

The steel drums are a family of percussion instruments made from industrial drums, also referred to as pans, or steel pans. Steel drums originated in Trinidad and Tobago, after the French arrived in Trinidad with their slaves during the French Revolution. In 1880, percussion music was banned in the country and in the 1930s orchestras began to appear with instruments of dustbin lids and oil drums. When the U.S. Navy arrived in the early 1940s, they were introduced to the steel drum, and its popularity around the world spread. The first steel drums were made from used oil drums but are now manufactured as an instrument all on their own to specific requirements.

Musicians who play the steel drums are sometimes referred to as pannists. The early metal drum musicians used a variety of tools to create the sound of metal music - including kitchen utensils and metal containers. When making a steel drum the bottom of the oil drum is pounded into the shape of a bowl. Further shaping and tuning is done with hammers that create surfaces that resonate to make distinct sounds. Originally steel drum instruments were played in steel bands with instruments such as dustbins, biscuit tins, and soap boxes. Today steel bands include a variety of other instruments such as triangles, bongos, congas, vibraphones, other percussion instruments, and cowbells. The most popular and well-known music played with steel drums is Calypso music. Early in the history of the steel drum in Trinidad steel bands competed with each other. Those who were members of steel bands were thought to be gangs members and street fighting was common. This resulted in steel bands being looked down upon.

In 1992 the steel pan became the official national instrument in Trinidad and Tobago. Since the first steel drums and steel bands emerged the popularity of this music has grown. Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, and many other non-Caribbean countries have steel bands featuring steel drum musicians. Steel drums only have about a one and half range octave which is not very much when compared to other instruments, and the bass steel drums are very large and difficult to move from place to place. The World Steel Band Music Festival is held in Trinidad since 1964. The largest competition for steel bands is held during Carnival in Trinidad - called Panorama.