

In Memory of John Kuzma

3:16/46 – 8/7/21



1987, photo Montview archive

As so many of us have said already, there will never be another John Kuzma. Not just in the sense that we are all unique beings, but that he was such a singular person, unlike anyone most of us have ever met or ever will meet. His powerful intelligence, breadth of knowledge, gigantic musical talent, laser focus, self-confidence and belief in himself, spiritual life, indescribable connection to the past and to the future, odd sense of humor, charisma and leadership combined to make him that person that held us all in a bit of awe.

John was born in Cincinnati and adopted by John and Martha Kuzma. They lived over the funeral home across from St. Lawrence Catholic church. John attended grade school at St.

Lawrence, was an acolyte, and sang in the choir until he began playing organ at churches for Mass around age twelve. He graduated from Elder High School, also part of the Catholic education system. Years later, John returned to record a CD on the rebuilt organ at St. Lawrence, which included performances of Bach, Vierne, Widor, Couperin, arrangements by his childhood choir director, and three plainsong arrangements of his own.

At Eastman School of Music, where John received a scholarship to study organ performance with the renowned David Craighead, he met Bess, who played French Horn. After graduation, the two of them married and then headed for Denmark, where John studied organ with Baroque specialist Finn Videro on a Fulbright Scholarship. They toured other European countries, where John got behind-the-scenes experience with historic organs. He returned to earn a masters degree at the University of Illinois, in organ performance (with Jerald Hamilton) and composition.

Bess and John moved across the country when he accepted the job of organist and choir director at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in San Diego. There he worked with and was mentored by the Rev. John Sanford, who was to become one of the leading international figures in Jungian psychology. Through Sanford, John also came to know Robert Johnson, another towering Jungian. John founded and was music director / conductor of the San Diego Chamber Orchestra. A special memory for him was the privilege of meeting and interviewing Aaron Copland before a concert of Copland's music in San Diego.

When John was hired as an assistant professor of organ performance and music theory at UC – Santa Barbara, it was the only academic organ job posted that year - and it went to him. This was followed by working for Rev. Robert

Schuller at the Crystal Cathedral, where he created and led a boychoir of about 100 boys, as well as playing organ for weddings and funerals.



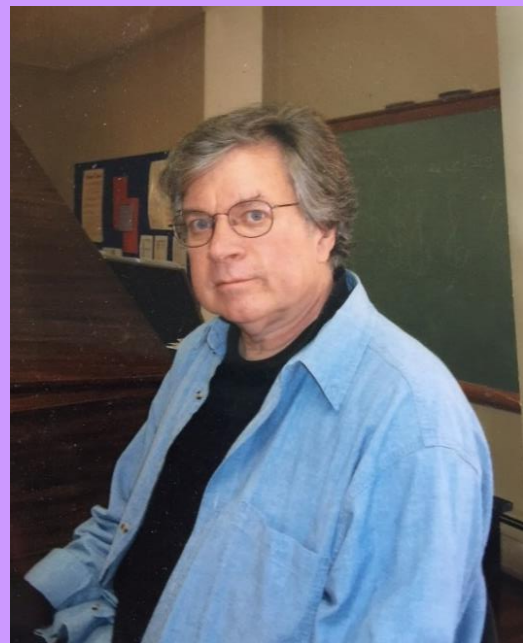
Undated, Montview archive

John and Bess were called back to the east coast when he took on the musical leadership of the American Boychoir at Princeton / Westminster Choir College. They toured nationally and internationally, and Bess played an important role in the private schooling of the boys. She recalls tutoring 26 boys every morning on tour in a vintage Greyhound bus. She would walk up and down the aisle, working with the seated boys. (She joked that she went through a lot of Dramamine!) One of the singers, Christian Cashman, later lived with the Kuzmas in Denver, where he studied privately with John, and they became his godparents.

In 1987, when John was hired as organist and choir director at Montview, he and Bess packed up yet again, and began a 30-year residency in

Denver. He made a huge imprint on the music program at Montview, not to mention throughout Denver and Colorado. He established the *Montview Conservatory of Music*, began a series of classical music programs for Denver school children, and increased the size, participation and educational focus of the three children's/youth choirs and the adult Westminster Choir. In founding the *Montview Music Endowment / Sacred Music at Montview*, John created an ongoing source of funding for Montview's music program, and the ability to hire professional instrumental soloists and orchestras to perform with the choirs in concerts and services.

A ceaseless composer and arranger, John wrote or arranged 86 scores for orchestra and choir that are in the Montview music library. He wrote over 50 additional pieces of choral music and over 30 hymn accompaniments for Montview, as well as numerous commissioned pieces for vocal and instrumental soloists, and



2009, photo by Lisa Boyum

choral and instrumental groups. Seven organ compositions were written for organist Barbara Hulac.

John was especially interested in exploring various musical styles, and understanding the compositional techniques of musicians he admired, such as Ned Rorem and Olivier Messiaen. The choir recalls his exuberant experimentation with the quodlibet, i.e., layering two or more tunes on top of each other. (This allowed him to program twice as many hymns on Easter Sunday!)

When Pope John Paul II visited Denver in 1993 for World Youth Day, John was the arranger/composer for the orchestra and soloists. He was also honored to play organ with the orchestra and thus be on stage with the Pope. A beautiful certificate from the Vatican, acknowledging his role in World Youth Day, held a prominent place in his office.



2011, photo by Jay Weiss

John was a Colorado Arts Council Music Composition Fellowship winner in 1999. He was also commissioned to collaborate with New

York artist Ann Hamilton in creating a performance piece for the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Orchestras including the Colorado Symphony, Chicago Symphony, and Dallas Symphony, have performed John's music, as well as other groups including the American Boychoir, Aries Brass Quintet, Ars Nova Singers, Colorado Symphony Chorus, Colorado Children's Chorale, Denver Brass, Denver Gay Men's Chorus and New York City Gay Men's Chorus. His arrangement of "Highland Cathedral" for brass, organ and bagpipe, is a favorite, and is played at Montview every fall on Reformation Sunday. John's organ compositions have been featured in recitals across Europe, as well as being performed by Montview organist, Barbara Hulac.

Over 20 of John's arrangements appear in the Denver Brass publication catalogue, and are played throughout the world. Denver Brass co-founder and artistic director, Kathy Brantigan, said that John was the first person to write brass-and-bagpipe arrangements for them, in conjunction with the Celtic Colorado Pipes and Drums. "Writing for large brass and bagpipes was unique at the time, and he was brilliant in his writing. John was always an inspiration, always encouraging. John used his many talents to the Glory of God." She added that John reminded her, and others, that we are "on a God-given mission to bring beauty and healing to our community." He was inducted into the Denver Brass Hall of Fame in March, 2014.

John was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2006, at age 60, but remained at Montview as the Minister of Music until 2015, when he retired due to worsening symptoms. He continued to express his amazing creativity, by producing and airing a music podcast, publishing a book of poetry (*The Fire of Prometheus*), and re-scoring his opera (*An Island of Sand*, with poet Thomas Troeger).

The Kuzmas relocated one last time, in 2018, to Cincinnati, where John lived out his last few years continuing to read about the ancient Greeks and Romans and the Catholic saints, and listening to and studying scores and recordings. As Bess shared in his final days, "Music was John's tool to reach others and inspire them to do their best." John was "on a path to the next



2018, photo by John Goerner

part of his journey...His spirit has already moved to a new place.... His spirit will be in all of our hearts forever." We know that the music in heaven is now a little louder, a little more challenging, and probably includes a lot more cymbal crashes.

- Lisa Boyum

We Love You, John!
Semper et Ubique

***From A Sabbath Morning Service,
according to the Union Prayer Book***

*And now ere we part, let us call to mind
those who have finished their earthly course
and have been gathered to the eternal home.*

*Though vanished from bodily sight, they
have not ceased to be, and it is well with
them.*

*They abide in the Shadow of the Most
High.*

*Let those who mourn for them be
comforted, Let them submit their aching
hearts to God, for He is just and wise and
merciful in all His doings, though no man,
no man, can comprehend His ways.*

*In the divine order of nature both life and
death, joy and sorrow, serve beneficent
ends, and in the fullness of time we shall
know why we are tried and why our love
brings us sorrow as well as happiness.*

*Wait patiently all ye that mourn, and be ye
of good courage, for surely your longing
souls shall be satisfied.*

Additional photos can be found below.

Click here to listen to *John's hymn*, "Where
Mountains Lift the Eye" (text by Thomas
Troeger), played by Minister of Music
Adam Waite at the August 8, 2021,
morning service at Montview Boulevard
Presbyterian Church in John's memory.



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth



2011, Photo by Jay Weiss



2011, Photo by Jay Weiss



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth



2015, Photo by Charlie Ellsworth