Remarks by His Highness the Aga Khan  
at the Aga Khan Music Awards prize-giving ceremony  
at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation  
Lisbon, Portugal, 31 March 2019

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

Your Excellency, President of the Republic,  
Professor Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa,  
Your Excellency, Vice-President of the Parliament,  
Mr. Jorge Lacão,  
Madame Isabel Mota, President of the Gulbenkian Foundation,  
Members of Government and of Parliament,  
Diplomats, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  

It is a great pleasure, and a great honour, to welcome all of you who have come to this exceptional venue tonight, on this extraordinary occasion.

As I welcome you, I do so on behalf of many others, all around the world, who have made this occasion possible.

I speak of course of those who are part of the Ismaili Jamat and the Aga Khan Development Network, but, more generally, all those who have helped to organise the Aga Khan Music Awards. I salute them all - the nominators, the members of the Awards Steering Committee, the Master Jury, and the Awards Secretariat. And of course, all the participants. I salute all the Awardees whose musical talents have so generously enriched today’s events.

I am grateful, too, to those here in Lisbon who have helped to plan this inaugural programme, and to the Gulbenkian Foundation for their invaluable support. This event is one that celebrates artistic talent and the sociological effects of artistic accomplishment in and from diverse places and cultures. And this place, in my estimation, is the perfect location for doing that. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is respected across the world for its role in honouring the arts and the sciences, while Lisbon has long been one of the world’s most welcoming cities for people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, and Portugal itself has played a major role over the centuries in bringing to the countries of this continent the cultures of distant lands.

The presence here tonight of the President of Portugal, the Vice-President of Parliament, the Minister of Culture, and so many other members of Government, speaks eloquently to the commitment of this country to pluralistic ideals in pursuit of a better tomorrow. We are deeply honoured to have you all with us.

The musicians we recognise this weekend represent highly diverse forms of the Muslim musical heritage. Now I know that in some parts of the world, the words “Muslim” and “music” are not often linked together in the public mind. But they should be. The cultural heritage of Islam has long embraced musical language as an elemental expression of human spirituality. Listening to music, practicing music, sharing music, performing music - have long been an intimate part of life for Muslim communities across the world, as has been the chanting of devotional and historical or epic texts.
I learned at a young age about how my own ancestors, the Fatimids, cultivated music in the city of Cairo a thousand years ago. And I also learned about how the Iberian region where we are now meeting, the territory known as al-Andalus, produced new forms of music and poetry in the late medieval period. It was here in al-Andulus that Muslims, Jews, Christians, created together an exemplary culture of tolerance, fostering musical creativity that even included new types of musical instruments and pioneering approaches to music education.

I also remember a visit I made to Tajikistan in 1995, during which I was deeply impressed by the richness of musical life among those whom I had visited. I began to think even more about the ways in which music can be a strong cultural anchor, deepening a sense of community, identity and heritage, while simultaneously reaching out in powerful ways to people of different backgrounds.

I recall sharing these thoughts with my brother, Prince Amyn Aga Khan, whose guiding hand helped to lay the groundwork, in 2001, for what we called the Aga Khan Music Initiative. And that programme has led directly to the Music Awards we inaugurate today.

The initial focus of the Aga Khan Music Initiative was in the countries of Central Asia. This mission was urgent, for the old Soviet Union, when it controlled these regions, had actively discouraged, or even suppressed, music linked to traditional ways of life. The Music Initiative worked first to build a heightened awareness of their musical heritage in local communities themselves, to ensure that a new generation of musicians playing traditional instruments was formed, and then to introduce this music and these musicians to international audiences. And it worked - on two levels. It helped musicians, first of all, to earn a livelihood so that they could continue to develop their talents. And, it also advanced a pluralistic understanding of Muslim cultures and inter-cultural sharing.

The initial success of this work in Central Asia led to the expansion of the Music Initiative beyond Central Asia’s borders to include countries in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. In so doing, it reached beyond performance to new composition, to creation, and all of this work complemented our other efforts to advance economic and social development, contributing to more stable communities, nurturing a new sense of inspiration and hope, and building vectors of human connectivity across old divides.

One other point we learned to appreciate and to share is the remarkable diversity which exists within the world of Muslim music! It comes in many styles, forms and classical repertoires. It includes simple folk melodies, contemplative mystical music and driving dance rhythms; and it reflects the immense diversity of different Muslim cultures themselves, including musical traditions that have been carefully cultivated over the centuries within the Ismaili community.

In creating the Music Awards, we now hope to expand the reach and impact of the original Music Initiative. To this end, our Award winners will not only each receive a monetary prize, but will also be asked to collaborate with the Music Awards secretariat in broadening the impact of their creative work in dialoguing with each other. The goal is not only to help today’s generation of artists, but also to inspire a new generation of young performers and composers in both the East and the West.

In all of the performances that are taking place on this occasion, you will hear outstanding musicians expressing themselves in their own authentic artistic languages. Here in Lisbon today - and across the world in the months and years to come - their voices will, we trust, continue to transcend old boundaries of time and place, reminding the world that every individual can respond to art and music, whether it emanates from a different culture or not.
For, after all, art is a matter of humanity just as much as it is a matter of identity. As the Islamic tradition has reminded us for many centuries, the Divine spark that bestows upon us our individuality also bonds individuals in a common human family.

In this light, we learn to see our differences in a new way. We can understand that cultural diversity is not a burden or a threat. In fact, it is rather a Divine Gift, an opportunity to learn and to grow, an opportunity to understand and to appreciate the Identity of the Other and thereby one’s own essential identity.

The technological forces that are re-shaping our world now mean that neighbours who live on the other side of the planet are as close to us as our neighbours who live across the street. In such a world, peace and progress require that we promote a pluralist agenda, that we invest in a Cosmopolitan ethic. These Music Awards aim to be an investment in that promotion.

Thank you.

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