

Christopher Taylor

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Setting Off Political and Pianistic Fireworks

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

The rhythmic chant "The people united will never be defeated!" has become so ubiquitous at protests worldwide that it is hard to imagine that there was a time when it was actually composed.

Early in 1973, Sergio Ortega wrote the music, and the folk ensemble Quilapayún wrote the text, as an anthem for Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile. The song was ferociously repurposed just a few months later, after the coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power, to serve as a potent rallying cry in the resistance to the Pinochet regime.

Two years later, in the fall of 1975, with Pinochet still firmly in control, the American composer Frederic Rzewski composed a series of 36 variations on Ortega's tune. At the work's premiere the pianist Ursula Oppens performed it alongside Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations. Other artists have programmed it as a companion to Bach's "Goldberg" Variations.

One pianist who has paired the Rzewski with the "Goldbergs" is [Christopher Taylor](#), a dazzlingly virtuosic and

thoughtful musician who in December performed Messiaen's "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus," [complete and from memory](#), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Mr. Taylor returned to "The People United" in the second half of "Keyboard Practice," a lively yet magisterial concert at Miller Theater on Saturday evening that was part of the theater's Bach Revisited series. The foil this time was not the "Goldberg" Variations but Bach's Four Duets (BWV 802-805) and French Overture (BWV 831), which, like the "Goldbergs," were part of the keyboard music collections that Bach collectively titled "Clavier-Übung" ("Keyboard Practice").

The idea was evidently to avoid illustrating the Rzewski work's similarities to another set of variations — that ground has been well trod — and instead to use the juxtaposition with Bach to tease out other musical aspects. In a program note Mr. Taylor mentions the two-voice counterpoint in the duets and the repurposing of popular music in the French Overture as elements also found in "The People United."



Artist Management

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The passionate precision of Mr. Taylor's playing, its almost vibrating sheen, also unified the concert, from the glinting, pulsing energy of the fourth duet, in A Minor, to the lush overlapping lines of the French Overture's opening and the almost violent quality of its Gigue.

In "The People United," as in the Bach works, there was the sense of structural rigor adding rather than draining energy. Mr. Rzewski's sweeping, nearly hourlong work is meticulously organized, in six sections of six variations each, but it rushes by in a headlong effusion, abstracting Ortega's melody into forms that range from Romantic outbursts to atonal spikes to icy sparseness.

**A tempo indication from the 16th variation spoke for Mr. Taylor's masterly performance of this modern classic:
"Expansive, with a victorious feeling."**