



Special ability

By FOO YEE PING

HE HEARS the phone ringing or that knock on the door. But Cheong Yew Choong is often confused where the sound came from.

A viral infection at a young age led to him wearing hearing aids since he was eight. Now, he has only about 40% hearing ability in his left ear and complete hearing loss in the other ear. But put Cheong, 29, in front of the piano and he would tinkle away just like any other accomplished classical pianist.

In March, he was among the four recipients named as International Young Soloists by VSA arts, an international organisation based in Washington DC which focuses on arts appreciation by people with disabilities.

"I can't really hear everything when I listen to music. I can't identify pitches or high frequency. So, instruments with high frequency such as the flute, oboe, piccolo, violin are tough for me to listen to," he said in an e-mail interview.

A KL native, Cheong is doing a doctorate in musical arts at West Virginia University, which he is due to be completed next year. He also gives piano lessons to undergraduates and children.

Cheong is back in Kuala Lumpur for his first solo piano recital on July 11 at University College Sedaya International, his former alma mater.

"My former piano professor Dr P'ng Tean Hwa had asked me to play there. I will also be performing at their annual concert for two nights, on July 7 and 8."

Cheong said he has often been inspired by Austrian classical pianist Artur Schnabel, who was considered to be one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. He quoted Schnabel who said: "Music cannot hurt. Sunshine can burn you, food can poison you, words can condemn you, pictures can insult you, music cannot punish, only bless."

"It's the power of music that motivates me till today," said Cheong, who has three sisters.

He began learning piano at the age of seven but he was not really into it until he turned 15.

That was when he began listening to classical music (the very first piece was Beethoven's *Bagatelle*) and decided to resume his lessons, which had previously stopped when he was in Form One.

His growing-up days had not been entirely easy. "I was often confused, always afraid to talk to people because I didn't want others to know that I have hearing problems. I remember that I was always insecure as a kid."

He "calmed" himself by hearing music in his mind, he said. "My parents were very worried about me but today, they are glad to see that I have become a stronger person."

Now, he keeps stressing that he isn't totally deaf but "hearing-impaired".

"Sorry for such an emphasis but I want to

Cheong Yew Choong who is hearing-impaired will be giving performances at University College Sedaya International in Kuala Lumpur.

avoid any misunderstanding that I'm deaf."

Still, he faces difficulty in communicating with people because of their unique intonation.

"They just need to slow down for my clarity. While watching TV, I often have difficulty in reading lips so I rely on subtitles. And I'm always confused about the source of the sound. For example, I can hear cars honking but I'm uncertain where it comes from."

Once he completes his studies, Cheong hopes to share his passion and knowledge with students and music enthusiasts through teaching and performing.

"Education is the key to promote music appreciation among the public," he said.

■ All performances are open to the public. For details, please call Nurlina at ☎ 03-9101 8880 (ext 3324).