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INTRODUCTION

Johann Kuhnau

Johann Kuhnau was born in Geising, Saxony, on 6 April 1660. Much of what is known of his life—especially his early years—depends upon the biographical sketch in Johann Mattheson's *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte*, which is based upon material supplied by Kuhnau himself.¹ From Mattheson's book, we learn that Kuhnau was the third of seven children born to Barthel Kuhn, a carpenter, and his wife Susanna, the daughter of a tailor, both Protestant refugees from Bohemia.² Barthel Kuhn's must have been no humble carpenter's family, for three of his sons became choristers in Dresden's Kreuzkirche, one of Protestant "Germany's" most important religious establishments, and were able to benefit from the demanding education that child singers received in connection with their service there. Johann and his elder brother Andreas went on to study law at the University of Leipzig. The composer ultimately adopted the spelling "Kuhnau" for his surname, as did his brothers Andreas and Gottfried.

According to Mattheson, Kuhnau was in his ninth year when his fine voice and his exceptional aptitude for learning became manifest.³ It was, then, perhaps in 1669 or '70 that the boy was sent to Dresden,⁴ a city which, under Johann Georg II, Elector of Saxony, was one of the leading musical centers of Germany. There, the young Kuhnau, after studying for a time with his relative Salomon Krügener (a court musician in Dresden), was evidently entrusted to the care of Christoph Kittel, the court organist,⁵ who was in charge of instructing the choristers in singing. Mattheson reports that Kittel's harsh tutoring was difficult for the boy to bear, and so he was allowed to join his older brother Andreas as a chorister at Dresden's Kreuzkirche and as a student at the Kreuzschule.⁶ The organist of the Kreuzkirche was Alexander Hering, who had been a pupil of Heinrich Schütz; the cantor was Jakob Beutel, Mattheson's "Beatelius." According to Mattheson, Kuhnau studied with both men.⁷

The highly respected Kreuzschule had on its rolls some two hundred pupils, who came from various parts of the region and boarded at the school. The student body was drawn both from the nobility and from the wealthier commercial families, but the school was prepared to admit promising youngsters of humbler origins. It must have been at the Kreuzschule, with its curriculum grounded in the Northern Humanism of the previous century, that Kuhnau received the basic training that would prepare him to master a variety of disciplines in subsequent years.

In the Dresden of Elector Johann Georg II, however, the most stimulating musical activities took place not at the Kreuzschule but at court. Vincenzo Albrici, the court Kapellmeister, took a special interest in young Kuhnau's development, and in the late 1670s Kuhnau became a frequent guest in Albrici's home, where Italian was spoken. Kuhnau soon mastered this language, and, we learn from Mattheson, he studied French at the same time.⁸

¹ The earliest extant biography of Kuhnau appears in Johann Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte* (Hamburg: Author, 1740; reprint, Berlin: Leo Liepmannsohn, 1910), pp. 153–58; reproduced as Appendix B, Part 2, below. The words "ex autogr." at the head of the entry on Kuhnau indicate that Mattheson based his biography on material supplied in the composer's own hand, i.e. on material by the composer. No recent book-length biography of Kuhnau has been published; indeed, the most useful extended survey of Kuhnau's life and career remains Richard Münnich, "Kuhnau's Leben," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musik-Gesellschaft* 3 (1902): 473–527.

² Information about Kuhnau's parents is taken from Münnich, "Kuhnau's Leben," pp. 475–77.

³ *Ehren-Pforte*, p. 153.

⁴ Münnich, "Kuhnau's Leben," p. 482.

⁵ Not Christian Kittel, as Mattheson states; see Münnich, p. 480.

⁶ *Ehren-Pforte*, pp. 153–54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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1689¹⁰ pp. 1-13

Praeludium

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