

Regional

Band students learn music and culture on trip

For a student to learn the music of another culture is always intriguing, but to perform it in the very country where that music was born is something really special. And that is precisely what happened when a group of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville students traveled to Trinidad to perform in a steel band.

□ I had the opportunity to speak with some of the students, along with their instructor, Dan Smithiger, of the department of music at SIUE. They were: Sophie Browning and Alyssa Cowan, both majors in music education, and with Merrick Haji-Sheikh and Ryan Helenthal, both majors in music performance. During the last Christmas break they visited Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, a small country off the coast of eastern Venezuela.

□ In fact, the steel band at SIUE is the only one in the entire St. Louis area and the idea to create it was the brainchild of Smithiger.

“There are other steel bands in the country associated with universities,” he explained. “One of the first steel bands to be associated with a university was actually up the street at Northern Illinois University in the early 70s. So it is a common thing and it is such a wonderful vehicle for world music and specifically music of the Caribbean.”

For Browning, who originally played the clarinet, learning the music of steel band was an exceptional experience for her career as a music educator. “For me the attraction was getting some experience in an area which was completely outside of anything I had done before,” she said.

For Haji-Sheikh, the whole idea came from his surroundings. “In an interesting twist of fate I was raised by NIU,” he said. “I lived a block away from campus, and I got really infatuated with the whole idea of becoming a percussionist. They have a really good percussion program and then they have the steel band and my high school had a steel band. When I was looking for schools I came here and heard they had a steel band and I wanted to be a part



Prof. Dan Smithiger (left) and his SIUE students of the steel band in Trinidad. of that as well.”

Cowan, a native of the Chicago area, was already familiar with steel band music. “I actually participated in a steel band when I was in the eighth grade and that was my first exposure to it,” she said. “Other than that, steel bands are very few and far between. This was the only one in the area that I knew of. I grew up about a half hour from Northern Illinois and I was not exposed to that either. So this was com-

pletely new and different.”

Helenthal said that he already sees the great advantages of learning steel band music. “There are a lot of different styles and things like that and being a performance major I think it is really important, especially for a percussionist, to be well rounded and have at least some idea of the different styles of music,” he said. “With our trip to Trinidad, being able to go to the birthplace of where it got started and get-

ting involved in that culture is even more than the standard textbook stuff that you learn about. Being able to experience it is very helpful.”

This is not the first time that Smithiger took students to Trinidad.

The first time he took nine students and this last trip 15, which speaks of the increasing popularity of this type of music on campus. Some of the students, including Browning, went on both trips.

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“Last time we went and we played and that was really cool,” Browning said. “But this time we went back knowing people. I personally know a couple of local people who I met last year, and when I went back it was like I already had friends waiting for me. And we got to play a lot more and we competed with them on a stage. Playing here is great, but when you go there it is a completely different atmosphere.” For others, like Haji-Sheikh, the trip was a broader experience that went beyond the music.

“Down in Trinidad it is obviously a slightly different culture, but there are obvious parallels,” said Haji-Sheikh. “In high school we have big bands that students join and learn the art of the big band. From my experience with that and then going down there and participating in this competition, a lot of the ways they approach things are the same, with the exception that they try to learn it all by ear. There is not a lot of paper involved. Mostly the section leader will play something and you are expected to pick it up by ear.”

Given the simplicity of the instruments in a steel band, one wonders if they could be good tools to introduce to children. “Definitely,” said Cowan. “We did that over the summer at the percussion camp that I helped with here. It is difficult to teach them because the drums are so malleable, you hit it and it changes pitch. So it is hard to teach them not to create their own instrument by playing it. But the visual of it is great for kids because they can see the note they want to look for and then they can play it and hear it and make the connection.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Picture courtesy of Dan Smithiger