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Faculty Recital: Karel Husa: A Chamber Music Tribute

Ithaca College Music Faculty

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Karel Husa: A Chamber Music Tribute

Hockett Family Recital Hall
Monday, November 13th, 2017
7:00 pm



ITHACA COLLEGE

School of Music

Program

Twelve Moravian Songs (1956)

Sunrise
Between the Mountains
When I Sing
What is Wrong?
Echoing the Mountains
The Snowball
Lost Love
Homeland, Goodbye

Karel Husa
(1921-2016)

*Deborah Montgomery-Cove, soprano
Charis Dimaras, piano*

Three Studies for Solo Clarinet (2007)

Poignant Song
Mountain Bird

Richard Faria, clarinet

Sonatina, Op. 1 (1943)

Allegretto moderato
Andante cantabile
Allegro marciale

Charis Dimaras, piano

Élégie et Rondeau (1957/1960)

*Deborah Martin, piano
Steven Mauk, alto saxophone
Diane Birr, piano*

Five Poems for Wind Quintet (1994)

Walking Birds
Happy Bird
Lamenting Bird with a Dead Bird
Fighting Birds

*Wendy Herbener Mehne, flute
Paige Morgan, oboe
Michael Galván, clarinet
Christin Schillinger, bassoon
Alexander Shuhan, horn*

Intermission

String Quartet No. 3 (1968)

Allegro moderato
Lento assai
Allegro possibile
Adagio

Susan Waterbury, violin
Calvin Wiersma, violin
Kyle Armbrust, viola
Elizabeth Simkin, cello

Cayuga Lake Memories (1992)

Maestoso/Recitativo
Moderato (attaca) Interlude
Allegro non troppo
Misterioso-Maestoso

Wendy Herbener Mehne, flute
Paige Morgan, oboe
Michael Galván, clarinet
Christin Schillinger, bassoon
Kim Dunnick, trumpet
Alexander Shuhan, horn
Johanna Wiley, bass trombone
Jasmine Pigott, tuba
Susan Waterbury, violin
Calvin Wiersma, violin
Kyle Armbrust, viola
Elizabeth Simkin, cello
Diane Birr, piano
Gordon Stout, percussion
Christopher Hughes, conductor

Tonight's concert is a tribute to a long-time friend and colleague, Karel Husa. This is only a sampling of his excellent list of chamber music compositions. Due to time restrictions, some of the works will not include all of the movements, but those movements selected will present a picture of his compositional variety and creative genius.

Note from the Dean

Dear Audience Members,

I send you greetings from Scottsdale, Arizona, where my work as a member of the NASM Commission on Accreditation unfortunately keeps me from joining you for this concert. However, my connection with Karel Husa is such a deep and personal one that I hope you will allow me to share a few reflections as you await the start of tonight's performance.

Karel was one of the very first Ithacans I met when I moved here from Los Angeles as a 26-year-old assistant professor of piano. His was a name, of course, like "Carl Sagan," one of the famous Ithacans that practically everyone had heard about. I remember being immediately struck by the enormous distance between his legendary, supersized reputation and his gentle, gentlemanly, kindly human qualities. I think I expected him to be 8 feet tall, bigger than life. When I actually did meet him, he was to my surprise a warm, approachable, personable man; so welcoming, and such a good colleague. He would share things with me that he had written from time to time, and chat easily and freely about music and life. Over time I came to appreciate the "real person" living inside that "famous" composer.

One of the pieces you will hear tonight, Cayuga Lake (Memories), has very personal meaning for me, because I was the pianist for the premiere of that piece in Alice Tully Hall in 1992. I can remember working on it with him, rehearsing it in Ford. I can remember his passion, his musicianship, and, above all, his kindness, always.

Karel made a big impact in our world, a big impact in Ithaca, and Karel made a big impact in my life. I know there are many people in tonight's audience, and on stage, who undoubtedly feel the same. I share with you a sense of reverence, gratitude, and great fortune that this man lived in Ithaca and that his path crossed mine, and yours. Enjoy tonight's concert.

With kind regards,
Karl Paulnack, Dean
School of Music

Karel Husa, 7 August 1921–14 December 2016

Chronology of a Life

- 7 August 1939: Husa celebrates his 18th birthday; time for professional studies
- 18 November 1939: Nazi regime closes technical schools in Czechoslovakia; career in civil engineering becomes impossible
- 1940: Husa begins study with composer Jaroslav Řídký; enters his composition class at Prague Conservatory in 1941
- 1945: Husa completes his Bachelor's Degree in music; makes his debut as conductor leading the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra in a performance of his Overture, Op. 3 (1944); completes his Sonatina, so-called "Opus 1"
- 1945–47: Husa pursues advanced degree at Prague Academy of Music
- 1948–49: Husa studies in Paris with Eugene Bigot, Andre Cluytens, Nadia Boulanger, and Arthur Honegger
- 1950–51: Husa's compositions performed at Darmstadt and Donaueschingen Festivals
- 1952: Husa marries Simone Perault in February
- 1954: Husa moves to Ithaca, New York to assume a faculty post at Cornell University
- 1967: Husa begins teaching composition at Ithaca College
- 1968: Husa composes *Music for Prague 1968*
- 1969: Husa wins Pulitzer Prize for String Quartet No. 3; Kenneth Snapp directs Ithaca College Concert Band in the premiere (Washington, D. C.) of *Music for Prague 1968*
- 1986: Husa retires from Ithaca College; begins his series of concertos: for Orchestra (1986), for Organ and Orchestra (1987), for Trumpet and Orchestra (1987), for 'cello and Orchestra (1988)
- 1990: Husa conducts *Music for Prague 1968* in Smetana Hall, Prague, 13 February 1990
- 1992: Husa retires from Cornell University; completes the score of his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in honor of the 150th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic (premiered 27 May 1993, Glen Dicterow soloist)
- 1993: Husa wins Grawemeyer Award for Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra
- 2007: Husa publishes his last major work, *Cheetah* for wind ensemble

Program Notes

Twelve Moravian Songs (1956)

Karel Husa arrived in the USA on 28 September 1954. He had been denied a passport from the Czech government and had actually been living in France during his final European years. He came to the USA to join the faculty of Cornell University and was later joined by his wife and children. He knew full well that he could not go back to Czechoslovakia as long as the Communists were in control. His music was banned. He would have been arrested. When his mother died in February 1955, his family members did not tell him for fear that he might, in an impetuous moment, return to his homeland for his mother's funeral. It was only after the funeral had taken place that the news of Božena Dongresova-Husova was communicated to him. It was under these circumstances that Husa composed these highly nostalgic *Twelve Moravian Songs*. The equally nostalgic *Eight Czech Duetts* (1955) for piano four-hands were also composed under this cloud of homesickness. Husa arranged two of these songs, "Sunrise" and "Aspen Leaves" for a *cappella* mixed chorus for the 1981 set of *Three Moravian Songs*. Husa revisited the *Twelve Moravian Songs* yet again in his *Postcard from Home* (1997) for saxophone and piano. Two of the songs, "Echo in the Mountains," and "Homeland, Goodbye" form the basis of *Postcard*.

Three Studies for Solo Clarinet (2007)

Husa's Three Studies for Solo Clarinet (2007) were composed for and dedicated to Professor Jiri Hlavac in honor of his 60th birthday. The pieces had their premiere at the 60th Prague Spring International Music Competition in 2008. Originally ordered "Mountain Bird," "Poignant Song," and "Relentless Machine," the premise was to display three different types of performance on the clarinet: expressive, legato, and *detaché*.

Sonatina, Op. 1 (1943)

The history of the Sonatina is convoluted. Its opus number should actually be "two"; however, the publisher—who specialized in first publications of promising composers, including Fibich, Dvorak, and Smetana—requested the alteration of the opus number. The Sonatina, originally published in Prague by Frantisek Urbánek in 1947 was taken over into the catalogue of Associated Music Publishers, Husa's primary publisher. Husa ceased using opus numbers altogether following the publication of his Sonata for Piano, Op. 11.

Élégie et Rondeau

The *Élégie* for piano solo, which was drafted in August of 1956 and put into final form in 1957, is unrelated to the "Elegy" of the *Eight Czech Duetts*. The piano piece was written in memory of Husa's mother. Although it is highly effective in its original form, it is another example of Husa's reuse of music in a different context: He rescored the movement for saxophone and piano at the request of the saxophone virtuoso Sigurd Rascher, who premiered that version at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York, on 12 June 1960. The compositional evolution continued when Husa added a second movement thus creating the *Élégie et Rondeau*, which Rascher premiered at Wigmore Hall, London, on 12 December 1960. The story evolved still further when Husa orchestrated the pair of movements. This version was premiered by Rascher with the Cornell University Orchestra under Husa's direction on 6 May 1962.

Five Poems for Wind Quintet

Beginning in October 1994, Husa and his wife Simone began spending the winter and spring months in Ponce Inlet, Florida. The first piece that he composed there was the set of *Five Poems* (1994) for woodwind quintet, Husa's second Koussevitzky Foundation commission.) As a consequence, the manuscript is deposited at the Library of Congress in accordance with the commission requirements.) The pieces were written specifically for the Quintet of America, who gave the premiere on 10 February 1995 at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Husa knew their playing well, since he had performed his Serenade for wind quintet and chamber orchestra with them in 1982.

The title is a bit misleading, as there are, in fact, no poems at all. Instead, each of the five movements of the piece is intended to conjure the ambience of different situations in the ornithological world. Cornell University's renowned Sapsucker Woods is within easy walking distance from what was Husa's primary residence in Ithaca at 1322 Hanshaw Road until Husa and his wife went to a smaller home at 1 Belwood Lane in August of 2000. Husa was not so much concerned with recreating the bird songs in an exacting way. He was more interested in transferring the virtuosic and distinctive aspects of birdsong to the five wind instruments at his disposal. The movements of *Poems* thus offer concerto-like writing for each of the five winds.

In Czechoslovakia, the *Five Poems* were quickly taken up by the Prague Wind Quintet, who performed them there publicly for the first time in December 1996. They subsequently recorded them on the Supraphone label. (Supraphon CD 81-9009-2-131. ©1998)

String Quartet No. 3 (1968)

A performance of Husa's Second String Quartet (1953) by the Parrenin Quartet at the University of Chicago inspired Leonard Sorkin, the first violinist of the Fine Arts Quartet, to obtain a commission for Husa's Pulitzer-Prize-Winning Third String Quartet. The commission came from the Fine Arts Foundation of Chicago in 1967. The ensemble had been founded there in 1946 by Leonard Sorkin, who was still the first violinist when the group gave the first performance of the piece on 14 October 1968 in Chicago. It was actually the 'cellist, George Sopkin, who targeted Husa as a potential commission recipient. Sopkin had heard the Parrenin Quartet's performance of Husa's Second String Quartet during their 1959 tour of the USA. He liked the piece so much that he prevailed upon his colleagues to take it into their repertoire; and they did. After playing it frequently both in America and Europe, they decided it was time to get Husa to write a Third String Quartet. The piece he created for them is dodecaphonic, but the application of the procedure is liberal. Octave doublings, microtonal writing, and passages written in a free, pan-tonal style preface the score. Eventually, the piece became a ballet. This was the idea of choreographer and dancer Dennis Nahat after he attended a concert by the Fine Arts Quartet in New York City. He informed Husa of his idea to create the ballet *Ontogeny* (i.e., the development or course of development of an organism), and Husa gave his blessing.

The nomination of the Quartet for the Pulitzer Prize was the work of the Fine Arts Quartet. They contacted Husa to request the score of the work, and they submitted it to the prize committee without Husa's knowledge. When the selection committee had completed their work, they contacted Husa's home to convey the good news. Simone, the composer's wife, had no idea what this phone call was about. Suspecting some sort of telephone marketing gimmick, she thanked the caller but indicated that she was not interested in any prizes. Startled by this reaction, the committee contacted Husa at the

Ithaca College School of Music. It was a happy day for Karel Husa and for IC!

The tone row of the Third String Quartet is D, F#, G, G#, A, C#, D#, F, E, Bb, B, C. The tones fall into two pairs of two trichords, two with half steps, and two with half steps combined with major thirds. Though some critics decried Husa's score as being "hopelessly out of touch with the times," important composers including William Schuman, Samuel Adler, and Otto Luening made a point of writing letters of congratulations to Husa. (For the text of these letters, see Mark A. Radice, *Karel Husa: A Composer's Life in Essays and Documents*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, pp. 185, 187, 191.)

Cayuga Lake (Memories) (1992)

Husa composed *Cayuga Lake (Memories)* for the Centennial of Ithaca College. In it, he set out to use three quartets consisting respectively of strings (conductor's left), woodwinds (center), and brass (conductor's right). These were complemented by piano and percussion. Husa insisted that the piece must be disposed into quartets with the piano and percussion at the back rather than with the players dispersed as a chamber orchestra. The score includes some unusual elements, especially the use of wooden flute for playing a Native American lullaby, characteristic Native American drumming, and other indigenous elements. Living in upstate New York, amidst Seneca Lake, Cayuga Lake, and other locales named after Native Americans, he had the idea of writing the work in homage of the original residents of the region. In fact, Husa undertook to explore Native American music (which he used already in the "Drum Ceremony" of the *American Te Deum*). The sixty-two pages of sketches for *Cayuga Lake* include numerous pages with indications of such elements including: "Love Song," "Hand Game Song," "Mountain Song," "Victory Song," "Warrior Songs," "War Song," "Rejoicing and Thanksgiving," "Wolf Song," "Big Thunder," "Greeting Song," "Dance Song," "Medicine," and "Song . . . Ritual." In his Prefatory Note, Husa explains:

I have lived in this region for over thirty-eight years, and this lake has become part of my life as a composer. Since 1964, I have written practically all of my music in my summer home, a few feet from its gentle or storming waters. I am fascinated by the changes of the lake's colors, which happen not only every season, but every day or hour and even within minutes. It is a beautiful palette of blue, yellow, green, grey, orange, and red in so many combinations and shades, reaching sometimes a complete darkness. The singing of birds, winds, and colorful fish bring the lake to life every day, and you can actually hear in these waters the flutes, drums, bells, and I imagine the habitants of the surrounding territories, so unjustly silenced. And the fossils released regularly by the lake to its shores remind us of its mysterious deepness as well as its glacial age.

Reading Husa's commentary, I can't help but recall that early in his education, he had considered becoming a painter. Because of political circumstances in Czechoslovakia at the time, pursuit of his painting career was impossible, but we musicians know very well that he *did* paint, and that the notes for him were as powerful and vibrant as any brilliant colors in a tube of paint.

Notes: Mark A Radice, Tuesday, 10 October 2017