

unaccompanied minor -- program note

I was asked in 2006 to compose “unaccompanied minor” for the 2007 edition of the Irving M. Klein String Competition in San Francisco. This excellent competition for young string players includes a feature not often found in similar events of international stature: a commissioned work composed especially for the contestants. In this case, contestants who reached the semi-finals were required not only to learn and perform a brand-new piece; they had to do so with just a few weeks of preparation time: the rules stated that they would receive the piece in the mail just six weeks before the competition began. In other words, this component of the competition tested their ability to absorb and master an unfamiliar work under pressure, a harsh but meaningful test of the contestants’ ability to survive the unexpected twists of professional musical life.

Under these circumstances, I was asked to provide a work that would be significantly challenging to a sophisticated 20-something-year-old cellist yet at the same time it could not be a completely unreasonable challenge. It might seem strange to imagine this (if you are not a composer), but actually for composers it’s harder to stay within well-defined limits of technical difficulty and stamina than it is to compose with an entirely free rein. A little like asking a pitcher to throw a curve that will break right over the low outside corner of the plate...and no mistakes allowed!

In spite of being boxed in this way, it was a real pleasure to write “unaccompanied minor” (and I apologize for the bad pun: I had thought of the title quite some time before writing the piece and couldn’t resist using it here because of course it’s an unaccompanied piece and also because at least a few of the competitors were going to be teenagers!). I also hoped that the piece might have a life beyond the competition among professional (grown-up cellists) and in fact, it already does. My good friend Parry Karp has already recorded and performed “unaccompanied minor”—superbly!

The piece is cast in a more or less rondo form, with a recurring pizzicato passage serving as the anchor among a series of related excursions. And yes, it really is (or at least ends up) in a minor key...f-sharp to be precise.

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