A piece of contemporary music that has been played over 7000 times? In less than 20 years? Impossible, you think. Indeed, Karel Husa's *Music for Prague 1968* has really been played that often—and it still receives standing ovations from normally staid concert audiences. How does one explain this phenomenon? “I ‘vibrate’ as the world vibrates,” muses the soft-spoken Husa. “I also hope that I write ‘music of today’—that is, music that speaks of today’s life, its problems, and its excitement.” This February 11 Chicago Symphony audiences will hear the world premiere of Husa’s Concerto for Trumpet, with principal Adolph Herseth as soloist. It promises to be an event you won’t want to miss—even if you get another 7000 times to hear it.

Karel Husa’s life, shaped by quirks of fate, began in Prague on August 7, 1921. He began musical studies on the violin and piano, and started composing by the age of 13. His parents insisted that he become a civil engineer, so young Husa entered one of Prague’s technical institutes. But the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia precipitated the closing of Prague’s universities and institutes, and he was ordered to report immediately for work in Dresden. Fortuitously, however, Prague’s music conservatory remained open, and Husa escaped deportation by capturing, in 1941, the school’s last opening—in the composition department. Here Husa flourished under the tutelage of Jaroslav Růžička. In 1946, after a year of graduate study, the budding composer/conductor received a fellowship to study in Paris with Arthur Honegger, Nadia Boulanger, and André Cluytens. “At that time I composed in the style of Stravinsky, Bartók, and Janáček,” recalls Husa. “I used folk material—all composers did, except maybe Schoenberg! Even as late as 1948, after my study with Honegger,
I came back to these folk melodies. Perhaps this was a kind of 'remembrance,' or sentimental return to Czechoslovakia, for at that time I knew that I would not go back to Prague."

Husa's warmly lyrical String Quartet No. 1 (1947), which typifies his work from this period, brought the young composer international recognition. He gained renown as a conductor as well, and in 1948 was termed "one of the greatest hopes of Czech music" by a Prague newspaper. "I thought I would probably lead a life like Mahler—composing and conducting a few concerts each year," he admits. But when he refused to return to Czechoslovakia in 1949 after the Communist takeover, he lost his citizenship. "I was a composer without a country," says Husa. "It was very difficult; I was both politically and artistically an expatriate." In 1954, at the invitation of the esteemed musicologist Donald Jay Grout, Husa accepted a teaching position at Cornell University. He immigrated to the United States, and in 1959 became an American citizen.

Nevertheless, Husa was still considered a musical outsider in America. This artistic isolation was ultimately catalytic; it forced him to forge his own strong personal identity as a composer. In the 1950s, his music became increasingly dissonant and complicated as he attempted to find his own compositional voice. He created new, "looser" structural forms, and, in his Poem for viola and chamber orchestra (1959), experimented with highly complex serial techniques.

With the composition of his Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Concert Band (1967), Husa finally discovered his unique mode of expression. Characteristically, his mature scores are firmly rooted in tradition, yet call upon a wide variety of compositional techniques to achieve the desired sonic effect. Microtonal, aleatoric, and serial passages peacefully coexist with classically constructed sections filled with tonal implications; driving rhythms, powerful ostinati, and short, repeated motives weave dramatically long phrases and shattering climaxes. A brilliant orchestrator, Husa invents new notation when necessary. He reveals: "What intrigues me most in composition is contrast: music that is exciting and powerful on one hand, and gentle and quiet on the other. I started to paint when I was 13, and as a composer I like to 'paint' with long lines. Tension and energy are also important. Just look at the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—it amasses incredible power, but with only a few notes!"

Although 1968 was a painful year for Husa, it proved most fruitful. He had long planned to write a tribute to the beauty of his native city, but he reshaped his creative ideas when he saw the televised images of Soviet tanks rolling through Prague's streets that August. Thus was born Husa's remarkable Music for Prague 1968—with its cries of despair and its defiant strains of the fifteenth-century Hussite war song "Ye Warriors of God and His Law," long a symbol of resistance. "Prague is a manifesto," Husa declares. "This little nation wants freedom; they consider it of paramount importance. Why can't it happen? I thought
that as a native Czech I had the right to express how disgusted I was. Well, my music is now forbidden in Czechoslovakia. If I hadn’t written *Music for Prague* 1968—with that date—I think it would still be played there. But I don’t mind. I had to write this piece.” Husa’s austere, intense String Quartet No. 3, which had premiered earlier that year, won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in Music. This firmly established Husa as one of the late twentieth century’s leading composers.

A man of tremendously broad interests, Husa draws musical inspiration from widely varying sources. The orchestral *Two Sonnets from Michelangelo* (1971) reflects Husa’s love of poetry; his ballet *Monodrama* (1976) depicts the isolation and struggles of the American artist. Husa discloses: “I always visit churches, temples, and mosques when I’m travelling. I am moved by the spirit of the people in these religious shrines, as well as the quietness, the colors coming through the windows, and the stones. In Gothic churches I feel as if I’m absolutely nothing. Something happens to me—it’s like reading a magnificent poem.”

The composer’s profound love of nature and the earth’s beauty sparked another of his masterpieces, *Apotheosis of this Earth* (1970). Husa once wrote: “Man’s brutal... misuse of nature’s beauty—if continued at today’s reckless speed—can lead only to catastrophe. I hope that the destruction of this beautiful earth can be stopped, so that the tragedy of destruction...can exist only as a fantasy, never to become reality.” Nevertheless, his *Apotheosis* graphically depicts just such a reality. The earth is pulverized; wistful voices lament the loss of this “savagely, mortally wounded creature.” Yet Husa volunteers, “I’m not a pessimist—I’m an optimist! In general, I think my music is hopeful. Yes, it’s dramatic and sometimes tragic. But that’s not because I’m pessimistic, it’s because I like to write about things which are deep. People sometimes confuse depth with despair.”

Such lofty artistic ideals make Husa a gifted teacher; he has taught at Cornell for 33 years. “I was helped to become a composer by a teacher, Jaroslav Ridký,” he explains. “I eagerly absorbed his feelings and view of the world. Now it’s my duty to pass this on to others. But it’s more than a commitment: like the Greeks said, teachers can also learn from students.” The young composer Byron Adams, one of Husa’s former students, illuminates the nature of Husa’s genius as a teacher: “He never insisted that his students imitate his own musical style and methods, but rather eagerly searched for those elements that allowed the student to build a characteristic mode of expression. Although my own style is quite different from that of Professor Husa, I know I found my own individual voice studying with him.”

Long a familiar name in the symphonic band world, Husa has recently become a rising star in the orchestral arena as well. His virtuosic Concerto for Orchestra (1986), commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, and Concerto for Organ and Orchestra (1987) have met with high praise. A cello concerto for Lynn Harrell will be unveiled later this year. Tremendous expectations surround the premiere of Husa’s new trumpet concerto, which was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony. “It’s a three-movement work influenced by classical forms,” divulges Husa. “My first trumpet concerto, written in 1973, was much more exploratory—it even used pedal tones at impressively high ranges. This concerto is a musical vehicle for the trumpet, not a technical one.”

The 66-year-old Husa seems to be leading a truly charmed life these days. He rhapsodizes, “People complain about the twentieth-century world, that it’s directionless and all war. But we really have an incredibly wonderful life, and I think these days are most exciting to live through. And music remains powerful, gentle, mystical, and mysterious. I’m probably using ‘great’ words, but that’s what it is to me. When I go to a concert I am still positively swept away.”

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