

Harmonica quartet in perfect harmony

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KUALA LUMPUR: While many people of the younger generation are more into discos, clubs, and pubs, these two men and two women would rather spend time with their harmonicas.

The four — Owen Ho Chee Kin, Vinz Low Chew Nie, Vincent Tan Boon Hean and Mavis Yap Mei Wei — who make up the Mastro World Class Harmonica Ensemble, began their love affair with the instrument at SMJK Ya Hua, Kajang.

They were the Champion in Harmonica Trio and had won the Outstanding in Harmonica Group, Solo, Duo & Open category at the last year's World Harmonica Festival in Germany.

"We never expected to win the title. We spent a lot of time practising and we are happy that we won," said Ho, 30, who is the group's leader.

Ho, who plays the lead chromatic harmonica, started playing the instrument when he was 17. For him, it opened a whole new dimension and he decided to pursue music as a full-time career.

After completing his Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, he took a three-year Diploma in Composition course at University College Sedaya International (UCSI).

"I started performing solo in functions and concerts after my SPM exam.

"I have my own in-house production company," said Ho, who is also the composer in the ensemble.

After performing in various concerts and shows in college, he formed a band in 2003, but it broke up a year later.

The following year, Ho participated in the 5th Asia Pacific Harmonica Competition in Hong Kong, where he met his

three ex-schoolmates, and decided to form the ensemble.

Low, 22, who plays the second chromatic, was a member of her school's harmonica club.

At first, it was only a school activity for Low, but after seeing her seniors competing in an international competition and winning awards, it became a major turning point for her.

"I never knew that this would be a part of my life," said Low.

Initially, she practised and improved her harmonica skills with the help of her school teacher.

She practised two hours daily after school, and on Saturdays.

"My teacher was a great help," said Low, who is a full-time insurance agent.

Her interest and hard work paid off when she won her first award, the Outstanding in Harmonica Trio and Small Ensemble Open category in the 5th Asia Pacific Harmonica competition in Hong Kong in 2004.

Tan, 24, the band's chord player, learned to play the harmonica in school.

Like Low, Tan is also an insurance agent, but he has plans to play the harmonica full-time.

He said not many people see the the harmonica as a major musical instrument.

"It can perform as well as any other musical instrument," he said.

Tan first participated in an international competition at the 2002 Asia Pacific Harmonica Festival competition, in Japan, where he won a bronze medal in Trio Open category in the competition.

The fourth member of the

ensemble, Yap, 22, has been playing the harmonica for 10 years, and is pursuing her degree in financial planning at INTI International University, Nilai, Negri Sembilan.

When she is not studying, she performs and practices with her team members.

Yap learned to play the harmonica while she was in primary school. She started with the recorder but later switched to the harmonica.

Yap hopes the group will perform at more concerts. She hopes to open a school to teach harmonica music.

The group is performing at a concert at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KL-PaC) at Jalan Strachan in Sentul, on Nov 15.

Their repertoire will range from classical to contemporary music.

Tickets are priced at RM30, RM50 and RM80.

The show is from 7.30pm till 10pm.

For tickets and details, call Mel Lau at 03-6207 8668 or email concert@matroharmonica.com.



Mastro Harmonica Group performing with their harmonicas. — Picture by Azahan Rosli