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Prime promoter of orchestral music

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MIRZAN Mahathir is just as comfortable talking about music as he is with weighty corporate lingo.

Never mind that his love affair with the piano fizzled out after four years, ("It's a good thing my parents recognised my lack of talent and did not push me further", he jokes), but his deep-rooted appreciation for orchestral music lingers till this day.

As chairman of the Malaysian Youth Orchestra Foundation (MYOF) and organising committee chairman of the Asia Youth Orchestra (AYO) Malaysia Youth Programme, Mirzan believes music is a powerful medium to help shape behaviour.

"An appreciation for orchestral music, be it European or Asian, brings a unique pleasure to both the performer and listener alike," he says, adding that music when performed with precision and exuding passion and spontaneity, somehow embraces its audience in a special magic.

"Music lifts the spirits, it speaks without words and it transcends colour, creed and culture," he declares.

A firm believer that the MYOF is a first step to the outward reaches of the world's top concert halls and to the inward places of the soul, Mirzan said its establishment will enable young and talented Malaysians to hone their abilities, promote a sense of teamwork and focus their minds and bodies to produce works of beauty in accordance with world-class standards.

"The MYOF aims to create an artistic and cultural awareness among our youth through the inspiration and positive influence of orchestral music and the performing arts.

"By promoting orchestral music, which has a long and distinguished history throughout the world, the foundation hopes to nurture and develop our home grown talents, young Malaysians who may not otherwise have such an opportunity," he remarked.

The spirited chairman hopes that with the foundation's help, more youth will come forward and specialise in the study of certain instruments, and following this, perhaps a full fledged Malaysian orchestra can be formed.

Asked whether youth today are interested in the serious sounds of orchestral music as compared to the louder, trendier hip hop rock and pop music, Mirzan said being in an orchestra takes discipline as it is a more studied music.

Affirming that the MYOF is an initiative in response to the social ills facing Malaysian youth today, Mirzan said the boundless energy of the local youth can instead be channelled in a positive, productive and creative manner.

"These talented youth can become better members of society as participation in an orchestra and music classes foster a sense of purpose, self respect and teamwork," he said, adding that the foundation is flexible when it comes to how young a person has to be to benefit from the foundation.

"I'm looking at those in their teenage years because I believe music development is something that takes place during one's younger years. But we will not turn down a talented 20-something either," he said.

The foundation, barely two months old, has been actively sourcing for sponsors to provide financial assistance in the form of instruments, books and scholarships to those recognised to have musical talents and

creativity, and who are in need of such assistance in the furtherance of their musical development.

In appealing to corporate sponsors to come forward, Mirzan said it is for a beneficial and worthy cause. "Sponsors play an important role in helping the foundation to promote, develop and maintain education in, and an appreciation for the arts and science of music among Malaysian youth.

"We believe that the vision of the foundation is shared by many who subscribe to sustainable and balanced national development and who are concerned about the social pressures faced by today's youth."

"We are in the midst of putting together sponsorship packages as we want commitment from these people over, say, a five-year period so that there is continuity in our activities," he said, adding that the foundation is very lucky in that the Ministry of Finance has agreed to make donations to the foundation tax exempt.

To those who may not be able to afford donations in cash, Mirzan said volunteers for administrative work are always welcome.

As part of its project to inculcate interest in orchestral music among youth, the MYOF is now hosting the AYO's three-week intensive rehearsal camp.

Five Malaysians have been given the honour of performing in the AYO - Lo Mei Yoke and Chan Lai Kheng on the violin, Ong Li Kern on the viola, Lee Yin Fah on the trombone and Lin Yin Fung on the cello.

The AYO, formed in 1987 to showcase the talents of Asian musicians, selects the best musicians throughout Asia every year for their tour across the world.

The 102 young men and women of the 1997 Asian Youth Orchestra represent the finest young musicians in Asia. Close to 1,500 students from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong and Vietnam auditioned for the AYO this year.

When the process was over, 22 musicians were chosen from China, 11 Taiwan, 23 Japan, 11 Hong Kong, four South Korea, five Malaysia, four Philippines, nine Singapore, two Thailand and 11 Vietnam.

Conceived as a tuition-free summer programme, the AYO is designed to ignite pride for what can be achieved by Asian musicians in Asia, while affecting a positive influence on the brain and talent drain that continues to frustrate all Asian nations.

Yesterday, the AYO visited and performed at the Kolej Yayasan Saad in Malacca.

The culmination of these rehearsals is the Malaysian Gala Performance on June 29 at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

Shortly after that, the AYO will leave for Hong Kong where they have been given the honour of performing at the handover ceremony.

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