

Felicitas Kukuck

Composing Against All Odds

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Felicitas Kukuck (1914–2001) was a prolific German music educator and composer who lived through both world wars in Germany. The socio-economic and political upheaval of the time had a tremendous impact on her life and output. She wrote over one thousand works, including for chamber ensembles, piano, flute, and solo voice, though the bulk of her output is choral. Her choral music suits singers of varying levels of experience, often allows for adaptation as needed, and is neatly crafted with both musicians and listeners in mind. Her works display approaches to structure and melody that recall Johannes Brahms and Hugo Distler, and harmonic language that reflects her study with Paul Hindemith. All of her vocal works are in German. Due to the post-World War II recovery period that overlapped with Kukuck's most prolific years, as well as challenges she faced during her lifetime as a woman of Jewish descent in Germany, only a small percentage of her compositions are easily accessible to conductors today. However, taking some extra time to investigate her works will yield rewards for the dedicated conductor. This article provides a start.

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Biography

Felicitas Kukuck was born Felicitas Cohnheim on November 2, 1914, in Hamburg, Germany. Her father was a physiologist and her mother was a trained classical singer, and both were supportive of their four children's musical aptitude. Felicitas sang songs with her mother from an early age, beginning piano lessons at the age of ten and improvising songs on piano with her younger brother, Fritz. Her childhood was not without challenges: World War I broke out just four months before she was born. In 1916 her parents changed their family name from the Jewish-origin Cohnheim to Germanic-origin Kestner out of concern for the family's safety. At the end of World War I, Felicitas and her sister had the good fortune to travel to the Netherlands for six weeks as part of a wartime recovery program for children. This early experience may have contributed to her later dedication to children's health, well-being, and education.

She eventually returned to Hamburg and went on to attend the city's renowned Lichtwarkschule, a school that emphasized critical thinking, creativity, and the arts. When the Nazis came to power and took over the school in 1933, she transferred to the Schule am Meer on the island of Juist—a residential school that emphasized the performing arts. While her time there was short, this was perhaps a formative time for Kukuck, as pianist and composer Eduard Zuckmayer conducted the school's choir and orchestra. Zuckmayer was also



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well acquainted with Paul Hindemith, who would later become Felicitas's primary composition teacher. Unfortunately, the Schule am Meer closed just one year after Kukuck enrolled, as many students from Jewish families were forced to emigrate due to the extreme anti-Semitic sentiment in Germany. Kukuck finished her studies at the progressive Odenwaldschule in 1935.

The year 1933 was pivotal for the Kukuck family. Despite changing the family's name to Kestner two decades earlier, and although the family had long been members of the German Evangelical Church, the family's Jewish ancestry came to light, and Felicitas's father lost his position at the university in Hamburg. He had served, with honors, in the German military during World War I, but that did not save him from the Nazi government. Their house was raided in 1933, and their lives were made increasingly difficult as World War II drew near. Kukuck wrote in her autobiography:

This was how German Jews were treated at the time by German Nazis. Even now this makes me so furious that I feel absolutely miserable. But I know I must not let go of it. Everyone should know about this. All the details, so that something so cruel and inhumane will never happen again.¹

Her parents and younger brother reluctantly emigrated to England in 1939. Life in England wasn't easy but was somewhat safer at that time.

In 1935, Kukuck wished to pursue post-secondary studies in music education in Berlin but was told she wouldn't be allowed to teach in schools due to her Jewish ancestry. She then enrolled at the Musikhochschule Berlin, where she studied flute and piano and passed the required exams to teach private lessons. At the same time she learned she had passed these exams, she received official notice that she was forbidden also from teaching privately. Kukuck continued her studies, playing in the orchestra and singing in two choirs, in addition to studying piano. She then had what she considered a life-changing stroke of good fortune: she joined the composition class taught by Paul Hindemith.²

Studying composition with Hindemith was a joy for Kukuck. She and her classmates met with him three

times a week from 9:00 am until 1:00 pm. Each student brought their pieces with them, and Hindemith offered feedback on each piece with all students watching and learning. Sometimes they collaborated on writing three-part pieces at the chalkboard, each student taking a part and working it into the other two parts. For Kukuck, the most exciting aspect of learning from Hindemith was his approach to melody. The melody "wasn't supposed to be a song, or a sonata theme, or a fugue theme, but rather a melody in itself."³ She would later tell her daughter, Margret Johannsen, that Hindemith saw melody like a jewel in a ring: the band of the ring exists to decorate the jewel and bring out its beauty. Similarly, Kukuck's writing begins with melody, and the rest of the music exists to help the melody shine.⁴

Hindemith also influenced Kukuck's perspective on composition as a practice. He encouraged his students to consider the text, the performers, the audience, even the performance space, when writing music. His lessons stayed with her:

Composing is my life. I am happy that I can compose, and that I can always learn more about it. At the same time, it also means that I am in contact with and among people. New compositions aren't for the drawer, not for me. They should be sung and played. They are for other people.⁵

Hindemith left Germany in 1938, and Kukuck continued to work toward her final exam in piano performance, which occurred in 1939. Her exam selections showed her dedication to Hindemith, who at the time was designated as a "degenerate" composer by the Nazi Music Chamber. Kukuck included a piece by Hindemith on her exam to honor him and his impact on her development as a musician and composer. She did this against the advice of her piano teacher, who was a member of the Nazi party (perhaps reluctantly) and wore a swastika on his lapel. He was concerned his colleagues might not pass Kukuck due to her choice of repertoire but, in the end, he allowed her to play the piece and likely shared her sense of relief when the committee gave her passing marks.⁶

Three days after passing her exam, Felicitas married Dietrich Kukuck, a friend from school who also played in the Hochschule orchestra. Dietrich may have helped save her life: before their marriage, he secretly found a sympathetic clerk to change Felicitas's documents to reflect Kestner as her official birthname rather than Cohnheim, which still remained on the original document. This hid her Jewish ancestry on government paperwork. Their marriage was a happy one, with their first son born in 1940 in Berlin. Shortly after, Dietrich was called up to serve in the German military, and Felicitas was left to care for herself and their young son during the horrors of World War II. In addition, she supported a young Jewish woman who needed shelter and food. Kukuck remained in Germany while so many members of her family and her friends chose to leave. She explained in a 1980 interview: "The music—German music, the land of Johann Sebastian Bach—held me tightly. I was rooted here. I wanted to live here. I would never have left."⁷

After the war, Felicitas and Dietrich were fortunate to find each other again in Hamburg and remained in the area. She gave birth to three more children and continued her disciplined composition practice. Collaborations with choir directors, school teachers, and church musicians brought numerous commissions and occasions to write music for many different instruments and musicians at varying levels of experience. Kukuck wrote canons and simple part-songs for school music books, pieces for beginning piano and guitar students, and arranged folk songs for amateur choirs. A collegial working relationship with Gottfried Wolters, conductor of the Norddeutschen Singkreis, led to a number of commissions for motets, oratorios, and other significant choral works. In 1969 she founded Kammerchor Blan-



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kenese, a choir that often premiered and performed her music and which, in a different configuration, still exists today. From 1971 to 1981 she taught music at the Lola Rogge Dance School in Hamburg, where she composed pieces for performances and her students' final exams.

The 1980s saw a burgeoning peace movement that spread across Europe, with fierce commitment from people in Germany. Kukuck joined this movement, and soon after, began to address themes of war and peace in her music. Many of her larger works are from this era, including the church opera *Der Mann*

Mose [The Man Moses], the cantata *De Profundis*, and many smaller chamber music pieces. One of her largest works, a requiem titled *Und es war: Hiroshima. Eine Collage über Anfang und Ende der Schöpfung* [And It Was: Hiroshima. A collage about the beginning and end of creation] premiered in 1995 during World Peace Week in the ruins of Hamburg's historic Saint Nicholas church. The same year saw the premiere of the cantata *Wer war Nikolaus von Myra? Wie ein Bischof seine Stadt aus der Hungersnot rettete und vor Krieg bewahrte* [Who was Nicholas of Myra? How a Bishop Saved his City from Famine and Protected it from War], as well as three motets and one more cantata.

Kukuck composed daily until her death in 2001. She wrote over one thousand works—primarily vocal and choral pieces—for musicians at all levels. It is rare for a composer to be effective at writing for such a wide range of abilities and to take pride in all of it. Margaret recalls her mother saying that it was easier to write complex music and harder to write simple music. Felicitas wanted "only the best"⁸ for children who were studying music and, with four children at home and

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supportive colleagues, she had a good sense of what worked.

Felicitas Kukuck's music is mostly performed in Germany by community and church choirs, and is rarely heard outside the country. In 2014, over thirty concerts across Germany marked the centenary of her death, and her name remains among the prominent German composers of the twentieth century. Most of the information about her life and work is in German, although relatively well documented thanks to the efforts of her daughter and organizations such as the Archiv Frau & Musik, which now holds the rights to Kukuck's estate. The quality, adaptability, and content of her body of work will be of particular interest to musicians working in Christian churches, although the collections of canons and folk songs—if one can track them down—will provide rich material for those working with young and developing musicians.

Selected Works of Felicitas Kukuck

Es führt über den Main [It Crosses the Main] (1952)
Available in numerous arrangements

Of the more than one thousand pieces Kukuck wrote, it is her arrangement of this medieval *Totentanz* folk song for which she is best known. *Totentanz* songs are part of the medieval fascination with death and dance (also known as *danse macabre*) that appears in visual art, literature, and music of this era. The text of *Es führt über den Main*, authorship unknown, tells of how people dance when they cross a bridge over the Main River. Everyone—from a shoeless fellow, a young woman, and even a king—must dance as they cross the bridge, a metaphor for death. In the context of German Protestantism, the idea of dancing to one's death could be understood as finding joy in anticipation of one's own personal resurrection. It could also be a reminder to live one's life well, since death comes for everyone in the end, often without warning.

Whatever its original meaning, this folk song has been passed down for generations as part of Germany's extensive folk song tradition. In 1952, Felicitas Kukuck wrote an arrangement of the song for school

and community music publications and added two additional stanzas. Kukuck's stanzas continue the tale of the bridge: it gets destroyed by all the people in the land, who dance as they swing their axes. In Kukuck's version, the song ends with people coming together and holding hands as they dance "ohne Ende," or without end. It could be that she wanted a stronger ending for a song children would sing in school, or to contribute to a sense of unity among children after so many years of war in Germany.

Whatever the case, the additional stanzas have become the definitive version of this old folk song. The singable melody is built like a bridge, with gentle ascending stepwise notes, lingering a moment an octave above where it began, and descending gracefully on the text "fa la la la." It moves from minor to major and back to minor again. When Kukuck sings it in an old recording, her vocal tone and tempo vary to reflect the parts of the story.⁹

Storm-Lieder [Storm Songs] (1952, 1985)
Möseler Verlag

There are two volumes of these delightful part songs that set the texts of nineteenth-century German poet Theodor Storm. Unaccompanied and set for mixed choir, the texts are largely secular and make frequent reference to the natural world. Homophony prioritizes clarity of the text, mixed meters indicate word stress, and occasional, often unprepared, chromaticism illuminates deeper meaning contained within Storm's poetry. These pieces may be more suitable for experienced choirs.

Das kommende Reich [The Kingdom to Come] (1953)
Carus Verlag

Written for mixed choir, orchestra, baritone and organ, this seventy-minute setting of the Beatitudes is an example of Kukuck's belief that music for less-experienced musicians must also be of high quality. The choral parts in this score are sometimes for two parts only or written

in unison or octaves, and are frequently supported by orchestration. People comfortable with German can sing the parts written specifically for the “Gemeinde,” or congregation. Otherwise, these parts can be done by the full choir or even a smaller subset of singers. The baritone solo is accompanied by two flutes who are sometimes in octaves with the soloist, and at other times filling in harmonies in modest ways, perhaps recalling the “halo effect” used by Johann Sebastian Bach centuries prior.

Die Weihnachtsgeschichte in Liedern
[The Christmas Story in Songs] (1973)
Möseler Verlag

This collection of seven pieces for mixed choir (and soloists, when available) was printed in 1973. Each piece recounts part of the Christmas Story. In Kukuck’s time, it was common to have Christmas celebrations in public schools as well as church, and these pieces would suit both occasions. They vary in mood and tempo, providing opportunities for creating dramatic interest. Three different places in the score indicate that the congregation could sing a hymn or carol that pairs with the part of the story outlined in the song. The writing is accessible and can be adapted for different voicings and instrumentation as needed.

Ecce Homo: Die letzten Tage des Jesus aus Galiläa [Behold the Man: The Last Days of Jesus of Galilee] (1990)
Möseler Verlag

This ambitious work was written in 1990 for mixed choir, vocal soloists, and an ensemble consisting of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, alto and tenor recorders, percussion, saxophones, trombone, string quartet and organ (or synthesizer). The structure recalls the Passions of J. S. Bach, with soloist roles for Narrator (similar to Bach’s Evangelist), Jesus, Judas, Petrus, Kaiphas, and Pilate; a choir singing the role of the People (like Bach’s turba choruses) and reflective chorales; and groupings of notes signifying crosses throughout the piece. Margaret Johannsen compiled Bible verses and added her

own writing to create the libretto. While not strictly atonal or twelve tone, this oratorio is full of chromaticism. The singers are often, but not always, doubled by one or more instruments. Recitative-like material is notated and metered yet retains a speech-like feel.

The oratorio almost ends with Jesus on the cross and the earth rumbling. At that point, an unexpected epilogue opens on a train station in Danzig, Poland, in August of 1942. The brief scene is based on the real story of Janusz Korczak, a Polish children’s book author, child advocate, and director of an orphanage. When given the opportunity to escape, Korczak refused to leave the nearly two hundred children in his care and boarded the train to Treblinka concentration camp with them. The soloist who sang Jesus in the first part of the oratorio now sings the part of Korczak. The final words of the oratorio are “I am not guilty,” sung by the soloist who previously sang the role of Pilate and now assumes the role of the soldier who offered to help Korczak escape.

Und es ward: Hiroshima. Eine Collage über Anfang und Ende der Schöpfung [And it Was: Hiroshima. A Collage About the Beginning and End of Creation] (1995)
Möseler Verlag

This oratorio was written for mixed choir, organ and/or woodwinds, percussion, and soprano and tenor soloists. Despite living through so much war, Kukuck didn’t address it as a theme in her music until sometime in the 1980s when she joined Germany’s burgeoning anti-war movement. This difficult and powerful piece explores the tragedy of the bombing of Hiroshima through texts from the Bible, poetry written by Hiroshima survivor Mitsue Furuta, and additional texts by Kukuck’s daughter. The forty-five-minute-long work features unaccompanied chorus with arias and recitatives accompanied by the organ and/or woodwind instruments, and percussion. Many of the choruses will be accessible for church or community ensembles; there are, however, moments of rhythmic and harmonic complexity that merit careful attention and may be better suited for more experienced ensembles.

Conclusion

It is difficult to suggest only a few pieces from Kukuck's rich catalogue of choral music, particularly as so much of her work would be useful for a wide range of ensembles. Her style is emblematic of most twentieth-century German vocal music: expansive and singable melodies are mixed with unusual intervals and chromaticism. Her overall harmonic language can be considered tonal, although there are deviations from tonality in her more complex and later works. The architecture of each piece is clear, and the text—always in German—guides the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and metric setting. Some of her scores are easily accessible, while others will require correspondence with the publisher to obtain. A full list of published works and publishers is on the website www.felicitaskukuck.de.

The oft-heralded composer Paul Hindemith certainly had a profound impact on Kukuck's development as a composer. Yet even cursory study of her work cements her place in the lineage of fine German composers in her own right. Her dedication to music education and writing thoughtfully crafted music to suit a range of abilities distinguishes her music from that of many of her contemporaries. Whether selecting from the more complex pieces, her church motets and cantatas, her part songs, or even folk song settings, the work of Felicitas Kukuck provides an illuminating window into music in the German classical tradition during some of the country's most turbulent and transformational years. 

Additional Resources

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NOTES

¹ Felicitas Kukuck, "Autobiographie in Form eines Tagebuchs ab 17. April 1989," 7, https://felicitaskukuck.de/Autobiographie_FKukuck.pdf

² Felicitas Kukuck, "Autobiographie in Form."

³ Felicitas Kukuck, "Autobiographie in Form," 10.

⁴ Margret Johannsen, interview by Beatrix Borchard, Hamburger Musikhochschule, July 5, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcu6RUXy608>

⁵ Cordula Sprenger, *Felicitas Kukuck als Komponistin von Solo- und Chorliedern* (Tectum Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008), 17.

⁶ Margret Johannsen, interview by Beatrix Borchard.

⁷ Eicke Funck, "Eicke Funck im Gespräch mit Felicitas Kukuck," *Intervalle I*, Arbeitskreis Musik in der Jugend (Wolfenbüttel, 1980), 13.

⁸ Margret Johannsen, interview by Beatrix Borchard.

⁹ "Musik zum Reinhören," https://felicitaskukuck.de/musik_hoeren.htm.