



# COMPOSER SPOTLIGHT



## JOHANN KUHNAU

1660-1722

Style: Baroque



### A True Polymath

Johann Kuhnau, a German composer of the Baroque era, showed a wealth of knowledge and skill in many diverse activities. In addition to being a composer, he was also a novelist, translator, lawyer, and music theorist among other things. He somehow managed to balance these activities while serving as Thomaskantor in Leipzig for 21 years. When he died, J. S. Bach took his place as Thomaskantor.

### What is a Thomaskantor Anyway?

The Thomaskantor is the director of the St. Thomas Boys' Choir, founded in Leipzig in 1212. At the time, Kuhnau and the choir had to provide music at four different churches. He organized music for city functions such as elections, as well as weddings, funerals, etc. The Thomaskantor also had to compose, copy music, run rehearsals, and teach music AND general subjects. It was one of Germany's most respected but challenging music positions.



### The Dirty Job of Thomaskantor

Although Kuhnau juggled many talents, it seems to have taken a toll on his health. Scholar Willi Apel has called the job as Thomaskantor "as vexatious and difficult for him as his successor, J. S. Bach." Kuhnau often faced attempts by rival musicians such as Georg Phillip Telemann and Kuhnau's own student Johann Friedrich Fasch who tried to undermine his activities as Kantor.

### His Music

Much of his music, including operas, masses, cantatas, and other large-scale vocal works are lost. However, many of his keyboard pieces survived, and his *Biblical Sonatas* are some of his best-known works. These suites, published in 1700, each depict a particular story from the Old Testament of the Bible. Kuhnau was the first to use the word *sonata* for a keyboard solo in 1696.



### Significant Works:

- Biblical Sonatas
- Neue Clavier Übung (New Keyboard Exercises)
- Frische Clavier-Früchte (New Keyboard Harvest)