

Christopher Taylor

“Genius” pianist has won a \$20,000 Emily Mead Baldwin Award in the Creative Arts

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Wis. prof. invents improved double-keyboard piano

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It won't come as a surprise to anyone who knows Christopher Taylor that the internationally acclaimed pianist and UW-Madison professor of music is now inventing a musical instrument.

"Christopher Taylor has been hailed as one of the great pianists of the 21st century. He's a phenomenon," said John DeMain, music director of the Madison Symphony Orchestra. "I don't use the term 'genius' loosely, because I think people toss that word around. But Christopher Taylor is an authentic genius."

Between performing and teaching engagements across the U.S., Asia and Europe, Taylor has been drawing up blueprints for an instrument inspired by the 80-year-old double-keyboard Steinway piano in his campus office that he is known for championing.

The piano, with two sets of hammers but only one set of strings, allows a pianist additional room to maneuver in compositions with highly intricate fingerings.

It's a "fabulous and unique instrument" but has its mechanical problems, Taylor said. "So getting a new version of this thing built has been kind of a long-standing dream of mine."

Taylor's proposal for his invention won him a \$20,000 Emily Mead Baldwin Award in the Creative Arts from UW-Madison, given annually to a faculty member for creative research. He'll use the money to pay a patent lawyer and to develop a small prototype of the instrument.

"With luck, in a couple of months it will be patent pending and I can pitch the idea to a couple of (manufacturers)," Taylor said of the instrument, which will have two keyboards and make use of modern digital technology "so that some of the mechanical problems that exist in the purely mechanical device that exists in my office can be bypassed."

"If something gets built, it will be very exciting for me to try out some of these new

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features and potentially get some composers interested in it," he said. "I don't see it as something we'll manufacture a million of, but my hope is that it would be less prohibitive to build my invention than to build a new version of the instrument that exists already in my office."

The son of a physics professor and an English teacher who grew up in Boulder, Colo., Taylor, 41, graduated from Harvard with a degree in mathematics, studying piano on the side with the famed Russell Sherman. He went on to earn a master's degree at the New England Conservatory and by his early 20s had won acclaim in the piano world, including a bronze in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. He received early tenure from UW-Madison in 2005.

Taylor's two daughters are now in elementary school and the family recently added on to their Middleton home, so "I guess we're pretty well settled here," he said.

Still, this season alone Taylor has traveled twice to Korea and in December performed in a festival at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, "an important place nowadays in the world of music," he said. He'll soon perform in Carnegie Hall with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, playing a commissioned piece by Peter Maxwell Davies which Taylor premiered with the chamber orchestra in early 2010.

"That was sort of interesting because originally another pianist (Angela Hewitt) was going to do it," he said. "But she backed out at the last minute, so I had about six weeks to learn the thing and rescued them in a tight spot, I suppose."

New York Times critics gush every time Taylor performs a contemporary work, but the pianist also has won renown for projects such as memorizing and performing all 32 Beethoven sonatas in a little more than two months in 2008.

"There's always the danger you're going to be pigeonholed as a contemporary specialist. But I certainly resist that," Taylor said. "I want people to know I'm doing the old stuff too. I think that's very important, and there's still a lot to be said with music by, say, Beethoven and Schumann."

Taylor will soon play Schumann's piano concerto with the MSO in Overture Hall, marking the 200th anniversary of Schumann's birth. It will be the first time he's performed the piece, and his first appearance with the MSO under the baton of DeMain, rather than a guest conductor.

"I've taught (the Schumann concerto) a few times, so I guess I've learned vicariously, and of course I've heard it all my life. But there's nothing like actually wrapping your fingers around it to appreciate it," he said.



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When he performs in Madison, "I feel like I have a certain home court advantage, I guess," he said. "People know who I am, so I guess I like to think they're sort of rooting for me. It's nice to be in a familiar hall, knowing so many members of the orchestra and so forth. But since it's going to be a concerto I haven't done before, it doesn't mean I'll be able to rest easy."

Taylor will appear again at the Overture Center in March 2012 with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, playing a rarely performed concerto by John Field, an Irish composer who greatly influenced Chopin.

"I'm thankful that he's open to those sorts of challenges," said WCO music director Andrew Sewell, whose children have studied piano with Taylor's wife Denise and who personally asked Taylor to tackle the Field sonata.

"Just the fact that he's willing to do that says a lot to me," Sewell said. "He's just a man of great energy, with an ability to do so much."

Information from: Wisconsin State Journal, <http://www.madison.com/ws>

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-wi-exchange-instrume,0,5700742.story>