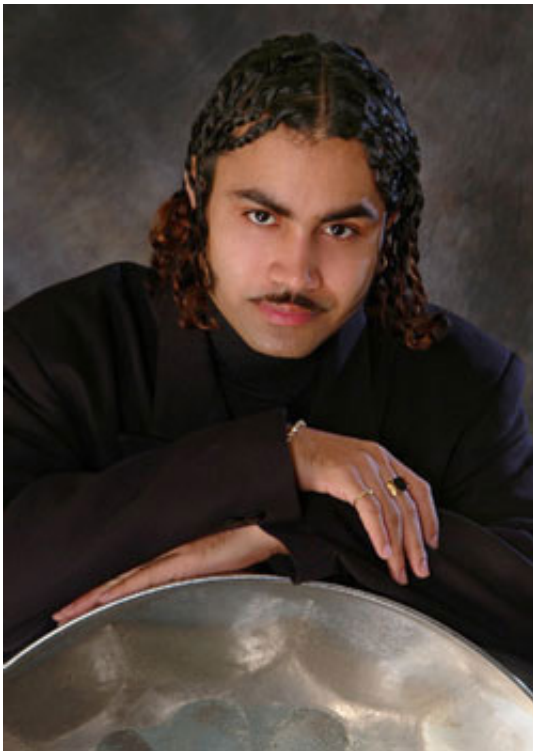


**Preview: Steel Pan virtuoso Liam Teague
in 'Schubert & Steel' with the Akron Symphony**

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by Daniel Hathaway



On Saturday evening, February 20, the Akron Symphony begins its program in Germany and ends in Austria, but takes a fascinating side trip to the Caribbean in between.

J.S. Bach's Third Brandenburg concerto marks the first stop and the evening ends with Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in C, aka 'The Great'. In the middle, the 'Steel' part of 'Schubert & Steel' will feature an usual concerto for steel pan and orchestra written for Liam Teague, one of that instrument's great virtuosos, by Illinois composer Jan Bach.

We caught up with Mr. Teague in DeKalb, Illinois, where he teaches at Northern Illinois University.

Daniel Hathaway: You are a native Trinidadian. You must have started playing steel pan very young.

Liam Teague: Relatively speaking -- I started at twelve years old, which is somewhat late for a musician.

DH: What instrument did you start on?

LT: I played the recorder in high school, then I took up the steel pan, which is the national instrument of Trinidad & Tobago.

DH: And very popular in Northeast Ohio. Both Oberlin and the University of Akron have steel drum bands. Have you played with either of those?

LT: I've played with the University of Akron, and I believe that Oberlin is getting ready to play one of my arrangements that I did for a competition several years ago.

DH: How did you come to play with the Akron Symphony?

LT: The main percussionist in the Symphony, Dr. Larry Snyder, who is head of percussion studies at the University of Akron, is very familiar with my work and he knew about the concerto, so I think he was the main person responsible for bringing it to the Symphony's attention.

DH: How did the concerto originate in the first place -- was it your idea or the composer's?

LT: It was the composer's. I'm a professor at Northern Illinois University, but I also have my bachelor's and master's degrees here. Jan Bach heard me perform, and I guess he was impressed enough to write a concerto for me in 1994. I premiered it with the Chicago Sinfonietta and recorded the piece with the Czech National Symphony.

DH: What else is there in the orchestral repertory for your instrument?

LT: There's not very much written for the solo steel pan, actually, so I'm trying my best to champion that cause. I've had a few pieces written by people like Michael Colgrass and Libby Larsen, but we definitely need more original works for the instrument.

DH: What are your teaching duties at Northern Illinois University?

LT: Well, this is one of only three institutions in the world where you can get a degree in music and

focus on the steel pan as your main instrument. I'm director of Steel Pan studies here and I also co-direct the Northern Illinois University Steel Band.

DH: How many young aspiring soloists do you have in the program?

LT: We have about ten steel pan majors and they hail from all over the world. We have students from Japan, Trinidad, we've had students from Denmark. The Japanese student is fabulous. She's also a pianist, but she's learning how to build and tune the instruments and she's a very good player.

DH: Who makes your steel pans?

LT: At NIU we have one of the greatest builders and tuners of steel pans in the world. His name is Clifford Alexis, and he's also from Trinidad.

DH: How are the instruments tuned?

LT: The majority of the process is done by hand. It's very intricate and it can take hundreds of hours to do it. And it's not something that I can do -- I wish I could do it! But he uses a hammer to strike different parts of the pan to raise or lower the notes.

DH: In Akron, will you just be using one steel pan?

LT: Yes, just one. It's called the soprano steel pan.

DH: What's the range of the instrument?

LT: It goes from E-flat 4 up to about F-sharp 6, which is just about two and a half octaves.

DH: And that probably carries extremely well even over a fairly large orchestra.

LT: Well, I will be using amplification, just for safety's sake. But it's important for people to understand that the steel pan is one of the only acoustic instruments invented in the twentieth century.

DH: Who did invent it -- or was it a group of people?

LT: It sort of evolved from lower class Afro-Trinidadians. Of course, people weren't very wealthy, so they used any raw material that was at their disposal to make steel pans -- paint tins, garbage pans. So it's really ingenious what these 'street scientists' came up with.