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Karel Husa: A musical mirror of our times

Kariann Sullivan

University of Northern Iowa

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Karel Husa:

A Musical Mirror of our Time

Presidential Scholar Project
Kariann Sullivan
March 25, 1992
Introduction

Copernicus, Einstein, Beethoven, Thoreau. These are but a few of the individuals who have been shunned, criticized, or even punished for their ideas. Oddly enough, however, these were the people who made a difference in the course of man and his thinking. Science would not be what we know it as today if it were not for Copernicus and Einstein. The course of music might have been completely different had Beethoven never existed. Thoreau's thoughts led him to jail, yet are now considered essential to the understanding of the Romantic man.

Their contemporaries thought them fools. We know otherwise. They saw past that which was known. Instead of merely repeating what had been said before them, they reflected ideas that were new and different. Openness to change let these great minds experience fully the society in which they lived, rather than living through the perceptions of a previous time.

Every area of expertise has its own personages considered to be on the cutting edge. Some will succeed and become part of history. Others will fall by the wayside. It is nearly impossible for one to look at the late 20th century and know which figures will become the great minds to be read about in future history books. In some cases, however, an individual surfaces out of the mass who is so extraordinary that one can be almost certain of his/her role as a true representative of this time in our society.

Karel Husa has proven to be one such representative in the musical arena. His works are amazing. His mind is extraordinary. He, himself, feels his music reflects the time in which we live. Some would argue. It is technically difficult, complex in structure, and deep with meaning. Those unwilling to give up the constraints of the past and the comfort of
the familiar will naturally take offense to the music of Karel Husa. However, those open to change and aware of the world around them will find his music necessarily appropriate for the complex world it is trying to portray.

The following pages can be but a meager attempt at depicting Karel Husa, the man, and his music. The two are nearly inseparable. One cannot understand the music without having some knowledge of the man. However, the music is so much a part of Husa's character that its inclusion is demanded. It is the author's intention to introduce Karel Husa through a discussion of his life and ideas, musically and otherwise. Through this discussion, one will hopefully understand his position as a musical mirror of our time.
Bibliography

Karel Husa was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia on August 7, 1921. His musical training began when he was eight years old, at which time he began to study the violin. Piano lessons began when he was thirteen years old. His parents’ intention was never to raise him to become a musician. In fact, his mother wanted him to pursue a career in engineering, building bridges. They simply felt music was a necessary part of his education and upbringing. Interestingly, Husa stated in interviews that his family did not have a lot of money, however, both him and his sister took music lessons. Obviously, the importance of music was instilled in Husa at a very young age.

Husa was on his way to an engineering career, enrolled and attending classes, when the Nazi occupation in 1941 forced all the technical schools to close. In an attempt to avoid working for the Nazi-ruled military he had to be attending some type of school. His interests in art and music provided him with viable alternatives. When his application to the art school was refused due to his former status as a technical school student, Husa went with his final option: to attend the Prague Conservatory. The only opening in the school was in the composition department. It is here that he began his formal composition training, although he had been composing since the age of thirteen. He graduated summa cum laude from the Prague Conservatory in 1945 and furthered his education towards a doctorate by attending the Academy of Musical Arts in Prague from 1945-1947.

His first prize winning composition was his *Sinfonietta for Orchestra* composed in 1946. This piece won the Prize of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1948. His *First String Quartet* (written
1947-48) won the Lili Boulanger Prize in 1950 and the Bilthoven Festival Prize in 1951. The most noted piece, his *Third String Quartet*, composed in 1968, won the Pulitzer Prize in Composition in 1969.

Husa continued his studies in Paris in 1946, becoming a composition student of Nadia Boulanger and Arthur Honegger at the Ecole Normale de Musique. He also studied conducting with Andre Cluytens, Eugene Bigot, and Jean Fournet while in France.

In 1954, Husa was offered a temporary position at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He accepted the three-year position for two main reasons: 1) he felt it would provide him with more time for composition, and 2) as a teacher he would be brought into contact with young people, something that is very important. (Hartzell, p. 91) In 1957, the three-year position turned permanent as he was appointed Director of University Orchestras at Cornell.

Although Husa returned to Prague briefly in 1948, he lost his citizenship when he refused to return again for renewal of his Visa. He could not bear to see homeland in such a state. In 1959, Husa became an American citizen and has since lived in the United States. His plans are to retire this spring to allow for more time for compositions.

When asked about his compositions, Husa feels his early works were greatly influenced by his teachers and other composers he was hearing at the time. Through the years, however, he believes he has developed his own style and makes a conscious effort not to listen to other modern composers too closely, for fear of letting them influence his own works.

In particular, Husa considers two of his works, 'manifestos.' *Music for Prague 1968* and *Apotheosis of this Earth* are extremely powerful pieces that carry deep meaning for Husa. These two works seem to be the
essence of the man, Karel Husa, in that they give one an opportunity to see inside the mind and understand the values he holds.

Music for Prague 1968

Music for Prague holds deep meaning for Husa, in that it is the musical expression of his reaction to the news of the invasion and Soviet takeover of his home, Prague, in 1968. Radio broadcasts of the situation became the impetus for Husa as he began sketches for a composition he knew he would eventually write in its entirety. The opportunity came when a friend suggested a work be commissioned for the Music Educators National Conference convention in Washington, D.C. in January, 1969. (Whitwell, p.1)

The total composition time for this work was merely seven weeks. After teaching on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, Husa would travel forty minutes to a cottage near Lake Cayuga in upstate New York and compose until his return Sunday evenings. (Nelson, p. 16-17) The urgency felt is obvious in his composition of the work and in the music.

The work itself is in four movements. Although this is common formal procedure, as in symphonies, Husa continually attempts to go beyond the familiar in his compositions. The overall form seems to have been only a result of the natural evolution of the musical ideas, rather than a fixed entity within which he composed.

The following is the Forward that Husa specifically requests to be spoken or printed in the program at each performance of this work:

Three main ideas bind the composition together. The first and most important is an old Hussite war song from the 15th century, "Ye Warriors of God and His Law," a symbol of resistance and hope for hundreds of years, whenever fate lay heavy on the Czech nation. It has been utilized also by many Czech composers, including Smetana in My
Country. The beginning of this religious song is announced very softly in
the first movement by the timpani and concludes in a strong unison
(Chorale). The song is never used in its entirety.

The second idea is the sound of bells throughout; Prague, named
also the City of "Hundreds of Towers," has used its magnificently sounding
church bells as calls of distress as well as of victory.

The last idea is a motif of three chords first appearing very softly
under the piccolo solo at the beginning of the piece, in flutes, clarinets
and horns. Later it reappears at extremely strong dynamic levels, for
example, in the middle of the Aria.

Different techniques of composing as well as orchestrating have
been used in Music for Prague 1968 and some new sounds explored, such
as the percussion section in the Interlude, the ending of the work, etc.
Much symbolism also appears: in addition to the distress calls in the first
movement (Fanfares), the unbroken hope of the Hussite song, sound of
bells, or the tragedy (Aria), there is also the bird call at the beginning
(piccolo solo), symbol of the liberty which the City of Prague has seen
only for moments during its thousand years of existence. — K.H.

(Score - Music for Prague 1968)

The first movement, "Introduction and Fanfare", contains the basic
musical material to be utilized throughout the entire piece, all within the
first four measures. In the first bar the timpani plays the opening notes
of the Hussite war theme, with it continuing in the fourth measure. The
melodic motive, a bird call, is heard in the piccolo solo in the second bar.
Three chords used consistently throughout the piece and referred to by
Husa as chorale chords are heard in the flutes, clarinets, and horns and
measures three and four.

A gradual intensification by means of these three main elements
continues through the thickening of the textures and expansion of the seed
material. The music builds until the first entrance of the trumpets,
without mutes, occurring at letter C. The contrasting brass intensify in
motive, texture, and dynamic throughout the remainder of the movement.
As if out of control, these ideas seem to fall apart into near chaos as the
rhythms become less concise and the motives less discernible. Chaos
eventually dissolves into the a brief return of the piccolo solo to close the
movement.

The low reeds dominate the second movement entitled, “Aria.” The movement’s title indicates the intention of the composer to portray a ‘song’, in form and melodic structure. The listener is given the opportunity to hear the melody in the saxes alone first, with complimenting percussion parts. Increased rhythmic activity in the upper woodwinds delineates a contrasting section in the middle of the movement. The arch-like structure of the movement demands the return of the saxophone melody as a final section in the ‘song’.

The Interlude, scored entirely for percussion, is a prime example of Husa’s continuing search for new and different ways to express ideas through music. A large percussion section is employed with each of the requisite five or six players covering many instruments. Each timbre holds a particular role in the movement. For example, the snare drum characteristically becomes militant in nature, whereas as the vibraphone is meant to represent a nervous human voice. The idea of the bells of Prague’s towers is very apparent in this movement. They function as a warning of the impending danger.

The final movement, Toccata and Chorale, is formally a counterpart to the first movement. Corresponding passages in the two movements further enhance the unity of the piece. The Toccata conjures up the images of frenzy due to its rhythmic nature. The repeated note passages may be a recreation of distress signals being transmitted by Morse code. A fragmented melody, very disjunct in nature, furthers the feeling of uneasiness and unrest. The Chorale section brings a dramatic return of the Hussite war song, first in the timpani and then in the winds. Perhaps to represent the act of oppression, the instrumental statement is
interrupted by the rhythmic figures first introduced in the Toccata. The remaining two bars of the war song return after the interruption. Immediately following is the snare drum solo, reminiscent of the third movement, and an aleatoric passage in the winds, representing a culmination in chaos. The entire ensemble overpowers the snare through a fortissimo statement of the war theme as a final call for help. The last two notes of the theme, C to E are repeated, symbolizing the continued struggle and the remaining hope for resolution and freedom.

Technical difficulty and emotional intensity makes this an extremely challenging piece, even for the best ensembles. The composer's heightened ability to express emotions through music come through clearly in this piece. A basic understanding of the entire history of Czechoslovakia can be drawn from this piece. Those who will live hundreds of years from now could easily listen to such a piece, understanding the society and its hopes and fears as reflected in this work.

*Apotheosis of this Earth*

A more global counterpart to *Music for Prague* may be experienced in Husa's *Apotheosis of this Earth*. Whereas *Prague* holds very specific and personal meaning for Husa and his Czech counterparts, the *Apotheosis* may be considered his manifesto for all of planet Earth. His uncanny ability to express the state of our world through this piece is frightening in that it forces the listener to become aware of a major problem in society today: the destruction of nature and the environment.

The music of *Apotheosis* crystallized out of various individual images, aurally and visually, that had a great impact on Husa. The title
explains the purpose of the piece, in the composer's mind. "Apotheosis" is "apotheos" in Czech and is frequently used in Czech poetry. The meaning is difficult to grasp in that the word is not used in the English vocabulary. Essentially, it means a glorification of someone who has departed. Thus, "Apotheosis" of this Earth suggests the imminent danger of destroying that which gives the Earth its life.

The first movement, Apotheosis, was inspired by Husa's memory of witnessing the first man on the moon in June of 1969. Such an image in black and white at 4:00 a.m had a profound impact on Husa. The view of the Earth from the moon became the visual source for the aural representation that exists in the first movement of Apotheosis. The clarinet solo at the very beginning signifies the first glimpse of the Earth, as if one were approaching from outside the universe. The music acts appropriately to reflect the increase of the Earth's size as one moves closer. While first just a dot of light appropriately depicted as a single note, details become clearer and the texture thickens to fulfill the aural reflection as the movement continues. Towards the end of the movement, the listener is reminded of tragedy that may not have been seen from far away. The xylophone cuts through as an indication of the reality that exists.

The second movement, Tragedy of Destruction, cruelly alerts the listener to the injustice and pain that man has inflicted upon the Earth and its other inhabitants. All levels of destruction are depicted. Everything from atomic bombs to the cruelty to whales can be heard. Husa used a variety of compositional techniques to assimilate appropriate sounds as representatives of the destructive actions of man. As a result, the Earth is crumbling from the neglect and abuse. Appropriately, the music falls
apart, almost imperceptibly at first, then becoming blatantly obvious. The end of the movement symbolizes the end of the Earth.

The third movement, while titled Postscript in the score, was actually intended to have the label, P.S., according to the composer. Editorial decisions were made that went against the composer's wishes at the time of publication. In any case, the final movement is filled with remorse at the demise of the Earth. The last voices are heard 'bouncing around' as they travel back into space as there is nothing left on Earth. The conclusion one comes to at the end, the composer feels, is a question, "Why have we let this happen?"

The universality of this piece in its role as a mirror of the present is astounding. At any level, whether it be global peace or local recycling, one can see the development of awareness that was never found in Apotheosis. "Fantasy to remind of danger" is the phrase the composer uses when referring to this piece. The effect of even the slightest possibility of such a disaster occurring, to any degree, serves as a reminder of what is important in the world today. It is sad that we must go to the extreme of imagining total loss before we can begin to appreciate all that exists for us now.

In Summary

A musical mirror. An odd image, but one that seems very appropriate when discussing Karel Husa and the music he creates. Time and again, in interviews and lectures, Husa stressed his belief of music reflecting the time in which it is created. This is how we remember history and the societies of the past, by the art which survives. When asked, Husa states that *Music for Prague 1990* might be in the planning.
The liberation of Czechoslovakia gave Husa the chance to conduct *Music for Prague 1968* in Prague for the first time in 1990. It had been banned due to its possible political implications.

My hope is that someone, be it Husa or another composer, will compose music that reflects the hope that we have for the future. Mistakes have been made. Now we must learn from them and grow to create the beauty that music was meant to reflect.
Sources


Interviews and lectures with Karel Husa during his residency at the University of Northern Iowa, November 18-22, 1991.
Karel Husa

Al Fresco

Kariann Sullivan

December 20, 1991
Introduction

As one of the forerunning modern composers of today, Karel Husa's music spans all musical media in his efforts to reflect the times in which we live. It would appear as if the wind band medium, however, is his preferred means of expression. Two works which he refers to as 'manifestos', *Apotheosis of this Earth* and *Music for Prague 1968*, were first written for band, although they have since been rewritten for orchestra. The majority of his wind compositions are clearly intended for college and/or professional ensembles. The technical demands made upon the performer are even challenging to these levels of ensembles. One piece, however, seems to be more 'technically accessible' to the players.

Written on commission for the Ithaca College Concert Band, *Al Fresco* was premiered at the MENC Convention in Philadelphia on April 19, 1975, with Husa conducting. The material for this work was originally contained in Husa's *Three Fresques for Orchestra*, Op. 7, written in 1947. The first movement was slightly revised in 1963. As this movement utilizes the wind parts to a great extent, Husa had been considering reworking the material for wind band. This particular commission offered Husa a chance to do just that.
All of Husa's music is difficult in many aspects. For this reason, the approachability of his music by high school students is often thought questionable, if not impossible. This particular piece, however, is "intended for young, high school musicians," according to Husa.(4) Husa's perception of the difficulty of his own music is, interestingly enough, often inaccurate. The following pages will help to determine whether or not Husa's intentions for this piece are appropriate.

Al Fresco

If one is going to give consideration to this piece as a possible endeavor for an average to above average high school band, serious analysis of all aspects posing potential problems needs to be done. Areas of difficulty include instrumentation, technical requirements, and conceptual understanding. Only after an objective study of these areas, such as follows, can one compare the demands of the piece to the situation and abilities of a particular ensemble and determine its accessibility to the students.

The most obvious consideration for any band director is the availability of instrumentation for a particular piece. Although further study may show obvious scoring duplications providing for flexibility in
this area, the band director must assume at the outset that all instruments are necessary for the composition to be true the composer's intentions. The instrumentation, without regard for possible doublings, is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Group(s)</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Group(s)</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piccolo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Alto sax (1,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>String Bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flute (1,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor sax</td>
<td></td>
<td>Piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oboe (1,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Barit sax</td>
<td></td>
<td>Timpani (sm., med., lg.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb clarinet</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass sax/contrabass cl.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Percussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bb clarinet (1,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bb trumpet (1,2,3,4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>vibes, marimba, glock,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alto clarinet</td>
<td></td>
<td>F Horn (1,2,3,4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>xylophone, snare drum,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass clarinet</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trombone (1,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>pair lg. crash cymbals,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bassoon (1,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Baritone</td>
<td></td>
<td>lg. and sm. susp. cym.,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrabassoon</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tuba</td>
<td></td>
<td>lg. gong, bass drum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cues for important lines that may be missing due to lack of instrumentation are shown in the score as they appear in the parts. For example, contrabass clarinet is cued in the bassoon, string bass is cued in the piano, and English horn is cued in the oboe. With these in the score, it can be assumed that the composer recognized the fact that those instruments may not be readily available and, thus, determined alternate instruments which he felt would be appropriate substitutions.

Along the same lines as instrumentation is the consideration of the accessibility of needed equipment. One of the main components of this work which make it substantial in the band medium is its extensive use of percussion. Although certainly not as big and diverse as a Bukvich piece,
Husa still gives the percussion section a variety of playing opportunities within the expectations of what an average high school program might own. In addition to the percussion section, Husa writes for diversity in textures and timbres by using a variety of mutes in the brass section. In order for an ensemble to play this piece just as the composer intended, the following would be needed:

- Trumpet straight mutes - fiber and metal
- Trombone straight mutes - fiber and metal
- Trumpet harmon mutes
- Trombone harmon mutes
- Horn mutes
- Tuba mutes

Husa is very specific in the parts as to which types of mutes he is requesting. When a composer takes the time to think about the desired sound and determines how to get such a sound, the ensemble must respect those requests and act accordingly.

Once instrumentation and equipment have been established then one must look at the technical considerations of the piece. Ability levels of the individual players, as well as the ensemble as a whole must be assessed. Range, rhythm, and other technical aspects of the parts appear to be the main determinants in deciding whether or not this piece would be feasible for a particular ensemble.

The ranges for the expected instrumentation of a high school
ensemble (omitting contrabassoon, bass sax, contrabass clarinet, and string bass) are attached as Appendix A. In some cases, certain notes that may be possible only for those students with better quality instruments are notated by parentheses in the score and another octave is given as an option. For example, not all alto saxophones are equipped with a high F# key, so the lower octave is given as an alternative. It is purely an individual determination by the band director of a specific ensemble in deciding the ability of the players to handle such ranges. Context of notes at the extremes of the ranges must also be considered in this area of assessment.

When studying the rhythmic complexity within the score, one finds a great deal of variety within lines and between lines. For example, the following rhythm would require a high degree of understanding from the ensemble in order to be played accurately. (trombones mm. 68-71)

Various levels of beat division in close proximity, as above, are found throughout the piece. Adding to this rhythmic excitement are increasingly complex syncopated figures. The example below occurs just before the obvious climax of the piece. (clarinets mm. 214-216)
Without the added degree of tension at that particular point in the music, which can only come from a rhythmically precise ensemble, the composer’s musical intentions cannot exist.

In addition, conflicting rhythms are often occurring at the same time between two different lines. For example, measures 80-84 show sixteenth notes in some instruments while others are playing triplets. Unless all players are solid in their particular rhythm, the contrast will not be apparent. Measures 212-214 and 216-218 might also be challenging in the maintenance of the rhythmic independence of lines.

Repetition of such figures increases the difficulty.

The variety of playing techniques in this piece is very characteristic of Husa’s music, especially in his works of the last twenty years. For high school players, who certainly are not accustomed to such devices, their ability to understand and master these will need to be addressed. The aleatoric passage from mm. 219-238 will certainly pose problems for the entire ensemble. Many high school players will shy away from playing anything that is not spelled out in the music. In addition, maintaining awareness of the passing musical time during such sections is difficult when first encountered.

Challenging individual requirements of the music serve as additional
measuring devices for this piece. Glissandi, flutter tonguing, double tonguing, and quarter tones are fairly advanced techniques that Husa utilizes. The trombone glissandi in mm. 157-168 may be particularly difficult as they cover the range of almost two octaves over the span of anywhere from three beats to two measures. The concepts of flutter tonguing, double tonguing, and quarter tones may be accessible to a few advanced high school players.

Aside from the unusual techniques, the difficulty of the parts themselves must also pose a question in the band director's mind. Extremely soft passages in the high woodwinds are difficult, even for advanced players. Actual finger requirements of all the woodwinds are very demanding, although it does appear that the composer has made a conscious effort to simplify the music for the individual players. For example, many sixteenth passages alternate between two players or two parts. It is difficult to say whether or not this was done with the sole intention of making the music easier or whether the goal was the aural appearance of change within the line. Measures 51-54 are the first instance of this writing in the bassoons and horns. It would not appear as if having one person play the whole measure (m. 51) would sound significantly different. Therefore, an assumption would be that this was
done in an effort to simplify the part. This practice, however, is not consistent throughout the piece so the true purpose in such writing is still unclear.

The final consideration is that of conceptual understanding of the work as a whole. Unlike *Apotheosis of this Earth* or *Music for Prague 1968*, Husa states this piece is without programmatic content, although his inspiration stems from his experiences with the frescoes in Italy and France. The emotional depth of Husa's 'manifesto works' would perhaps be beyond the understanding of the high school students. The capacity for such understanding may be there, however. With *AlFresca*, the imagery of the paintings might be just enough to give them focus to the piece. From there, the students can enhance the music with their own experience and understanding.

The work is intellectually approachable by the high school students. The key in fulfilling their understanding of the work must inherently come from the conductor. If she/he is not totally aware of the piece in its entirety, she/he will be unable to enhance the students' experience of the piece. The technical difficulties will get in the way of the students' understanding if the conductor does not make a point of broadening the players' awareness past the notes on his/her part.
Conclusion

We return to the question, "Is this work playable by 'young, high school musicians'?" It should be, but it is not. In the ideal school system, the students would have exposure to good music throughout their musical education, starting in elementary school. Their understanding of music by the time they reach high school would automatically prepare them for such pieces as *Al Fresco* and other contemporary works. Then the technical concerns would be the only obstacle.

Admittedly, this is a very technically challenging work. Even in an ideal music curriculum, only the better high school bands would be able to play this piece well. However, students live up to challenges and can only grow when higher expectations are placed upon them. If any particular ensemble played only those pieces which were well within their playing ability, the ensemble would never get better and might actually get worse.

Hopefully, as we work to improve the music education system in our schools, pieces by Karel Husa and other modern composers can be part of the core repertoire for even the average high school program. The reasons should be obvious. These composers are writing music for today by utilizing and expanding upon the musical resources of the past while integrating experiences of the present. (Thus, music education must
include study of the past for the students to truly understand good music.)

Only when the educators make the decision to persevere with their ideals in mind can we truly broaden the students understanding of music.
ENDNOTES


(3) McLaurin, p.28.

(4) Husa, p. 1.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A

Ranges for Al Fresco

Piccolo  Flute  Oboe  English horn

Bassoon  Eb clarinet  Bb cl.  Alto cl.

Bass cl.  Alto sax  Tenor sax  Bari sax

Trumpet  Horn  Trombone  Euphonium

Tuba