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Friedrich Kuhlau – a Mini Biography in 12 Chapters


1 Childhood and Apprenticeship

In the history of music there are many examples of musicality being an inherited trait, and of families whose gift for music has produced artists and composers branching out over several generations. One of these examples is the Kuhlau family. No fewer than 17 military musicians, town musicians, church musicians and composers of this name can be traced in Germany, Denmark and Sweden. The following family tree is based on Kuhlau’s paternal grandparents:

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<th>Christiane Magdalene Kuhlau</th>
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<td>Friedrich Daniel Rudolph Kuhlau</td>
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<td>Johann Andreas Christian Kuhlau 1782-1858</td>
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<td>Susanne Frederike Kresse 1792-1846</td>
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<td>David Gottfried Martin Kuhlau 1780-?</td>
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<td>Alisa 1788-1820</td>
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<td>Sophie Clara Amalie Kuhlau 1774-1851</td>
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<td>Nis Jepsen 1777-1823</td>
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<td>Johanne Elisabeth Kuhlau 1801-?</td>
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<td>Soren Kjeld Kuhlau 1798-1864</td>
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<td>Anne Marie Gnam 1801-1881</td>
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<td>Daniel Kuhlau 1794-1816</td>
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1. Childhood and Apprenticeship

In the history of music there are many examples of musicality being an inherited trait, and of families whose gift for music has produced artists and composers branching out over several generations. One of these examples is the Kuhlau family. No fewer than 17 military musicians, town musicians, church musicians and composers of this name can be traced in Germany, Denmark and Sweden. The following family tree is based on Kuhlau’s paternal grandparents:
Both his grandfather and his father were military musicians, whereas his uncle Johann Daniel was trained as an organist. In 1784 he was the first of the family to move to Denmark, where he served as organist at Budolfi Church in Aalborg. Two years later, on September 11 1786, the subject of this biography was born in the small town of Uelzen in Northern Germany, where the father was stationed at the time. When he was baptized he was given the name Friedrich Daniel Rudolph Kuhlau. His father's position meant that the family often had to move, and the next piece of information we have about Fritz, as he was nicknamed, is that he has moved to Lüneburg.

It was in Lüneburg that Kuhlau was hit by accident - an accident however, which he himself later described as a stroke of good luck, for it became a driving force in the course of his life and career. One night when he was sent into town to pick up a bottle of something, he stumbled and fell so that the bottle broke and the glass splinters penetrated into his right eye in such a way that the eye had to be removed (in most pictures it is clearly seen that Kuhlau's right eye is missing). In order to divert the boy's attention from the pain, the parents put a little piano next to his his bed - and now it appeared, in the poetic words of an old lexicon, "that his chest was full of slumbering Aolean harps". After recovery he began to receive music lessons from Ahrenbostel, the organist at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Lüneburg, and it was not long before he himself tried his hand at composing.

In 1805 Kuhlau had become a student of the renowned C.F.G. Schwencke in Hamburg. Schwencke was a student of Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, the famous son of J.S. Bach, whose position as the head of music for all the churches in Hamburg Schwencke had taken over. Schwencke was also a composer, and furthermore a feared critic, so it was therefore the highest distinction when Schwencke four years later declared that he could not teach Kuhlau any more, and that Kuhlau was "thoroughly musical both emotionally and intellectually."

It was also Schwencke who opened the door for Kuhlau at the prestigious music publishers Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig. Here he had published three piano sonatas: Op.4, op.5a and op.8a, which both in length and technical difficulty match the sonatas of his great ideal Beethoven. But also in terms of content these sonatas were praised to the skies by the prestigious journal of music, "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung": Kuhlau was even declared "a new star in the firmament of music". At that time, however, he had already had some compositions published at local music publishers in Hamburg.

Most of these publications, already bearing an opus number, he later denounced, after which he restarted the numbering of his works. Therefore in the list of Kuhlaus compositions a few of the early opus numbers have been added the letters 'a' and 'b', of which 'b' marks the earlier composition.

At the same time Kuhlau was also active as a pianist, but the circumstances of his education in this area are still unknown. It is, however, a well-established fact that he developed remarkable skills as a pianist, and at the beginning of his career his income was partly based on his concerts. It was also as a pianist that he first attracted the attention of the public in Denmark - but first, let us take a look at what brought him there.

2. Kuhlau settles in Copenhagen

Kuhlau grew up at a time when Napoleon swept through Europe. In 1808, Hamburg was occupied by the French troops, and in 1810 the city became subject to French law, which meant that all adult men were to enlist into the French army. Kuhlau was concerned that he might be called up despite his missing eye, and at the end of the year he fled to the Kingdom of Denmark, whose southern border at that time ran close to Hamburg.
But Denmark too, and especially Copenhagen was severely marked by the Napoleonic wars. Parts of the city still lay in ruins after the British bombardment in 1807 - a counterstrike to the refusal of the Danish King Frederik the Sixth to cut off all connection with France.

On 23 January 1811 we meet Kuhlau in Copenhagen for the first time giving a concert at the Royal Theatre where he plays his piano concerto in C major, which many pianists today have in their repertoire. The reception was extremely favorable, and so was his reception in the city's musical circles, which included the composers Kunzen, Schall and Weyse. Although his initial intention was to continue his journey to Stockholm and St. Petersburg, he let himself be persuaded to settle in the Danish capital - not least because the king appointed him 'Royal Chamber Musician' and offered him a Danish citizenship.

Kuhlau had hoped that the title would soon lead to a paid position, but in this he was disappointed. Instead, he had to earn a living by giving concerts and piano lessons. Even when a vacancy as a piano teacher at the Royal Theatre appeared, the king preferred another applicant - of whom nothing is known today except that he was called Förster - in spite of the fact that both the musical director, Kunzen, and the Lord Chamberlain, Hauch, recommended Kuhlau warmly.

A new opportunity seemed to arise when the poet Oehlenschläger offered him the libretto for an opera, 'The Robbers Castle', which premiered in March 1814 and became a tremendous success. For Kuhlau, the profits were very modest, but encouraged by the success he now wrote a new application to the king - one that would have devastating consequences in that it turned out to limit his creative abilities and opportunities for many years to come. The essence of the application follows here, but it should be noted that in the meantime Kuhlau in had pledged to support his elderly parents and a disabled sister, who also had fled the unbearable conditions in Hamburg.

"When it suited Your Royal Majesty most graciously to appoint me as your Musicus, I got my honorary Post without any fixed annual Salary. This Circumstance has so far forced me to seek a Livelihood to support myself, my Father, my Mother, and my Sister by giving Piano Lessons, a veritable Disaster for the creative Artist, since he thereby is prevented from developing his own Talent, and to delight his Fellow Citizens with new Compositions. Therefore, I most humbly dare to apply for a fitting permanent and annual Salary, whereas I willingly commit myself to providing an Opera for the Use of Your Royal Majesty's Danish Scene"

The king most graciously accepted the offer, which during the next few years resulted in the operas 'The Magic Harp,' "Elisa" and "Lulu". But the 300 rigsdaler (the Danish currency at that time) which the king found it fit to give him was completely out of proportion to the tremendous work of composing an opera. Kuhlau therefore continously had to to look for other sources of income. In addition to giving piano lessons, he now worked for the Copenhagen music publisher C.C. Lose, who had just then started one of the "musical monthly magazines" that were very popular at that time in Denmark and abroad, filling roughly the same needs as today's weekly magazines. During the following years, Kuhlau delivered no less than 76 compositions for the monthly magazine "Nye Apollo" and its sequel "Odeon" and the "Musikalsk Theater Journal".

About this left-hand work, which also includes the many small and light-weight sonatinas that up until today have belonged to the standard repertoire of piano teaching, Kuhlau himself remarked: "Die Kunst geht nach Brot" ("Art needs bread"). However, none of what Kuhlau delivered in this area is without taste, and much of it is actually really good music. But still, it is somewhat tragic that these pieces are what most people today know Kuhlau for - like remembering Beethoven only for the little piano piece "Für Elise"!

In spite of these obstacles, Kuhlau also found time to write "real music" during these years, first and foremost piano sonatas and other piano works in the grand style, but often he had to compromise on the fee to have them published. This was also the reason why he stopped working with Breitkopf &
Härtel in 1822. He now established a more satisfactory relation with other major German music publishers. More of this later; here follow some examples of how Kuhlau's first compositions were reviewed abroad.

3. Examples of Reviews in the "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung"

The leading music magazine at Kuhlau's time was the "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung". Not long after Kuhlau had arrived in Copenhagen, its editor asked Kuhlau to write an article about the musical scene in the Danish capital. Kuhlau did this only reluctantly because there was, as he replied, not much positive to say for it: "I would create enemies if I declared that vocal music here is beneath contempt, that the orchestra, the Royal Chapel, is mediocre to say the least, and that I have found only very little understanding of music in general." However, Kuhlau let himself be persuaded, and the printed article is somewhat more muted. During the next few years Kuhlau regularly wrote reports on the Copenhagen musical scene in the "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung".

Here are some examples of how Kuhlau himself was reviewed in the magazine:

About his piano sonata op.5, it is said: "Recently, Mr. Kuhlau has through a few yet significant compositions emerged as a composer that all piano players who know how to appreciate a serious intention, a taste for nobility, and a thorough and complete elaboration, should not fail to notice."

His piano sonata op.8, which are impressive not only in quantity (31 pages!), but also in quality, are reviewed thus: "Mr. Kuhlau belongs to the inner circle of musicians who really know what they write, and who, beside praiseworthy contrapuntal learning, also demonstrate that they are in possession of ingenuity and know how to give their work character." And after one of the longest reviews ever in the "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung", the reviewer concludes with these words: "The reviewer takes his leave of Mr. K. with an assurance of true esteem and the desire soon and often to meet him again in his works - a desire that the connoisseurs, the accomplished true piano players, will certainly share, once they have made the acquaintance of Mr Kuhlau."

The fact that Kuhlau has written over a hundred lieder and romances is virtually unknown today - but listen to this review of "10 deutsche Lieder mit Klavier", op.11a, from the "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung": "It is with great pleasure that the reviewer presents these songs. Not only do none of them deserve criticism; on the contrary, they all deserve renown, and some are quite obviously among the most beautiful pieces that have been composed in this genre for several years. This reviewer already knew Mr. K to be one of today's most marvellous, most artistic and most profound piano composers; but that he was also such an excellent song composer - this was unknown to him and - from the usual experience with masters of instrumental music - also unexpected."

The three Italian canzonettas that were released in Peters without an opus number (# 153 in Fog's catalog) get the following review: "The reviewer did not suspect that this serious, scholarly artist - whose great, rich and elaborate piano compositions are treated unjustly indeed by music lovers if they are not played more than is the case in the circle of the reviewer - that he can write so simply, neatly and jokingly as he does here."

About another of Kuhlau's vocal compositions - the three songs to texts by Gerstenberg, op.21 - it is said that they are "a true enrichment to the repertoire of expressive and noble solo song with piano accompaniment."

Let's finish these examples with the review of Kuhlau's first collection of duos for two flutes, op.10a: "If two flutists of significant skill on their instrument... want to entertain themselves with duets, then we cannot recommend any other ones among the creations of recent years so unconditionally as those mentioned here." To this day, the three duos belong to the standard repertoire of flutists.
4. Kuhlau as a Teacher and an Innovator

Meanwhile in his new country, Kuhlau was wasting his time giving piano lessons. Yet gradually his financial situation allowed him to do away with the most boring work and concentrate on those students who were aiming at a professional career. But it took several years before he could entirely escape this work, which he repeatedly complained about, as it prevented him from composing. When he writes in a letter, “There is nothing so hateful to me as teaching”, he probably has the teaching of amateurs in mind. Those of his students mentioned below all refer to Kuhlau as an extremely competent and polite teacher. They are among the sources from which Thrane, Kuhlau's first biographer, collected many of the personal memoirs that he reproduces in his book. (It is Carl Thrane's credit that so much source material has been preserved against the odds; his Kuhlau-biography was published in his book, 'Danish Composers', 1875.)

Nicolaj Gerson, Carl Schwarz and Nicoline Valentiner were Kuhlau best piano students. In the following decades their names are often found in the Copenhagen concert programs. To this group must be added his nephew Georg Friedrich, who Kuhlau accepted into his home as a foster son and also trained as a pianist (Georg Friedrich was the son of Kuhlau's eccentric brother Gottfried, who had moved to India - cf. the family tree in the first section).

The teaching of music theory presented an even greater need. At that time, no academy of music existed in Denmark, and now Kuhlau got the opportunity to pass on the rigorous education that he had received from Schwencke - which came directly from Carl Ph. Em. Bach and Johann Sebastian Bach himself. Many of the Danish musicians of the time and especially many members of the Royal Chapel are thus indebted to Kuhlau, such as violinists J.L. Mohr and Fr. Wexschall, bratschist Ivar Bredahl, and flutist N.P. Jensen. Among the students who later made careers as composers, J.C. Gebauer, J.O.E. Hornemann and J.F. Froehlich must be mentioned. Another important figure was Anton Keyper, who was an officer and therefore involved with military music. He became one of Kuhlau's closest friends, and for several years he helped him in practical things into which the composer had little insight.

On the whole there was a cordial and relaxed relationship between Kuhlau and his students. Sunday afternoons they often gathered to enjoy a glass of wine, smoke a pipe and play music with him. Especially in the field of figured bass (what today would be termed theory of harmony), it was not only professional musicians who benefited from Kuhlau's knowledge. In 1817 he put in a newspaper advertisement offering "24 Hours Education in Figured Bass". The training, which took place at his then residence at Vestergade 11, drew many amateur musicians, including the famous archaeologist P.O. Brøndsted, whose records relating to Kuhlau's teaching are kept at the Royal Library. Kuhlau himself wrote even a manual of 'Figured Bass', but he never managed to have it published, and the manuscript was since lost.

With these initiatives Kuhlau contributed greatly to raising the level of music education in Denmark. But he also contributed in other ways to a much needed renewal. Above all others it was Kuhlau who introduced Beethoven's music in Denmark. This did not happen without resistance, for according to the opinion of Weyse, another leading Danish musician, Beethoven sounded like "music for the Birthday of his Majesty the Devil".

Already with "The Robbers' Castle" Kuhlau introduced a new musical direction in the theatre scene as well. In the words of Thrane, "The Robbers' Castle" was "the very first harbinger of romantic music", and the poet Jens Baggesen, who came personally to deliver the libretto for Kuhlau's next opera, "The Magic Harp", declared enthusiastically that with "The Robbers' Castle" Kuhlau had created a "wonderful musical reverie... which in a very original Way mixes Seria, Buffa, Pastorals and Chorals, almost all Harmonies and Executions in a varied and romantic Concert".

a print from the website www.josebamus.dk/english/Kuhlau
5. Kuhlau's Travels

As mentioned, it was something of a coincidence that Kuhlau came to live in Denmark. He had originally intended the journey to continue to Sweden and further to St. Petersburg, which drew many virtuosos at the time.

In 1815 he finally came to visit Sweden. The reason was that the famous German French hornist Schuncke came to Copenhagen during a concert tour. The two became very good friends, and Schuncke persuaded Kuhlau to accompany him to Sweden, where they gave several concerts together in Stockholm and probably also in other cities. Among the compositions that the journey inspired was his op.25: "Fantasy and Variations on Swedish songs and dances." This was not the last time Kuhlau was inspired by the characteristic Swedish folk tune tradition - also op. 83, 86, 91, 93 and 102 have borrowed their themes from there.

In the following years Kuhlau often visited Sweden. One of his patrons here was Baron Nolcken, on whose estate 'Jordberga' near Trelleborg he spent many wonderful days. Furthermore his student, the pianist Carl Schwarz, settled in Gothenburg. He was an eager promoter of Kuhlau and opened the door for him to several Swedish acquaintances.

In 1816 Kuhlau finally visited Hamburg again. On this journey he was accompanied by a friend who described their experiences in an article for the magazine "Nyeste Skildere af Kjobenhavn" ("The latest Portrayal of Copenhagen"). This friend is probably Georg Gerson, a banker by profession, but also an accomplished violinist and a prolific amateur composer, and a brother of the aforementioned piano student Nicholas Gerson. He wrote: "Here in Hamburg Kuhlau is very well-known and also very well-respected and loved . . . We live here royally and merrily. Each day we are invited to Dinners and Evenings by the greatest and most distinguished Families." Together, the two friends also gave a few concerts, but the highlight of the trip was a performance of "The Robbers' Castle" at the theatre in Hamburg conducted by the composer himself. In a report back to the Copenhagen newspaper "Dagen" ("The Day") it says: "When the Rehearsal was over, Mr. Kuhlau had to give in to the unanimous Shouts and Applause of the Audience, and appear on the Stage, an Honor which has not befallen any Composer for many Years."

The trip also had the effect of strengthening Kuhlau's relation to the Hamburg music publishers August Cranz and J.A. Böhme. In the following years he had several compositions published by both publishers.

Talking about the trips, we'll skip ahead to the year 1821 when Kuhlau makes his first trip to Vienna. First it must be added that Kuhlau was not free to travel as he pleased. As Royal Chamber Musician he had to ask the king for permission before he could leave the country, and now Kuhlau applied for a leave for a two-year art journey. This time, the king apparently must have been in a good mood - not only was the permission granted, but during the journey Kuhlau was even allowed to keep the salary as Royal Chamber Musician that he at last had been awarded in 1818 - after seven years of waiting!

On this trip, Kuhlau had his first experience of sailing with a steamship, i.e. "The Caledonia", which had been put on the route between Copenhagen and Kiel. In Germany he stayed for some time in Leipzig, where his older brother Andreas was the owner of a major grocery store and a tobacco factory. In Leipzig he got the opportunity to make the personal acquaintance of Härtel. In Vienna he frequently visited theatres and went to concerts, but nothing indicates that he himself gave performances here in the capital of music. In a letter home he writes that he preferred theatres over the Opera House, "for here, too, the impure and evil spirit of Rossini is given a free rein."

More of this later. A visit to Beethoven had to be cancelled, as he was ill with jaundice during the summer of 1821. Also a plan to continue the journey to Italy was abandoned. At Christmas-time
That year Kuhlau was home again. The journey was not to last two years as planned, but only approx. 10 months.

Kuhlau's later travels and his meeting with Beethoven in 1825 will be described chronologically whenever possible.

6. Kuhlau at Home

In May 1818 Kuhlau moved outside Copenhagen's city walls after living at various addresses in the city. His new location was in what today is known as 'Nørrebro'. With him he brought his parents, who he still had to support. Meanwhile his sister Magdalene had moved to Aalborg, where she made a living by teaching music and language. One of the reasons for Kuhlau's moving house was undoubtedly the fact that the rent here was cheaper than in the city. But Kuhlau also loved being out in nature, and the area outside the city walls was still largely unbuilt. For a short while the family lived on the country house 'Solitude', owned by Kuhlau's close friend, Frederik Hoegh-Guldberg. Later they moved into a house whose garden bordered the 'Sortedamssøen', one of the lakes outside the city walls. In this area laundry was laid out for bleaching, and it was therefore called 'Blegdammen' ('The Bleaching Pond').

While Kuhlau lived here, he famously set off early one morning and walked the 20-mile stretch to Roskilde to see the Cathedral where the Danish kings and queens are buried, and having had his lunch at an inn, he walked all the way back to return home in the evening.

The mentioned Frederik Hoegh-Guldberg taught Danish and other subjects at different schools, and he helped Kuhlau write letters to the king and to the theatre, as Kuhlau never learned to speak Danish. This was not a real problem as Denmark for all practical purposes was a bilingual monarchy at the time, and many of the luminaries and officials were German-born. Among these were Kuhlau's composer colleagues Kunzen and Weyse, and also several members of the Royal Chapel.

Hoegh-Guldberg, who was also a poet, had an open house every Friday night. Here Kuhlau regularly was the centre when he improvised on the piano. He enjoyed this informal company far more than the evening parties at the palaces and mansions in the city - not to mention the court, where he was required to appear and play when piano music was needed for entertainment.

On the whole, Kuhlau was a very modest person, almost self-effacing, and this probably also explains why he did not protest the terms and conditions that he was offered by the Danish authorities. His almost exaggerated sense of duty is not only reflected in his relationship with his parents, but also very much in relation to his official duties. Although he probably had his own opinions, he never commented on the social and political problems which were otherwise intensely debated at the time. Unlike the poet P.A. Heiberg and and the social critic dr. Dampe he did not want to run the risk of exile or life imprisonment!

Kuhlau never married - not because he did not appreciate the opposite sex, but he was too shy to commit himself. No doubt the loss of his eye also made him feel less attractive. When asked why he was still a bachelor, he replied: "Hab 'keine Zeit dazu". ('I've got no time for such things')

7. Busy Years of Ups and Downs

Kuhlau's year of travelling in 1821 was very stimulating for his creativity. During the following two years alone, he published as many compositions as in all of the ten years that had passed since he settled in Denmark. The year began with a disappointment: he fell out with the publishers Breikopf & Härtle, who until now had been his best promoter. But in turn he established connections to several other large German publishers, especially Peters in Leipzig and Simrock in Bonn.

This was also the starting point of the long list of compositions for flute - solo or with other instruments - that have made Kuhlau a favorite composer with flutist and has earned him the nickname
"The Beethoven of the flute." The flute was very popular then, and although publishers again and again reminded Kuhlau that the style should be easy and the pieces not too difficult to play, he never compromised with his artistic conscience, and many of these works are counted among his most inspired. Here we find variations and fantasies for solo flute, sweet-sounding pieces for two and three flutes, and even a single work for four flutes. The most substantial ones, however, are the sonatas for flute and piano. One senses that Kuhlau here felt free to express the musical ideas he had previously materialized in the form of grand piano sonatas, which now were less in demand. Most will probably agree that the jewels among the flute compositions are the three quintets for flute, violin, two violas and cello op. 51, published by Simrock. Today they rank among Kuhlau's most played chamber music compositions.

Abroad it was taken for granted that Kuhlau was a virtuoso on the flute, and several of the contemporary encyclopedias claim that he was a flutist in the Royal Chapel. But the truth was quite different. He jokingly used to say that he could not manage even the smallest grip on the flute, but at one occasion he did admit that he knew the flute quite well, but played it only poorly and rarely.

Among the other compositions from these years, mention must be made of the piano sonata in B-flat major, op.30 (the final movement alone spans 705 bars!), the three smaller, but musically no less excellent sonatas op.46, the sonata for violin and piano op.33, and two more sparkling jewels for the treasure trove of chamber music: the two piano quartets op.32 in C minor and op.50 in A major.

During these years Kuhlau also composed his dramatic masterpiece, the opera "Lulu". Güntelbergs libretto was first offered to Weyse, but he declined the offer with his usual irony: "I have never composed music of steel and stone, and I do not do so now" (the remark refers to a scene in the opera). For Kuhlau, the task meant another interruption of his normal work, and thus a loss of income from the publishers. In a petition to the king he asks to have his fee raised from 300 to 600 rigsdaler, "for the composition will hardly be successful if I am forced to contend with bitter financial difficulties at the same time." As far as we know, the application was accepted this time, but in the end Kuhlau lost money by taking on the job, and he had to pay a translation of the libretto into German out of his own pocket.

Today, it is generally agreed that "Lulu" is Kuhlau's dramatic masterpiece, but his joy was embittered as the audience divided itself into a pro-Kuhlau party and a pro-Weyse party (Weyse's opera "Floribella" premiered around the same time). Kuhlau was accused by his colleague of playing Rossini's game - ironically, because Kuhlau himself just a few years earlier had commented on Rossini's "impure and evil spirit that was given free rein".

Incidentally Weyse, who in his youth had written no less than seven symphonies, had to admit that Kuhlau had a better mastery of the orchestra than himself. Yet strangely enough Kuhlau never wrote a single symphony himself. But the symphony as a genre had a very low priority in the Copenhagen concert programs, and with no prospect of getting a symphony played, let alone having it published, Kuhlau could not afford to spend time on such a demanding composition.

8. Kuhlau's Second Trip to Vienna and his Meeting with Beethoven

Already in 1825 Kuhlau felt wanderlust again. Twice this year he was in Sweden: the first time at the invitation of the previously mentioned Baron Nolcken, to whom Kuhlau had dedicated the three sonatinas Op.60; the second time he went to visit his old student Carl Schwarz, who now lived as a very popular piano teacher in Gothenburg. In the summer Kuhlau started on his second trip to Vienna, and this time he met Beethoven. There are no reports of the meeting from Kuhlau himself. But here are some excerpts from the account of Ignaz von Seyfried, Beethoven's first, albeit somewhat fanciful, biographer:

a print from the website www.josebamus.dk/english/Kuhlau
"When the Royal Danish concertmaster Kuhlau [again an example of the misunderstandings concerning his position in Denmark that prevailed abroad] under no circumstances would leave Vienna without having made Beethoven's acquaintance, Haslinger [one of Beethoven's publishers] arranged a trip to Baden, where he himself had his summer residence, and Mr. Sellner, Professor at the Conservatory, piano manufacturer Conrad Graf as well as Beethoven's close friend Holz [violinist, member of Schuppanzigh Quartet] were participants in the company in honor of the cherished guest. Hardly had they arrived at the beneficent health spring of Hygæa and had been welcomed with a robust handshake by Beethoven before a cry was heard: "Go, go! Out in the open! "The meddlesome host led the way, and the trio from the city followed, not quite without effort, eagerly emboldened by the commander . . . But the dinner meal that was ordered in the glorious Hellenental compensated them amply for the dangers they had overcome, and the lucky chance that our weary wanderers turned out to be the only guests contributed significantly to the greater merriment of the company . . . Kuhlau wrote an improvised canon over the name BACH, and in memory of this pleasure-packed day Beethoven wrote a canon over the text "Kühl, nicht lau". The next day, though, he felt compelled to apologize for the joke - in case the honorable art colleague would have felt hurt - with the following lines: "I must confess that yesterday the champagne also went to my head too fast to, and I once again had experience the truth that my creative powers are suppressed rather than stimulated by such things."

Although much of Seyfried's account is a very free rendering, the main features of the meeting can be confirmed from Beethoven's conversation booklets and other sources. The two canons are also known today. The booklets further show that Kuhlau attended the privately arranged original performance of Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, op.132.

On October 27 1825, the newspaper "Dagen" reports that Kuhlau has returned to Copenhagen with the steamship "Caledonia". Here new work for the theatre awaited him. For a start, he was asked to write the music for C.J. Boye's play "William Shakespeare", which was to be staged on the occasion of the King's birthday. Kuhlau's music comes close to the atmosphere of nature and fairy-tale that Mendelssohn created his Shakespeare music seventeen years later. The overture, which is considered Kuhlau's best, is often played today, but also the remaining part is very well suited for a concert performance.

Kuhlau's next challenge was a new opera, "Hugo and Adelheid", also with a libretto by C.J. Boye, and this time the occasion was the celebration of the Queen's birthday. This again led to submissive petitions to the king for the compensation of income losses - but the king was adamant, and Kuhlau had to settle for the usual 300 rigsdaler. The opera premiered on October 29, 1826. After just five performances the play was taken off, never to be revived again. What glorious sonatas and chamber music could Kuhlau have written during the time he spent on the opera!

9. Kuhlau in Lyngby - "The Elves' Hill" and the Trip to Sweden 1828

In the late summer of 1826 Kuhlau had moved to Lyngby 8 miles north of Copenhagen with his parents. In the beautiful rural surroundings he could enjoy nature to the full and go on long walks with the dog Presto (whose predecessor was called Allegro). He no longer took part in the society of the city, and only rarely attended theatre performances. He had finally been able to stop all teaching activity, so now he could largely concentrate on composing.

Some of the publications from the next few years deserve mention. The Sonatas for Flute and Piano op.69, 71, 83 and 85, the three sonatas for violin and piano op.79, the three variation works for piano on themes by Beethoven, op.73, 74 and 75 in as well as several duos and trios for flute. In the lighter genre he still provided music for Lose's monthly musical magazines, including "Les Charmes de Copenhague", Op.92, a medley of familiar tunes that would put the listener into moods associated with "the charms of the Danish capital".
During these years he also wrote the music that every Dane knows him for today: the music for Heiberg's play "The Elves' Hill". Again, the occasion was an event in the royal family, namely the marriage of the later Frederik the Seventh to Wilhelmine, the daughter of Frederik the Sixth. The marriage lasted only six years, whereas the spectacle soon acquired the status of "national festival play". At the Royal Theatre alone it has been staged more than a thousand times. Here it is performed especially in relation to state visits and events in the royal family.

As a consequence of "The Elves' Hill", Kuhlau was appointed 'Professor' by the king - an empty title that did not include any form of salary. Nevertheless Kuhlau was very proud of it, because it did serve to raise his social status and probably also relieved him of his sense of inferiority.

Kuhlau was no less proud that he was made an honorary member of the newly created Student's Association. For this occasion and in the following years he wrote several songs for male choir which he dedicated to the association - songs that to this day is on the repertoire of most male choirs in Denmark.

In 1828, the year that "The Elves' Hill" was performed for the first time, Kuhlau made another trip to Sweden, this time with Hashagen, an instrument builder, who in the meantime had taken over Anton Keyper's role as Kuhlau's adviser in practical matters. Hashagen was a native German himself. Back in Denmark Kuhlau no longer gave concerts, but on this trip he appeared both in Gothenburg and Stockholm, where he played his second piano concerto, which is now lost. He made also a detour to Christiania (now Oslo) on his own, possibly to establish contacts with Norwegian music publishers.

In the meantime he had established a contact in Germany with the publisher Schott in Mainz, who published some of the flute works mentioned above.

10. The Travel to Berlin and Leipzig 1829 - the Connection with Farrenc

In the summer of 1829 Kuhlau again applied to the king for permission to make a trip abroad. The goal was Berlin and Leipzig.

No major music publishers were located in Berlin, but the aim here was primarily to enjoy the cultural life of the city, and in a letter home Kuhlau explained that he and Hashagen, who also accompanied him on this trip, lived here as if in a wonderland. In Leipzig he formed a link of friendship with C.G.S. Böhme (not to be confused with the Hamburg publisher of the same name), who only a year before had taken over the famous publisher Peters. As a result, a number of Kuhlau's works were released by this publisher in the following years, e.g. the quartet for four flutes, op.103, the piano quartet op.108 and Kuhlau's only string quartet, op.122 (though the latter two appeared only after his death). The Quartet for four flutes Kuhlau had brought along in manuscript form; four flautists were summoned for a play-through; Böhme was excited and bought it immediately.

On the way back to Denmark Kuhlau had also a fairly long stay in Hamburg, where he visited his friends Methfessel, singing master and composer, and K.A. Krebs, who was a conductor at the opera. The possibility of staging "Lulu" in Hamburg was discussed, but it never materialized. Also in Kiel Kuhlau stopped over at an old acquaintance, G. C. Apel, who taught music at the local university. The last part of the journey was made from Kiel, again with the steamer "The Caledonia".

One can wonder what actually kept Kuhlau tied to Denmark, where he received far less attention. Part of the explanation may be his concern for his parents, who he might not want to go through another strenuous move. A remark in one of the letters from his sister Amalie from the period after their parents' death suggests that he actually considered moving back to Germany. But the key is most likely to be found in Kuhlau's tendency to acquiesce rather than to rebel. He bowed to his fate and managed to arrange things so that he could be as independent of others as possible and devote himself to his music - while at the same time enjoying his pipe and a glass of red wine as well.
Kuhlau's name was now well-known all over Europe. In 1829 he received an order from a wealthy merchant in St. Petersburg, Witkowsky, for a piano quartet: his op.108, which, as mentioned above, was published by Peters. But more importantly he now also found a very cooperative publisher in the French Aristide Farrenc. Many of the works from Kuhlau's last years were released by this publisher, although in several cases they were published in so-called parallel versions, so that Farrenc got the rights for France, while for example Peters got the rights for Germany. It was precisely during these years that the publishing business finally began to become regulated. Previously it had been possible to copy the publications of others freely without risking lawsuits - a practice that euphemistically was called 'reproduction', but more truthfully also labeled 'piracy'. There were also plans to stage one of Kuhlau operas in Paris, and Kuhlau himself began to talk about a trip to Paris, but soon these plans were to meet with an abrupt end.

At the end of the year 1829, several foreign celebrities visited Copenhagen, among them singer Anna Milder-Hauptmann, who Kuhlau had met during his visit to Berlin earlier that year, and composers Fürstenau and Moscheles. Fürstenau had already visited Copenhagen in 1823, and in spite of the fact that he was Kuhlau's nearest competitor as a flute composer, a warm friendship developed between the two - envy and professional jealousy was something that was foreign to Kuhlau. During the visit, Moscheles, who was living in London, attended the private original performance of the Piano Quartet op.108 and a theatre performance of "William Shakespeare". For the latter, he was so enthusiastic that he wanted to arrange a performance in London - but like the plans for Paris, this idea was never carried out.

11. "Das Schicksal hört noch nicht auf mich zu verfolgen!"

"Fate never stops persecuting me!" Behind these words from one of Kuhlau's letters to his new publisher, Farrenc in Paris, lies a devastating personal disaster. On the fifth of February 1831 a fire broke out in a property adjacent to Kuhlau's house in Lyngby, and in less than fifteen minutes, his house too was in flames. Very little was saved, and the worst thing was that all his manuscripts were lost, including many works not yet published. Among these was his second Piano Concerto in F minor, which he and his students had often played both at home and in Sweden, and which was said to be the best of the two.

Already the previous year fate had knocked on his door in the form of the death of his parents, but on sober consideration this must have relieved him of a heavy burden. Meanwhile, her sister Amalie, who otherwise lived in Leipzig, had taken over the household (the other sister still lived in Aalborg), and from her letters and other sources we have a fairly good knowledge of Kuhlau's final years. She tells how Kuhlau had convulsions of the chest after the fire, so he had to be hospitalized at Frederik's Hospital and was hovering between life and death for a long time. For quite some time before, he had already suffered from a severe cough, and we must assume that the real cause was asthma.

When he finally recovered, Prince Christian Frederik offered him rooms at the Sorgenfri Palace, but Kuhlau did not want to live there. Instead, he chose to move back to the city, where he rented an apartment in a building in Nyhavn. In a letter Weyse describes the reaction of the king, which seems somewhat out of touch: "Because of a Fire in Lyngbye, poor Kuhlau has lost everything he owns, yes even all his Manuscripts, of which some had not been published. I've gone through a lot of Trouble get him the king's Permission to have one of his Operas performed as a Charity, but the king replied No, this would not be acceptable as it was against Regulations." And about a fundraising campaign that Weyse also initiated, he ironically describes how the richest man in Copenhagen, councillor and merchant Constantin Brun, in whose house Kuhlau had often played, "exceedingly generously, after have abused both me and Kuhlau thoroughly, went to his writing bureau and gave me two - yes, 2 – Rigsdaler. Oh, what a generous man".
The hardness of fate did not change Kuhlau's positive attitude to life. In a letter to his brother Andreas in Leipzig, he writes: "One must hold on to memories of former joys, but one should not look back on suffering that has been overcome".

In the summer of 1831 Kuhlau had a commission for six string quartets from the Copenhagen wine merchant and patron of the arts Waagepetersen. For a long time he had wanted to cultivate this the noblest genre of chamber music, but it was certainly not the kind of thing that the publishers were lining up to publish. Waagepetersen would not only pay the work "sehr generös" (: very generously), as Kuhlau puts it in a letter, but he would also arrange for the publication. Again fate interfered, as he only managed to finish the first of the quartets.

From Farrenc in Paris came the good news that from now on he only wanted to publish Kuhlau's larger compositions, and his first commission included some trios for violin, cello and piano, another genre Kuhlau had long wanted to cultivate. But he did not succeed in beginning this work either.

From a merchant Scherres in Königsberg, he received a commission for another three quintets for flute and strings (i.e. the equivalent of op.51), and Moscheles' promise to put in a good word for him in England also began to bear fruit. Already before the fire Kuhlau had been in contact with the English publisher Wessel (the present-day Ashdown), and his music was highly praised in the English magazines. Wessel was the one to order the trio for two flutes and piano op.119, and since the title page says "Premier Grand Trio", we must assume that the commission covered more than one trio. Fate interfered here, too; Kuhlau did not live to see the publication of even the first trio.

12. Kuhlau's Death and Legacy

Just when many of his dreams finally seemed to be coming to fruition, fate hit Kuhlau with a final blow. We do not know the circumstances surrounding Kuhlau's death, but on March 13 1832 Amalie writes to Andreas home in Leipzig, "Oh God, I cannot even begin to describe the suffering that once again has struck us. He is no more, our dear brother Fritz; after a fortnight of illness and hard struggle he passed away last night at a quarter to eight."

The funeral service was held in the German St. Petri church in Copenhagen. A newspaper report gave the following description: "The funeral procession was very large, and consisted mainly of members of the Royal Chapel and the Royal Theatre as well as a considerable number of students, especially from the Students' Association, whose Extraordinary Member of the deceased was."

Afterwards, Kuhlau was laid to rest at the Assistents Cemetery in Nørrebro, not far from where he had previously lived. A group of friends collected money for a memorial, but the progress was slow, and the final result was just an ordinary tombstone into which, however, a few years later a marble relief was inserted.

Denmark has never officially erected other memorials for Kuhlau than the bust which is located in the foyer of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Apart from that and the gravestone, he has only been memorized in the form of a privately set up tablet on the house of no. 23 in Nyhavn, where Kuhlau lived the last year of his life. It says that here lived Kuhlau, the composer of The Elves' Hill. Period. Finale!

His possessions were sold at an auction a few months after the funeral. From the auction list it appears that they actually included several unspecified manuscripts. All that is known about them is the fact that they were rated lower than some sheets of blank music paper (!), and most of them have apparently been scattered and since lost. Among what has been rescued is the string quartet and a "Grand Sonata", which Kuhlau already before 1820 had vainly offered several publishers. It was now published as op.127 by Lose and Farrenc together.
At the time of Kuhlau's death, the new era of Romanticism was on the upsurge. It can already be traced in many passages of Kuhlau's music, and if fate had granted him a longer working life, he would undoubtedly have continued in this direction and would today have been counted among the pioneers of this new movement. The maxim that the poet Grillparzer put on Schubert's tombstone could equally well have been put on Kuhlau's: "Der Tod begrub hier einen reichen Besitz, aber noch schöner Hoffnungen". (Here Death has buried a rich treasure, but even higher hopes.)

In the meantime the new time was mainly concerned with itself. Now Mendelssohn, Schumann and Chopin were those whose music was most played plus a host of other composers that are virtually unknown. But this does not necessarily mean that they are bad. One of the characteristics of our time is the enormous interest in 'forgotten' composers - an interest that especially the record industry has profited enormously from. This has also benefited Kuhlau - just take a look at discography in the menu!

It is especially Kuhlau's piano music, flute music and chamber music which like the Sleeping Beauty have been awakened from their slumber. These also were the genres that Kuhlau felt most strongly for. The popular perception of him during his own lifetime as an opera composer may best be explained by the glamor which at all times has surrounded this musical form. The theatre was the place where people met, and the latest drama or the latest opera was on everybody's lips, but in most cases they were quickly forgotten. The fact that recent attempts to revive some of Kuhlau's operas have not been very successful is perhaps best explained by the very thin texts he was asked to put into music. Kuhlau did take an interest in the genre, and towards the end of his life he actually expressed a desire once to write an opera all of his own choice.

Carl Thrane, Kuhlau's first biographer, completes his portrayal from 1875 with the words: "It is our pride and joy that this noble and pure Artist found his Home in Denmark and that he got his best Songs from Denmark." As a nation, Denmark has neither then nor later granted Kuhlau the official appreciation that has been bestowed upon composers such as Weyse, Hartmann, Gade and Nielsen. But should this come about, may it come in the form of a grant to republish his music rather than in the form of a monument!