

pan podium feature
center
stage by
 with Kennet Chang On

The Trinidad and Tobago Chinese Steel Ensemble



In 2006, 200 years after the first Chinese immigrants landed on the shores of Trinidad, a series of events were held to celebrate this historic occasion. To enhance the celebrations, an all-Chinese steelband was formed in March of that year and so the Chinese Bicentennial Steel Ensemble was born.



The Management of Excellent Stores Silver Stars, PCS Starlift, and Harvard Harps Steel Orchestras were kind enough to lend the band some of their surplus instruments, as the band had no instruments of its own. The band comprises of youngsters from the age of nine (9) to teenagers and adults well over their fifties; from schoolchildren to business owners. A handful of the members were experienced players but most were novices, many not having played a musical instrument before.

However, the hard work and long hours of practice paid dividends when, in the short space of just under six (6) months, the band was ready for its first public appearance. They successfully performed at a series of concerts in Trinidad and Tobago, culminating in a banquet hosted by the President of T&T at his residence on Chinese Arrival Day, October 12th, 2006. In the Bicentennial celebrations, traditional Chinese musical instruments such as the

Er-Hu, Yer Woo, Toon Kam and Mook Kam, all string instruments, were blended with the sound of the steel pan. Accompanying the band in a few of its renditions were vocalists performing authentic Chinese songs.

At the end of the celebrations, the borrowed pans were returned to their respective owners and there was much sadness among the members of the band as they thought that the band would have been disbanded.

However, Chinese Bicentennial Limited, whose mandate is to propagate Chinese arts and culture in Trinidad and Tobago, decided that the band must go on and started a fund to purchase instruments. They also sought financial assistance from several of the better-known Chinese business places in their community, some of whom came forward readily.

By May 2007, sufficient funds were raised to purchase instruments, but by then about half of the original members had left the band for various reasons and they had to start with a fresh group of recruits. The band, under the leadership of its new captain, Susie Young, started once again practicing feverishly for that year's celebrations.

These all concluded successfully to the acclaim of those who were in attendance. With a mandate to fill at least 50% of its repertoire with songs of Chinese origin, the CBSE plays Chinese folk songs fused with rhythms of the Caribbean and South America, as well as soca, classical and pop pieces. It is the sound of Chinese



music as it has never been played before, all uniquely arranged by resident pan virtuoso Douglas 'Dougie' Redon.

The band members are:
Tenors - Sonya Lee Kim, Carol Mayers, Felicia Aleong
Double Seconds - Romero Edwards
Double Guitar - Marcus Jodhan
Triple Cello - Mary Angai
4-Cello - Lori Lee Lum
Tenor Bass - Thais Lee Kim
7-Bass - Nick Lee Lum
Drums - Susie Young

In early 2010, the band changed its name to Trinidad and Tobago Chinese Steel Ensemble. To prepare for its tour of Ireland, the band learned the following Irish tunes, all spiced up with a uniquely Trini flavour: Wild Rover, Black Velvet Band, Lord of the Dance, Phil the Fluter's Ball and Molly Malone.

On Saturday May 8th, the TTCSE performed at Fiesta Plaza, Movie Towne, just before they left for their tour of Ireland. The band's tour to Ireland was its first performance outside of Trinidad and Tobago and their members fully enjoyed entertaining the people of the Republic of Ireland.

On the evening of May 15, the band participated in the Dublin Summerfest at St Stephens Green from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. This was arranged through the kind courtesy of Brian O'Farrell, the Consul to the Republic of Ireland in Trinidad and Tobago.

On the evening of May 17, the band was hosted by Fr Senan Murray, an Irish Dominican priest who spent many years in Trinidad and Tobago. Just before returning to Ireland he was the scoutmaster of the First Trinidad Sea Scouts at St Mary's College and then served as parish priest at St Mary's Parish, St James. A public concert was held in Askeaton, Limerick, at the parish church from 8:00 p.m.

The band is housed in comfortable, air-conditioned premises at 34 McDonald Street, in Woodbrook, Trinidad, where pan lessons, including lessons with music theory, are conducted three times weekly.

No experience, musical or otherwise, is needed to join the classes. The band is also available to play at private functions and events and may be contacted at 758-4099 (Noel).

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