

CYPRIEN KATSARIS

Music is a language without boundaries

World-renowned French-Cypriot pianist receives the 2011 Nemitsas Prize for Excellence in the Arts and Sciences

With an international career littered with countless accolades, Cyprien Katsaris was recently in Cyprus to receive one of the most noteworthy tributes of his life.

"This is a very special award," he told me on the day of the ceremony during which he and fellow pianist Martino Tirimo were jointly given the 2011 Nemitsas Prize. "What Mr and Mrs Nemitsas are doing here is recognising Cypriots who have excelled in various fields, like medicine, music, high technology, to make people aware of the value of some Cypriots who have excelled worldwide. It's very unusual to have a private initiative like this, and many countries do not have such prizes."

Katsaris, it seems, was always destined for a life in music.

"My mother, who is not a liar, claims that when I was five or six months old I used to try to sing the Mexican song 'La Raspa,' which was very popular at the time," he recalled. "I don't remember that myself but what I do remember is that when I was three and a half my parents brought a piano for my sister, who is three years older, and I remember exactly where it was placed in our living room. I was drawn to it like a magnet and immediately tried to play."

Katsaris' family was living in the Cameroonian at that time, a French colony of which the second largest European community was made up of Greeks and Cypriots.

The now internationally-renowned Paris-based pianist began lessons "with a tall, blond, very good-looking teacher called Mrs. Louwerse", who began by asking him to draw with a coloured pencil around his hand, in order to help him gain awareness of his hands. "I still have that piece of paper," he smiled. Throughout his childhood years, his music-loving parents would play classical LPs including Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Piano Concerto 'The Emperor', Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Handel's 'Messiah,' and his mother recalls that he would sit captivated by the record player for



hours.

Continuing his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Katsaris quickly reached a level that ensured his inclusion at the top tier of the global classical music scene. Having performed as a soloist with some of the world's greatest orchestras and collaborated with countless celebrated conductors over the years, he has also been involved in the 'Katsaris Piano Quintet' to great acclaim.

With accolades such as 'UNESCO Artist for Peace' and 'French Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters' to his name, Katsaris has also conducted masterclasses with his own personal philosophy holding strong.

"You should just expose, never enforce," he stated. "Many people start learning music when they are kids and then they abandon it. This is 100% because of bad teaching. Children are very impatient, they want to play the piece immediately

and the teacher doesn't 'control'. If you have a book and no dictionary, you'll lose interest.

"Even if someone is very highly cultivated there will always be some words in a text they may misunderstand, and if you allow this you will become distanced from it. Teaching music is similar, with gradients. You cannot build the third floor before taking care of the basement."

While impressed at the number of music schools on the island, Katsaris is aware of the danger that many of the very talented young musicians won't be able to have a successful career.

"It's a worldwide phenomenon. So many emerging countries like Korea, China, Latin America and the Arab world are producing great young talents, but it's a very complex and mysterious combination of ingredients that is needed for a career, including each individual's

personality as well as PR and marketing. You see famous pianists, but what people don't know is that 20 others of very similar quality didn't make it."

Coming from a country that is home to Europe's last divided capital, Katsaris firmly believes in the power of music to unite and to heal.

"Daniel Barenboim, for instance, has played in and conducted thousands of concerts throughout his magnificent career," he explained. "But he deserves the highest praise for his work with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which featured both Palestinian and Israeli musicians."

As a musician with global reach, Katsaris is sure that communication can be achieved through music.

"It might not help in a truly political sense, but music is a language beyond boundaries. With reasoning, ethics and determination, we will make it."

