

# HOW SWEET THE SOUND

These kids have  
their sights on  
Royal Albert Hall

Text by Heidi Ernst  
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*“The Lord has promised good to me; His Word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be As long as life endures.”*

**A** *Amazing Grace* has never sounded as festive as it did at St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Brooklyn, on Christ the King Sunday. It might be hard to imagine what the hymn sounds like on steel drums. But when it’s played on 31 of them and backed up with a drum set—with a gospel beat, three key changes and a softer verse for a little extra drama—the old classic becomes hard to forget.

Nearly four years ago, 18 teens at the church were assembled to form the Young Acolytes Symphonic Steel Orchestra. They began as kids who liked having a reason to see each other, but they have become virtuosos whose sights are set on playing Royal Albert Hall in London.

Three band members are from the borough of Queens, and the rest



**Not your usual acolytes:** Members of the Young Acolytes Symphonic Steel Orchestra “light up” worshipers at St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Brooklyn on Christ the King Sunday. In the foreground is Keva Wegman (left) Ebony Yearwood and Ossafo Bishop.

live in Brooklyn—many in Flatbush, where St. Stephen is located. The congregation was founded in 1898, when German immigrants worshiped at the Tudor-style church. Now it’s as diverse as the surrounding neighborhood, with more than 15 countries represented but drawing heavily from the West Indies.

## YOUTH-FRIENDLY HISTORY

The church has a long history with organized groups for young people—a stained-glass window in the sanctuary bears the inscription: “Presented by St. Stephen’s Luther League organized January 24, 1899.”

But a century later activities for youth in the church and community were few. That’s when then-pastor Eric Harrison, a Jamaica native, looked to the church’s new Caribbean connections for an answer.

On the Internet he found Rudy

Bishop, director of the Chronicle Atlantic Symphony Steel and Brass Orchestra. Bishop has traveled the world with the group but by then had moved from his home country of Guyana, on the northern coast of South America, to Brooklyn. He has received awards for his work with music and youth, including an M.S. from Guyana. “Some say it stands for Master of Steel,” he says, “but it’s a medal of service that my country bestowed on me.”

Bishop gathered some of St. Stephen’s acolytes and a few other kids to form the Young Acolytes in May 2001. Three months later Harrison died unexpectedly—giving everyone even more determination to succeed, Bishop says. Their first performance, on Easter Sunday 2002, was met with standing ovations.

“Our worship should always reflect the rhythms and cultural idioms of the



place where the church is,” says current pastor Scott Kershner. “From the beginning the congregation was really excited about having them.”

The orchestra (members now range in age from 10 to 19) rehearses three nights a week, not only practicing the rudiments like chromatic scales but also expanding its repertoire, which includes church, classical, reggae and calypso music—from *Unchained Melody* and *The Church’s One Foundation* to pieces from *Flight of the Bumblebee*. Many of the pannists (the drums are called pans) bring homework along because they must do well in school, Bishop says—“or they will be out.”

### **DISCIPLINED, MOTIVATED**

But they don’t mind the discipline, even in the summer. Their motivation comes from inside, not from parents, says Denise Mitchell, the orchestra’s secretary/treasurer and mother of Keva Wegman, who plays double tenor pan. “They know it’s important and work

toward that. The teamwork to try to make it happen is unbelievable.”

The young pannists like to perform, which they do about twice a month at churches, parks, parties, Caribbean and drum festivals, and even a Metropolitan New York Synod assembly.

And they like to travel. “The Hamptons was my favorite place to go,” says Eboni Yearwood, who plays double second pan. “On the way there we saw interesting things, and the praise we got for playing was more than usual.”

Devaughn Alexander, on tenor pan, liked a concert in a hotel on Long Island. “I’d never been to a hotel like that,” he says.

On Christ the King Sunday—the day this congregation celebrates the West Indian harvest—the orchestra conspicuously snuck in during the sermon because they’d played at the 80th birthday party for the grandmother of two band members and didn’t get home until 3 a.m. But they

became as bright as their red shirts, white ties and white jackets when they played, grooving to *The Church’s One Foundation* and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, and getting heads in the pews to bob along.

They were animated afterward, too, when talking about playing Royal Albert Hall. “If you played there, you’d know you’re famous,” shouted one voice. Another said: “It’s a goal, and you want to achieve your goals.”

Five of the kids play with Bishop’s professional Chronicle Orchestra, and all play without sheet music. “The novelty remains,” Bishop says. “When they rattle off 10 or 12 pieces, you know they’re maestros.”

To prove that with practice they’re going to travel much farther than the Hamptons, the orchestra ended with a rousing classical medley, including music from *Carmen*, right through the distracting smell of curried goat wafting from the potluck lunch downstairs.

Says Trevin Blair, who plays double guitar pan, “It’s very satisfying to know you can take something you have a love for and share it with other people.”

How sweet the sound, indeed. □

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