

MARTINO TIRIMO

A classical master

Acclaimed Cyprus-born pianist receives a significant honour from his homeland

With a career spanning decades and continents, Martino Tirimo is one of classical music's enduring talents. Last week he added to his long list of achievements and awards when he received the 2011 Nemitsas prize, together with fellow pianist Cyprien Katsaris, in a ceremony held at the Presidential Palace.

"It's a private initiative of the utmost importance," Tirimo told me during our recent meeting, describing the prize awarded by the Takis and Louki Foundation which aims to recognise and honour Cypriot excellence in all fields of endeavour.

"I'm not sure whether there has been anything so significant in the cultural life of Cyprus at any time." Especially meaningful was the fact that this accolade came from the country of his birth.

"Although I have lived in London since my early teens, Cyprus remains my great love," he smiled warmly. "It's within me, and it was of enormous significance to be recognised during this fine ceremony."

Receiving the prize awoke memories of another noteworthy milestone in his life's work.

"There have been many significant concerts," he explained, "but being at the Athens Olympics in 2004 when I had the opportunity to play with the Vienna Philharmonic at the Herodus Atticus theatre is definitely one of the highlights. That was a very momentous event for me, to play during the Olympic Period in that venue, with what is considered by many

as the greatest orchestra in the world." Tirimo's musical path was paved very early in his life, as he was born into the world of music.

"My mother used to say that when I was about two years old, they used to find me asleep on the floor outside my father's studio, obviously having sat there listening to him practising his violin," he recalled with a laugh. "My father was a great musician, and I was really very lucky. I don't encourage young children to start too early, but I began lessons at around four and a half, as I simply wanted to play and it really never occurred to me to do anything else."

As soon as his father discovered that there was "a little bit of talent", he planned for him to go to Vienna when he was eight years old, but that was postponed for several years. At the age of twelve, he continued his education at boarding school in the UK, at the recommendation of a visiting English examiner of the Royal Schools of Music who heard

him play. "This school had a particular emphasis on music and it was actually a very important step in my life," said Tirimo. "I was away from my family, I didn't know the language very well and I had to stand on my own two

feet, which helped me become very independent."

At 16, he was urged by his piano teacher to try for a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music. "When I won the Franz Liszt scholarship I didn't want to take it up as I was so happy at the school," he laughed. "There was a lot of

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soul-searching, as I was only sixteen." Tirimo moved to London, where he was the youngest student at the Royal Academy of Music, and "the cultural centre of the world" has been his home ever since.

As part of his speech during the Nemitsas prize ceremony, he spoke of the ancient Greeks who had a very high regard for music, and he is very excited at the idea of using the therapeutic qualities of classical music in healing. Fellow musician, conductor and pianist Nikos Christodoulou, also took the opportunity during the ceremony to quote Nobel-winning poet George Seferis who described the immortality of music and poetry. "We have CDs now," explained Tirimo, "and videos, but you cannot replace the immediate communication of a live concert. Classical music requires a level of concentration from the audience, and a live concert is something special. Even if only one person in the audience picks up what I'm trying to express, then I'm a happy man."

With an impressive international presence, Tirimo has collaborated with renowned orchestras, conductors and performers while appearing in world-famous venues. He admits, however that young

musicians face enormous challenges today.

"I would say that it is more competitive now than at any other time, and it's more difficult for a young talent to break through," he said. "I'm sure that if we heard Chopin or Liszt play now, we'd be very disappointed. At their time, they were great stars, but there was not so much competition."

Referring to the technical accuracy that today's audiences expect, Tirimo is impressed by the Cypriot public. "You hear a CD which is edited to sound perfect, and the audience comes to the concert and expects to hear the same level. Given the size of the country, I would say there is quite a large percentage of the population here that constitutes a very good audience. You cannot come here and play like a pig, and expect to be applauded. People really know what the standards are, and what is good."

Classical music fans will have the chance to hear Tirimo play as part of the Rosamunde Trio on November 5, when he returns to Cyprus to participate in a "marriage of dance and music" at the Strovolos Municipal Theatre, for Dance-Cyprus' next event.



Tirimo with fellow piano Cyprien Katsaris

