Preserving Quan Ho folk singing

Vietnam’s Quan Ho folk singing was recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of mankind in 2009.

Bui Xa upholds singing tradition

In the cradle of Quan Ho, on the northern bank of the Cau River in Bac Giang province, locals are working tirelessly to preserve this piece of world heritage.

Every Saturday afternoon, lovely, heartbreaking melodies resound from a house at the end of an alley in Huu Nghi village, Bac Giang province. Members of the local Quan Ho Club have been singing in this way for 20 years.

They are famers, traders, or retired workers, who share a common passion for singing.

Dressed up in colorful traditional costumes and flat palm hats, the amateur singers become engrossed in the music world, forgetting their everyday chores.

80 year old Nguyen Thi Mo says she fell in love with Quan Ho naturally.

She said “When I was a child, I began to sing along with the older female villagers. At that time, there was no singing movement like now. As I am retired, I joined a Quan Ho singing club. The old melodies are difficult to sing but carry deep meaning, like the song “Inviting guests to drink and chew betel” or “Burning fragrant incense.”

Smiling toothlessly, Ms. Mo said Quan Ho singing requires resonance, modulation, and strength. At her age, she cannot sing as well as the young people, but still helps to preserve the folk singing of her homeland.

Tran Van The, head of the Quan Ho Club, said Huu Nghi is one of the first Quan Ho villages to be recognized by UNESCO.

The local Quan Ho singing contains the pure characteristic of Cheo (traditional operetta), the warmthness of Dam singing of the central region, profoundness of Ca Tru (ceremonial singing), and the sincerity of folksongs.

Despite recent modern adaptations, local villagers insist on the old style of singing.
Mr. The said “We learned the old melodies and lyrics from our village elders and from experienced singers in the neighboring province of Bac Ninh. We are teaching what we have learned to other members of the club. Many of us can sing hundreds of songs.”

Mr. The, his wife, and other villagers have opened a Quan Ho class for locals of all ages, particularly children, some of whom cannot write a word but can sing some lines.

Many families have been singing for 4 generations. He said "Young villagers love and want to begin their career with Quan Ho. They are very fast to learn and can sing after just several rehearsals. The young generation needs to practice Quan Ho singing regularly to pass it on to the next generation."

Dao Trong Ca, head of the Culture Division of Viet Yen district, said local Quan Ho contests and performances help to detect talents and promote the singing movement. Nearly 100 classes are open people of all ages to make Quan Ho closer to community life.

“The Quan Ho singing movement has expanded, but its quality should be improved. We focus on the traditional singing style and teach locals how to perform in that way. We combine preservation of Quan Ho with community-based tourism development. Quan Ho helps to attract more visitors to our district,” he said.

VOV5