

Expanding the Role of the Steel Drum Band: *It's not just another Percussion Ensemble*

by Scott Harris

Every year the steel band, as part of an instrumental performance curriculum, becomes more and more popular in both college and high school music programs. Since steel drums, or *pans*, are essentially percussion instruments the steel band is generally considered part of, or an extension of, an already existing percussion ensemble program. While it's easy to associate the steel band with the percussion ensemble, there are many musical and educational characteristics/opportunities that you can use to promote the ensemble as its own separate and unique musical entity.

1. Non-percussionists can play too

Steel drums, relative to typical band/classical instruments, do not require years of intense musical study to become technically proficient on the instrument. Therefore, students from other musical disciplines can easily participate. In fact, even students with little or no musical background can join a steel band and be successful. This is a great opportunity for other band members (and/or students outside the instrumental area or even the department) to do something new, engage their creative spirit, and broaden their artistic horizons – all without the stress of “technical difficulties”.

Students who can play in a steel band include percussionists, wind and string players, vocalists, and students in non-musical fields (theatre, sports, computers, and other academics) - so just about anybody! You may need to do some marketing and recruiting outside of your regular classroom but beyond that all students need is an interest in learning and a little bit of direction from an encouraging teacher.

2. Practical Applications of Music Theory and Aural Skills

In many performance ensembles addressing and applying music theory, and/or aural skills, is something that can be difficult if not impossible. For students music theory is something typically learned in a separate classroom with a pencil and paper, not something dealt with everyday in large and chamber performance ensembles. However, the nature of the steel band literature is such that you can discuss and apply both basic music theory and aural skills in your regular rehearsal – and ultimately in a practical performance setting.

Many pieces in the steel band library use simple harmonies and chord progressions (sometimes with as little as three chords), strong tonic/dominant relationships, and chord symbols (like in a jazz piece or on a lead sheet). In teaching the ensemble you can develop music theory by teaching chords by rote (immediately requiring students to understand where they are and what chords they are playing) and then associating what they're playing with what is on the page. You can also challenge students to try different voicings and rhythms within the defined form and chord structure. It's important, and fairly easy, to get away from the printed music and work towards *hearing* the changes, progressions and form rather than just *seeing* it on the page.

3. Improvisation

In my experience many students brought up in a classical music training environment are scared to death to put the music aside and make something up - or as I say in my own teaching to “just play”. The term improvisation seems to bring out fears of

extended chords, complicated progressions, syncopated rhythms, and scales well outside the classical comfort zone. Students are simply afraid “they won’t sound good” or that they won’t play the *right* thing.

The steel band can help alleviate many of these fears and provide an encouraging environment where students can be creative and develop their own improvisational skills. Take an established chord progression and ask every member of the group to take a turn playing over the form (repeating 8-16 bars or whatever the music dictates). Remember that the chord progressions will probably not be difficult so students will immediately sound pretty good simply by playing within the key. This is a great exercise that is also a lot of fun - and it can go as long as you and the ensemble want. The only caution is that once students start enjoying themselves they may not want to stop!

4. Additional Instrumentation

Not only is there a presumption that only percussionists play in steel bands but it is also assumed that only percussion instruments (including the pans) make up the steel band. While a percussion-only instrumentation is typical in steel bands today, the nature of the ensemble allows for easy additions of non-percussion instruments. These new voices can greatly expand the tone color of the ensemble, literature choices, and provide new and exciting performance opportunities for other musicians in your school band/music program.

Here are some easy and interesting additions you can make to the typical steel band instrumentation of pans (variety of numbers and sizes), drumset and percussion (engine room):

- electric bass: can double or replace bass pans and has an extended range.
- piano/guitar: as used in a jazz combo with a lead pan or pair of seconds as the lead instrument(s); works best with electric bass/drumset; many steel band arrangements already include a lead sheet with chord symbols; you can also use Real/Fake Books just as you would for jazz combo settings and continue to integrate music theory and improvisation.
- winds/horn section: a brass tone quality is very common in pop and Latin music and adds a great amount of energy to the ensemble; pan parts can be doubled or simple melodic/harmonic lines can be added; instead of brass use a flute and/or strings to soften the tone of the ensemble - the possibilities are endless!
- vocals: adding vocals can be a simple and audience friendly way to enhance your ensemble; much of the popular music arranged for steel bands today originally had vocals (i.e.: pop tunes); be cautious because too much classical or operatic vocal training may be inappropriate for singing with a steel band; a microphone and a sound system will be needed to balance with the ensemble.

5. Student Arrangements

The steel band provides a very accessible performance venue for students to develop writing and/or arranging skills. Much of the music performed in a steel band is popular music that younger generations are already familiar with and interested in. Again, because of the relative simplicity of the music it is not difficult for students to reproduce it on paper. Here are some specific suggestions:

- Latin and popular music works very well; Harry Belafonte, Jimmy Buffett, Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, Santana, etc; jazz, show tunes, and classical music can also be arranged for steel band.
- begin with four parts (lead, seconds, cellos, bass); identify the bass and melody lines and then fill in the harmonies; it’s a good idea to write a

drum/percussion part – it doesn't need to be specific (exact notes etc.) but it should outline the form, style and any important hits/fills/solos.

- writing is a great opportunity for students to get familiar with music writing software (Finale); in today's musical environment a familiarity with the computer technology is absolutely essential.
- BE AWARE OF COPYRIGHT LAWS – when in doubt ask permission! This is especially important if arrangements are being recorded, aired on TV or radio, or being published.

6. Appealing to Multiple Audiences

Everybody loves a steel band! The steel band is one of the most audience friendly ensembles at our disposal. The ensemble can perform successfully almost anywhere including the concert hall, community events/festivals, parties (public and/or private), restaurants, and schools for any age level. Performing at a variety of different events will give you and your students a variety of performance opportunities and engage audiences that may otherwise never hear your groups. The danger of course is that as your group becomes popular you'll have to be very selective about which events you perform for, and which events you say no to.

7. Performance Practice

Performing in a steel band is significantly different than performing with a classically oriented ensemble. Many of us, particularly students in school music programs, are used to performing in an environment with a specific set of rules for performance and audience etiquette (like standing still, formal dress, no facial expression or unnecessary physical movement, and being quiet) - in the steel band most of those rules don't apply.

In a steel band performance: it's ok to look at and engage the audience, it's ok to move around and/or dance, it's ok to vocalize your enthusiasm (hoot and holler), it's ok for the audience to respond and participate, and it's ok to visibly have fun, laugh and SMILE!

At first this can prove difficult, especially if students are quiet, reserved, and simply not used to this kind of outward expression. However, to engage your audience and demonstrate what kind of behavior is appropriate is one of the essential elements of a successful musical performance. In a classical setting it is appropriate to sit quietly and listen intently but in a steel band setting the exact opposite is true and that's OK! Remember, with any performance ensemble you want to create an atmosphere that's appropriate to the music but also engaging to the audience. Give the audience a great musical experience and they'll come back for more – and next time they'll bring friends!