

# *Helen Kotas (1916-2000)*

*Helen Anne Kotas Hirsch was principal horn in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1941-1948); she was a pioneer as the first woman wind principal in a major American orchestra. She was also an accomplished horn soloist, outstanding teacher, and an active contributor to her community.*

*Kotas was born in 1916 to Bohemian immigrants and grew up in Brookfield, Illinois. She started studying piano at age six, then took up cornet in high school. The band director suggested that she play horn, so her father bought her a Wunderlich single F horn. Frank Kyrl, who played with the Chicago Symphony and lived a few blocks from Kotas, approved the instrument purchase and taught her through high school and junior college. Kotas joined the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago as fourth horn at age 14 and moved to first horn the following year.*

*Kotas attended Lyons Township Junior College (1932-34) and played first horn in the West Suburban Symphony Orchestra. During her second year at the college, she started studying with Louis Dufrasne, principal horn of the NBC Orchestra in Chicago. Her sister gave her a Geyer double horn the following year, and Kotas performed on Geyer horns and mouthpieces throughout her career.*

*Kotas earned a BA degree in psychology at the University of Chicago in 1936 while playing in the Women's Symphony, a wind quintet, and the university orchestra. She continued with graduate studies, and also joined the Chicago Civic Orchestra, which led to her first job with the Chicago Symphony as extra. She auditioned for Fritz Reiner for third horn in the Pittsburgh Symphony on the recommendation of Wendell Hoss. Philip Farkas resigned from the Chicago Symphony in 1941, and conductor Frederick Stock wanted Kotas to take the position. Reiner agreed to release Kotas if a substitute could be found; James Chambers won the position.*

*Kotas joined the Chicago Symphony for the 1941-42 season and remained as principal until 1947. She said that she was honored to be a member of the orchestra and felt welcomed by her colleagues. Philip Farkas returned to Chicago in 1947 with a contract as principal horn under Artur Rodzinski. Rodzinski used a loophole in Kotas's contract to move her down the section, and Kotas decided to leave the orchestra after the 1947-48 season.*

*After leaving the Chicago Symphony, Kotas was principal horn in other orchestras such as the Grant Park Symphony and Chicago Lyric Opera. She enjoyed the opera so much that she declined an invitation from Reiner in 1953 to return to the CSO. She also performed solos and chamber music, including an early performance of the Hindemith Sonata for Four Horns, championed new works, and often traveled to premiere performances in the US and Europe. She married Dr. Edwin Frederick Hirsch in 1949.*

*Kotas taught at the American and Sherwood Conservatories. Her students include Lowell Greer and Randall Faust.*

*Kotas was hit by car when crossing a street in 2000 and died several weeks later without regaining consciousness. She was remembered as a kind, generous, dedicated, and hard-working person, one whose impact on the music world remains far-reaching and enduring.*

*Heather Thayer wrote a tribute to Kotas for the May 2011 issue of The Horn Call.*

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