

Christopher Taylor

At Santa Barbara's Music Academy of the West

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Music review: A great pianist once more flies under the radar

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Christopher Taylor is the overpopulation pianist. He has a common name, which means he has a lot of company on Internet searches. His handful of obscure, [independent recordings](#) have such amateurish graphics that he would be easy to dismiss as a home hobbyist.

For the last 10 years, Taylor has been an associate professor at the School of Music at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he began teaching at age 30. He easily looks the part of unprepossessing academic. For his recital at Santa Barbara's [Music Academy of the West](#) Wednesday night, he appeared in dark suit and tan T-shirt.

In fact, Taylor *possesses* one of the great keyboard techniques of our time and has a probing mind, musical and otherwise. Two years ago, here in the academy's intimate recital venue, Hahn Hall, he performed Messiaen's epic, two-hour "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus" (Twenty Gazes Upon the Child Jesus) with such pianistic rigor and spiritual intensity that he made the keys all but levitate.

Wednesday, Taylor chose an even more ambitious program of two huge sets of variations – Frederic Rzewski's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!" and Bach's "Goldberg Variations." Both were played from memory. He outdid himself.



These two punishing works cover an enormous amount of territory, and it doesn't hurt that Taylor happens to have a math degree from Harvard. He also has a background in philosophy, linguistics and computer science. And just as important, he is an athlete (a bicyclist). All of those skills were of use in Rzewski's hourlong set of 36 variations.

In 1975, the politically feisty American composer created a kaleidoscopic near-hallucination on a contemporary Chilean song that helped inspire the country's democratic movement. The variations are a structural tour de force, in that Rzewski sections the first five groups of six variations in such a way that the last in each group reprises the first five. The final group of variations combines bits of all the earlier ones, and No. 36 is a whirlwind revisit of the whole piece.

That's one aspect. Rzewski's set is also a stylistic *tour de force* finding room for blues, jazz, Lisztian fantasy and most techniques of modern music. Political conviction is part of the picture as well. And there is the physical challenge of so much intense virtuosity and mental concentration.

Taylor was sweating profusely early on. With no breaks, even to wipe his brow, he was sopping wet by the end and the keys must have become treacherously slippery, adding yet another obstacle. Riders in the Tour de France at least get to drink water.

Rzewski at one point asks the pianist to whistle the tune while playing a difficult accompaniment. Taylor told the audience he can't whistle, so he used a whistle sample programmed on a synthesizer, which he played with his left hand while assuming both right and left hand parts with his right alone. The impossible became even more impossible.

Bach's 30 variations on an aria are, of course, a famed structural masterpiece that many pianists have mastered over the years. Taylor played them with great eloquence. Each movement is divided into two parts, and each part can be repeated. Taylor played without repeats.

He phrased with great beauty. He supplied graceful Baroque decorations. He elucidated intricate counterpoint with crystal clarity. Fast variations flew by. Dance movements danced. The playing was simple, direct, intensely musical, structurally illuminating. But, more, this was a powerfully dramatic performance.

If Taylor made Rzewski's variations feel like a big bang, an explosion of the Chilean song to create new worlds, he used his structural skills and astonishing physical power to make Bach's variations seem more like a journey into an ever more magical realm. The forward

momentum never ceased until the climax at end of the 30th variation.

There he came to sudden stop, the first break in 45 minutes, before he repeated the aria. It was as though waking from the best dream of your life.

Taylor has won many awards. He has performed widely. He has a sheaf of rave reviews from major publications that would make any musician proud. Yet he remains a blip on the piano radar. He, for instance, made his Los Angeles Philharmonic debut in 2000 as an outstanding soloist in Lou Harrison's Suite for Violin, Piano and Small Orchestra. He has not been back.

But he's still young, and perhaps all he needs is to repeat the Rzewski/Bach program at a major festival and everything might change. Christopher Taylor is a great pianist. And the world needs to know it.

-- Mark Swed

Photo: Christopher Taylor playing piano and synthesizer at Academy of the West Wednesday night. Credit: David Bazemore