

Lifestyle | Features



In this picture Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad. — AFP photos



In this picture Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, recites verses from the Muslim holy book in Islamabad.



In this picture Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, gestures during an interview with AFP in Islamabad.

Egyptian architects win Mosul mosque competition

Eight Egyptian architects have won an international competition for the reconstruction of the historic Al-Nouri Mosque complex in Mosul, Iraq, selection organizer UNESCO said Thursday. The complex was severely damaged by conflict in 2017, and the rebuilding of the mosque is part of the organization's project for the rehabilitation of the ancient city. The mosque, built in the 12th century and famous for its leaning minaret, suffered badly in fighting between the Islamic State group and US and Iraqi forces, known as the Battle for Mosul, with IS accused of blowing up the site before it was captured by government forces.

Selected from among 123 entries, the winning design is called "Courtyards Dialogue". The reconstruction "will be a landmark in the process of advancing the war-torn city's reconciliation and social cohesion," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. The reconstruction work, to start in the late autumn, aims to rebuild Al-Nouri's historic prayer hall and integrate the complex, the largest public space in the Old City of Mosul, into its urban surrounding through open public spaces.

UNESCO launched the competition in November 2020 in coordination with the Iraqi ministry of culture, the Iraqi Sunni Endowment and with support from the United Arab Emirates. It is part of UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" initiative for the rehabilitation of the city and its cultural life, and the strengthening of its educational system. — AFP



In this picture Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, exercises as part of his training regime in Islamabad.



In this picture Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad.

Living on a prayer: Champion Pakistan Quran reader in full voice

To master the art of Quran recitation, 21-year-old Hassan Ali Kasi had to follow a strict regime of yoga, hours of rehearsing vocal scales and a total ban on biryani. His dedication is paying off, and he was recently named champion of an international online qari competition hosted by Afghanistan, where he was up against men from 25 other countries. Revered in Pakistan, qarīs are professional reciters of the Quran, called upon to lead prayers at mosques and also to teach the Muslim holy book to students.

They are in particularly high demand during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting currently being observed around the world. "It was a job of the prophets," Ali Kasi told AFP in the capital, Islamabad. "One of the very first elements of preaching was recitation. It is as old as Islam." Qaris require

perfect Arabic pronunciation, a difficult feat in Pakistan where Urdu is the national language.

A finesse of rhythm and intonation produces the slow, melodic sound similar to the distinctive azan, or call to prayer, delivered through loudspeakers from the top of mosques five times a day. Recitations during competitions can last for 15 minutes, so Ali Kasi practices yoga to help with breath control, and vocal exercises to strengthen his voice. "A qari should be able to recite for a minimum of 50 seconds without taking a breath," said Ali Kasi, an Islamic Studies student at a university in the capital. "The throat is very sensitive, a qari should avoid cold water and fatty food as it produces too much mucus, which causes abrasion when you touch high notes," he cautioned. He was tutored in the Quran by

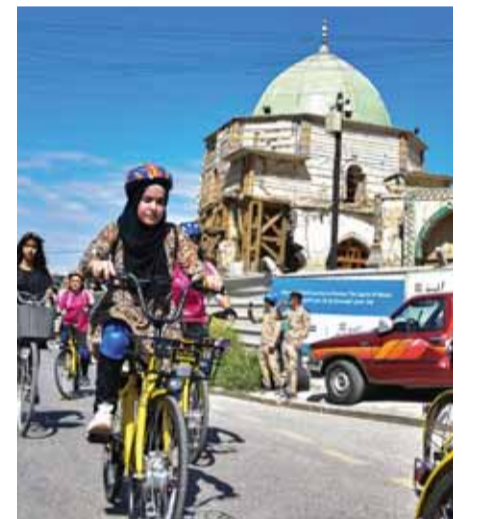
his father, and his recitation skills quickly earned him recognition at national level where he won numerous awards before making it onto the international stage.

'The voice is a gift from God'

Many qarīs emerge after being taught at religious schools known as madrassas, where young boys are taught to memorize the Quran — often with little understanding of the Arabic language and also at the expense of other subjects. Education activists say the colossal effort that can often take years to master fails to prepare students for the workforce. But for millions of boys in impoverished and deeply conservative Pakistan, it is the only schooling available, providing free shelter, clothes and food. Very few madrassas are open to girls.

Boys who complete their studies can

go on to become teachers or lead prayers at mosques around the world — even if they earn little money from it. "One has to be meticulously hardworking," said Abdul Qudus, from the Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia, the country's largest group of madrassas. "The voice is a gift from God, but one has to polish it." He said hundreds of prayer leaders in the Middle East are madrassa graduates, while others are now teaching the Quran online to Pakistanis living overseas in Europe or America. Ali Kasi, who spends hours practicing verses ahead of competitions, said quality teachers were the key to his winning voice. "When you follow a good qari, you can spread your voice across the world," he said. — AFP



Iraqi cyclists participate in the Old City marathon in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. — AFP

ABBA's Bjorn Ulvaeus urges reforms to pay songwriters their due

The COVID-19 pandemic's rampage through the music world has laid bare the industry's flaws, shining a bright light on "the plight of songwriters," says ABBA's Bjorn Ulvaeus. The renowned artist behind the disco pop group's megahits like "Dancing Queen" and "Mamma Mia" co-wrote a report released Saturday entitled "Rebalancing The Song Economy," which urges revamping pricing structures to ensure fairness for writers behind the music. Ulvaeus, 75, became president of the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) — a Paris-headquartered rights network representing some four million creators and publishers across the arts — last year, as the spread of coronavirus began devastating livelihoods worldwide.



In this file photo Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson (ABBA) pose on the red carpet upon arrival for the world premiere of the film "Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again" in London.

tribute it according to their agreements. Artists have long disparaged that dominant model, holding it favors the globe's biggest stars at the expense of music's middle class.

Right now, "80 percent goes to the Drakes, the Swifts. The niche jazz artist gets almost nothing, if anything," Ulvaeus told AFP. "But the niche jazz artist might have 10,000 people out there who love him or her — and if all that money went to him, he could make a living out of that." Apple recently disclosed it pays, on average, a penny per stream, approximately double what Spotify — which has far more users and thus more streams — pays rights-holders. The breakdowns of which players — labels, distributors, streaming services, and the owners of performance and publishing copyrights — receive what fraction of revenues depends on specific record deals that are rarely public. But songwriters, especially if they are not also performers, generally receive the smallest pieces.

Lean back, lean forward

The report authors are proponents of fan-centric models they say could better support music's creators, paying out total revenue based on the actual tracks specific users listen to. Ulvaeus also draws distinctions between "lean-back" and "lean-forward" music — and says it

should be priced accordingly. Lean-back music, the artist says, is music users hear based on curated playlists, while lean-forward songs are those listeners specifically seek out or bookmark. "There's a difference between those two. And there should be a difference in royalties as well," the Swedish songwriter said.

More broadly, Ulvaeus says the current "rat race" songwriting model has creators risk-averse and rushing to push out content-formulating eminently streamable songs with viral potential to the detriment of their art. Streaming "has hugely impacted the kind of songs and their structure," he said. "When (ABBA's) Benny Andersson and I wrote albums, we wrote albums." "You can't do that now because... it takes 30 seconds, 15 seconds before people click another song."

Money is time

Ulvaeus laments that today's songwriters must navigate a system that forces their focus towards charts and entrepreneurialism: "I have a feeling that many songwriters have to part with their song too early." In winning the Eurovision song contest with "Waterloo" in 1974, the musician says he and Andersson also won "artistic freedom." "We learned to recognize garbage, and we learned to recognize when we had something really good," he said. "That takes time and hard work and patience. And how can you have patience if you have people breathing down your neck?" "Money gives you that time."

In addition to fan-centric payment models, Ulvaeus and his report co-writers back songwriter residency programs, where labels could support songwriters with regular salaries and partner them with performers, cultivating long-term working relationships. And key to reform is transparency, which Ulvaeus said is severely lacking in an industry long built on closed-door dealings. "It's a very old-fashioned business, and quite conserva-

likely long, Ulvaeus said many of the changes laid out in his report are overdue — and need to catch up with people's creativity. "People are going to write songs. But why not treat them fairly?" he said. — AFP

Though the road towards equitable payment reforms in the music industry is



In this file photo taken on April 6, 1974 Swedish band representing Sweden with the song "Waterloo" (from left to right, up) Bjorn Ulvaeus, music producer, writer and manager Stig Anderson, Swedish record producer, composer Sven-Olof Walldoff and Benny Andersson, (from left to right, down) Anni-Frid Lyngstad (Frida) and Agnetha Faltskog, hold the trophy as they celebrate on stage after winning the final of the Eurovision Song Contest 1974 Grand Final in Brighton. — AFP photos



In this file photo Executive Producer US rapper Drake attends the Los Angeles premiere of the new HBO series "Euphoria" at the Cinerama Dome Theatre in Hollywood.

Pre-pandemic, performing artists could count on income sources like concerts and merchandise, but "most professional songwriters are just that" — songwriters, he said. Now everyone is relying on streaming, which accounts for 83 percent of US music industry revenue, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. But many artists have long said they aren't reaping the benefits, and the pandemic is exacerbating the issue. Streaming giants pool subscription money and divvy it up based on aggregate play counts to rights-holders or management organizations, who dis-