

Artist Management

Christopher Taylor Plays Bach on the historic Dual-Manual Steinway

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Christopher Taylor Explores *Goldberg Variations* on Dual Keyboards

Scholars have authored numerous and often intriguing articles on Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, "Number Symbolism," by the late Brandeis University professor Erwin Bodky. Renowned Bach scholar and harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt uncovered, among other things, "magic" numbers in the music of the German master.

The story goes that, in the act of addressing a letter to Harvard University's music department in which he was declining their invitation to come and lecture on the great composer, Leonhardt suddenly became aware of Cambridge's zip code—02138. Leonhardt immediately had a change of mind and accepted the position. He had discovered that the zip code was a cipher for the master: B2-A1-C3-H8.

Much thinking and writing about how Bach wrote music and how that music should be played continues on to this very day. Before going to the concert of the *Goldberg Variations* played by Christopher Taylor on Feb. 1, I had an opportunity to ask pianist Timothy

McFarland, who teaches at MIT and the University of Massachusetts Boston, about what to look for these days in a performance of *Goldberg Variations*.

Expecting insights into numbers and secrets about playing Bach, I was surprised—not to mention grateful—to hear McFarland's answer: "The individual. What each performer brings to the music." We laughed, remembering the words of Wanda Landowska, the first to record *Goldberg Variations* (she did it on harpsichord in 1931), who said something to the effect of,

"Dear, you play it your way and I will play it Bach's way." So with that in mind I went to Boston's Gardner Museum's "Young Artists Showcase," which has put its foot forward with back-to-back concerts of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Last week, Pius Cheung performed it on marimba, of all instruments, which I am sorry not to have heard. And now, this week, Christopher Taylor performed it on a dual-keyboard Steinway-Moór.

The dual-keyboard Steinway-Moór piano is Taylor's piano. It truly is a one-of-a-kind. The only one ever made was by piano developer Moór, in 1929. With two keyboards, both hands avoid being "hassled" (Taylor's word) with frequent crossing over each other, bumping into each other, or winding up on top of each other—things that happen in performances of *Goldberg Variations* when played on a single standard keyboard.

Taylor found new colors with extraordinary touch of keys and pedal. He found ways of repeating both sections of each variation as an explorer might, changing this, finding that, altering a course for one reason or another. This worked best when the overall sense of the variation was kept intact. In variation 28 the trill-like

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figure of the first section appeared to be getting Taylor in the right place, but it was the first time through the second section that the figure turned magical; there was incredible swiftness and blend of both hands, an extraordinary virtuosity and timbre. In the repeat, though, the effect was not there.

His slow Bach soared with poetry, artistry and pianism often with bass line played staccato and with the melody articulated in a beautifully and ever so attentively honed cantabile. Variation 21, in particular, displayed amazing transparency. An unusual dreamy feeling came about through rhythmic nuance and contained dynamics. The Aria—both at the beginning and end of the set—differed just enough and could not have been more inviting.

His fast Bach danced as in variation 11 which rollicked most of the way. An abundance of cheerfulness was often in evidence. Power exploded in the last variation, the quodlibet, the momentum harnessed just right to make this interpretation as stately as I thought it could ever get.

His approach to Bach raises questions. Why so often a crescendo approaching the ends of sections in both slow and fast tempos? Predictability resulted. Was it the Steinway-Moór or Taylor too often producing a clamor? Here, Bach verged on noise. And, finally, why such break-neck tempos as in

variation 14, which could have been so much fun? Several speedily played variations resulted in mishaps and momentary erratic playing. But his daring deserves applause.

All in all, this was, in ways, an overwhelming experience coming from one so devoted to the piano and Bach. His explorations never bored this listener. It goes without saying that his accomplishment boggles the mind. Not only did he play Bach from memory for well over an hour with hardly a break, but he, in his own words, “unlearned the contortions” demanded by a single keyboard in order to play on this unique instrument. Sorely missing, however, was the visual element of the artist at the keyboards, given the positioning of the instrument on stage.

Bravo! Taylor’s encore, *Paysage* by Franz Liszt, played on the piano’s individualism, where the very loud passages were as transporting as the softer.

Christopher Taylor has worked with various orchestras including The National Symphony Orchestra, Fort Worth Symphony, and New York Philharmonic. He is a recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Gilmore Young Artist Award and a bronze medal from the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. A graduate of Harvard College (Summa Cum Laude in Mathematics) and former student of Boston’s Russell Sherman, Taylor is currently Associate Professor of Piano at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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David Patterson, Professor of Music and Chairman of the Department at U. Mass Boston for the past 15 years, was recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Award in Teaching and the Chancellor's Distinction in Teaching Award. Also a composer, he lives in Watertown.

<http://classical-scene.com/2009/02/01/christopher-taylor-explores-goldberg-variations-on-dual-keyboards/>