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MUSE

Music of the Land

Evanna Ramly



The MPYO was first established in 2006

A- **A** **A+**

Fresh from its collaboration with RTM Orchestra, the Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (MPYO) continues to celebrate its 10th anniversary in what promises to be a sensational collaboration with Orkestra Tradisional Malaysia (OTM). Dubbed Konsert Tanah Airku, this partnership marks the second collaboration between the two orchestras, the first being in 2014 in Johor Bahru.

Since its establishment in 2006, the MPYO has grown in virtuosity and versatility. There are currently 98 members, and the aim is to nurture and encourage these young and passionate musicians. Thus far, the ensemble has also performed in Singapore and Brisbane, Australia.

OTM, on the other hand, is an ongoing effort by the Ministry of Tourism & Culture Malaysia through Istana Budaya, reorganising traditional musicians while allowing traditional Malaysian music to achieve a high professional international standing. Seen as a key catalyst for the revival of indigenous music in the 21st century, its core repertoire comprises music of diverse ethnic races.

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Konsert Tanah Airku will breathe new life into traditional folk songs like *Sri Mersing*, *Laksamana Raja Di Laut*, *Joget Irish For Sitar*, *Dialog Cak Lempong*, *Pantun Budi*, and *Serampang Laut*. This special showcase will also feature legendary rock star, Datuk Ramli Sarip, renowned for his vocal prowess in such memorable hits as *Kamelia*, *Teratai*, *Kau Yang Satu*, and *Syair Laila Majnun*. Conducted by MPYO's Ahmad Muriz Che Rose and OTM's Mohd Yazid Zakaria, vocalist Norihan Saif completes the concert's line-up.

"Personally, it's a dream come true for me because Yazid and I go back a long way. We've known each other since college days when we had more hair and less protruding bellies," laughs Muriz. "We may have diversified in terms of music but we came from one source and I'm ecstatic to share this music we've collaborated on."



OTM champions traditional Malaysian music

Muriz reveals there will be a showcase of rarely heard traditional music along with two brand new compositions. "Then, of course, there's our godfather of rock and roll and Nusantara music," he adds. "The few times I've had the pleasure of working with Ramli, he never fails to create good vibes and push boundaries. This time around, I know it will be even better."

Yazid is equally thrilled to present the unique collaboration. "It's very exciting. MPYO may comprise of teenagers but the quality of the performances and level of skill are very high," he opines. "It's a good opportunity for OTM, in which we champion not only traditional music but all concepts of songs using traditional musical instruments."

Ramli is honoured to be asked. "It's challenging not just in terms of performance but also song selection. There is that traditional feel as well as a certain randomness that stays true to the evolution of my performances."

Elements of blues, he shares, add a different energy to the show. “Normally, traditional music features soft, wistful strings but here we have something stronger. Yet, in that strength lies its own softness.”

The rock legend has worked with both conductors previously and they have grown accustomed to one another’s creative processes. “My songs, as well as the music that they have selected and arranged, are compatible with my strengths,” Ramli says. “I have no issues adapting to their style either.”

“As far as possible, we would like to retain the traditional concept,” says Muriz. “As a classical orchestra, when we collaborate, our aim is for the traditional aspect to be more prominent. Some songs will be modernised, such as Ramli’s in the second half, but that plays its own role. There will be something for everyone.”



Yazid, Ramli and Muriz at the press conference of Konsert Tanah Airku

Ramli believes that a singer has to appreciate and respect what he or she sings. “If you want others to like you, you must first like them. Otherwise, you will never earn their approval. In music and performing, it is the same.”

The key lies in holding onto Eastern values. “You may borrow Western elements but you can never own them. What we can own is the culture we were born into and raised with. It’s beautiful in its own right when a singer – pop or jazz – harnesses those elements and the spirit of Nusantara. Their music will be deeper in meaning and emotion, and it will not end there.”

"It's a vital aspect," he continues. "You cannot fake it; you have to truly appreciate it. Once you know it well and really go into it, it will be a part of you and the audience will feel it. You cannot lie and it cannot be forced. This is you, what you do best and believe in, what you're proud of."

He stresses the importance of preserving this rich culture of music. "There are very few of the next generation of musicians who would uphold it. Things have changed in the music industry, right down to the recording style, the whole world over."

Ramli laments the passing of Tan Sri SM Salim and Datuk Sharifah Aini, who left the nation with no one to take their place. "We cannot find anything like their music anymore. What they left behind was so beautiful and difficult to replace. We need to bring this sort of creativity back to life."

Youngsters today are embarrassed to sing traditional songs and he feels that this is wrong. "If you want to be a good singer, you need this spirit. Only then can you moved your audience because this is the people's music, the songs of our people. Popularity is another story."

"I'm thankful that at 65 I can still do a two- to three-hour show. It's a long, hard road but it is a beautiful and colourful journey and that is what we want to share," he smiles. "I hope the next generation will understand this. Everybody is chasing hits but if you take a year to produce one single, how are you going to compile your work as a national treasure? There is no lasting power, no character. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement and plenty of opportunities. It's the soul and spirit of a region that we want and it can be stronger."

Muriz agrees: "If something has been done, why should we replicate it? Therefore, we will try to make this as unique as possible. It's also a great learning curve for the young members of our orchestra. We hope that our selection has that hidden hand which will grab the audience. The idea is to make them think, which is why we chose to serve something different."

Yazid points out that the songs they have selected are most suitable for the collaboration, showcasing Ramli's identity while remaining true to the classic and traditional. "While OTM does collaborate with pop and jazz singers, the aim is always to promote a love for traditional rhythm. I hope this collaboration also exposes the MPYO to a new musical experience as our objective is not only to entertain but also to educate."

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