

ARTS

Thompson attempts to satisfy all cultural tastes

THE man behind the choice of performing groups for this year's Asian Arts Festival is its artistic co-ordinator, Mr John Thompson, who has been involved with the festival since 1980.

This year's program sports two main types of performance, Mr Thompson said. The first kind is characterised by lively music, dance and colourful costumes, as typified by the Milastar Kashmir Music and Dance Group from India, the South Sulawesi Arts Group from Indonesia and the Mukam music and Dance Ensemble of Xinjiang from China.

The second aims at a specialised audience and in this context Mr Thompson recommends the recital by a Japanese biwa player. The Milastar Kashmir and South Sulawesi groups will also provide separate performances, characterised by epic and classical music.

The festival committee is also on the lookout for contemporary theatre - a fairly new phenomenon in Asia - and hopes to inject it into the festival next year.

A symposium on the study of Mukam, a music form prevalent in the Islamic world, is bound to be a highlight of the festival.

It is generally believed in the West that Mukam was brought to Xinjiang from the Middle East, while Chinese



John Thompson

scholars have suggested that it is the other way round. Some academics even suggested that the music originated in China, then influenced Middle Eastern music, which in turn affected the development of western music.

Mr Thompson's job has enabled him to scout around Asia for new forms of art and to unearth exciting performers. And, based on his experience, he feels that each group, far from just being art practitioners, is in fact a bearer of a deeper social or historical message.

Of particular interest is the Inbal Dance Theatre from Israel, a striking violation of the social norm of its genre in that it is a dance group specialising in Islamic dance yet led by a woman, whose sex occupies just a peripheral position in the Islamic world.

This, according to Mr Thompson, has to do with the musical history of the Arab world.

Because of Islamic restrictions on the performing arts, many professional musicians in the Arab world before 1950 were Jewish. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, a lot of Jews from the Arab world emigrated to Israel, including a large proportion of Jewish musicians.

The classical music group from Thailand is equally interesting in that it is led by an American. While this has infuriated many Thais, it is representative of a growing phenomenon where more and more western musicians, who have exhausted the study of western classical music, are turning eastward for stimulation and inspiration. The leader of this Thai group, Bruce Gaston, is one such personality.

Mr Thompson suggested that traditional music is generally facing a problem of heritage.

"People always look for something new. As western art is popular, they tend to copy from the West, which takes a certain amount of time.

"But there's been a revival of interest in the traditional as people begin to see that to do something new, they must keep the old. There is also a growing trend where people try to create new things out of a combination of both the Western and Eastern cultures," he said.

- CAITLIN WONG



The Inbal Dance Theatre from Israel . . . performing the folklore of Israel's many Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic groups.