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Christopher Taylor: Seeking Adventure for Fingers and Mind

By [Kathryn Shattuck](#)

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THOSE who know the pianist Christopher Taylor tend to speak of him in the hushed, reverent tones typically reserved for natural wonders if not the otherworldly. Colleagues trip over words like "innocence," "fervor," "beauty" and "vision" in an attempt to capture his elusive personality. Critics praise his virtuosity, his cerebral interpretations tempered by an aching tenderness, his unconventional programming and his advocacy of late-20th-century music.

Mr. Taylor's bold individuality may never have been more evident than at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 1993, where he took the bronze medal, becoming the first American to place in the event since 1981. In a year when Rachmaninoff dominated the concerto round, Mr. Taylor bucked the trend with renditions of the Brahms B flat and the Bach D minor. He saved his Rachmaninoff, an

"Étude-Tableau," for an encore. Mr. Taylor — Kit to his friends — has always had a mind of his own.

"I have described Kit as a kind of Parsifal with a computer mind, with a tremendous innocence in what he projects in music and a fervent belief and devotion that shows in certain works with tremendous conviction," said the pianist Russell Sherman, with whom Mr. Taylor studied on and off for a decade. "He is one of those strange genius types but very well balanced. The basic package is powerful."

The cellist Fred Sherry, who hired Mr. Taylor for the current festival "A Great Day in New York," said: "When you talk to him, you feel that things are percolating inside his head, but when he plays, that all goes away and his attention is totally focused. Whatever he brings to bear goes into the music."

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Taylor sat before a Steinway in the Rose Studio

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at Lincoln Center, where he would later rehearse for his "Great Day" performances, which end on Tuesday evening at Alice Tully Hall with Tobias Picker's "Invisible Lilacs," featuring the violinist Robert McDuffie. But with time to spare, Mr. Taylor was trying to make peace with Messiaen's "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus" ("Twenty Gazes on the Child Jesus"), which he will perform in its two-hour entirety in the Miller Theater at Columbia University on Saturday evening.

"I like to describe the work as a kind of great odyssey," said Mr. Taylor, more than 6 feet tall and elegant, with a maturity and a formal diction that belie his 31 years "It is a sort of intellectual exercise, and it can be hard to pull off."

"The stereotype is that 20th-century music is hard music, like a 'Wozzeck' or a 'Lulu,' something like horror-movie music. But the Messiaen is wholesome and joyful and outgoing and optimistic and celebratory music. Sometimes Messiaen acts a little icy and mathematical, to use the term in its pejorative sense, but there are various motifs: the theme of God, the theme of joy, the theme of love. It requires an audience ready for a big adventure."

Composed in occupied France for the composer's pupil (and later his wife), Yvonne Loriod, who recorded it, "Vingt Regards" is thorny and expansive, with impenetrable

rhythms, crashing dissonances and "rainbow" sonorities countered by strong, simple melodies. Requiring a furious technique, it rests at the apex of 20th-century piano music and poses great difficulties even for highly accomplished pianists.

"All that is required from the performer is everything," Paul Griffiths wrote in *The New York Times* last month, when a Norwegian pianist, Hakon Austbo, took up the challenge, "including, in particular, enormous resources of range (in texture, color, touch, force), of concentration and of certainty."

Mr. Sherman suggests that "Vingt Regards" was designed for a pianist like Mr. Taylor: "It has tremendous devotional tenderness, and the work is really meant for him in a way because of that emotional center. Some of the pieces are technically complex, very busy, powerful. Kit negotiates the keyboard — I wouldn't say with remarkable grace; he is not a *leggiero* pianist — so accurately, so precisely and so targeted and so directed to his goal that it is frightening and wonderful."

Indeed, for Mr. Taylor, some of the work's allure seems to lie in its difficulty. He begins playing a segment — singing, moaning, his expression rapidly shifting between pain and euphoria — then stops to interpret, to explain: the refrain based on primary numbers; the rhythms that unfold, like wings, then

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wrap back onto themselves; the notation, with its virtually indecipherable clusters, which only a mathematician could fully appreciate.

Mr. Taylor was born in Boulder, Colo., to a physicist and a high school English teacher, who enthusiastically encouraged their 7-year-old son's dream to learn the Beethoven piano sonatas.

"I was very eager to get started," Mr. Taylor said, recalling how he would compare his father's scores of Beethoven symphonies with recordings "to see how notes and music lined up."

A year later, he entered the studio of Julie Bees, then a doctoral student at the University of Colorado, armed with the first movement of the "Moonlight" Sonata.

"He had an intense passion for the music at the very beginning," said Ms. Bees, now an associate professor at Wichita State University. "And he had a penetrating intellect for an 8-year-old, asking questions like 'What does this "l'istesso tempo" refer to,' questions that you hope you'll never meet on your doctoral exam. It was scary."

She diverted his Beethoven ambitions for a time, but Mr. Taylor never forgot them, arriving at each lesson with his volume of sonatas on

top of the pile, "just to remind me what his goal was," Ms. Bees said.

At 10, he gave his first formal recital and performed one of his own works, "Thunderstorm," for a convention of music teachers. He also developed a taste for the rags of Scott Joplin and began composing his own. He sent his works to the composer William Bolcom, himself a rag lover, who sent back a letter of encouragement.

"Kit's pieces I remember as being very fresh and fun, and then I found out he was just a kid," Mr. Bolcom said. Later, Mr. Taylor took to playing Joplin rags as encores. And last summer, he recorded Mr. Bolcom's Pulitzer Prize-winning "12 New Études" for future release, in an interpretation the composer has called "wonderful."

By 13, Mr. Taylor had won his division in a national competition for young pianists. But his aspirations were not limited to music, and as his senior year of high school approached, he and his father embarked on a search for a college at which his predilection for mathematics could be honed as well.

He settled on Harvard, he said, largely because he wanted to study on the side with Mr. Sherman, himself an iconoclastic interpreter.

"Kit was exceptional in my mind," Mr. Sherman said of their first meeting. "He showed up with an

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English twang to him" — Mr. Taylor's father is English — "an Eton collar and with a slight reserve, and he played one of those Messiaen works. He was very convincing, very powerful, very overwhelming.

"I teach a small class, and generally there is a lot of pondering as to whom to enroll. With Kit, it was unmistakable, and I told his father, 'If you want to come to Boston and have him study with me, I will accept him on the spot.' That's how convincing an impression he made."

If there was a moment when Mr. Taylor felt he had arrived — and he hesitates to pinpoint one — it may have been the summer of 1990, when he was among the first four recipients of the Gilmore Young Artist Award, a scholarship for promising American pianists. Soon thereafter, he took first prize in the William Kapell International Piano Competition at the University of Maryland, where he met the woman who was to become his wife, Denise Pilmer, who holds a doctorate in musicology. They have a 10-month-old daughter, Ellie.

After the Kapell victory, Mr. Taylor set about getting his feet wet, touring in cities as disparate as Knoxville, Tenn., and New York, and learning to adjust to a variety of pianos and audiences.

In 1992, after graduating from Harvard summa cum laude in

mathematics, he studied in London for a year with Maria Curcio Diamond. By now, it was apparent that he would be competing in the Cliburn, and he turned his attention to repertory. In June 1993, he flew to Forth Worth bearing the sort of idiosyncratic fare that was soon to become his trademark: the 10th segment of the Messiaen, Bach's "Goldberg" Variations, Beethoven's Opus 111 Sonata and Boulez's Second Sonata, a work that he describes as "very uncompromising, fiercely complex" and that took him a year to learn.

"I went in with zero expectations, and I was pleased with the outcome," he said of the competition and of winning the bronze medal.

Unlike some Cliburn finalists, who immediately dropped off the map, Mr. Taylor has made headway with his career. In 1996, he earned an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and last year he won an award from the American Pianists Association. He performs more than 25 concerts a season, he said, just enough to keep him established on the concert circuit while teaching at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in a position to which he was appointed last year.

"You make choices in your career, and teaching is something I believe every well- rounded person in the arts should do," he said. "Performing

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more than 100 concerts a year is not my idea of success."

In his spare time, he reads mathematics textbooks ("a sort of Mount Everest achievement would be to understand the proof of Fermat's last theorem," he said) and programs computers. And with the philosopher Daniel Dennett, he has written a paper on free will, to be published by Oxford University Press this year.

Still, Mr. Sherman likes to recall the time he emphatically asked Mr. Taylor why, after graduating from Harvard, placing at the Cliburn and earning a master's from the New England Conservatory, he would spend the next year and a half at the conservatory, pursuing a doctorate in piano performance (a pursuit he put on hold, just a semester shy of his degree, to take up the position in Wisconsin).

The reply, Mr. Sherman reports, was delivered in dead earnest: "Because I don't want to spend the rest of my life being introduced with my wife as Dr. and Mr. Taylor."

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