

Spring in Prague, 1968. Soviet tanks were extinguishing the flush of freedom that the forward-thinking Dubček government had infused into Czechoslovakia. Karel Husa, who had been exiled from his homeland after the Communist takeover in the late forties, could only watch the events unfold on television with frustration from his new home in America.

Husa turned that anger into music. *Music for Prague 1968*, from the moment of its sensational debut in Washington to Husa's own triumphant return to his liberated homeland in 1989 to conduct the work, received thousands of performances. It continues to find its way onto programs, and between its symphonic and band versions can boast more than 7,000 performances to date.

Were Karel Husa's reputation to be based on one work, it would of course be *Music for Prague 1968*. Such a modest reputation is unlikely. Husa has composed dozens of large-scale works, including a ballet, two symphonies, and concertos for orchestra, cello, violin, trumpet, and alto saxophone. The cello concerto gained him the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in 1993. He has written four string quartets—his third won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1969—and dozens of works for band. Husa also made his mark as a conductor, and his letters are full of gracious compliments from Copland, Bernstein, Honegger, Poulenc, Křenek and others thanking him for insightful performances. And as these four works for wind quintet attest, Husa has a gift for drawing out startlingly individualistic sonorities for chamber musicians.

Born in 1921 in Prague, Husa played violin as a youth, but he decided early on to study engineering. That was not to be his destiny, and Husa now admits jokingly that “if I had built the bridges in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet tanks would have never made it in.” The Nazis closed the engineering school after the 1939 invasion, and Husa, needing to remain a student to avoid deportation, entered Jaroslav Řídký's composition class at the Prague Conservatory. After further studies at the Academy of Musical Arts in Prague, Husa went on to the École Normale de Musique in Paris to study composition with Arthur Honegger and conducting with Jean Fournet. While in Paris he would also study with André Cluytens, Darius Milhaud, and Nadia Boulanger.

By the late forties Husa's music was already attracting attention—his first string quartet won the Prix Lili Boulanger—and one critic called him “one of the greatest hopes for Czech music.” But in 1949 the Communist government revoked his passport, and Husa would not return to his homeland for forty years. In 1954 he came to America to teach at Cornell University, and lived in Ithaca until his retirement in 1992. Husa now divides his time between Ithaca and Ponce Inlet, Florida.

Husa's compositional style evokes some obvious comparisons, but he admits to no overarching influences. Like Bartók, he incorporates folk idioms into structures that stretch tonality, yet Husa's opaque surfaces have none of the dense textures Bartók uses. He studied the microtonality techniques of Alois Hába, but Husa's own music avoids the thorny unapproachability Hába presents to listeners. He also studied Schoenberg's 12-tone technique, but Husa's own approach to serialism is more organic, less intentional. Like Janáček, Husa shows great rhythmic ingenuity, but unlike Janáček Husa generally arrives at this through aleatoric devices. And even though he calls for chance and improvisation, Husa presents none of the freewheeling randomness of Stockhausen or Cage.

Regarding the formal structures he employs, Husa has said “we must try to lose the classical forms, because they were used so long and so well.” But others have astutely observed that while Husa stretches traditional forms, he does not break them apart: “Husa represents an important and almost unique tie between past and present,” writes Harrold Simmons. “No extremist, he has absorbed many facets of the so-called New Music without destroying or belittling the aesthetics and devices of his musical forebears.”

Husa set out intentionally to find a unique voice: “As a young composer in Paris, I felt it would be impossible to do better work in the same styles as the past,” he says. “I felt the need to differentiate, especially through explorations of different sonorities.” He also considers his long exile from his homeland to be somewhat of a blessing musically. “I probably would have been much more conservative if I had stayed home. When I finally returned to Czechoslovakia, I noticed that Czech composers had continued to use the same structures and tonality as in the past. They had to, because the authorities insisted. So many of them say my music presents difficulties for them now, because it is so complicated.”

Although the composition dates of these four works for wind quintet span nearly five decades, the pieces bear striking similarities. All purposefully set out to stretch the traditional range of wind sonorities, and often leave rhythms and pitches

loosely notated. Yet while all four works explore atonality, at root the tonal structure is easy to identify. All four works are emotional and virtuosic, challenging to play, and sophisticated enough to reward repeated listenings.

Deux Preludes, for flute, clarinet, and bassoon, was written in 1966. The work was commissioned by Kappa Gamma Psi at Ithaca College, a chapter of the national musical fraternity. *Deux Preludes* received its premiere April 22, 1966, at Ithaca College's spring concert.

The composer notes that, as with many of his works, in *Deux Preludes* he set out to explore sonorities that were “not recommended. For instance everyone says the clarinet sounds beautiful in the high and low ranges, but that you must avoid the middle register. I purposely explored the middle range. I also challenged the traditional hierarchy of the wind trio. In some places I give the bassoon the high part and have the flute play below.”

The first prelude, marked *adagio misterioso*, forms an arch, beginning and ending quietly but building to a crescendo at its apex. The *pianissimo* opening leads first to a clarinet solo, which introduces a rapid staccato trio section. The flute then takes a cadenza-like solo, which shifts the tempo downward, and the piece gradually lessens in intensity until it reaches its *calmo* conclusion. It ends with a single note in the bassoon. The second prelude, marked *allegro*, offers no solos, keeping all three players engaged throughout. Here Husa's tinkering with the instrumental hierarchy is most in evidence. The three voices loop above and below each other, alternating a brisk pace with pensive sections marked *meno mosso*.

Five Poems, for wind quintet, was the first piece that Husa wrote after he and his wife moved to Ponce Inlet, Florida, in 1994. It was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation of the Library of Congress, and is dedicated to the memory of Serge Koussevitzky. It calls for flute, oboe, B-flat clarinet, horn in F, and bassoon. *Five Poems* was premiered by the Quintet of the Americas at Weill Recital Hall in New York on February 10, 1995.

The *Five Poems* are actually musical characterizations of birds, although Husa avoids imitating bird song directly. “I wrote *Five Poems* to express my admiration for birds, these wonderful creatures that embellish our lives so magically,” he says. “If Messiaen hadn't already directly imitated bird song, I might have. I have done notation of bird songs in the past, which is difficult because they never exactly repeat themselves. And that was the effect I tried for in *Five Poems*—subtle varieties among the patterns.”

Husa calls for certain unusual effects in the score. The instruments play *smorzando* in some passages, squeezing the lips together to diminish the sound and slightly alter the pitch. Quarter tones are written in certain measures, to produce an effect, Husa says, “like jazz singers or saxophone players do—playing just a little out of tune, and then returning to the pitch. In that way, dissonance is exciting. It adds emotional intensity.” Husa calls for fluid rhythms in some sections, not actually marking the beat but instructing one or more players to play slightly before or after the others.

The first poem, “Walking Birds,” gives a staccato march-like line to the lower voices, interspersed with chromatic runs in all five voices. The effect evokes shore birds scurrying back and forth along the beach as waves come and go. The second movement, “Happy Bird,” gives an extended solo to the clarinet, characterized by a descending two-note “bird call” figure. The clarinet trills merrily throughout, supported by a wobbly counterpoint line. Gradually, “Happy Bird” flies off into the distant woods, the final measures marked *lontano* as the episode quietly closes.

A brief interlude: “Lamenting Bird,” marked *adagio*, introduces the third section “... With a Dead Bird.” The interlude is a trio for the upper instruments, with the elegiac melody in the oboe. After the interlude the horn takes up the melody, supported by drones in the rest of the group. The loss of a companion gets illustrated musically as the horn melancholically “echoes” itself at the end of each phrase. The fourth poem, “Fighting Birds,” shifts to *vivace*, shaking the mood dramatically. It dashes madly, with all five instruments getting their moments, to a fast trilling crescendo that introduces a coda-like conclusion. The finale, “Bird Flying High Above,” develops a quietly dignified whole note *maestoso* that builds gradually to a soaring dynamic climax, restoring the sense of reverence.

The New Amsterdam Ensemble commissioned *Recollections* for the Dutch-American Bicentennial Celebration in 1982. The first performance took place on October 28, 1982, performed by the ensemble with the pianist Walter Ponce, at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress. *Recollections* is set for flute, oboe, B-flat clarinet, horn in F, bassoon, and piano.

The six movements explore unusual sonorities and demand virtuosic technique. Some measures are given imprecise rhythmic notation, allowing one or more of the players to undermine its regularity. A sheet of paper under the pedal dampers of the low strings prepares the piano in some sections.

The first movement, *Largo*, begins with the quietest possible tones in flute and piano (the pianist frequently is instructed to play with the inside of the finger, to achieve triple *pianissimo*). The melody stays in the flute, characterized by a descending triplet figure. A central section engages the entire ensemble, but the *largo* returns to barely audible tones as it closes, with both flute and piano given extreme liberties with pitch and tempo.

The highly textural second movement, *Andante*, also remains in the quietest dynamics, and continues employing aleatoric markings for the rhythm. The piano is prepared in some sections. Husa says “I wanted the rhythm, especially in the piano, to have freedom. It adds complexity to the harmonies, as the rest of the group often doesn’t know exactly where the beat is. I want it to sound like rain falling, in an imprecise pattern.”

The third movement, *Adagio*, shakes the soundscape with a *forte* blast, the quintet playing a rising and falling figure that wobbles to *niente* before repeating. This movement is the least tonal of the set, spent entirely on the fringes of the harmonic structure, until a late unison E flat restores order. The fourth, *Moderato*, uses a favorite ploy of Husa’s, giving a high melody to the bassoon and having the upper winds provide support down below. The soloist constantly challenges the pitch, while the rest of the ensemble holds its tonal ground.

A *Vivace* follows, the liveliest and most agreeably tonal movement of *Recollections*. An inventive series of challenging runs for the quintet is accented with bold chordal textures for the keyboard. The movement dashes recklessly to its surprising conclusion, a retrospective low E in the clarinet. A brief coda, marked *Moderato molto*, has the oboe solo alone, giving way only in the final measures to the flutist. As a constant reminder to the listener to avoid complacency, Husa bends the flute’s final D down a quarter tone.

Of the title, Husa notes that “recollections are vivid, but not exactly precise. The way we remember things is a mix of accuracy and fancy.” He likens listening to *Recollections* to reading an entire volume of poetry all at once. “There is so much to memory that it is impossible to describe it all. There are memories that are distant, some that are joyous, tragic, and melancholic. To accomplish all this, I wanted the composition to develop from simple tones and to return to them, all the while researching new combinations and sonorities in the quintet.”

Serenade, a reworking of Husa’s previous *Évocations de Slovaquie* for clarinet, viola, and cello, is set for wind quintet, xylophone, harp, and strings. It was written in 1963 and premiered January 7, 1964, by the Baltimore Woodwind Quintet and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Peter Herman Adler conducting.

Serenade explores Slavic folk music, adding abrupt and irregular rhythms. It has three movements, “La montagne,” “La nuit,” and “La danse,” titles that are more fanciful than programmatic. Although reviewers have commented on its seeming 12-tone structure, Husa disavows working from a predetermined pattern. “I was constantly adding new tonalities as I worked through *Serenade*, right from the opening notes in the clarinet, but only to avoid repetition.”

Long solo lines in the upper trio of winds delineate the sound structure of “La montagne,” sweeping over a jaunty staccato rhythm. Support underneath stays minimal, as the upper lines weave across each other like various paths to a summit.

“La nuit” commences tranquilly; reviewers have noted its debt to French impressionism in its atmosphere and metrical flow. The melody begins in the horn, the pace gentle and the sonorities soft. An energetic middle section engages all the players, with Husa typically giving the bassoon the high part as the upper winds support. The original tempo returns as the movement disappears into silence.

The finale, marked *ritmico*, uses a brisk tempo and heavily accented rhythms to convey its dance ideas. The clarinet and oboe share most of the primary melodic material, although everyone gets into the act, including, for the first time, the strings, as “La danse” races to its tuneful conclusion.

Husa’s determination to explore new sonorities, to upset rhythmic regularity, and to challenge accepted notions of how

wind instruments should interact, combine to create a bold and unmistakably identifiable personal signature.

—*Keith Powers*

Keith Powers covers classical music for the *Boston Herald*. His features and reviews have also appeared in *Chamber Music*, *Musician*, *Bolshoi*, *The Quarterly Review of Wines*, the *Improper Bostonian*, and *Portfolio* magazines.

Karel Husa, a Pulitzer Prize–winner in Music, is a world-renowned composer and conductor who was Kappa Alpha professor at Cornell University from 1954 until his retirement and Lecturer in Composition at Ithaca College. An American citizen since 1959, Husa was born in Prague on August 7, 1921, studying at the Prague Conservatory and Academy of Music, and later at the National Conservatory and École Normale de Musique in Paris. Among his teachers were Arthur Honegger, Nadia Boulanger, Jaroslav Janáček, and the conductor André Cluytens.

Husa was elected Associate Member of the Royal Belgian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1974 and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1994. He has received honorary doctorates from Coe College, the Cleveland Institute of Music, Ithaca College, Baldwin-Wallace College, St. Vincent College, Hartwick College, the New England Conservatory, and Masaryk University and the Academy of Musical Arts (Czech Republic). He has been the recipient of many awards and recognitions, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and awards from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, UNESCO, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Koussevitsky Foundation, the Czech Academy for the Arts and Sciences, the Lili Boulanger Award, the Bilthoven (Holland) Contemporary Music Prize, a Kennedy Center-Friedheim Award and the Sudler International Award. His Concerto for Cello and Orchestra earned him the 1993 Grawemeyer Award. In 1995, Husa was awarded the Czech Republic's highest civilian recognition, the State Medal of Merit, First Class, and in 1998 he received the Medal of the City of Prague.

His String Quartet No. 3 received the 1969 Pulitzer Prize and, with more than 7,000 performances, his *Music for Prague 1968* has become part of the modern repertory. Husa calls another well-known work, *Apotheosis of this Earth*, a “manifesto” against pollution and destruction. His works have been performed by major orchestras all over the world. Two works were commissioned by the New York Philharmonic: the Concerto for Orchestra, which was premiered by Zubin Mehta, and the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, written for the concertmaster Glenn Dicterow and conducted by Kurt Masur. The Concerto for Trumpet was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Sir Georg Solti for performances with principal trumpeter Adolph Herseth. Among his recent compositions are the String Quartet No. 4 (an NEA commission for the Colorado Quartet), *Cayuga Lake* (for Ithaca College's centennial celebration), and *Les Couleurs Fauves* for wind ensemble (written for Northwestern University).

Karel Husa has conducted many major orchestras including those in Paris, London, Hamburg, Brussels, Prague, Stockholm, Oslo, Zurich, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, New York, Boston, Washington, Cincinnati, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, Louisville, and others. Every year he visits the campuses of music schools and universities to guest conduct and lecture on his music.

Founded in 1976, **Quintet of the Americas** (Sato Moughalian, flute; Matthew Sullivan, oboe; Edward R. Gilmore, clarinet; Barbara Oldham, horn; Laura Koepke, bassoon) has long been recognized as a leading ensemble in the interpretation of contemporary and folk-inspired wind quintet music of the Western Hemisphere. Two-time recipients of the ASCAP/Chamber Music America Adventuresome Programming Award, the Quintet's programs have included repertoire with elements as varied as electronic music, Sephardic music, Native American music, music influenced by jazz, music of women composers, music from Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, and Colombia, and music from the African diaspora.

The Quintet has toured more than three hundred cities in the United States, and in Canada, Venezuela, Colombia, the Caribbean, Ukraine, and the Republic of Georgia. The Quintet is currently in residence at the Department of Music and Performing Arts in the Steinhardt School at New York University. It has participated in residencies at Northwestern University, Austin Peay State University (Tennessee), Hunter College (New York City), and New York's Americas Society, and has performed outreach programs for Carnegie Hall Neighborhood Concerts, Lincoln Center Inc., the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, Midori and Friends, Fundación Batuta in Colombia, the Queens Symphony, and Young Audiences.

The Quintet presented a Carnegie Hall debut recital in 1992. Other important concerts have included the Carnegie Hall

American Music Week Series at Weill Recital Hall, the Bermuda International Festival, Chamber Music Northwest, the Inter-American Festival in Puerto Rico, the Bar Harbor Festival, the Chautauqua Festival, the Pan American Music Festivals at the Library of Congress and the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C.; the Festival Internacional de Música Contemporanea in Bogotá, Colombia (1993), the First International Congress on Women in Music; two Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festivals, the International Flute Convention, a two-day Villa-Lobos centennial festival co-produced by the Quintet and Sine Nomine Singers, and an eightieth-birthday concert for Karel Husa, as well as appearances at retrospective concerts of composers David del Tredici at Town Hall, Ursula Mamlok at Merkin Concert Hall, and Ann McMillan at Greenwich House Music School.

The Quintet has commissioned more than thirty works funded by Chamber Music America, New York State Council on the Arts, the Serge Koussevitsky Foundation of the Library of Congress, the Jerome Foundation, Meet the Composer, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and others.

The Quintet has recorded three previous CDs of contemporary American music: *Quintet of the Americas: Self-Portrait* (CRI), *Discovering the New World* (MMC) and *Never Sing Before Breakfast* (Newport Classics). Three additional CDs have also been released: *Xango*, music of Villa-Lobos (Newport Classics), *Souvenirs* (XLNT), and *Dancing in Colombia* (MSR).

Quintet of the Americas began its association with Karel Husa when its members invited the composer to conduct the New York premiere of *Serenade* at the Quintet's debut concert, May 25, 1980. On the occasion of the Quintet's tenth anniversary, the Quintet performed *Recollections* in New York and Ithaca. Believing that a woodwind quintet by Mr. Husa would be an important addition to the repertoire, the Quintet pursued a commission from the Koussevitsky Foundation of the Library of Congress for *Five Poems*, which the Quintet premiered at Northwestern University and at Weill Recital Hall in 1995.

The Quintet of the Americas' Web site is www.quintet.org.

Pianist **David Oei** was a soloist with the Hong Kong Philharmonic at the age of nine and has since performed with many major orchestras including the New York Philharmonic and the Pittsburgh and Baltimore Symphony Orchestras. He has made guest appearances with the Audubon Quartet, the Da Capo Chamber Players, the St. Luke's and Orpheus Chamber Ensembles, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. A founding member of the Aspen Soloists, the Festival Chamber Music Society, and the Intimate P.D.Q. Bach, he has also been a regular participant at Chamber Music Northwest, Bargemusic, and the Dobbs Ferry Music Festival. An affiliated teacher at SUNY Purchase and the volunteer coordinator and head coach for Manhattan Special Olympics, Mr. Oei lives in New York City with his wife.

The **Perspectives Ensemble** was founded in 1993 by its artistic director, Sato Moughalian, at Columbia University for the interdisciplinary series *Perspectives in Music and Art*. The group has achieved wide critical acclaim for its performances focusing on the works of composers in cultural context and programs that bridge themes in the musical, visual, and literary arts. The group's first CD, *Goddess of the Moon: Music of Charles Tomlinson Griffes*, was released on the Newport Classic label. The Perspectives Ensemble has recorded music by Richard Danielpour for Sony Classics, and collaborated with the Young People's Chorus of New York on a disc for Vivendi. The ensemble has been presented in the Lincoln Center's Great Performers Series, in its own series at the 92nd Street Y, and recently made its Carnegie Hall debut performing with Spike Lee and Terence Blanchard for the JVC Jazz Festival. Under the sponsorship of the Spanish Ministry of Culture, the ensemble has collaborated with Spanish musicians for numerous concerts in tribute to twentieth-century Spanish composers both in New York and Chicago.

Perspectives Ensemble

Sato Moughalian, Artistic Director

Violin 1

Eriko Sato, concertmaster

Ilana Blumberg

Peter Krysa

Esther Noh

Violin 2

Robert Taylor
Lisa Tipton
Leona Nadj

Viola
Masako Yanagita
Alissa Smith
Junah Chung

Cello
Peter Sanders
Daniel Miller

Bass
Gregg August
Troy Rinker

Xylophone
James Neglia

Harp
Anna Reinersman

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Apotheosis of this Earth. Louisville Orchestra, K. Husa conducting. First Edition 9.
Évocations de Slovaquie. Long Island Chamber Ensemble. Phoenix Records 113.
Les Couleurs Fauves. New England Conservatory Wind Ensemble, F. Battisti conducting. Albany Records 340.
Music for Prague 1968. Louisville Orchestra, J. Mester conducting. First Edition 9.
Sonata No. 2 for Piano. P. Basquin, piano. New World Records 80493-2.
Sonata for Violin and Piano. E. Oliveira, violin; P. Basquin, piano. New World Records 80493-2.
String Quartet No. 3. Fine Arts String Quartet. Phoenix Records 113.
String Quartet No. 4, "Poems." Colorado String Quartet. Albany Records 259.
Symphony No. 1. Prague Symphony Orchestra, K. Husa conducting. CRI 592.
Symphony No. 2, "Reflections." Bowling Green Philharmonia, Emily F. Brown conducting. Albany Records 321.

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KAREL HUSA (b. 1921)

RECOLLECTIONS

QUINTET OF THE AMERICAS

80571-2

Deux Preludes (1966)

(publ. by Alphonse Leduc et Cie)

1. Prelude 1 4:35

2. Prelude 2 4:28

Sato Moughalian, flute; Edward R. Gilmore, clarinet; Laura Koepke, bassoon

Five Poems (1994)

(publ. by Associated Music Publishers)

3. Walking Birds 2:06

4. Happy Birds 2:19

5. Interlude . . . With a Dead Bird 4:38

6. Fighting Birds 4:16

7. Bird Flying High Above 3:37

Quintet of the Americas: Sato Moughalian, flute; Matthew Sullivan, oboe; Edward R. Gilmore, clarinet; Barbara Oldham, horn; Laura Koepke, bassoon

Recollections (1982)

(publ. by Associated Music Publishers)

- 8. Largo 4:56
- 9. Andante 4:12
- 10. Adagio 2:56
- 11. Moderato 2:15
- 12. Vivace 4:25
- 13. Moderato molto 1:46

Quintet of the Americas; David Oei, piano

Serenade (1963)

(publ. by Alphonse Leduc et Cie)

- 14. La montagne 5:04
- 15. La nuit 4:58
- 16. La danse 4:44

Quintet of the Americas, Perspectives Ensemble; David Gilbert, conductor

TT 61:24

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