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A COUNTRY'S uniqueness is not solely defined by its history and geography but also by the development of its culture and music. When these two elements intertwine, they possess the power to unite the global community and highlight a nation's identity, promoting tourism and international recognition.

This synergy was vividly displayed as over 300 participants from nearly 80 countries gathered to showcase the beauty and distinctiveness of their nations' art and culture at the recent 13th Sharq Taronalari International Music Festival.

Held in the majestic Registan Square, Samarkand – Uzbekistan's second-largest ancient city and a Unesco World Heritage site – the festival ran from Aug 26-29.

On the festival sidelines, participants also took part in international scientific and practical conferences on the culture and music of Eastern societies. These events were enriched by the presence of musicians, professors, educators, and university students, further enhancing the cultural exchange.

Building bridges

Sharq Taronalari, which means "Melody of the East," is the largest festival in Central Asia. First introduced in 1997, the event is held biennially. After a lengthy pause due to the pandemic, the festival, last organised in 2019, made a triumphant return this year.

Recognising the profound impact of music and culture, Ozodbek Nazarbekov, the Minister of Culture of Uzbekistan, emphasized that investing between RM10mil and RM17mil in the festival carries long-term significance.

"People often say: 'You hold festivals like 'Maqom', 'Bakhshichilik', and 'Hunarmandlar', why do we need them? Maybe it would be better to spend the money on improving street infrastructure?' There are differing opinions on this matter. But, excuse me, at this moment, such festivals are more important than paving streets," the Minister of Culture said in a news report in Uzbekistan.

He underscored that such an investment is vital not only for the enrichment of cultural heritage but also for preserving the

Sharq Taronalari is more than a festival; it's journey through the soul of Central Asia.



The Orkes Melayu Kuala Lumpur, a cultural music group under Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), proudly represented Malaysia at the festival in Uzbekistan. – Photos: Sharq Taronalari Official



Hitting the right notes

In Uzbekistan, the Sharq Taronalari Festival celebrates national music, preserves cultural heritage, and fosters global harmony.

future of humanity, reflecting a commitment to nurturing the very essence of our shared cultural identity.

The festival's primary objectives are to promote national musical achievements, preserve and develop cultural traditions, support young musical talents, and foster international creative relations while advancing the ideals of peace, friendship, and mutual tolerance.

Participants in the competition were judged on various criteria, including the national identity of the songs, the harmony and meaning of the lyrics, the performers' skill levels, cultural attire, and stage presence.

Representing Malaysia

The Orkes Melayu Kuala Lumpur, a cultural music group

under Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), flew the Malaysian flag at this festival in Uzbekistan.

The ensemble features Syed Shahril Faisal Syed Hussein on vocals and bass, Oly Fizly Othman on percussion, and Nurfarhana Abu Bakar as the second vocalist. Joining them are Aris Kalisa Razli on guitar, Adam Shahrir Omar on accordion, and Muhammad Saufi Nasyari on violin.

On stage, it performed a medley of four traditional music genres – dondang sayang, zapin, Mek Mulung, and joget.

Syed Shahril said that the traditional rhythms gave the performance a lively and vibrant feel.

"We incorporated four elements of Malay rhythms, reinterpreting them to energise the music. Our set featured dondang sayang, the song *Ya Salam* with a zapin rhythm, Mek Mulung, and

concluded with the joget favourite, *Ala Emak Kahwinkan Aku*," he explained.

Although Malaysia did not win the competition, he felt fortunate to have showcased the country's unique music and culture on an international stage.

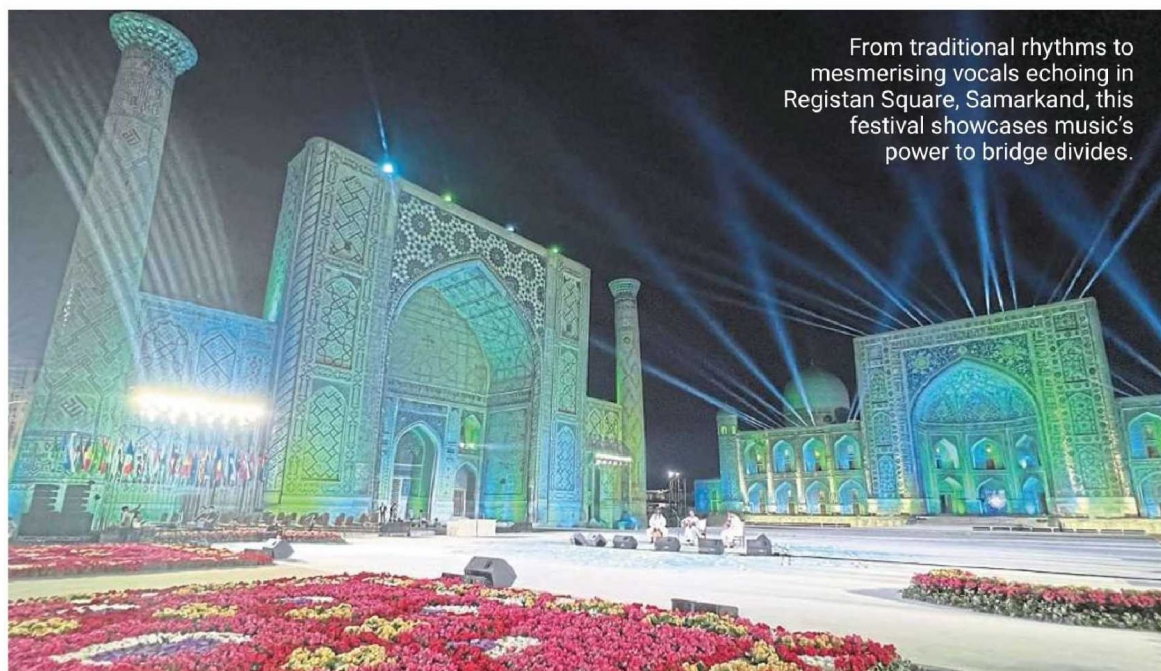
"While winning wasn't our primary goal, we are proud that our traditional music is being recognised and appreciated globally," he said.

He also noted the competition's prestige, as it gathers traditional music enthusiasts from around the world. For the members of Orkes Melayu Kuala Lumpur, the chance to perform internationally is a significant achievement.

With its rich diversity of ethnicities and cultures, Malaysia has the potential to make a more significant impact at future festivals.

In a previous edition of the Sharq Taronalari in 2007, the Seri Maharani Ghazal Group from Muar, Johor, made the nation proud by securing third place.

This year's top prize was awarded to Azerbaijan, which received US\$10,000 (RM43,500). Turkmenistan claimed first place with a prize of US\$5,000 (RM21,700). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both secured second place, each receiving US\$3,500 (RM15,200), while Japan, Mongolia, and Russia walked away third place, with each country picking up US\$2,000 (RM8,700).



From traditional rhythms to mesmerising vocals echoing in Registan Square, Samarkand, this festival showcases music's power to bridge divides.



This prestigious festival has grown to attract participants from over 75 countries.