

Dancing on Steel

By Dr. Jeannine Remy

Dancing on Steel is an original composition for steel band, percussion, and choreographed dance. This musical suite was inspired by folk music from Trinidad and Tobago, and the dances use authentic movements and gestures characteristic of the genres presented. The piece contributes to new music repertoire for steelpan and works as a medium for promoting the country's cultural heritage and the dances associated with it.

This multimovement work is orchestrated for tenor (lead), double tenor, double seconds, cello and/or guitar, tenor bass, and bass. Other percussion instruments include drumset, timpani, and optional auxiliary percussion. Since the parts are idiomatic for the players, it is hoped that others will take up the challenge of performing this work; scores are available from the composer.

HOW IT EMERGED

Dancing on Steel was commissioned by Professor Michael Mizma and the San Jacinto Central Steel Band for its United States premiere in May of 2024. Inspired by Dr. Jeannine Remy's *The Rainmakers* at PASIC 2008, Mizma has been actively engaging composers to create themed works specifically for steel band. The instructions for this commission were to compose six pieces, each of five minutes, which would be choreographed to dance. Given these parameters, I identified and

captured the cultural practices and dances of the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Ultimately, I selected the Belair, Jig, Stick Fighting, Bongo, Limbo, and Calypso.

Before beginning to compose, listening to, researching, and comprehending the chosen cultural artifacts' proper authentic structure and meaning was necessary. Accordingly, I studied videos, listened to the folk music of each genre, and examined their drumming patterns; this was essential for capturing the essence of these deeply rooted cultural expressions. It is worth noting that each movement was influenced by its precursor of West African origin and has evolved and was later assimilated into the local cultural milieu.

For a global audience, the work's title had to capture the overall meaning in a

straightforward and uncomplicated way. Next, each movement's name was meticulously chosen to resonate with its cultural ethos and accurately represent the dance style. These titles not only expressed the essence and meaning of the cultural practices, but also had to be understood and acceptable to the local populace. Despite my initial conception of the movement sequence, I ultimately entrusted this to the choreographer's artistic sensibilities.

THE STORYLINE

Once *Dancing on Steel* was composed, the choreographer created a dramatic story inspired by the structure and complex assemblage of compositional components of the musical suite she called "A Folky Love Story." Joanna Charles envisioned a dream scenario where a museum keeper,



DANCING ON STEEL: A MULTI-MOVEMENT WORK FOR STEEL BAND AND CHOREOGRAPHED DANCE INSPIRED BY CULTURAL PRACTICES FROM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

during his rounds, visits a room housing statues of folk dancers. Soon, his attention is drawn to the beautiful “La Reine Rive” (Queen) statue at the back. She awakens and drapes her foulard (scarf) around his neck as he approaches, putting him in a daze; then, miraculously, the other dancers come alive.

Smitten by the beauty of La Reine Rive, the museum keeper dances the Belair with her. They fall in love and get married at a traditional Tobago wedding, which is captured by the indigenous Tobago Jig. Soon afterward, the situation goes haywire when the groom is sidetracked by other women dancers. A brawl, symbolized by stick fighting, ensues, and the bride dies defending her husband from the diversions of the women-suitors. The Bongo, a funeral dance, follows. It depicts the mourning of the deceased bride and the celebration of her life. She is then symbolically resurrected in the indigenous Limbo dance that follows. The spectacle ends with the traditional Calypso dance, where, due to his vigorous dancing, the museum keeper’s scarf is loosened, and he comes out of the trance, only to realize it is all a dream.

MOVEMENTS

I. Grandiose Affair

This opening movement conveyed the Belair’s grandeur through the music’s rhythmic complexity and emotional intensity, producing highly majestic imagery that was awe-inspiring. Dancers wear full-fabric flare skirts, which are characteristic of this dance’s costume and cultural representation. The opening statement is significant, as it captures the male dancer’s initial impressions. Furthermore, the musical precision and attention to detail embody the essence and ethos of the genre, enabling the dancers to faithfully express the elegance of the style.

The cello introduces the Belair melody. As this movement unwinds, melodic fragments mutate, numerous layered counter-melodies support this motivic development, and quartal harmony is utilized. Notably, this cultural practice involves dis-

tinctive drumming patterns used to transition between sections. Additionally, the drumset player is occasionally required to play on the cymbal bell, mimicking the African bell. Due to the distinctive stylistic components typical of the Belair, certain elements of African drumming were incorporated, such as 2:3 polyrhythms and call-and-response.

II. Celebration, the Wedding

This movement uses elements of the Tobago Jig melody played by the violin (in fiddle fashion) accompanied by the tambrin drum (a frame drum, similar to the Irish bodhran but without the cross bars) with goatskin heads. The music opens with a layered harmonic pyramid privileging open fifths and creating a quasi-hoedown or square dance ambiance. The choreographer decoded this texture through the three-step brush-back dance step, indigenous to Tobago weddings. This movement includes changing duple and compound duple time signatures with shifting accents and hemiolas that mislead the listener into perceiving the pulse differently. “The Celebration” is playful and euphoric, capturing the joy and exuberance of a Tobago wedding. The piece also features rich moments of contrapuntal treatment and sometimes gives the feeling of a round or canon. It concludes with an ostinato, a repetitive cliché jazz bass, with the jig melody juxtaposed on the top.

III. No Retreat No Surrender

Stick fighting developed from a West African martial arts tradition where two combatants armed with sticks (*bois*) battle in a fighting ring called the *gayelle*. This cultural practice is incredibly brutal; the victor is determined by drawing first blood. Each challenger (*bois man*) is motivated by a chantwell, the lead singer, who riles up the fighters. This singer continues the West African tradition of the “griot,” who functioned as a chronicler, commentator, and storyteller. The fighters decipher and act upon the accompanying hypnotic drums that frame the setting. One of the most important is the cutter, whose sound

comes from a highest-pitched African drum. Its complex syncopated rhythms pierce the ensemble’s polyphony. This drum also signals the end of a section. The repeating bass ostinato in this movement adds to the genre’s trance-like quality.

The extended performance techniques utilized, such as striking the skirt and rim of the steelpan, work to create textural and programmatic elements that imaginatively set the tone of the confrontation while conveying significance to its adherents. It represents the soundscape in the ring where the fighters are merciless, ferocious, and unrelenting, with sticks whooshing through the air, aiming to make contact with one’s opponent and deliver the decisive blow. This “sonic zone” is augmented by the musical “war” between the timpani and drumset as they compete in a seemingly continuous call-and-response. Although this movement is physically and emotionally intense, it is extremely fun for everyone to play.

IV. Do So or Dance So

The piece starts with a processional at the wake of the deceased. Usually held at the family home, this ritual begins calmly and ends in a flurry of competitive and frenzied dance. It is a celebration of the departed and for the rejuvenation of life. This Bongo night culminates in a contest in the wee hours of the morning. It becomes a way of saying, “I can do better/dance better,” as each dancer shows off their abilities, seeking to upstage one another.

Correspondingly, the musicians get to make an impression as the theme of the Bongo is tossed around the ensemble from player to player, flaunting their virtuoso abilities. This movement also allows the dancers to showcase their skills in various styles. Structurally, “Do So or Dance So” includes multiple musical genres, including Latin, Castilian, gospel, blues, and waltz. One of this movement’s more complex and challenging parts is the gospel/bluesy/jazz feel set to the folk music “Brown Skinned Girl” in 6/8 time. Furthermore, several metric modulations exist where one note

value equals another from a different time signature. Fittingly capturing the occasion's solemnity, the movement concludes with an augmentation of the opening theme.

V. Bring it Down to the Ground

A short call-and-response melody forms the core of this monothematic movement. Unlike the previous dances, which are through-composed, this one follows a D.C. al Coda structure. It starts, predictably, with tonal harmony, but as the music progresses, consonance gives way to increasing dissonances, signifying the increasing challenge of dancing under a limbo pole that lowers with each attempt. As the music progresses, more blues notes and riffs are added. Meanwhile, the background maintains the undecorated melody of the limbo. This part simulates the "calm before a storm," leading up to the lighting of the limbo stick. Here, the double seconds and cellos produce gradually descending yet increasingly chromatic harmonies, symbolizing the lowering of the pole.

The section, representing an ignited limbo pole, uses mostly augmented chords. The tenor pans perform "flicks" (quick grace notes) that act as sparks to the fire, adding to the energetic bass ostinato. The music becomes more aggressive, shifting gradually to a minor tonality. Then, the cellos and seconds engage in a musical battle with their climbing melodic riffs in groups of four, intensifying the texture of the piece. Cluster chords create a jarring harmonic jolt, intentionally deviating from traditional Western harmony to achieve a percussive dissonance. The piece winds down with a long chromatic scale, trilled in minor seconds, signifying going as low as possible, from which it unexpectedly springs back, leading to the recapitulation.

VI. Calypso Dancing Time

This movement uses a traditional calypso with functional chords, a tuneful melody, and characteristic phrasing. The orchestration is a textbook example of the structure and development of a cliché pan-

orama piece and is suitable for teaching pan arranging. It involves an introduction, verse, chorus, five variations on the verse and chorus, two jams, a minor key variation on the verse and chorus, a recapitulation, and a classical-sounding rhythmic clichéd ending.

The modulations are seamless, first to the subdominant key and then to its relative minor. The first variation of the verse and chorus places the melody in the background pans with a bit of reharmonization as it develops. The piece can be regarded as an exercise in motivic and rhythmic development and features melodic sections for all players to shine. In this final movement, the choreographer incorporated elements of traditional Carnival characters and their associated gestures.

ENCORE

Overall, *Dancing on Steel* has met the test of several performances, receiving standing ovations every time. Audiences in Trinidad and Tobago and the United States were awestruck and reacted exuberantly. The musicians and dancers loved performing the suite and had a great time on stage. It was created for the enjoyment of all!

CREDITS

The music was performed by UWI Arts Steel, led by Jessel Murray and Khion De Las, and the UWI Arts Percussion Ensemble, led by Dr. Jeannine Remy. The dancers are from the UWI Dance Ensemble led by Joanna Charles.

Dr. Jeannine Remy, composer of *Dancing on Steel*, is a Senior Lecturer of Music at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in St. Augustine, Trinidad, where she teaches percussion, steelpan, pan arranging, and steelpan history and development. Dr. Remy is a prolific composer and arranger for the steelpan.

Joanna Charles is a choreographer, professional dancer, and dance instructor at UWI. She previously taught dance at primary and secondary schools and holds de-

grees in both dance and theatre arts. She brings her Caribbean folk, modern, and contemporary dance expertise to this collaboration.

Jessel Murray, the conductor of *Dancing on Steel*, is Head of the Department for the Department of Creative and Festival Arts at UWI and Senior Lecturer. He teaches voice, choir, piano, and choral conducting. **PN**

KEYBOARD

KAI STENSGAARD Virtual Keyboard Clinic/Performance — The Aluphone and the Six-Mallet Grip

This session will cover the unique sound of the Aluphone, which spans the range between the glockenspiel and tubular bells. The Aluphone has now existed for 12 years and is widely used by drum corps, percussion artists, percussion ensembles, symphony orchestras, and more. Many world-renowned composers have written for it. It made its world debut at the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics, where Dame Evelyn Glennie played the Aluphone when the Olympic flame was lit.

Six-mallet grip has become a prevalent technique among many international marimba artists worldwide and is becoming standard among the younger generation of marimba players. Kai Stensgaard's approach to it is based on Stevens Technique. Kai began developing the grip in 1984 and has since written many works for marimba solo.

Kai Stensgaard studied percussion at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and pursued advanced marimba studies in New York City with Leigh Howard Stevens. Kai is internationally recognized as a leading concert marimba artist and award-winning composer. Kai has given concerts and clinics in Europe, the U.S., South America, Taiwan, and Mexico. He is one of the pioneers in six-mallet playing and has composed numerous works for six mallets. He is the author of a method for six-mallet playing called *The Six Mallet Grip* and the marimba method *Advanced Marimba Technique*. In 2012, he and engineer Michael Hansen invented a completely new mallet instrument called the Aluphone.