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Unaccompanied Sonata: The Story and the Song

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Unaccompanied Sonata: The Story and the Song

Abstract

The paper is a review of “Unaccompanied Sonata” a short story published in *Maps in a Mirror* by Orson Scott Card. It served as the inspiration for an original musical composition with the same title. “Unaccompanied Sonata,” centers on Christian, a musical prodigy in a dystopian society. In a controlled world where everything and everyone has their place, Christian’s great love of music leads him to break the structured bonds holding his society together. The musical project took shape slowly after days of tossing ideas around. In the end, it became a reflection of my own personal journey throughout the several weeks it took to compose.

“Unaccompanied Sonata,” is, at its most basic level, a reproduction of the plot of the like-titled short story. Listened to once, “Unaccompanied Sonata” is pleasing to the ear. Listened to again, as a companion to the story, there is an intense interplay of hope and despair, resistance and surrender, longing and desire that is intended to evoke a very real and personal response from the listener.

Author statement on musical piece:

“Unaccompanied Sonata,” Orson Scott Card’s short story of a musician caught in the machinery of a complex dystopian society, inspired me to compose an original musical piece in classical sonata form. Though I used the story as a model, what I created became much more than a simple reconstruction of the narrative in melodic form: the music took me on an unexpected journey of creative self-discovery. The result was an intensely personal reckoning that parallels the struggle and eventual catharsis of Card’s central character. Both the sonata and my prose analysis of the writing process come together to form the musical and literary exploration I named after its inspiration, “Unaccompanied Sonata.”

Cover Page Footnote

Honors Faculty Mentor: Danny Alexander, Professor, English

Quite unintentionally, this project has become one of incredible personal significance; if the process and product could be summed up in a single word, it would no doubt be catharsis. Art is always personal though, and perhaps I should have expected that when I first began working with a story I felt such an intimate connection to.

Orson Scott Card has been an author of great significance to me for over a decade. Beginning with my first reading of *Ender's Game*, I quickly found myself in the midst of a passionate love affair with his masterful contributions to the genre of science fiction. Book after book, series after series, I devoured his works, though it wasn't until 2009 that I stumbled across a collection of Card's short stories bound together under the title *Maps in a Mirror*.

When I initially read "Unaccompanied Sonata," it was just after the attempted suicide of my then 18-year-old sister. It was a time of great confusion for me as I struggled to cope with feelings of anguish and guilt, and in the tragic beauty of "Unaccompanied Sonata" I found a sister spirit. Unable to put into words the turbulent emotions I felt, Card's tale of combined love and torment truly struck a chord in me.

The story centers on Christian, a musical prodigy in a dystopian society. In a controlled world where everything and everyone has their place, Christian's great love of music leads him to break the structured bonds holding his society together; as a "Maker" of music, he is forbidden to leave his home or allow outside influences to affect his music. He lives alone with his Instrument from childhood till manhood, until, one fateful day, his path is changed forever. Prohibited from having any

interactions that may mar his complete originality, Christian remains wholly isolated until a designated “Listener” confronts him with the temptation that becomes his fall from grace.

The punishment of an outside influence is severe, and “true originality forever compromised,” Christian spends the rest of his life banned from creating music ever again. His love for his art is too strong however; Christian needs to create. Again and again he fails to resist, as torturously as he may try, and the repercussions are extreme. The story is at once tragic and poetic, devastating and beautiful, and in it I felt an ode to my sister’s struggle as well as my own: The most difficult battles aren’t necessarily the ones fought against outside forces. Instead, the wars we wage within ourselves are often the most devastating. This is the case for Christian as he combats his own irresistible need for his music, just as it was the case for my sister as she struggled against the demons of self-doubt. When I read of Christian’s torment I felt my own longing for a reconciled heart and mind, one not poisoned with the insatiable longing for something unnamable that was missing.

It was a difficult decision to touch a story that was tinged with so many of my own painfully poignant memories. Fingering the pages again, I was reminded of the phone call I had gotten from my sister that fateful night, when she asked me to promise her that I would love her no matter what. I did, and drove to find her in the middle of the night. Never before have I or again will I know a fear like that, or a fierce, burning love like that which I have for my sister.

The pages of the story are tinged with the same burning, unconditional love, and the first time I read “Unaccompanied Sonata,” I found myself weeping over its

pages inexplicably. The reaction I had to it was so raw, so bewildering that it was over a year before I had the courage to read it again. But in it I had discovered a truth, and I knew I would not stay away.

“Unaccompanied Sonata” was therefore my immediate choice when I began my Honors Contract. It had been floating somewhere in the back of my mind for some time, as I had only recently been diagnosed as Manic Depressive. Battling an oppressor similar to the one that nearly took my sister’s life, I turned to various creative outlets to help cope. I revisited some of my favorite literature, and naturally I found myself drawn back to Card’s story.

Going into the project, I knew I wanted to create something. I didn’t want to just read a story and write a paper; I wanted to *make*. The project took shape slowly after days of tossing back and forth myriad wild ideas. In the end my musical nature won out-it felt only appropriate. I became resolved to create a piece of music that not only reflected the plot and themes of the story, but my own personal reaction to the text. In the end, it became a reflection of my own personal journey throughout the several weeks it took to compose, including the highs and lows of manic depression and an unexpected coming to terms with the guilt and doubt of my past.

“Unaccompanied Sonata,” the natural title of the composition I sculpted, is, at its most basic level, a reproduction of the plot of the like-titled short story. At five minutes long, it is a succinct summary, but one that displays the major climaxes of the fiction.

Through increases in intensity, the music parallels the action of the story: Christian’s initial wonder; his giving in to temptation; the loss of his music; his

inability to stay away, etc. as the pattern is recycled until the final climax. The development of the plot is mimicked in the structure of the music, but to say that the piece only touches the physicality of the story would be a gross understatement.

Through the subtle nuances of pattern and tone, my goal was to give another sensory outlet for the story. In the notes, I sought to express what I perceived Christian feeling. On the surface the music may seem little more than a pretty plot parallel, but each and every note was chosen carefully to express the longing the story portrays. In it's fluctuations, the composition strives to give voice to the intense and very real emotions Christian suffers.

In the beginning there is the sound of fall, and wind through the leaves. The wonder of innocence with an undertone of oncoming winter is meant to be portrayed in the naivety of the initial few notes. As the movement progresses, it strives to reflect great internal conflict. Again and again, building like waves, the music fights the battle that Christian struggles against. The futility of resistance, the great overwhelming pain and joy of true passion; this is what the music strives to convey. Listened to once, "Unaccompanied Sonata" is pleasing to the ear. Listened to again, as a companion to the story, there is an intense interplay of hope and despair, resistance and surrender, longing and desire that is intended to evoke a very real and personal response from the listener.

With this project, my original intention was to translate what is seen to what is heard, nothing more. But as I composed, I felt more and more that my true desire was to create something that could elicit a reaction from the listener. As a companion to the story, or alone as its own piece, it is my hope that listeners may

hear in the music their own memories and apply it to the work. It is my opinion that that is what art is really about. As beautiful as it is to hear what the author felt and intended, it is a far more beautiful thing to be able to find true individual meaning in a work. To strike a chord in another's heart, that became my goal.

For the music truly became a part of me. In revisiting the story that represented such a turbulent time in my own life and creating something entirely new from it, I found a sort of peace. I transformed something that embodied feelings of loss and helplessness into something else. A tribute, if you will, of those emotions and their passing. By creating something out of that represented loss, I managed to fill an emotional void in a most unexpected way. Not only did I have an opportunity to experience and come to truly understand old emotions, but I discovered in myself a strength and hope not dissimilar to Christian's in the story. Because there is a kind of incommunicable hope that can only be found in despair. It defies all logic, because that is what hope is. Christian and I share the hope found only in cases of unconditional love: his for his music, mine for my sister and my own searching soul.

While experiences are individual, hearts are universal, and within them, no matter how unique we are, we hold so many of the same things. Exploring old emotions and building anew, I came to terms with the ghosts I had long been haunted by-the instability of my mind, the longing of my heart for completion, the guilt that it was I who let my sister fall, held deep in my soul.

Not only did the project prove therapeutic in the sense that it provided some sense of closure about my sister's suicide attempt, it also became an outlet for my

struggle over the last few months with my Bipolar Depressive Disorder. Out of the chaos in my mind, music was something that calmed the beast, so to speak.

Bouncing back and forth between psychologists and medications, I went for days without sleep then days without waking. There were weeks that I felt floated by as I walked around in the trance of the heavily sedated, broken periodically by the lurid highs of the Manic during which I turned to my vices for calm. I broke once after the medication that caused audio hallucinations-music was a welcome distraction then. I had never composed before, but somehow I felt that if I could rise to this challenge I could face down my own demons. I was proved correct.

And thus, "Unaccompanied Sonata," the song and the story, became so much more than a project for me. In it I found closure and catharsis. A challenge and an outlet. It became a transforming experience, so much more meaningful than I had ever intended. Inspiration can truly be found in the most unexpected places.

There are many things I have learned during the course of this semester; many hard lessons learned, many hard battles fought. I emerged having gained so much from the experience, and if I could ask one thing of my reader and listener now it would be to let the story and the music in. Let it change you, too. Meaning can truly be found in the most unexpected places, if you give it a chance.