

NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa International

By Rohan Abraham

“Tassa” is a percussion style found in India and within the East Indian diaspora in various parts of the world.

The ensemble consists of kettle drums accompanied by cylindrical bass drums and brass cymbals. Although various Indian communities worldwide may include tassa as part of their cultural celebrations, no other country in the world can boast of tassa’s popularity, advancement, and pre-eminence than the islands of Trinidad & Tobago.

During the mid-19th century, the British colonialists introduced “indentured” labor to various countries. Most of that indentured labor came from India. The British West Indies was a primary destination for this labor and, as a result, countries like Jamaica, Guyana, Belize, and especially Trinidad & Tobago received a sizeable population of East Indians until the early 20th century, when indentured labor was abolished. Little did many know that East Indians would influence West Indian culture to what it is today.

Aside from cuisine and fashion, Indian music in Trinidad plays a heavy part in local culture like a flourished tree, and a fruit of that tree is tassa drumming. Traditionally, the kettle drums were made of clay and goatskin, the bass drum made of wood and goatskin, and the cymbals made of brass. Prior to a performance, the skin of the ket-

tle drums was required to be heated for expansion to achieve the proper tone. However, within the past 30 years, advancements were made to adopt stronger materials (e.g., metal), synthetic skins, and a nut-and-bolt tuning system; this adoption allowed for convenience, durability, and longevity in performing. The majority of the Trinidadian tassa bands of today utilize this system, although this innovation was already adopted in India in the early to mid-20th century.

There are many tassa bands in Trinidad, but the band that honors itself as the global ambassador for tassa drumming is the NGC

Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa International band. This band was founded by Ustad Lenny Kumar, HBM, a professional tassa drummer with over 50 years of experience. Kumar is a fifth-generation tassa drummer, coming from a rare musical bloodline similar to that of the late tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussein. Kumar started training at the age of five and became a professional player by the age of eight. His youth drumming skills afforded him a well-earned reputation as a local musical prodigy, playing alongside his father and many local professionals. As the years went by, Kumar, his father, and his siblings had a family-based tassa band, which won numerous awards.

Fast-forward to the early 2000s: Kumar started to envision tassa on a global rather than local scale. Starting from scratch with his daughter on cymbals and a friend on bass drum, humble beginnings brought this band into inception. Today the band consists of a senior group (in which Kumar is the lead drummer), the first-ever all-female band, in which two of the members are his own daughters, a junior section, an academy, and a U.S.-based group located in the greater Tampa Bay region of Florida.

NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa doesn’t function only as a band, but as an organization. Kumar has traveled the world showcasing tassa in countries like Poland, Italy, India, and Germany. In addition to performances, he conducted discourses at



Lenny Kumar

the University of Florida, Indiana University in both Bloomington and Indianapolis, and Northern Illinois University, to name a few.

Aside from performing, teaching, and lecturing, Kumar also specializes in engineering and manufacturing the ensemble's instruments for personal use and purchase. Kumar and the band have also made a historical breakthrough, publishing the first ever sheet-music book for tassa (soon to be released), which will allow musicians/percussionists from all over the world to learn the rhythms.

In 2022, the Office of the President of the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago awarded Kumar with the rare Hummingbird Gold Medal, which is the highest rank, due to his lifelong contributions to the tassa artform.

Kumar and the band are no strangers to PASIC, as he and the Florida crew attended and performed at PASIC 2011 along with steel pan maestro Liam Teague and the Steel Pan Orchestra. The band also attended and performed at PAS Days of Percussion at the University of South Florida and West Virginia University. They also attended PASIC 2013, by conducting a clinic and master-class.

NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa International credits itself with becoming the first tassa group ever to get involved with PAS, as well as attending and performing at PASIC. The band is honored and excited to perform and connect with many at PASIC50.

For more information, visit www.sweet-tassa.edu.com/about. PN

WORLD

Jeremy Wade

World Workshop

Developing Your Bodhrán Toolkit

Every percussionist has a built-in musical toolkit – a functional vocabulary of musical concepts. Whether you are just beginning your journey or have been performing for years, you can leverage your preexisting knowledge to effectively play the bodhrán in a variety of contexts. This workshop will explore how fundamental elements of bodhrán performance can be combined with personal experiences in fresh and creative ways. We will begin with a crash course in technique before digging into an analysis of an Irish reel. We will learn how to play a basic “motor rhythm,” and discuss methods for incorporating space, voicing, sticking, and ornamentation to bring the music to life. There will be a selection of drums and sticks available for participants, but you are welcome to bring your own bodhrán/frame drum.

Jeremy Wade is an educator, composer, and performer who serves as the percussion instructor for Transylvania University and Lexington Christian Academy, and as a teaching artist for the Lexington Philharmonic. Jeremy teaches dance for the Kentucky McTeggart Irish Dancers (KMID) and is Co-Director of the Kentucky Irish Music Academy. Jeremy has presented bodhrán workshops at schools/festivals throughout the region, including the 2024 PAS Days of Percussion in Kentucky and Tennessee. Jeremy plays bodhrán as one half of Irish trad duo Set Course, and serves as an accompanist at local feiseanna and céilí events.

TNTeague Duo

World Daytime Showcase Concert

The Magic of the Steelpan

TNTeague duo will offer an eclectic and unique blend of original music and adaptations that highlight the profundity and versatility of the steelpan in tandem with non-steelpan instruments (piano, marimba); this will include original steelpan compositions by Liam Teague, Kevin Bobo, and Gary Gibson, plus Trinidadian calypsos, jazz standards, classical music, ragtime, and tango.

TNTeague, the father-and-son duo of Liam Teague and Jaden Teague-Núñez, offers a blend of music that includes calypso, jazz, classical and ragtime. Sixteen-year-old Jaden Teague-Núñez is a multi-instrumentalist (steelpan, piano, and percussion) and recently became the first steelpan player to win the 2024 Crain-Maling Foundation Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Young Artists Competition, and he was recently recognized as National 2025 YoungArts winner with distinction in classical/percussion by the National Foundation for the Advancement of Artists. Liam Teague is one of the world's leading steelpan virtuosos and serves as professor of music and director of steelpan studies at Northern Illinois University.

Indigenous Vibes Band

Virtual World Daytime Showcase Concert

African Authentic Music Fusion

Indigenous Vibes Band won the 2022 Traditional Artiste of the Year Award at the Ghana music Awards. The ensemble combines authentic African rhythms with various world music. The group believes it is time to take their unique performance, which is influenced by music from different parts of the world, to global audiences. In Ghana they have performed at many popular entertainment centers and festivals and shared stages with respected Ghanaian artists such as Pat Thomas, Kojo Antwi, Gyedu Blay, Nat Brew Ambolley, Kwame Yeboah, and Paa Kow.