Husa's works a living presence worldwide

By John von Rhein
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Although performances of his music have been banned officially in the last two decades in his native Czechoslovakia, expatriate composer Karel Husa and his work have not been banished, only silenced.

"Of course I would love to be played in my homeland, because I think people there would understand what my music is about. I don't compare myself with Francais, but his masterpiece, 'Gala,' could only exist in a vacuum after the Franco regime had ended."

Husu, 66, smiled wistfully. "Perhaps one day I, too, will return."

Husa, a widely performed and respected composer who has lived and worked in the United States since 1954, earned his non grata status with the Czech authorities with a single composition for concert band: "Music for Prague 1968," inspired by the brutal Soviet suppression of the Czech independence movement. In its symphonic version the score was played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on two occasions, in 1973 and 1986, and remains his best-known work.

"I wrote it as a manifesto of freedom, a declaration of my love for the Czech people and the magnificent country I once called home," Husa said in retrospect. "That's the way I felt. That's the way I felt.

Husa's works are a living presence outside Czechoslovakia and around the world, and the neo-Noir commissioned by Chicagoans Lee A. and Brenna Freeman for the Fine Arts Quartet, won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1989.

"I am performed, and I'm happy about that," Husa observed.

The composer is in Chicago this weekend to attend the Chicago Symphony's world premiere performances of his new Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra, written for longtime principal trumpeter Adolph Heiss, and the work is the latest annual commission funded by the family of Edward F. Schmidt and involving CSO soloists.

"When the orchestra approached me a year and a half ago about writing the piece, I was scared stiff," the genial Husa admitted. "Mr. Heiss, Mr.

Arts at large

Solti and the Chicago orchestra are an incredible combination! That the orchestra has decided to play my work this month makes it even scarier.

"The main idea was to write a piece in which the solo trumpet would sound both virtuosic and, in the slow movement, sensitive and lyrical. I tried to explore all facets of trumpet playing, including a flamboyant cadenza at the end. Mr. Herrenst made several suggestions while I was writing the piece, advice I was pleased to accept from a conductor as experienced as he.

"It is a less experimental, less demanding work than my first trumpet concerto (written in 1973). Knowing Mr. Heiss, and his playing, I wanted to write something that was not so frightfully difficult that it would require hours and hours to rehearse.

"I wanted a concerto that would stand a chance of capturing the repertoire of works for that instrument. Whether or not I have succeeded, I can't say. A composer writes notes, and it is the performer who breathes life into the music. In a sense, the composer doesn't exist without performers.

Husa's strong practical streakOdyssey's Austrinity to the Czech blood in his veins, partly to the discipline he learned in the late 1940s and early 50s in Paris, where he studied composition with Nadia Boulanger and Arthur Honiger, and conducting with Vincent D'Indy and Jean Fournet.

"Professionalism is something we expect from conductors and other musicians, and we should expect it from composers, too," he said. "Music has to be written for performance. It doesn't have to be written easy, but technically it must be good. It's like a manuscript; no publisher would accept a novel that's badly written."

At Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y., where he has been a professor of composition and conducting for 34 years, Husa is in an advantageous position to survey the scene of American musical composition. He seems to be current on everything and everyone, and he is not altogether pleased with what he hears.

"I guess we are in a period of accepting many things," he said, referring to the present, anything-goes climate of serious music composition. Minimalism and the other hybrid forms derived from vernacular music are clearly not to Husa's taste, although he is too gentlemanly to say so overtly. He predicts that in a few years one musical style will assume prominence, although he declines to speculate what that style may be.

"There are times when young composers start with a big bang, embracing incredible avant-garde ideas. Then there are times when they get scared and go in the other direction toward overrejection, oversimplification. This is what I think is happening in the '80s. But that will change, it has to.

A Central European modernist whose works incorporate serial and chance elements, quarter tones and layers of dissonance within clear-cut, traditional structures, Husa nevertheless has remained aloof from academic fashion throughout his long and prolific career. Like Igor Strawinsky, he has remained his own man, retaining a consistency of style and expression regardless of the time or milieu.

"When I lived in Czechoslovakia I was part of the Czech musical tradition. Then I moved to Paris and was part of the French scene. For more than three decades I have been an American composer, but always I have remained myself."

"Perhaps it's because Cornell University is not part of the fast-paced New York City music environment. That means I have had to solve the problems of composition by myself."

Turning to the question of difficulty versus accessibility in new music, Husa says the kind of position one would associate with a composer of orthodox ideals and steadfast artistic integrity,

"I wouldn't like to write only to please the audience. It's important they like it, of course, but my main concern has always been to create music with ideas—music that is well written, that will sound good. Then it can communicate to the listener.

"When the composer is dead, it will be the performers who choose the music and the audience who will, or will not, accept that music. Isn't that so?"