**Music for Prague 1968**

**By Ryan Park  
Moraga, Calif.**

“Do not judge this piece until you have performed it.” Repeatedly, Mr. Benstein challenged us to look beyond the rugged atonalism which went against every concept of our musical knowledge, and convey the raw emotion that inspired Karel Husa to compose *Music for Prague 1968*. At that time I did not understand how emotions could be expressed without words nor could I comprehend the nightmarish atmosphere of a Soviet invasion. Instead I was more overwhelmed by the foreign rhythms, the harsh, squeaking notes that existed in the highest registers of my clarinet, the thunderous tempo. I hated the song.

Just as *Music for Prague* shattered my perspective of music, my mother’s unsuccessful battle against leukemia shattered the stability of my life. In October of 2005, after eight years and several failed treatments, it was determined that nothing more could be done for my mother. Over the next several months I watched as she withered away, living the last of her days with the feebleness of an old woman. When my mother lay too still in her sleep, I feared that I had lost her. And when she was awake, I was haunted by the images of her shivering violently in bed, the images blurred by the tears I tried to suppress in order to be strong for her, and the demoralizing feeling of helplessness that came with my inability to comfort her. I was torn emotionally. I wanted her suffering to end, but that meant losing her forever.

May 17 was the night of the concert and however nervous I was, all I can remember about that night was my mother, still a mother despite her physical state, harassing me for not taking a shower. It was for her that I vowed I would perform the song.

Mr. Benstein raised his baton and the melody of a bird song echoed from the flutes; the audience fell silent. The peaceful aura was broken by the minor chords of my clarinet, calling forth a looming presence. His baton strokes widened, and machine guns blasted from the snare drum, adding to the roaring of the brass tanks. My instrument emanated the cries of suffering, the notes shivering off my tongue. With the final upswing, he summoned the Hussite War song, and much of the pain that had built up inside my heart over the past months was lifted. My father told me later that he was deeply shaken by the piece as well. I realized that Music for Prague was not about the structure or the visual images it conjured, but instead it was the very lack of structure that allowed for Husa’s emotions to stand out.

She passed away only a couple of hours after the performance. For the first time in months she looked at peace as she lay still in the presence of her family and I was able to accept that she was in a better place. It was Karel Husa’s ability to capture the loneliness and the pain of losing a loved one that allows Music for Prague to move us all. The rhythm and beat of music describe emotions not restricted by words, flowing together with the beating of the heart.