

# THE STEEL PAN EXPERIENCE

NSU Steel Pan Ensemble • Oliver Molina, Director

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

It is fitting that our March *Nachtmusik*, which falls only a week after Mardi Gras, would feature the **NSU Steel Pan Ensemble**. The steel pan and its main repertoire, calypso, originated at Carnival, the same festival season which takes place before Lent, as it was celebrated on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Carnival, like our Mardi Gras, was brought to Trinidad by French Catholics, although for most of its modern history Trinidad was ruled, not by the French, but by the Spanish and later the British. Trinidad, the southernmost island in the Caribbean Sea, located a mere seven miles off the Venezuelan coast, attracted large numbers of French planters at the end of the eighteenth century. Their Carnival consisted of relatively tame masquerade balls and orderly processions in the European manner, while their African slaves, with their owners' permission, held their own, much rowdier celebrations. These included torchlit marches—our *flambeaux* correspond to their *canboulay* from French, *cannes brûlées*, “cane burning”—as well as mock stick fights called *kalindas*. These Carnival activities were accompanied by a style of West African work song known as *gayup* which, in this new setting, had developed into **calypso** by the mid-nineteenth century. Formally, many calypsos, like earlier *gayup*, are in two sections: the first boasts of victory while the second disparages the losers. Calypso also inherited from *gayup* a call-and-response texture. In *gayup*, the leader was a griot, a village storyteller-historian, whereas in calypso he became the *chantuelle* and, eventually, the calypsonian. Other defining characteristics include enthusiastic group participation from the chorus and preferences for duple meter and the major mode.

Calypso has also served as a means for social protest. Nineteenth-century calypso texts were typically in Creole French whereas the white ruling classes spoke English. Their texts told of newsworthy events, like popular and folk songs in many countries, which could comment on local happenings and satirize political events. Although slavery was abolished across the British Empire in 1834, Trinidad was far from an equal society; calypso belonged to the urban poor, most of whom were former slaves or their descendants. Carnival festivities could turn violent

and often did, as in 1881 when there were two days of rioting in the urban center, Port of Spain. Afterwards, the Peace Preservation Act of 1884 banned the use of African drums which were essential accompaniment to calypso singing. In response, Trinidadians developed new drums of their own called *tambooo bamboo*. *Tambooo* derives from the French word *tambour* meaning “drum” while bamboo refers to the grassy plant. In effect, bamboo stalks were carved into drums which would then be pounded on the ground, beat with wood or metal, or banged together. Fierce rivalries soon developed between *tambooo bamboo* bands and, as the music became popular with whites, island-wide competitions were established, often still held within Carnival season. As of the early twentieth century, calypso lyrics had moved into English and calypsonians were attaining international reputations thanks to the recording industry. Like American jazz and blues musicians of the same era, calypsonians also gained nicknames and honorary titles, such as **Lord Executor** (Felix Garcia) and **Atila the Hun** (Raymond Quevedo). Government officials were not amused, however, and in 1934 instituted censors against subversive lyrics and prohibited *tambooo bamboo* drums after an incident where rival bands sharpened their instruments into weapons.

Ever-resourceful, impoverished street musicians had already brought other percussive materials into their bands such as garbage cans, glass bottles, soap boxes, biscuit tins, and various metal scraps. Around World War II, bandsmen went a step further when they began repurposing the discarded oil drums which littered their beaches to develop the **steel pan**. Continuing rivalries between bands quickly led to more precise steel pan designs, but also hampered their standardization. The steel pan, as we know it, is cut from the bottom of a 55-gallon oil drum which is then hammered and tuned to produce a range of pitches. It is played with rubber-tipped mallets. Pans can also come in other sizes, and their sizes, of course, determine their ranges. As the steel pan became their principal instrument, these bands were referred to as steel bands. The professional steel band, nevertheless, will also contain other percussion instruments such as drum kit

and congas in what is nicknamed the “engine room.” At their popular peak in the 1950s, steel bands performed music from a range of genres, including calypso, other Latin American idioms such as mambo, film music, and familiar melodies from Western art music. Since the late 1960s, brass bands and recorded music have also become popular at Carnival, so that the most important event for the steel band is now the annual Panorama Competition where each group performs one, highly-complex arrangement of a calypso melody. Today the steel pan is recognized as the national instrument of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, an independent state since 1962 and a member of the British Commonwealth since 1976.

The music we hear tonight is mostly from the calypso repertoire. Additional pieces are drawn from other Caribbean genres as well as the surf music of the Beach Boys. The calypso songs “Marianne” and “Jump in the Line” were written by Trinidadians and gradually found their way into American popular culture. “Marianne,” originally “Mary Ann,” was written by Rafael de Leon, better-known by his stage name **Roaring Lion**, who with Atilla the Hun was one of the first calypsonians to record abroad. While recording in New York City in 1934, he performed for President Franklin D. Roosevelt who asked where he and Atilla were from; Roaring Lion answered “the Land of Calypso,” which has remained a nickname for Trinidad ever since. Aldwyn Roberts, who went by **Lord Kitchener**, wrote “Jump in the Line.” He was one of the leading calypsonians after World War II and has been called, “the Grand Master of Calypso.” The recordings by Roaring Lion and Kitchener blend the contemporary instrumentation of jazz with gently swaying rhythms and brassy riffs evocative of their tropical island settings. In the 1950s and 1960s, these songs and others became hits for Jamaican-American singer **Harry Belafonte**, who has been dubbed “the King of Calypso.” His 1956 album *Calypso* was the first LP to sell over one million copies and features the Jamaican folksongs, “Day-O” and “Jamaica Farewell.” Their inclusion speaks to the pervasive influence of calypso elsewhere in the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, which like Trinidad, was also a British possession. “Jump in the Line,” with its calls, “Shake, shake, shake, Senora,” appears on Belafonte’s 1961 album *Jump Up Calypso*, although we are just as likely to remember this song and “Day-O” from their use in the Tim Burton movie, *Beetlejuice*.

Belafonte was not the only American entertainer to popularize calypso. In 1962, **Chubby Checker** released “Limbo Rock,” a song about the limbo dance which was becoming popular in the United States at this time. As we

all surely know, the goal of limbo is to pass under a low bar without either falling or causing the bar itself to fall. What we might not know is that limbo originates from Trinidad where, going from a low bar to a progressively higher one, it was part of funeral rituals and symbolized the ascent of the soul into heaven. The dancer **Julia Edwards**, called “the First Lady of Limbo,” reversed limbo to make it more competitive and then introduced her new version to our country. “Yellow Bird,” which was a hit in 1961 for Hawaiian jazz vibraphonist **Arthur Lyman**, actually dates from 1893. It started as “Choucounne,” a song by the Haitian pianist Michel Mauléart Monton, and its text by Oswald Durand describes a beautiful woman. As Saint-Domingue, Haiti had been the jewel of the French Empire in the Caribbean until its enslaved peoples won their independence in 1804, driving many of its wealthy planters to New Orleans. Neither the strife of the Haitian Revolution nor the recent cataclysms of the 2010 earthquake, several hurricanes, and ongoing political upheavals are detectable in the gentle ambience of “Yellow Bird.” The Beach Boys’ “Kokomo” gives-off a similar island vibe. Known mainly for their songs of the 1960s about surfing, hotrods, and summer romance, the Beach Boys scored another number one single in 1988 with their song “Kokomo.” Their island, albeit invented, offers the perfect getaway trip and, though their tropical sound seems equally invented next to so much authentic Caribbean music, their recording at least features a prominent steel pan accompaniment.

© Jackson Harmeyer 2020

**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 following the completion of his thesis, “Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho.” There he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world’s leading contemporary composers. Jackson is active as a concert annotator and serves as Director of Scholarship to the Sugarmill Music Festival in Alexandria, LA. A project he is developing for the 2020 festival, “A Scholarly Presentation in Lecture and Music: Solomon Northup in the Central Louisiana Sugarhouse,” has recently been awarded a prestigious Rebirth Grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. He has shared

his research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN; the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN; and the University of Louisiana System Academic Summit in Thibodeaux, LA; in March 2020, he will present at the Music by Women Festival in Columbus, MS. Aside from his studies, Jackson is a composer, choral singer, music blogger, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

*Read additional program notes by Jackson at [www.JacksonHarmeyer.com](http://www.JacksonHarmeyer.com).*