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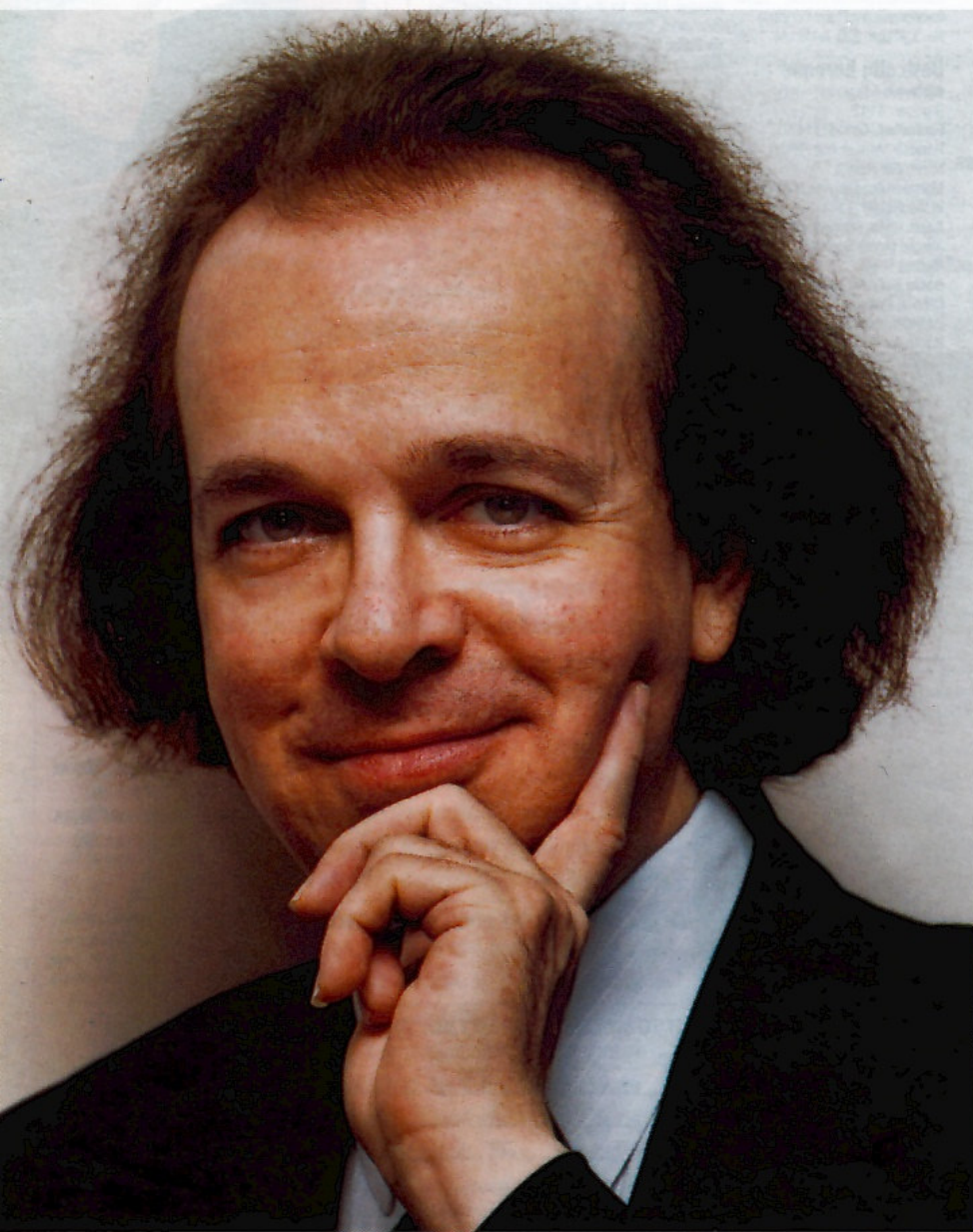
Cyprien
Katsaris

Unashamed Romantic



*In an exclusive and wide-ranging interview,
talks to Joanne Talbot about musical truths,
playing Bach on the modern piano*

Unashamed



Travelling along the Champs-Élysées by the Arc de Triomphe, one is reminded of the Napoleonic heritage so formative in French culture. Small surprise that Cyprien Katsaris – one of France's most esteemed pianists – should elect to live within a stone's throw of this great monument, his apartment tucked away on the elegant West Side of Paris. Nor does one escape this rich heritage once inside, for Katsaris has immersed himself in French history, bedecking his flat walls with framed letters of seminal French figures from Louis XIV to Napoleon and, more adventurously, one of the Three Musketeers. It's an interest that extends way beyond artefacts, for he is a musician who immediately strikes one as quintessentially French.

What does this mean, though? It really concerns the emphasis of certain constituent elements, for at the core of Katsaris's approach to the piano lies a finely-tuned perception of colour and timbre. This sensitivity to atmosphere and tonal range is integral to many French composers and surfaces in other art forms – most obviously the Impressionist school of painters. It therefore seems entirely natural that Katsaris should refer to the fingers as colour tools, with the pedals utilised in order to further enrich the tonal palette. Atmosphere is also of paramount importance, reflected in an acute sensibility to *rubato*, line and voicing. Of course such comparisons might initially appear superficial, but his involvement with French culture is long-standing, encompassing two Paris-based musicians: Liszt and Chopin. The French government has also recognised his special empathy with their culture, recently awarding Katsaris the Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters.

Born in Marseilles in 1951, Katsaris's parents became aware of his special feeling for music when at the age of just six months he sang back a Mexican song he'd heard on the radio. But it was the arrival

distinguished French piano virtuoso, Cyprien Katsaris,
 the art of accompanying, understanding rubato,
 – and founding a new record label

Romantic

of a piano when he was three years old that proved the formative event in Katsaris's life. Piano lessons started shortly afterwards, although at this juncture Katsaris wanted to be a traffic policeman. 'My mother was very upset because she had intended me to be a conductor. But her friend said it's all waving the arms around!' Apart from this shortly-held desire, being a pianist seemed the most natural path.

Following the family's move to Paris, Katsaris was awarded a place at the Paris Conservatoire, an establishment with a formidable reputation for training pianists. Legion quantities of scales were patiently worked through, but most rigorous of all was the sight-reading – a skill that pianists had to master in order to remain at the Conservatoire. 'They said it was essential for pianists to be good sight-readers, and you'll find that most French pianists are,' comments Katsaris. His own studies with Aline van Barentzen, Monique de la Bruchollerie and Jean Hubeau provided him with a secure technical and musical foundation. Prizes and accolades swiftly followed, most notably at the Tchaikovsky, Cziffra and Queen Elisabeth competitions. He can boast an impressive and wide-ranging discography that includes collaborations with legendary figures from Bernstein to Inbal, Masur and Ormandy, whilst he has been Director of the Echternach Festival in Luxembourg since 1977.

Throughout the course of the interview it became clear that after more than thirty years treading the concert platform, Katsaris still maintains an all-consuming passion for music and expounds its philosophy and aesthetics in an unmistakably French manner. From the earliest stages of his career, Katsaris adopted the mantle of the Romantic tradition, not only in his advocacy of the repertoire, but in forming an unassailably dazzling virtuosity. However, it is a repertoire that does not always relate easily to the French tradition, not least in Liszt's

music, with its orchestral vision of the piano. 'I wanted to understand how he did his transcriptions, so I took all the scores of Beethoven's symphonies and compared them to Liszt's solutions. In many cases, certain instruments of the orchestra were missing, so I found that I had to search for some new answers. In the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony Liszt gave up, and said to his publisher that he couldn't do it for one piano alone. His publisher insisted, but often the result is more like a piano score.'

'For example, in the last movement of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony the first violins play fast repetitions of the note 'A', while the seconds play 'F' simultaneously. Liszt's solution is to juxtapose 'A-F-A-F', but I substituted a more accurate rendering of the instrumentation, even though it was incredibly difficult to play those repetitions and made my fingers bleed! You need to have an orchestral approach to the piano, and I'm always imagining the timbre of a clarinet or a violin, or very often the voice. It's particularly important because the piano is a very percussive instrument and what we lack mostly in our playing is a sense of breathing in phrasing. For example, if I play the opening phrase of the First Ballade by Chopin it can sound "notey", but then if you think of it as a phrase bowed by a string instrument, this immediately makes an enormous difference.'

But exactly how did Liszt's transcriptions emulate the sound of the orchestra? 'One of the main formulas that Liszt used was actually developed by Sigismund Thalberg – ironically one of his main competitors. Interestingly enough, Thalberg studied the art of singing and this informed his remarkable *legato*. Liszt himself described Thalberg as "the only artist who can play the violin on the keyboard." He wrote many transcriptions of operatic arias where he continued

opposite and p. 12
Cyprien Katsaris
 Photos Isabelle de Rouville



I remember
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to develop this affinity with singing. I think his most innovative technique was to put the melody in the middle part split between the thumbs of both hands surrounded by brilliant arpeggios and arabesques – a technique designed to compensate for the lack of continuity on the piano. You can see Liszt using this in his *Ave Maria* transcription...

'One minute.' Katsaris jumps up and searches through some well-used volumes of Liszt, and hauls out the appropriate copy. He sits down and plays a passage illustrating this shared voicing of the melody with tremendous *élan*. Katsaris continued the point with avid enthusiasm. 'Liszt spent a lot of time at the piano developing new ideas such as the rapid alternating of octaves or use of tremolos – again to recreate the greater sustaining power that you get in a string instrument. In Cziffra's piano arrangement of *The Flight of the Bumble Bee* he uses this octave technique.' Katsaris locates the music and delivers another virtuosic demonstration. 'Liszt also develops this in the last movement towards the ending of the *Tannhäuser* Overture. Incidentally, Wagner also transcribed this work for piano, but his solution is more literal because he was not really a pianist. So Liszt was extending the piano's technical range to make it sound more like an orchestra – but of course he was not alone in this. Mendelssohn also split the melody between two hands in his Second Piano Concerto and his *Songs without Words*, whilst Brahms tended to use packs of notes with a greater sense of harmonic density. Nor should one forget that Chopin developed an incredible number of pianistic devices in order to extend the expressive scope of the instrument.'

'Chopin was also very aware of the vocal art, and used to say the fingers of a pianist should be singers – which is, of course, part of the *bel-canto* tradition. It is hardly surprising that one of the composers he admired most was Bellini, who was formative in this style of music. This is why in the last twenty years I've collaborated with singers, because I think that it's important to be aware and receptive to all the subtle nuances in a vocal line. Naturally you have to colour the piano part according to the vowels and rhythm of the text. One of the highlights for me was working with Brigitte Fassbaender and Thomas Moser on the world premiere recording (Teldec) of Mahler's own piano transcription of his *Das Lied von der Erde*. I must say that I've not since encountered such a perfect musical translation of the feeling of distress as in one particular solo passage of the *Abschied* finale.'

'Both in chamber music and accompanying singers, the pianist is primarily required to support the vocal or instrumental lines, apart from where the passages are soloistically conceived. But you also have to predict their delivery. For example, how you highlight and emphasise certain points in the harmony makes a great difference. Similarly you need to listen – it really is teamwork. Awareness of

the piano articulation is also important. For example, I sometimes utilise a more percussive sound because it combines better with the string colours. The pedal can also be used as a colouring tool. I use the middle pedal quite a lot, for example, in the fourth movement of Chopin's Second Sonata. You see...', Katsaris now illustrates how using the middle pedal can subtly colour the music by maintaining the notes selected with the pedal, 'it can be used for sub-phrasing or as a vehicle for creating variation in the repeat of a phrase.'

Depending on whether a given passage is by Chopin, Mendelssohn or Brahms, one inevitably encounters differing concepts of *rubato*. 'Oh yes', agrees Katsaris. 'Chopin had a natural way with *rubato*. If we take the literal meaning of "*rubato*" it comes from the Italian *rubare* – "to steal". You steal some time and then you put it back within the framework of the bar or phrase. This is the sort of *bel-canto rubato* as described by Pier Francesco Tosi in his famous treatise *Opinioni de cantori antiche e moderni o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* published in Bologna in 1723. In this discussion he said that the bass does not move in terms of tempo, but the melody above has flexibility. This is *rubato* type "a". Type "b" is when the whole building moves! What sort of *rubato* you use depends on the passage and the musical context. When you look at Brahms's Third Piano Sonata, which he wrote when he was 20, he used to write in "*rubato*" where he thought the music required flexibility. He stopped this in his later works, because it was obvious to him where the music demanded this expressive treatment. We know that this variability in the tempo is still important to his music, whether it is written or not. In type "a" *rubato*, the bass is like the solid trunk of a tree, but the leaves – the melody – move with the wind, and it is this sort of *rubato*, in my opinion, which gives life to music.'

'I remember when I was in Athens looking at the Parthenon, I realised that it uses architectural *rubato*. The columns are not exactly straight, but adopt a variability; this kind of subtle modification gives life to the building. Chopin's pupils tried to imitate the way he did *rubato*, but it wasn't natural and in the last decades of the nineteenth century there was an increasing tendency towards over-inflated, bad-taste *rubato*. This in turn provoked an excessively rigid approach to tempo, which is also not my cup of tea. At music colleges they instruct pupils to play Beethoven in a reserved manner. Rubbish! When you read Czerny's analysis of Beethoven performing his sonatas, he describes the composer as being like a volcano. He would adopt quick tempos, and would bring great contrast into his playing. The intellectual approach is fine, but you must have emotions too.'

'You also have to keep a healthy balance between standard and neglected repertoire. Sometimes by-passed repertoire isn't the greatest music, but the stylistic influences are often interesting. For

example, everyone knows Czerny because of his finger exercises, but these represent only ten per cent of his output. He wrote a Sonata around 1810 in which the second movement is pure Schumann – only it was written the year Schumann was born! I'm sure Schumann was aware of these sonatas when he studied with Wieck. Similarly, if you hear music by Sergei Bortkewicz you'd think it was Rachmaninoff, but you have to remember that each composer to a certain degree influenced the other.'

Surely though, these days the record companies are circumspect about taking risks on anything unknown? 'Ah well, my big news is that I'm starting my own new record label called *Piano 21*, which will use some material never issued before as well as some existing recordings and new projects. The first CD will feature Beethoven's *Prometheus* ballet. The original autograph manuscript was never found, but we know from Czerny that it is Beethoven's own version for piano.'

'Setting up my own record label is not so startling actually. Joanna McGregor has her own label and, of course, Jordi Savall. I simply don't want to be told by anyone in the marketing or A&R departments you may or may not record this work. I want total freedom. We're in a new world and things are changing a great deal with the internet. My new projects include a complete recording of Mozart's piano concertos with Yoon K Lee and the Salzburger Kammerphilharmonie. We're recording them in the Mozarteum in Salzburg, and it's the most complete recording to date because we do both versions of the Concerto for three pianos. Where Mozart did not write cadenzas I've written two sets. The first is more personal because I concentrated on the musical links between Mozart and other composers such as Beethoven. For example, the first movement of K491 starts like Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. The Fantasia in C minor by Mozart also utilises the same intervallic relationship, as does the Sonata in C minor, K457. In the middle part of the slow movement of this Sonata there is a theme similar to Beethoven's *Pathétique*. So I wrote a cadenza to effect a meeting between Mozart and Beethoven. But then I thought a big percentage of the listening public would be enraged, so I've also written cadenzas closer to the spirit of Mozart – so there's a choice!'

Whilst Katsaris is clearly ensconced in the virtuoso tradition of Liszt, Chopin and Thalberg, his views on Bach are equally passionate. 'I'm performing a Bach programme this year in New York, Paris, Mexico and Munich that covers three aspects of his music. Firstly I am going to play Bach's originals, then his own arrangements, and finally arrangements of Bach by other composers. I personally think that Bach should be played with a lot of involvement and life – I'm absolutely against Bach that sounds like a computer.'

'We know that Bach preferred the clavichord to the harpsichord because it offered a wider range of



colours, although it lacked the same projection of sound. Bach knew the first pianos, although he was disappointed in them because they were still developing. We also know that he designed an instrument that combined the qualities of the lute and harpsichord, and so bearing all these things in mind I have no doubt that Bach was an experimental composer with regard to instruments. If he had known the modern piano he would have surely used it, and therefore when I play Bach on the piano I utilise everything the instrument can offer. As far as I'm concerned, Bach is the perfect representation of music in the Pythagorean meaning. For Pythagorus, music meant mathematics, philosophy, art, and religion. You know I think Bach is closer to universal truth than any religious leader.'

As Katsaris amply demonstrated during the afternoon, our musical heritage is to be cherished, and yet it is a legacy that must remain living and vital. Although at the end of our meeting the piano lid was shut, his devoted admiration for music spanning the centuries was still very much reverberating through the air. ©

As far as I'm concerned, Bach is the perfect representation of music

above Cyprien Katsaris
Photo Steve J. Sherman