central. The aim, however, is not to advocate the use of music literacy to the detriment of other ways of teaching and learning. Indeed, one of the objectives is "to widen the scope of instruction in pan playing to include music reading in addition to rote learning" (UWI, 2003, p. 1). It is acknowledged that "literacy ... is a means to an end

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when we are working with some [types of] music” (Swanwick, 2000, p. 10). Designers of the pan exam syllabus agree that other methods of teaching the instrument are valid in certain circumstances.

The pan exams have impacted music education and several teachers use the syllabus as an instructional guide whether or not they are preparing students for exams. Another benefit is that a repertoire of notated pieces for tenor, double tenor, and double second pans—classified in order of difficulty from elementary to advanced—is being compiled as different editions of the syllabus are released. Locally, these pieces are heard in competitions, at CXC practical exams, and at various types of concerts. The supporting tests (sight-reading and musicianship) aid in the development of all-round musical skills that in turn underpin performance.

Conclusion

This insistence on the need for examinations is largely due to the influence of the British music examination boards that have offered graded instrumental exams for all instruments, except pan, for several decades. In our society, parents and others measure progress in music lessons by the passing of graded examinations. It is perceived that such examinations provide a benchmark from which to gauge a student’s progress.

In socio-cultural terms, full acceptance and recognition of the pan’s worth by our society lags behind that of the wider musical world, where the instrument is considered on par with any of the so-called traditional instruments. Implementation of the pan exams—a systematic method of assessment—has raised the pan’s status and has caused a shift in thinking by some parents and school administrations. For example, the small sample of teachers expressed enthusiasm about the initiative of the pan exams, as the formal structure has legitimized the instrument in the eyes of a society still clouded by the pan’s humble origins. The thoughts of these teachers were captured by the most senior respondent, who expressed the pride he feels now that the pan is being treated like any other instrument and considered worthy of graded examinations. This way of thinking is further illustrated by the response of a secondary school teacher who claimed that certain parents have only allowed their children to be involved in the school’s pan ensemble because they can

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see a future in learning the instrument now that there are graded exams offered by UWI. In the perception of these parents, then, the exams have given pan the validity that it previously lacked.

In musical terms, the pan is being moved into the mainstream of music making by the addition of compulsory piano accompaniment. Thus, the pan is being treated like all other solo instruments in the jazz, contemporary, or classical idioms. The use of piano accompaniment also reflects the growing trend of using the pan in combination with instruments outside of the steelpan family.

Other noticeable gains include an increasing number of former candidates beginning to enrol in UWI's Certificate and BA Musical Arts programmes. In addition to supplying better prepared students for music programmes at UWI, the existence of the graded pan exams confirms to the local society, what has been long recognized in metropolitan countries, that the pan has come of age.

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