



Karel J. Husa

August 7, 1921 – December 14, 2016

Cornell and the Department of Music mourn the loss of Karel Jaroslav Husa, Kappa Alpha Professor Emeritus, who passed away at his home in Apex, North Carolina. He was born in Prague.

Over the course of his long and illustrious career, Professor Husa was the recipient of several honors. These included the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 (for his String Quartet No. 3); the Grawemeyer Award, the most lucrative prize in classical music, in 1993 (for his Cello Concerto); and, in 1995, the Czech Republic's highest civilian recognition, the State Medal of Merit, First Class. He also received nine honorary doctoral degrees and numerous other composition prizes and fellowships. Commissions came from some of the major arts organizations in the country, including the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the New York Philharmonic (twice), the Chicago Symphony, and many others. As a conductor, he worked with major orchestras throughout Europe, Asia, and America, and as a guest conductor on many college campuses. Several of his works have entered the modern repertoire, led by *Music for Prague, 1968* (commissioned for wind ensemble by Ithaca College, where he also taught from 1967 to 1986, and later transcribed by the composer for symphony orchestra), with over 7,000 performances to date. Husa's music has been frequently recorded on major classical music record labels.

As a child, he studied violin and piano. He was also an avid painter (as he continued to be throughout his life), and hoped to pursue art study; however, his entry to the Prague Academy of Art was barred by its closure with the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1939. Embracing his concurrent interest in music, he studied composition (and on the side, conducting) at the Prague Conservatory under Jaroslav Řidký, 1941-1947. He completed his advanced diploma while living in Paris, having won a grant to study there with composers Arthur Honegger at the École

Normale de Musique. Around this time, he also studied privately with the composer Nadia Boulanger and the conductor André Cluytens.

A prominent composer, Husa was equally at home at the podium. Initially hired in 1954 to teach music theory and composition at Cornell, his role broadened to conduct the Cornell Symphony in 1955. He served in both composing and conducting capacities until his retirement in 1992.

Professor Husa was widely acclaimed during his career, and his stature in the composition world was international in scope. However, in 1948 the Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakian government branded his compositions as “decadent” and in Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia, and his music went unperformed there until breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989. Banished, he composed *Music for Prague, 1968* in response to the Soviet regime’s brutal quelling of the Prague Spring rebellion. This orchestral peon to his Czech homeland contains much symbolism, as his Forward to the piece explains, prominently a “Hussite war song from the 15th century, ‘Ye Warriors of God and His Law,’ a symbol of resistance and hope for hundreds of years” which no Czech listener would fail to recognize. As Husa recalled to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1986, he had already begun work on a score before the rebellion. “Then things started happening. I remembered a simple work song I heard quite often during the (Nazi) occupation in 1939. It has been sung by our people for over 500 years, ever since (religious reformer) Jan Hus was burned at the stake. It has kept the nation alive during all the occupations we’ve suffered.” A proliferation of chimes evokes Prague’s sobriquet, the City of Hundreds of Towers, and its magnificently sounding church bells as “calls of distress as well as of victory.” Husa begins the piece with a piccolo birdcall, “symbol of the liberty which the city of Prague has seen only for moments during its thousand years of existence.” Upon the breakup of the Soviet bloc in 1989, Husa was at last invited to conduct this piece, as former colleague and current Chair of Conducting and Ensembles at the Eastman School of Music, Mark Davis Scatterday, recalls. “When he finally conducted in a country where he had been banned for over forty years,” Scatterday writes, “it was a poignant homecoming, marking not only the success and perseverance of an individual artist, but heralding a changing world – changing this time in favor of new hope, new freedom, new dignity.”

Composer Roberto Sierra, Old Dominion Foundation Professor in the Humanities, notes that Husa was “one of the most distinguished and admired composers of the second half of the 20th century. At Cornell he taught generations of composers who became important figures in the American musical landscape.” Sierra adds that Husa “will be remembered for his great music and unique compositional voice.” A former student and colleague of Husa’s, the late Steven Stucky, Given Foundation Professor Emeritus, said in a 2012 statement that although steeped in modernist compositional techniques, “his personal passion and the really highly dramatic nature of his music made it approachable even though it was unfamiliar. I think that was a big step in the reception of modern American music in this country.” Illustrating the point, Scatterday recalls breaking down emotionally at a first performance of one of Husa’s iconic works – *Apotheosis of This Earth* (1971) – in a new arrangement that the composer also conducted. “I was not embarrassed by this moment,” Scatterday reveals, recalling it instead as a “changing point in my career.” Since that life-altering event, Scatterday has “always strived to experience this kind of true emotion” in his own musical work. In fact, Scatterday points out, *Apotheosis* grew from Husa’s personal encounter with the effects of pollution – dozens of dead fish washed

onto the shore of Cayuga Lake. With this emotionally searing work, Husa hoped to call attention to “Man’s brutal possession and misuse of nature’s beauty,” as he wrote in the Forward, “which – if continued at today’s reckless speed – can only lead to catastrophe.”

Karel Husa is survived by his wife of 64 years, the former Simone Perault; four daughters, Catherine Husseini, Anne-Marie Katerji, Elizabeth Evola and Caroline Husa Bell; 10 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Written by Steven F. Pond (Chair), Roberto Sierra and Mark Davis Scatterday