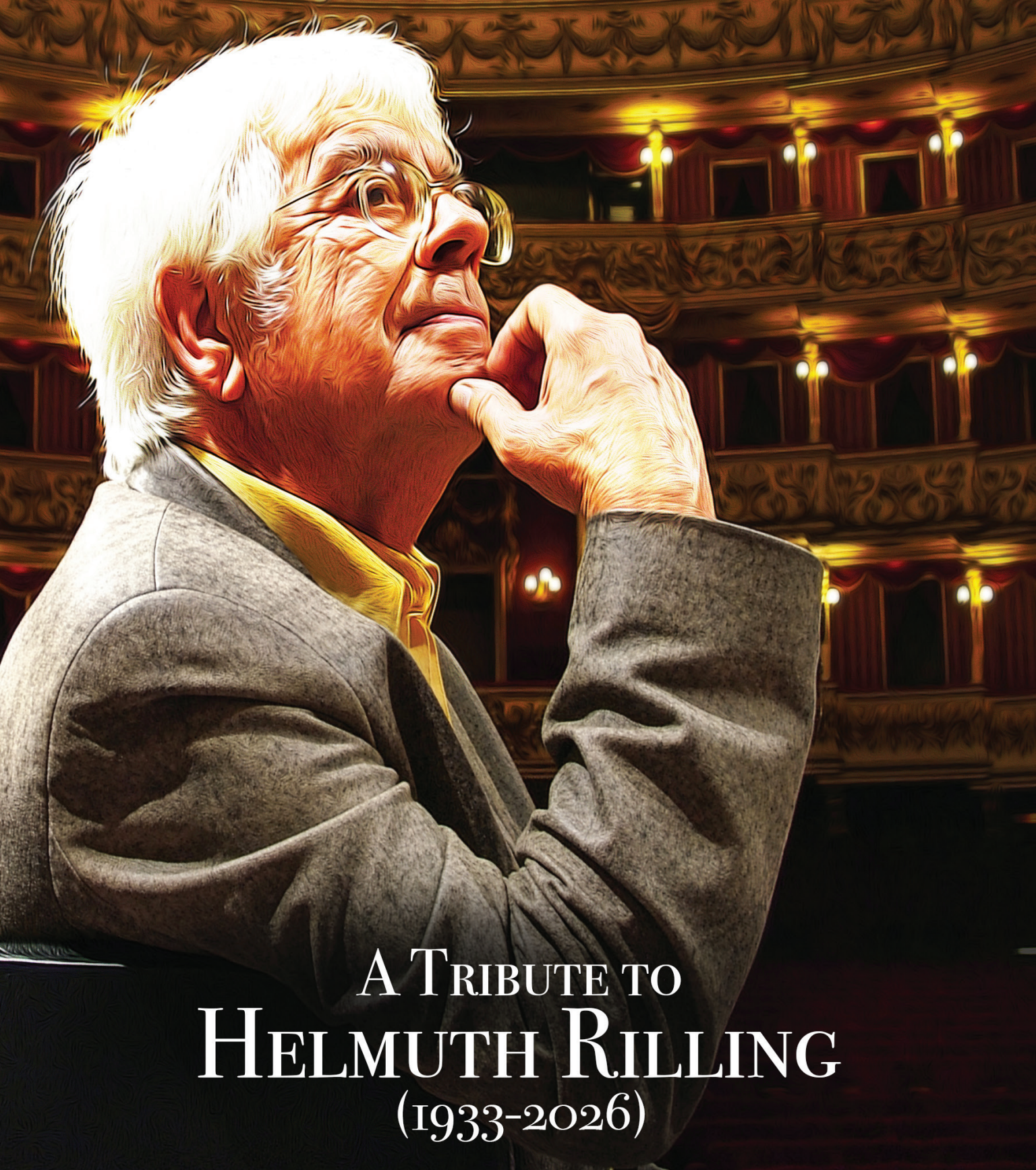


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CHORAL JOURNAL



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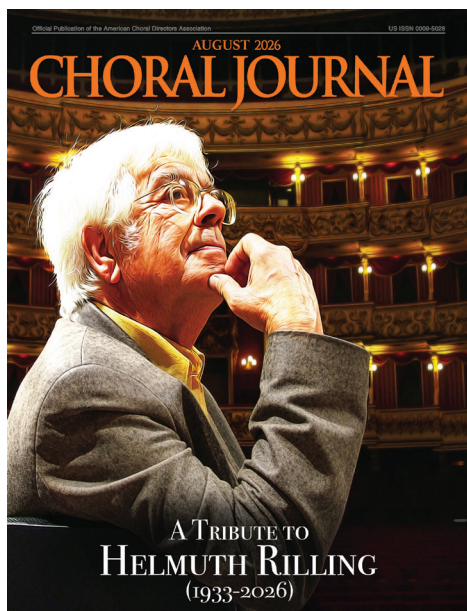
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From the Executive Director



Robyn Hilger

The Gift of Serving

One of the great privileges of my role is the opportunity to work alongside leaders from every corner of our profession. Every leadership transition reminds me of something important: people volunteer to be leaders and serve in ACDA, not because it is easy, but because they care so deeply about this organization.

As our six Region Presidents conclude their service this summer, each shared their reflections on this term of service in leadership in their region at their final board meeting. While their experiences were different, their reflections shared a remarkable similarity: they spoke barely about their accomplishments and almost completely about gratitude. Gratitude for the opportunity to contribute. Gratitude for the relationships they formed. Gratitude for the chance to work alongside colleagues they had admired for years.

Many described moments when they looked around a meeting table and found themselves sitting beside people whose work had shaped their own careers. Others spoke about the joy of discovering new friendships forged through this work. Almost all expressed some version of the same sentiment: they received as much, if not more, from this experience as they gave.

Jeffery Ames, Julie Dana, Derrick Fox, Amanda Hanzlik, Jonathan Owen, and Steve Zielke have each left their mark on ACDA. Their leadership has helped guide decisions, shape programs, strengthen connections, and advance our mission during some of the most critical moments in ACDA. More importantly, they have modeled what servant leadership looks like in practice—showing up, listening carefully, offering expertise, and putting the needs of the membership first. ACDA is deeply grateful for their service. I am deeply grateful to have been on this journey with them.

At the same time, a new group of leaders is stepping forward. Bill Campbell (NW), Penelope Cruz (E), Zachary Durlam (MW), Joshua Oppenheim (SW), Aimee Stewart (W), and Damion Womack (S) now begin their own chapter of service. They bring fresh perspectives, new ideas, and a shared commitment to helping ACDA continue to grow and thrive.

What encourages me most about these transitions is the continuity they represent. The names change, but the spirit remains the same. One group of leaders passes along its experience and wisdom, while another accepts the responsibility to serve. Together, they form an unbroken chain of stewardship that has sustained this organization for generations.

To those concluding their service: thank you for your leadership and generosity. To those beginning: thank you for saying yes. ACDA is stronger because of both.

ADVOCACY STATEMENT

The human spirit is elevated to a broader understanding of itself and its place in the world through the study of and participation in choral music. Singing in a choir produces more active and involved citizens. It affects self-worth in youth and adults. It builds connectivity throughout communities. Society benefits from the aesthetic beauty and community of singers created by choral programs within schools, houses of worship, and community organizations through involved citizenry, connectivity throughout communities, and feelings of personal self-worth. The American Choral Directors Association and its membership resolve to ensure the survival of choral programs for this and future generations by:

Actively voicing support for funding at local, state, and national levels of education and government; collaborating with local and national organizations to ensure the distribution of arts funding data and arts-related activism opportunities; advocating for full access to choral singing and inclusion of all singers in a choral program; and ensuring the distribution of advocacy statements and data regarding choral programs.

From the President



Edith Copley

Several years ago, I discovered a small book in our local bookstore by Don Miguel Ruiz titled *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997). The preface stated that if you did these four agreements, you would be happy for the rest of your life. Really? Do four things and be happy? I bought the book. For the last twenty-five years I've tried my best to follow

these four agreements, and as a result I believe I have truly experienced a happier life.

The first agreement is be impeccable with your word. Speak the truth, share words of kindness, and avoid speaking negatively about yourself and others. Say what you mean, because the truth really can set you free.

The second agreement is don't take anything personally. This can be difficult when someone says something negative about you or your work. The majority of my student evaluations were positive, but if one student was critical, I would go home, immediately make a vodka tonic, and later have trouble sleeping. Ruiz says that what others say and do often has nothing to do with you. They are living their own reality. Besides, as my mother always said, "you're not going to please everyone."

The third agreement is don't make assumptions. If you're not sure about something, have the courage to talk to the person who knows what's going on. Be a good listener and ask questions. Taking this important step avoids drama, bad feelings, and misunderstandings. As the old saying goes: "When we assume, it makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me.'"

The fourth agreement is always do your best. When you wake up in the morning, some days are better than others, but if you get up, get dressed, and do the best you can that day, that's all anyone can ask of you. This positive morning mindset can create a day filled with possibilities. As my massage therapist always says, "Your present thought is your coming attraction."

When guest conducting an honor choir, I will often take a few moments at the end of the last rehearsal to share these four agreements with the singers in the hope they will incorporate them into their lives and discover a path forward that is filled with happiness and all good things.

Edie Copley

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Amanda Bumgarner

Welcome to Volume 67 of the *Choral Journal*! It feels quite fitting to start a new volume year focusing on the life and work of Helmuth Rilling, who passed away in February 2026 at the age of ninety-two. I am thankful to Holger Schneider of the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart for the use of his photograph of Helmuth for our cover image along with other images found throughout this issue. I want to also extend my thanks to Sharon Hansen for putting together such a comprehensive history of Helmuth's "legacy in music" and María Guinand for sharing photos from her time with Helmuth during his visits to Venezuela.

In Rachel Carlson's interview article, Edward Maclary, Gordon Paine, and Kathy Saltzman Romey share their experiences preparing a choir for Rilling's direction and speak about Helmuth's legacy. Finally, we are reprinting a *Choral Journal* article from March 1991. I found this conversation between Helmuth Rilling, Gordon Paine, Royce Saltzman, and Dennis Shrock quite interesting and thought 2026 readers would enjoy hearing directly from Mr. Rilling in this updated layout format. He answers questions about preparing a major Bach work, score study, notational stylistic practices, and directly addresses whether or not he has a photographic memory.

I also want to call your attention to two articles from ACDA's Repertoire & Resources areas on Lifelong Choirs and Music in Worship. R&R National Chair for Lifelong Choirs, Jack Cleghorn, reflects on Rilling's influence in his own life and discusses excellence in lifelong choirs. Then, Jennaya Robison, National R&R Chair for Music in Worship, writes about "The Holy Act of Singing":

The holy act of singing bonds individuals on an artistic level in ways that we can see and hear. At the same time, the act of singing impacts the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of participants in a way that nurtures the sacred ground of being human.

Behind the scenes of every single issue of the *Choral Journal* is a dedicated group of scholars. Just as I am thankful for those who contributed to this issue's collection of content on the life of Helmuth Rilling, I am thankful for the *Journal's* editorial board, who review articles and work on column content throughout the year. Those names are in the sidebar of this column. Further, I often reach beyond the editorial board if an article review requires specific experience or knowledge in a particular subject or choral music genre. The work we publish is stronger because of everyone who contributes their time to make sure the research and information we share is as solid as possible. I encourage you to check out the *Choral Journal* index for Volume 66 in last month's June/July issue to see the wealth of content we published during the previous volume year.

Giving Through the Ages

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Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher: *A Legacy in Music*

SHARON A. HANSEN

Dr. Sharon A. Hansen is professor and director of choral activities, emerita, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She was an Oregon Bach Festival conductor under Rilling's tutelage and spent sixteen months at the Internationale Bachakademie in Stuttgart, Germany, researching her book, Helmuth Rilling: Conductor-Teacher, and singing sixty-five concerts with the Gächinger Kantorei.¹ sahansen@uwm.edu

Helmuth Rilling, German conductor, educator, and leading interpreter of Johann Sebastian Bach, died at the age of ninety-two in Warmbronn, Germany, on February 11, 2026, surrounded by his family. Born on May 29, 1933, in Stuttgart, Rilling is widely regarded as one of the most influential choral conductors of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Through performances, recordings, and masterclasses, he profoundly shaped generations of conductors, singers, instrumentalists, and audiences.

Rilling founded and directed the Gächinger Kantorei (1954–2013) and the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart (1965–2013). He founded the Oregon Bach

Festival with Royce Saltzman and served as its artistic director (1970–2013); and he founded the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart with Andreas Keller and served as its artistic director (1981–2013). He also established numerous Bach Academies internationally and remained active throughout his career as a guest conductor and pedagogue.

Given the interwoven nature of his artistic and institutional work, this article proceeds from his early biography to the three principal institutions most closely associated with his legacy: the Stuttgart ensembles (Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium), the Oregon Bach Festival, and the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart.



*Helmuth Rilling, Bachwoche Stuttgart
(Photo courtesy of Holger Schneider)*

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

Early Life, Studies, and Teaching

As the son of a music teacher and, maternally, of a lineage of theologians, Helmuth Rilling encountered music early and pervasively. From 1948 to 1952 he attended Lutheran boarding seminaries in Schöntal and Urach, where he sang in choirs and first engaged with the oratorio tradition. In 1952 he entered the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Stuttgart, where formative encounters shaped his development. He studied organ with Karl Gerok (a pupil of Karl Straube at Leipzig's St. Thomaskirche); harmony and composition with Johann Nepomuk David (noted for a contrapuntal idiom aligned with baroque principles, especially those of J. S. Bach); and choral conducting with Hans Grischkat, an eminent Bach interpreter who presented Stuttgart's first complete cantata cycle—a project Rilling later revisited at the International Bachakademie. The Hochschule's director, musicologist Hermann Keller—editor of the organ volumes of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition—was likewise influential. His son, Andreas Keller, would subsequently serve as general manager of the International Bachakademie.

During his university studies, Rilling served as Kantor in two local churches and worked for the church music department of the Süddeutsche Rundfunk. At a Rundfunk recording session with the distinguished organist Fernando Germani of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Rilling assisted as page turner; following an impromptu audition, Germani invited him to study at the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia. Ten days after graduating from the Hochschule, Rilling departed for Rome, where he studied organ with Germani from 1955 to 1957. There, among an international cohort of students, he first encountered performance at a distinctly global standard.

Following his studies, Rilling served as Germani's assistant at the Accademia Chigiana (1956–1963), where he encountered leading international artists, including Pablo Casals and Alfred Cortot. He subsequently taught at the School of Church Music in Berlin-Spandau (1963–1966) and directed the Spandauer Kantorei. In 1967 he studied in New York with Leonard Bernstein.² Following an appointment as professor of choral conducting at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main (1969–1985),

he established Germany's first degree program in choral conducting.³ Concurrently, he directed the Frankfurter Kantorei (1969–1981).

Foundations: The Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart

Gächingen, a small village on the edge of the Black Forest near Urach in southwestern Germany, played a formative role in Rilling's early musical life. While attending school in nearby Urach, he was invited to Gächingen by Albert Haberer, a family friend, to perform string quartets with the Haberer family. These gatherings gradually expanded to include fellow students, evolving into organized singing weekends that laid the groundwork for the later establishment of the Gächinger Kantorei.

From these gatherings emerged the concept of regular, project-based rehearsals for choral singers. This group of approximately twenty students presented its first concert on January 3, 1954, featuring works by Buxtehude and Schütz alongside contemporary compositions, and performed again in Stuttgart shortly thereafter.⁴ Thus, while still a student, Helmuth Rilling founded the Gächinger Kantorei. Initially devoted to unaccompanied repertoire from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries, the ensemble soon expanded to include neglected Romantic-era works.

The singers did not meet regularly, rehearsing only on a per-project basis. The number of singers required changed constantly depending on the needs of the repertoire. Ensemble members were not paid (except for recording) but did receive travel allowances.⁵ In 1965, Rilling established the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart as its instrumental counterpart, and concert repertoire from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries increasingly came to dominate programming. Rilling remained conductor of both ensembles until 2013.⁶

In its early years, foreign concert agencies urged Rilling to rename the choir, arguing that "Gächinger" was difficult for non-native speakers and that a larger city's name would carry greater prestige. Rilling refused, asserting that Gächingen represented an essential part of the ensemble's intellectual and spiritual identity, stating, "What is good can be known under any name."⁷

A Legacy in Music



Founding of the Gächinger Kantorei in 1954. Photo: Haberer archive.

The name remained, and subsequent success affirmed his conviction.

Gächinger Kantorei: Bridging the Iron Curtain

In 1954, at the suggestion of a fellow student, Rilling led the newly founded Gächinger Kantorei on its first tour to Thuringia in what was then East Germany, with performances in Eisenach, Ilmenau, Jena, and Bad Köstritz, and accommodations in private homes. This tour inaugurated Rilling's lifelong commitment to musical exchange with Eastern Bloc countries.

Following a second tour to Thuringia in 1961, Rilling wrote to Hartwig Eschenburg, then music director of St. Johanneskirche in Rostock, emphasizing "the necessity of human connections" between East and

West.⁸ Thirty years later, on the occasion of Rilling's sixtieth birthday, Eschenburg recalled:

Rilling's searches for human and musical connections appeared to many church musicians in former East Germany as a shining trail through the following decades. Rilling acted with diplomatic flair, sensitivity, and a warm heart through all the difficulties existing at that time in East Germany and other east-bloc countries. He journeyed out and always found ways to form and maintain connections between the East and the West, long before others from the West followed him.⁹

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

This commitment to transcending national and cultural boundaries formed a central tenet of Helmuth Rilling's broader life's work.

Gächinger Kantorei: Further Concert Tours and Collaborations

Following tours to East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the Gächinger Kantorei achieved international prominence with its first United States tour in 1968, performing in twenty-one cities. Subsequent North American tours followed in 1971 (fourteen cities and Mexico); 1981 (eleven cities with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra); and 1983 (fourteen cities, with additional performances in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra).¹⁰ The ensemble later returned for individual engagements, including performances with the New York Philharmonic in 1989 (*Messa per Rossini*)¹¹ and 2009 (Handel's *Messiah*),¹² as well as an appearance at the 2004 Oregon Bach Festival.¹³

The Kantorei collaborated with leading international ensembles, including the English Chamber Orchestra, Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, National Arts Centre Orchestra (Ottawa), New York Philharmonic, Orquesta Sinfónica de Sevilla, Swiss Radio Orchestra of Lugano, Vienna Symphony, and Israel Philharmonic, as well as major German ensembles such as the Berlin Philharmonic and the radio orchestras of Frankfurt, Baden-Baden, Berlin, and Stuttgart. Rilling later reflected on the significance of touring for both him and the ensemble:

It was very important to me that our concert tours not only serve as indicators of our personal performance level, but also that they should revolve around the understanding of people from other nations and other cultural backgrounds.¹⁴

A close artistic partnership linked Rilling with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, which he conducted in over 100 concerts together with the Gächinger Kantorei. With their 1976 performance of the Brahms *Requiem*, Rilling became the first German conductor to lead this distinguished orchestra after 1945.¹⁵ Rilling recalled the weight of that moment:

After the dress rehearsal I was informed that President Golda Meir would attend the evening concert, and, therefore, it was necessary to play Israel's national anthem. The thought then came to me that the Gächinger Kantorei could also sing the anthem. We were provided the music, we learned the melody and we learned the words. That evening in Jerusalem, President Meir entered the concert hall, the people stood, and the choir began to sing the Israeli National Anthem—a moment of deep profundity. Over a terrible past, Germans and Israelis reached out their hands to one another.¹⁶

These special collaborations between Rilling, the Gächinger Kantorei, and the Israel Philharmonic were said to have inspired long-lasting German-Jewish understanding and reconciliation.¹⁷

Under Rilling's direction, the Gächinger Kantorei maintained an intensive international schedule, averaging seventy-five to one hundred concerts alongside six to eight weeks of recording sessions annually, both in Europe and abroad. Between 1970 and 1985, Rilling led the Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart in a groundbreaking recording project encompassing Bach's complete sacred cantatas as well as major choral-orchestral works, including the Passions and *Mass in B minor*, issued in conjunction with the three hundredth anniversary of Bach's birth (1985). That same year, Rilling was awarded the Grand Prix du Disque for his work on this fifteen-year project.¹⁸ His long-standing collaboration with Hänssler Classic culminated in the "Edition Bachakademie," a 172-CD set representing the first comprehensive recording of Bach's complete *oeuvre*, released for the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Bach's death (2000).¹⁹ This monumental set won the 2000 Cannes Classical Award as "Bach Collection of the Year."²⁰ In parallel, both ensembles played a central role in performances, masterclasses, and instruction within the annual Sommerakademie Johann Sebastian Bach and the Europäisches Musikfest, organized by the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart.

Having long sought to bridge seemingly insur-

mountable cultural and institutional divides, Rilling was appropriately invited to conduct the musical program for the official German reunification ceremony on October 3, 1990, in Berlin. Marking the union of East and West, he led the Gächinger Kantorei, the Leipzig Radio Choir, and the Berlin Philharmonic in performances including Bach's *Cantata BWV 110* (*Unser Mund sei voll Lachens*) and "Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes" from Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*.

Anniversary Accomplishments

In 1989, during its thirty-fifth anniversary year, the Gächinger Kantorei appeared at the Granada and Salzburg Festivals and with the New York Philharmonic. They undertook a German tour, accompanied Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker on a state visit to Madrid, and participated in a television recording of the *Messa per Rossini*, a collaborative nineteenth-century Requiem conceived by Verdi in honor of Rossini.²¹ During its fortieth anniversary in 1994, the ensemble presented concerts in Cologne, Budapest, Düsseldorf; at the Dresden Music Festival; at the Rheingau Music Festival; and in Ludwigshafen, Wiesbaden, Constance, and Landau. CD productions that year included recordings of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Mendelssohn's *St. Paul*. Rilling's landmark Bach project with the Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart earned a Gold Record from Hänssler-Verlag, with over one million CDs sold, and was one of the most commercially and artistically significant large-scale choral recording projects in classical music.²²

The fiftieth anniversary in 2004 was marked by a U. S. tour featuring Bach's *Mass in B minor* at the Oregon Bach Festival's thirty-fifth anniversary, as well as by the publication of a commemorative Festschrift.²³ Further international touring followed in Rilling's final years between 2004 and 2013, including a 2006 Israel tour celebrating three decades of collaboration with the Israel Philharmonic.

Rilling retired from the Gächinger Kantorei and the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart in 2013. On August 24, 2013, he was honored in a gala concert at the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, attended by Federal President Joachim Gauck. At this event, Rilling and his Bachakademie successor, Hans-Christoph Rade-



Hans-Christoph Rademann (left) and Helmuth Rilling (right) with German Federal President Joachim Gauck (center) on August 24, 2013, in the Stuttgart Liederhalle. Photo courtesy of Holger Schneider.

mann (former director of the Dresden Chamber Choir and chief conductor of the RIAS Chamber Choir), appeared jointly with the Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart, symbolically marking the historic transition between artistic eras. Since 2016, the two ensembles have been unified into a single entity; under the direction of Rademann, they are now collectively known as the *Gaechinger Cantorey*.²⁴

The Oregon Bach Festival

The Oregon Bach Festival (OBF), an internationally acclaimed, multifaceted festival, originated from meetings in the late 1960s between Rilling and Royce Saltzman (1928–2023), professor of conducting and choral music at the University of Oregon and later ACDA

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

national president. The two first met in Stuttgart while Saltzman was directing the University's International Center for Music Education, a study-abroad program for students.²⁵ At the time, Rilling had recently been appointed professor of conducting at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt.

Recognizing shared artistic interests, Saltzman invited Rilling to Eugene in 1970 to teach conducting and organ masterclasses and to direct a choral concert featuring selected singers from the region. Following the success of this initial visit, the collaboration was repeated in 1971, at which point an annual workshop and festival began to take shape. Initially designated the "Summer Festival of Music," the event was formally renamed the "Oregon Bach Festival" by the end of the decade.²⁶ Although neither founder originally envisioned a permanent institution, the festival expanded

continually, growing from a first-year budget of \$2,500 to over \$1 million within twenty-five years. Saltzman, as cofounder, served as executive director for thirty-four years.

The First Five Years: 1970–1974

Recognizing the potential for a sustained performance initiative, Saltzman established an administrative board and founded the "Friends of the Festival," initiating a durable network of institutional, private, and corporate support that ensured the festival's continuation. In its early phase, the choir consisted primarily of University of Oregon students and local singers, while instrumental forces were assembled *ad hoc* from university students, faculty, and community musicians. From the outset, the festival's core structure was defined by masterclasses in choral and orchestral



Photo courtesy of Holger Schneider.

conducting, performances of major choral-orchestral repertoire, solo recitals by guest artists, and workshops and chamber-music presentations spanning a broad historical repertoire.

In 1973, a three-week program centered on Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* marked the beginning of the composer's enduring centrality to the festival's identity. That year also introduced lecture-rehearsals led by Rilling, combining commentary on the work under preparation with public access to the rehearsal process; initially free, these events later evolved into a subscription series due to their popularity. By the end of the fifth year, the festival had established a stable institutional base, significantly expanded its budget, and secured a clear trajectory for continued growth.

Ten Years of Development: 1975–1984

Between 1975 and 1984, the festival broadened its programmatic scope. In 1976, the Bach Cantata Series was inaugurated as an extension of the conducting-masterclass format, combining Rilling's introductory commentary on selected cantatas with rehearsals that employed the available forces for illustrative purposes. These culminated in full performances led by student conductors. From 1977 to 1979, the festival ensembles undertook their first off-campus appearances, with Rilling conducting concerts at the Portland Civic Center and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. During this period, he also introduced Bach cantata performances within Lutheran liturgical services, extending a practice long associated with his Cantata Weekends at the Gedächtniskirche in Stuttgart.²⁷

In 1983, Rilling and the OBF Chorus and Orchestra performed Bach's *Mass in B minor* at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. By now, the ensembles drew their membership from leading professional groups throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.²⁸ In 1982–83, the Hult Center for the Performing Arts was inaugurated in Eugene as the festival's principal venue. In subsequent years, while Bach's music remained central, the repertoire expanded to include major choral-orchestral works by Beethoven (*Missa solennis*), Brahms (*Ein deutsches Requiem*), Bruckner (*Mass in F minor*), Haydn (*Missa in Angustiis*), Verdi (*Requiem*), and Mendelssohn (*Elijah, St. Paul*).

The festival had undergone substantial institutional and artistic development in its first fifteen years. By the mid-1980s, cofounders Rilling and Saltzman had established it among the leading music festivals in the United States, earning both national and international recognition.²⁹

Two Anniversaries: Bach's 300th (1985) and OBF's 25th (1994)

In 1985, the Oregon Bach Festival mounted an ambitious Bach tricentennial program, featuring masterclasses and performances of the *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Mass in B minor*, the six Brandenburg Concertos, and additional works from the composer's *oeuvre*. That year, the festival ensembles returned to the Hollywood Bowl for performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* and *Mass in B minor*. In recognition of fifteen years of collaboration between the OBF and the University of Oregon, Rilling received the University's Distinguished Service Award.

In subsequent years, the repertoire expanded to include twentieth-century and operatic works, notably Krzysztof Penderecki's *Polish Requiem* and Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*. The 1990 season presented Handel's *Saul*, Mozart's *Thamos, King of Egypt*, and Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion*, the latter featuring actor Tony Randall as narrator, with the composer conducting. In 1991, Rilling led the OBF Chorus and Orchestra in Bach's *Mass in B minor* for the closing concert of the ACDA Conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

In the same period, the OBF Orchestra issued its first recording on the Hänssler label, featuring Bach's Orchestral Suites 3 and 4; a second recording, Suites 1 and 2, followed the next year. Rilling also introduced a "Bach Church Service," which drew over four hundred singers for a performance of Cantata BWV 80 (*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*). The 1992 closing concert presented the United States West Coast premiere of *Messa per Rossini*. The 1993 season included performances of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Elijah*, Haydn's *The Seasons*, Bach's Weimar cantatas, and Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*. That year also saw the release of a third recording, Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, featuring the OBF Orchestra and Women's Chorus.

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

In celebration of the Oregon Bach Festival's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1994, Estonian composer Arvo Pärt was commissioned to write *Litany: A Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom*. Royce Saltzman regarded the Pärt commission as a defining achievement, remarking:

A work [such as Arvo Pärt's *Litany: A Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom*] makes a statement that the Oregon Bach Festival and its audiences are looking ahead to the next 25 years.³⁰

The season also featured major works including Bach's *Mass in B minor*, *St. Matthew Passion*, and Brandenburg Concertos, Monteverdi's *Vespers*, and Verdi's *Requiem*.

Throughout his tenure, Rilling consistently placed education at the center of the Oregon Bach Festival. His conducting masterclasses provided advanced professional training to a significant number of participants from the United States and abroad; for many, participation in this rigorous summer program constituted a formative rite of passage. The pedagogical foundation of the masterclass was Rilling's own expertise, marked by his rapid diagnostic ability to identify technical and interpretive issues and to prescribe targeted solutions. His teaching style combined rigor with encouragement, typically framing critique through initial affirmation followed by specific recommendations for improvement. The OBF's "Discovery Series," which integrated masterclasses, lecture-demonstrations, and performances, became a model for the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, founded by Rilling in 1981. In this context, former ACDA President John Haberlen emphasized the principle of "lifelong learning" in conducting, noting the necessity of continual professional refinement.³¹ Rilling's masterclasses embodied this ethos by providing sustained daily engagement with professional choral and orchestral ensembles. Haberlen wrote:

Masterclasses in choral conducting...must involve an excellent choir and an exceptional master teacher and conductor. A most prestigious example of this type is provided by the Oregon Bach Festival, featuring Helmuth Rilling.³²

Under Rilling's direction, the OBF commissioned, co-commissioned, or presented world premieres of important works, including:

- Stephen Paulus, *Symphony for Strings* (world premiere July 5, 1989)
- Arvo Pärt, *Litany: A Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom* (world premiere June 26, 1994)
- Osvaldo Golijov, *Oceana* (world premiere June 27, 1996)
- Krzysztof Penderecki, *Credo* (world premiere July 11, 1998). In 2001, Rilling and his OBF ensembles won the Grammy Award for "Best Choral Performance" for their world-premiere recording of this work.
- Tan Dun, *Water Passion after St. Matthew* (American premiere July 4, 2002)
- Felix Mendelssohn, *The Uncle from Boston* (American premiere July 3, 2005)
- Sven-David Sandström, *Messiah* (world premiere July 9, 2009)

Helmuth Rilling retired at the age of eighty in 2013 after forty-four years as artistic director of the Oregon Bach Festival. He was succeeded by English conductor and keyboardist Matthew Halls, who was the artistic director from 2014 to 2017. Since 2018, the OBF has adopted a model of "Artistic Partners" to guide its programming. Current artistic partners include Jos van Veldhoven (former artistic director of the Netherlands Bach Society; historically informed performance practice) and Ken-David Masur (former conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra; modern choral-orchestral projects).

The Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart

The Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart (IBA) has been a leading institution for the performance,

study, and dissemination of Johann Sebastian Bach's music and related repertoires in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Founded in 1981 and under Rilling's leadership until 2013, it developed a distinctive model integrating performance, education, research, and international exchange. Its activities reflect both continuity with earlier Bach traditions and an innovative reconfiguration of canonical music within a globalized cultural context.

Beginnings

The Internationale Bachakademie was established in Stuttgart in 1981 as a publicly supported foundation. Rather than emerging in isolation, it developed from the convergence of Rilling's earlier work with the Gächinger Kantorei and the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart, and his experience with the Oregon Bach Festival. Although Rilling was already internationally recognized for his commitment to Bach (and his two performing ensembles had garnered both acclaim and institutional support), the transplantation of the OBF's expansive educational model—encompassing lecture-concerts, artist encounters, masterclasses, and performances, with additional focus on musicological research—necessitated new organizational structures.³³

By the late 1970s, rising international interest in early music—particularly baroque repertoires—generated demand for specialized training beyond traditional conservatory frameworks. Although German musical culture retained its longstanding prestige, new, historically informed interpretive approaches were being advanced by emerging figures such as Nicholas Harnoncourt, Gustav Leonhardt, Hans Brüggem, Christopher Hogwood, and John-Elliott Gardiner, alongside ensembles and artists from England, the Netherlands, the Baltic States, and Scandinavia. Concurrently, West Germany's relative economic prosperity fostered a revitalization of its own musical life, evident in the expansion of free courses at music academies, the construction of new concert venues, and the proliferation of festivals.³⁴

Stuttgart's contribution to the revitalization of German musical life took shape in the Johann Sebastian Bach Summer Academy, founded by Rilling in 1979. With the Gächinger Kantorei and the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart as its artistic core, the academy pursued a dual

mission: the performance of Bach's works and, following the Oregon model, the training of young musicians through masterclasses and workshops. Students would study ten cantatas over two weeks, taking courses in the morning and rehearsing in the afternoon. Concurrently, between 1954 and 2007, the Neue Bach-Ausgabe (NBA) was being produced at the Bach Institutes in Göttingen and Leipzig; as a result, prominent Bach scholars were drawn to the Summer Academy, where they presented the findings of their ongoing research.³⁵

Institutional support proved essential. Rilling's prior association with the Stuttgarter Musikfreunde (Friends of Music)—founded in 1965 and instrumental in managing his ensembles' recordings, tours, and concerts—provided an initial foundation. As Rilling's ensembles' activities expanded, however, the need for professional administration arose. In 1972, Andreas Keller, son of Rilling's former Hochschule Director Hermann Keller, responded to an advertisement that read, "Major Stuttgart vocal ensemble seeks manager," without knowing it was Rilling's ensemble. In October 1972, Keller assumed the role of general manager of the newly established Stuttgarter Konzertvereinigung (Concert Association), bringing with him extensive connections across governmental, business, and industrial sectors. Under his leadership, stable funding was secured, and the Summer Academy emerged as a prominent expression of Baden-Württemberg's cultural identity.³⁶

The Stuttgarter Konzertvereinigung managed the activities of Rilling's two ensembles from 1972 to 1982, and the Summer Academy's success in 1979 and 1980 culminated in its institutionalization. In 1981, Rilling and Keller formally founded the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, a foundation supported by substantial grants from the Baden-Württemberg industrial community, the city of Stuttgart, and the state of Baden-Württemberg.³⁷ In 1984, with the help of private sponsors, the Internationale Bachakademie acquired a four-story, former publishing house with a concert hall. To celebrate this momentous occasion, the mayor of Stuttgart proclaimed that the square near which the academy sits would be renamed Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Platz.

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

Recordings, Bach Weeks, and Worldwide Bach Academies

From 1981 to 2013, the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart underwent a period of remarkable growth and transformation under Rilling's leadership. Building on its founding vision of promoting the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries, Rilling expanded the institution into an internationally recognized center for performance, education, and scholarly exchange. This era was defined by a careful balance between tradition and innovation, as the IBA both preserved historical performance practices and embraced new global perspectives.

A significant achievement of the Bachakademie under Rilling was its extensive recording activity. Most prominently, the *Edition Bachakademie* (2000), issued for the Bach anniversary year, presented the complete works of J. S. Bach across 172 CDs under Rilling's artistic direction. This landmark project consolidated his standing as a leading Bach interpreter and furnished an indispensable resource for scholars, performers, and listeners. It further exemplified the Bachakademie's integrated commitment to both performance and documentation.

Concurrently with its expansion of its festival, the IBA established the *Bachwoche* (1999–2013), which encompassed fifteen iterations. This series offered a more concentrated engagement with Bach's *oeuvre* through performances, lectures, workshops, and discussions. Functioning as a complement to the larger festivals, it enabled a sustained and interdisciplinary exploration of Bach's music in its theological, historical, and artistic contexts.

The IBA's influence extended internationally through an extensive network of collaborations. Under Rilling's direction, it founded and partnered with Bach academies in more than a dozen cities across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, facilitating the global circulation of Bach's music and fostering cross-cultural exchange. In several instances, the Stuttgart model functioned as a template for analogous initiatives abroad,

effectively disseminating its interpretive and pedagogical approach to Bach performance.

Equally significant were the Internationale Bachakademie's educational initiatives, which established it as a cultural institution devoted to concerts, workshops, and contextual engagement with Bach's *oeuvre*. Under Rilling's leadership, it prioritized pedagogy through masterclasses, workshops, and lecture-recitals that attracted students



Helmuth Rilling with composer Wolfgang Rihm at the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, April 2013. Photo courtesy of Holger Schneider.

and emerging professionals internationally. These programs provided intensive training in choral and orchestral performance, often culminating in public presentations. Its pedagogical approach combined technical refinement with interpretive depth, fostering engagement with the theological, historical, and expressive dimensions of Bach's music. In this way, the IBA functioned as a formative center for successive generations of performers and conductors.³⁸

Festivals

One of the most influential pillars in the development of the Internationale Bachakademie was the series of Summer Academies (*Sommerakademien*), which ran from 1979 to 1999 and totaled sixteen iterations, significantly expanding during Rilling's tenure. These academies followed the proven Oregon Bach Festival

format, attracting young musicians, conductors, and scholars from around the world and offering intensive study and performance opportunities focused on Bach and other composers, including world premieres. Participants worked closely with Rilling and other leading figures; over time, the Summer Academies became a breeding ground for a new generation of performers deeply committed to historically informed yet musically expressive interpretations.³⁹

In 1985, the IBA presented its first and only Internationales Musikfest Stuttgart, marking a major step toward expanding its public presence. This international festival, celebrating the anniversaries of Schütz, Bach, Handel, and Berg, laid the groundwork for what would become a defining feature of the institution's identity: large-scale festivals that combined high artistic standards with thematic programming.

The festival concept evolved significantly with the introduction of the Europäisches Musikfest Stuttgart in 1988. Over the course of thirteen editions, running until 2008, the Europäisches Musikfest Stuttgart broadened the Bachakademie's scope beyond Bach to include a wide range of European musical traditions. This expansion reflected Rilling's vision of situating Bach within a larger cultural and historical context, demonstrating that a living engagement with the music of Bach depended not only on historical performance but also on the creation of new repertoire that spoke to contemporary audiences. Under Rilling's direction and in conjunction with the Europäisches Musikfest Stuttgart, the Bachakademie commissioned or presented world premieres of the following major works:

- Thirteen composers, *Messa per Rossini* (world premiere, September 13, 1988, Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart; Helmuth Rilling, conductor)
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Requiem in D minor*, K. 626 (Robert Levin completion, world premiere, January 19, 1991, Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart; Helmuth Rilling, conductor)
- Fourteen composers, *Requiem der Versöhnung* (com-

mission and world premiere, August 16, 1995, Gächinger Kantorei, Krakow Chamber Choir, and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra; Helmuth Rilling, conductor)

- Passion 2000 Project: Sofia Gubaidulina, *Johannes-Passion (Passio secundum Johannem)* (commission and world premiere, September 7, 2000, Choir and Orchestra of St. Petersburg Mariinsky Theater; Valery Gergiev, conductor); Tan Dun, *Water Passion after St. Matthew* (commission and world premiere, September 8, 2000, RIAS Chamber Choir and small instrumental ensemble; Tan Dun, conductor); Osvaldo Golijov, *La Pasión según San Marcos* (commission and world premiere, September 5, 2000, Schola Cantorum de Caracas and the Orquesta La Pasión; María Guinand, conductor); Wolfgang Rihm, *Passionstücke nach Lukas*, (world premiere, Internationales Musikfest Stuttgart, August 29, 2000, Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart; Helmuth Rilling, conductor)⁴⁰
- Wolfgang Rihm, *Stille Feste* (for Helmuth Rilling's 80th birthday and farewell as artistic director, commission and world premiere, April 27, 2013, Gächinger Kantorei and Bach-Collegium Stuttgart, Helmuth Rilling, conductor)⁴¹

Transitions

In 2009, at the start of Rilling's last five years at the Bachakademie, a change in titles from Europäisches Musikfest Stuttgart to Musikfest Stuttgart marked a re-orientation of the event. Rilling's long-standing colleague and cofounder, Andreas Keller, retired in 2008, necessitating a search for a new managing director. With the change in management and Rilling's retirement on the horizon, divergent ideas were emerging as to the future direction, not only for the IBA, but also for its festivals. In 2013, after more than three decades of leadership, Founder and Artistic Director Helmuth Rilling stepped down, passing the baton to Hans-Christoph Rademann. This transition signaled the end of an era and the beginning of a new phase in the institution's development. The foundations laid between 1981 and 2013—its artistic standards, educational mission, and international

Helmuth Rilling, Conductor-Teacher:

network—continue to shape its trajectory.⁴²

Rilling's Legacy

Helmuth Rilling is considered one of the three international choral conductor “giants” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, joining Eric Ericson (Sweden, 1918–2013) and Robert Shaw (USA, 1916–1999). Rilling has been recognized nationally and internationally for his many contributions, being the recipient of Germany’s highest national and civic honors (1978–2019). He received major music and international acclaim, including the Herbert von Karajan Music Prize (2011), the UNESCO Music Prize for the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart (1994), and a Grammy Award (2001). He received several honorary doctorates as well as a number of church-music awards. Rilling also was the recipient of two distinguished cultural and societal awards: The Theodor Heuss Prize (1995) and the Hanns Martin Schleyer Prize (2001), underscoring Rilling’s long-standing role as a cultural diplomat, fostering dialogue and international understanding across nations through music.⁴³

Speaking as one of the many thousands of choral conductors, choral singers, instrumentalists, soloists, students, and audience members who were fortunate to have crossed paths with Helmuth Rilling, how very lucky we were.

Ruhe in Frieden, geliebter Maestro. 📍

NOTES

¹ Portions of this article originally appeared in: Sharon Hansen, “Helmuth Rilling Celebrates Two Anniversaries,” *Choral Journal* 35, no. 5 (December 1994): 9–15. Information not cited in this article appears in: Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling: Conductor-Teacher* (Roger Dean Publishing Company, 1997). The author extends sincere appreciation to Holger Schneider of the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart for the use of his beautiful photographs, and profound gratitude to Dr. Gordon Paine for his distinguished editorial guidance on earlier drafts of this article.

² Helmuth Rilling, “About this Artist,” Los Angeles Philharmonic, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/4484/helmuth-rilling>.

³ Andreas Bomba, Henning Bey, and Holger Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart,” accessed April 12, 2026, https://www.bachakademie.de/files/bachakademie/content/bachakademie/publikationen/jahrbuch_gmg_bw_2022/jahrbuch_gmg-bw_2022_bachakademie_en_web.pdf.

⁴ David Allen, “Helmuth Rilling, Who Recorded Huge Swaths of Bach, Dies at 92,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/12/arts/music/helmuth-rilling-dead.html>.

⁵ Gordon Paine, “Helmuth Rilling and the Gächinger Kantorei,” *Choral Journal* (April 1984): 27–32.

⁶ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”

⁷ “In Stuttgart fest verwurzelt—zu Hause in der ganzen Welt,” *Forum Bachakademie* 17 (May 1993): 2. The title (“*Firmly rooted in Stuttgart—at home in the whole world*”) reflected the philosophy of the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart under Helmuth Rilling.

⁸ Helmuth Rilling to Hartwig Eschenburg, July 21, 1961.

⁹ Hartwig Eschenburg to the Internationale Bachakademie, May 21, 1993.

¹⁰ *Forum Bachakademie*, no. 80 (November 2013), special edition photo album for the 2013 Musikfest Stuttgart, published July 2013; published by Helmuth Rilling (Founder), Gernot Rehr (Intendant), and Holger Schneider (Editorial Direction). Sources: Andreas Keller, tabular overview (2007); Sarah Maria Rilling, *My Father Helmuth Rilling*, trans. Gordon Paine (Oregon Bach Festival, 2008); Helmuth Rilling and Hanspeter Krellmann, *Helmuth Rilling: Ein Leben mit Bach: Gespräche mit Hanspeter Krellmann* (Bärenreiter, 2013), <https://www.bachakademie.de/de/institution-bachakademie.html> (“Zur Geschichte”).

¹¹ “Messa per Rossini,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 23, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messa_per_Rossini.

¹² Vivian Schweitzer, “A Period-Style Taste of a Holiday-Season Staple,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/17/arts/music/17rilling.html>.

¹³ Fred Crafts, “38 Voices, 50 Years: The Choir Helmuth Rilling Has Led for Half a Century Makes Its First Trip to the Oregon Bach Festival,” *The Register-Guard*, July 4, 2004, archived November 28, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101128162320/http://oregonbachfestival.com/pressroom/news/143>.

- ¹⁴ Helmuth Rilling, address, February 13, 1987, performance of the Gächinger Kantorei and Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, Stuttgart, Germany.
- ¹⁵ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- ¹⁶ Helmuth Rilling, address February 13, 1987.
- ¹⁷ Andreas Bomba, “Nachruf: Helmuth Rilling,” Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, trans. by Gordon Paine, accessed April 20, 2026, https://www.bachakademie.de/files/bachakademie/content/bachakademie/rilling/Nachruf_Helmuth_Rilling_IBA_Andreas_Bomba.pdf.
- ¹⁸ Rilling’s groundbreaking recording cycle was the first complete recording of Bach’s cantatas and choral orchestral works on modern instruments.
- ¹⁹ Helmuth Rilling, “About this Artist,” Los Angeles Philharmonic, accessed April 5, 2026, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/4484/helmuth-rilling>.
- ²⁰ “H. Royce Saltzman, “Helmuth Rilling (1933–2026),” accessed April 14, 2026, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/rilling_helmuth_1933_/.
- ²¹ Festschrift zum 25-jährigen Bachakademie-Jubiläum (2006), Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, accessed April 24, 2026, <https://www.bachakademie.de/de/institution-bachakademie/helmuth-rilling.html>. This piece saw its world premiere under Rilling at the 1988 European Music Festival in Stuttgart and its United States premiere in 1989 with Rilling conducting the Gächinger Kantorei and the New York Philharmonic.
- ²² Festschrift zum 25-jährigen Bachakademie-Jubiläum (2006).
- ²³ Andreas Bomba, “*Singet se noh*: Festschrift zum 50-jährigen Bestehen der Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart (2004),” Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, accessed April 24, 2026, <https://www.bachakademie.de/de/gaechinger-cantorey.html>.
- ²⁴ Los Angeles Philharmonic, “Gaechinger Cantorey,” MusicDB, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/7488/gaechinger-cantorey>.
- ²⁵ International Federation for Choral Music, “Royce Saltzman Obituary,” accessed April 16, 2026, <https://www.ifcm.net/uploads/content/2023%20news/Saltzman%20Obituary%20Family.pdf>.
- ²⁶ “Oregon Bach Festival, ‘History of OBF,’” accessed April 19, 2026, <https://oregonbachfestival.org/history-of-obf/>
- ²⁷ After ten years of growth and success in the United States, Rilling transferred the Oregon Bach Festival idea back to his home state of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, where he proposed that the city and state underwrite a similar festival in Stuttgart. As a result, the first Summer Academy Johann Sebastian Bach was held in 1979 in Stuttgart.
- ²⁸ “Oregon Bach Festival, ‘History of OBF.’”
- ²⁹ Samantha Pierotti, “Helmuth Rilling, Oregon Bach Festival Co-founder and Conductor, Dies at 92,” *The Register-Guard*, February 13, 2026, <https://www.registerguard.com/story/news/local/2026/02/13/helmuth-rilling-music-educator-celebrated-conductor-dies-at-92/88665572007/>.
- ³⁰ “Oregon Bach Festival, *Part of the Plan*, program book (1993), 38.
- ³¹ John Haberlen, “From the President,” *Choral Journal* 34, no. 2 (February 1994): 3.
- ³² Haberlen, “From the President.”
- ³³ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- ³⁴ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- ³⁵ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- ³⁶ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- ³⁷ Paine, “Helmuth Rilling and the Gächinger Kantorei.”
- ³⁸ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- ³⁹ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- ⁴⁰ Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- ⁴¹ *Forum Bachakademie*, no. 80 (November 2013).
- ⁴² Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- ⁴³ *Forum Bachakademie*, no. 80.

Helmuth Rilling in Venezuela

María Guinand

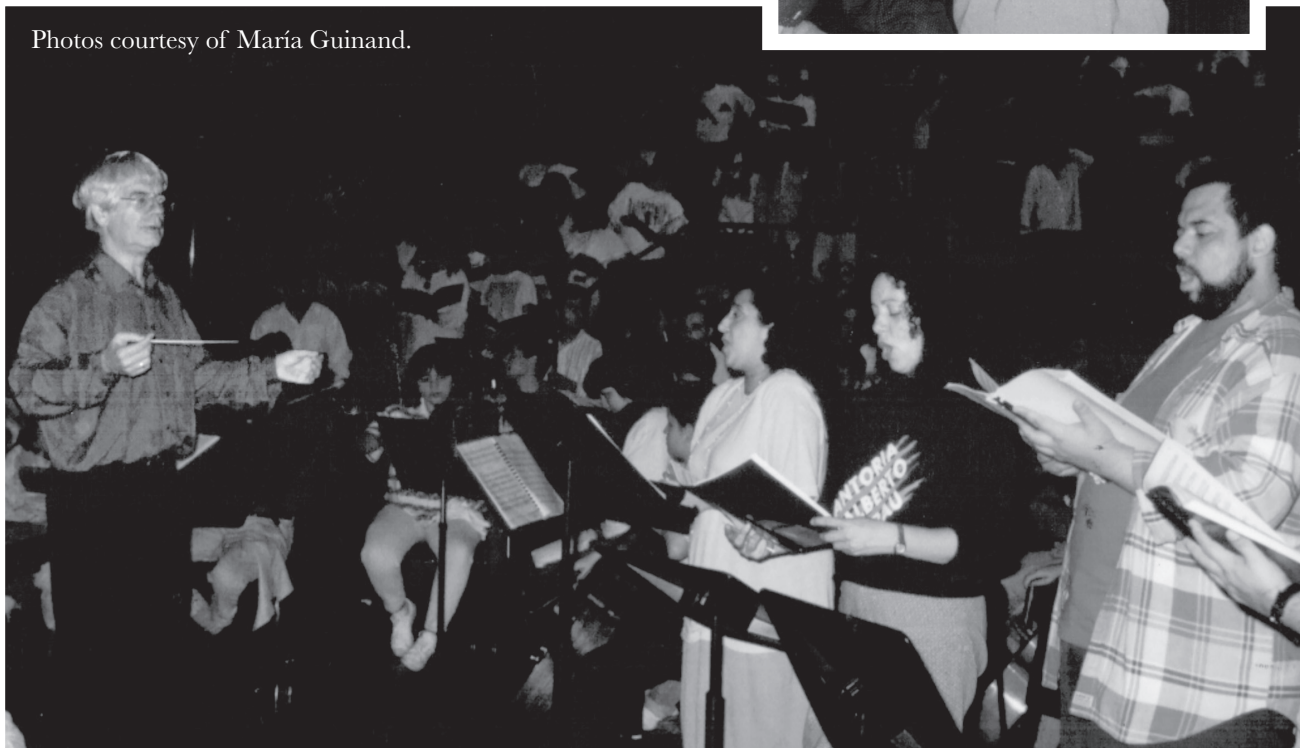
Artistic Director, Schola Cantorum of Venezuela

Recipient of the Helmuth Rilling Preis (2009)

Maestro Helmuth Rilling visited Venezuela for various projects of the Bach Academy between 1993 and 2012. All those years were wonderful encounters with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and other composers who carried on this tradition. Maestro Rilling always possessed a profound clarity in his understanding of this entire choral symphonic repertoire and the messages hidden within the music, and he taught us how to discover and convey them. He was a generous, selfless, and patient teacher who knew how to impart a message to each student and leave a mark of his wisdom. He was a great educator of audiences through his concert talks, seeking to bring everyone closer to the deepest meaning of the musical repertoire.



Photos courtesy of María Guinand.





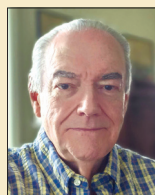


Maestro Helmuth Rilling's Teaching, Influence, and Legacy: An Interview with Edward Maclary, Gordon Paine, and Kathy Saltzman Romey

RACHEL CARLSON



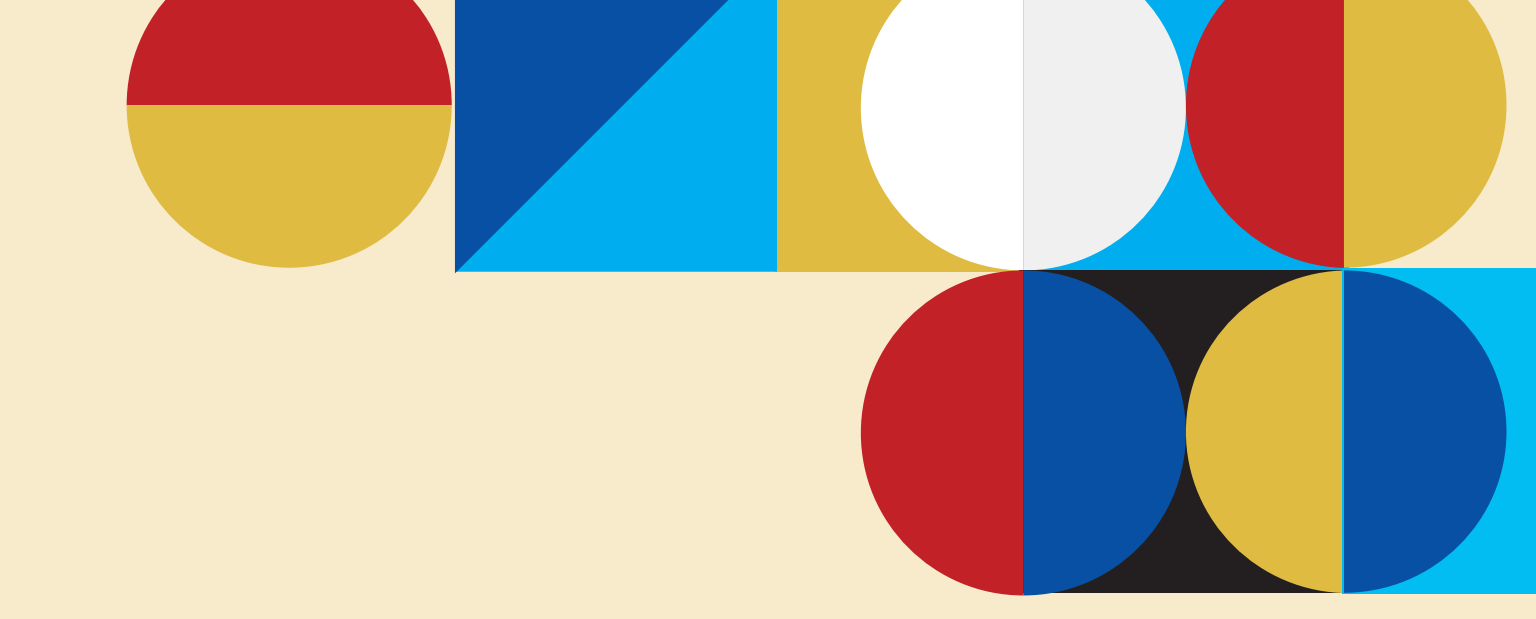
Edward Maclary is Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Maryland. He has served as a guest chorus master for the Cleveland Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. From 2014 to 2017 he was the Director of the Master Class in Conducting at the Oregon Bach Festival. He currently holds an appointment as Adjunct Professor at the Peabody Conservatory of Music.



Gordon Paine is Professor Emeritus of Music at California State University, Fullerton, from which he retired in 2003. He is perhaps best known for his books in the series “Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire,” published by earthsongs in 2000 and 2007. He served as Helmuth Rilling’s assistant at the Oregon Bach Festival from 1974 through 1999.



Kathy Saltzman Romey is Professor Emerita of Music and former director of choral activities at the University of Minnesota. She is also artistic director of the 200-voice symphonic chorus, The Minnesota Chorale, which serves as principal chorus for the Minnesota Orchestra. Romey has served as a staff member to the Oregon Bach Festival since 1984 and is chorus master of the Festival Chorus.



German conductor and educator Helmuth Rilling was born in Stuttgart on May 29, 1933, and passed away on February 11, 2026, at the age of ninety-two. Rilling taught at the Frankfurt Musikhochschule (University of Music and Performing Arts), directed the Frankfurter Kantorei, and founded many musical organizations in Germany and the United States, including the Gächinger Kantorei in 1954, Bach-Collegium Stuttgart in 1965, Oregon Bach Festival in 1970, and the International Bach Academy Stuttgart in 1981.

Although he commissioned and championed the works of many modern composers, he is best known as a master teacher and proponent of the works of J. S. Bach. He was the first conductor to record all of Bach's almost two hundred sacred cantatas, desiring to make these great works more accessible and familiar. He led a choral conducting masterclass and lecture-demonstration concert series called the "Discovery Series" at the Oregon Bach Festival each summer for over forty years, and influenced and inspired countless conductors and musicians during that time. In the following interview, conductors Edward Maclary, Gordon Paine, and Kathy Saltzman Romey discuss Helmuth Rilling's influence on their lives and on the field of choral conducting.

Rachel Carlson
Director of Choral & Vocal Activities,
Kean University
rachel.carlson@kean.edu



Maestro Helmuth Rilling's Teaching, Influence, and Legacy: An Interview

What was your relationship with Helmuth Rilling? How did he influence your career as a conductor and as a teacher?

Maclary: I first met Helmuth Rilling in 1985 when I was a conducting student at the Oregon Bach Festival (OBF). That was the “Bach Year,” and the amount of repertoire we covered was vast! Both of the Passions, the *Mass in B minor*, all six Brandenburg Concertos, motets, cantatas, etc. I had already completed my DMA and was teaching at the collegiate level and still, it felt like being thrown into the deep end of the pool! But I learned so much that summer.

Mr. Rilling was a patient but demanding mentor. If, in his mind, you had done a sufficient amount of score study and preparation, he would be incredibly generous with his time and effort with you. Years later when I was directing the choirs at the University of Maryland, he invited us to collaborate with him and the National Symphony Orchestra in performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* at the Kennedy Center. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for our students and for me as well. We subsequently collaborated with Helmuth and the NSO on three more occasions: for Haydn's *Creation*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and finally, an all-Bach Christmas program that included Cantatas 63 and 110. Then in 2014, Matthew Halls, the artistic director designate of OBF, invited me to become the director of the masterclass in conducting at the festival. It was an incredible and humbling offer to return to Eugene, Oregon, where I had learned so much nearly three decades earlier. And of course, Maestro Rilling was still active at the festival in those years, and so I had another opportunity to work with him and learn from him. What I learned, again and again, was how to study a score deeply, how to marry word and tone into a musical and spiritual interpretation, and how to pay close attention to detail without losing sight of the bigger picture. He made a profound and lifelong impression upon me.

Paine: I met Helmuth in 1974. I came to the OBF as an inexperienced student pursuing a second bachelor's degree in choral music after earning my first in economics. In exchange for a tuition scholarship, I served as Helmuth's right-hand man that summer, most im-

portantly to keep him from losing his passport. He also needed help in preparing his daily pre-concert lectures for delivery in English. Thus began more than a decade of midday, one-on-one meetings in which we discussed the works at hand. As the OBF grew and matured, my job expanded to include tasks ranging from preparing performance materials for the Monteverdi *Vespers* to presenting seminars in the masterclass on specific topics such as German language and Bach sources. Throughout the nineties until my departure in 1999, I served as choirmaster—in the latter years, along with Kathy Romey.

I also worked with Helmuth outside the OBF. In the early eighties, I translated his first book, *Johann Sebastian Bach's B-minor Mass*. Shortly thereafter, at Helmuth's invitation, my wife and I moved to Stuttgart. For three years we sang with the Gächinger Kantorei, and I conducted his church choir, the Figuralchor of the Gedächtniskirche, for two of those years. Other translation work included Sara Rilling's 2008 biography of her father and program notes for Helmuth's recordings of the complete Bach cantatas. During Helmuth's association with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, I contracted and prepared the chorus for his concerts.

Helmuth's example provided me with a north star from my student days through my twenty-five-year teaching career at Cal State Fullerton. His rigorous, systematic approach to score study was a model to me for the research and writing of my earthsongs publications on choral-music texts in German, French, and Italian.

Romey: I became acquainted with Helmuth Rilling in 1970 when he and my father, Royce Saltzman, founded the OBF. As a young adult, I spent time living with the Rilling family when their two daughters, Sara and Rahel, were born. During this period, I was exposed to the dynamic world of Germany's professional music scene through performance and recording projects led by Rilling with his chorus, the Gächinger Kantorei. Following completion of my undergraduate degree at the University of Oregon, my husband and I moved to Frankfurt, where I began an advanced degree in choral conducting under Helmuth at the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts. My husband worked for the International Bach Academy Stuttgart (IBA), and



we were both fortunate enough to participate in concert projects and tours under Rilling's direction.

Five years later, we returned to the United States, and I began to assist Rilling with preparation of special IBA projects in the United States, Europe, South America, and annually at the OBF. I had the great privilege of collaborating with him in many different settings for over thirty years. This had a profound impact on my own work as a conductor, teacher, mentor, and colleague at the University of Minnesota and OBF, and with the Minnesota Chorale.

What were Rilling's influences on the field of choral music?

Maclary: My sense is that for me and for many other conductors of my generation, Helmuth made the music of Bach, especially the larger works, less "fearsome" and more accessible, as well as more foundational to our programming and our teaching. And the fact that he was simultaneously commissioning and championing major works of the most important contemporary European composers was quite impressive. I believe he exemplified the idea that in order to do true justice to a specific work, it is vital to approach that work from the broadest possible base of knowledge and experience in the overall repertoire. He gave us the courage to learn and to teach and to program the most challenging repertoire of which our ensembles were capable and to do that knowing that the singers (and the listeners) would grow from the endeavor.

Paine: Helmuth's performances with the Gächinger Kantorei were inspiring and of the highest caliber. We are fortunate that so many of them survive in recordings. In my opinion, his interpretation of the Brahms repertoire was incomparable. His greatest influence, however, was probably as a teacher, and the primary venue for his teaching in this country was the OBF.

A major focus of American choral music fifty years ago was on developing choral tone—a distinctive sound. This was a concept foreign to Helmuth, to whom the musical content of a work and its relationship to the text were the primary concerns. Many a

conducting student in the early days of the OBF would begin his time on the podium with a lecture on sound color or something else tangential, only to be interrupted by Helmuth, who would ask, "What is the structure, please?" The student would struggle until saved by Helmuth's second question, such as, "Is it not a fugue?" A Socratic dialogue would then ensue on fugal structure, the text at hand, the relationship between them, and the musical means of projecting this to an audience—all in a minute or so. Experiences like this were turning points in many a career.

The OBF became a mecca for both fledgling and experienced conductors—not to mention singers—who had the opportunity to experience Helmuth's music making and conducting pedagogy in three (later two) intense and enthusiastic weeks. Students and singers alike left the OBF each year as changed people, their work in their own spheres profoundly enhanced by the experience.

One area of OBF performance was controversial: the use of modern instruments with Baroque and Classical repertoire. The 1970s witnessed a sea of change in this area, starting in Europe, with the use of "historically informed performance practices" becoming *de rigueur*. While Helmuth did not take this course, his approach to performance offered an example of what could be accomplished in terms of style with the modern instruments that most conductors would have available.

Romey: In the early years of his work with the Gächinger Kantorei, Helmuth broadened the scope of German repertoire through his revival of nineteenth-century romantic choral music and the presentation of works by contemporary composers. Throughout his career, he focused on the music of Bach and also commissioned significant choral-orchestral works by such renowned composers as Tan Dun, Osvaldo Golijov, Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt, Krzysztof Penderecki, Sven-David Sandström, and many others. As founder of the International Bach Academy Stuttgart and cofounder of the Oregon Bach Festival, Rilling offered annual conducting seminars in both Stuttgart and Oregon, and later, established international teaching academies around the world, which influenced the work of generations of conductors. Likewise, his recordings, performances, and touring with the Gächinger Kan-

Maestro Helmuth Rilling's Teaching, Influence, and Legacy: An Interview

torei brought not only international recognition but also opportunities to forge partnerships with colleagues around the globe.

What was your experience preparing a choir for Rilling's direction? What did that experience teach you about preparing choirs for guest conductors in general?

Maclary: I remember preparing the *St. Matthew Passion* for him and thinking that he had conducted the work many more times than I had even heard it and our ensemble was made up entirely of students. In other words, I was scared stiff. But he was kind and gracious and patient at all times. He was quite demanding, but he also had a wonderful capacity for teaching finer details while using his mastery of the text and theology and drama of the work to keep the larger structure in focus. The chorus was totally inspired by his rehearsals and would have done anything for him! And the National Symphony Orchestra was fully engaged, also very intent on learning from him. He rehearsed that gigantic work from memory(!), only very occasionally referring to a small, well-used miniature score that he kept in his back pocket.

The level of concentration in those rehearsals by everyone involved was so high, and I don't recall him raising his voice once during the entire week. Every conductor for whom you prepare is different, but they all want an ensemble that sings in tune and on time, and they all want an ensemble that is flexible and nimble enough to change things on the fly if necessary. And they always have reasons for the choices they make. The unique aspect of working with Mr. Rilling was that he always took the time to explain his choices and to allow a particular rehearsal moment to become a great teaching moment as well.

Paine: In my own early experience, each project felt like an ascent of Everest. I was young and terrified of disappointing the master. How could I possibly meet his standard? While that anxiety eased with time, I must admit that an echo of it always remained.

I thought it important to approach rehearsal in a way similar to Helmuth, not only because it was so ef-

fective, but also to acclimatize the singers to his systematic way of thinking and his priorities. If I was preparing a piece that I had performed or studied with him, I could embody some specifics into what I asked of the singers but, of course, could never assume that the present performance would mirror precisely what he had done before.

Romey: In preparing choirs for Rilling and working side-by-side with him, I was struck by his rehearsal pedagogy, his efficient use of time, his understanding of musical structure and architecture, his attention to detail, his passion for text, his personal and historical insight into the music, and his deep respect for the score and those performing it. He developed a specific methodology for score study with the end result of conducting everything from memory. This allowed him to connect with his performers in a very direct and free manner on the podium, which is why singers at the OBF often said, "Rilling is thrilling!"

While I do not conduct from memory, and I am certainly not as thrilling, I have incorporated much of what I learned from Helmuth into my own work as a chorus master. I am especially grateful for the amount of music I was exposed to during my years of study in Germany, which provided a solid foundation of knowledge in regards to choral-symphonic repertoire I regularly prepare for other conductors.

What were your biggest takeaways being a student in Helmuth's conducting masterclass, observing the masterclass, and/or preparing students to work in the masterclass?

Maclary: Helmuth's influence on me was deep and lasting. At the OBF, after you finished conducting a particular section of music during the seminar, he would often begin by asking, "What is the structure?" And if you had a satisfactory answer, he would commence with teaching you. The focus he brought to the task just by asking that simple question has informed my own teaching to this day. In the years between 2014 and 2017 that I directed the masterclass and prepared students to conduct portions of the Discovery Series performances, the overall supervision of the performances



*Edward Maclary with Helmuth Rilling in 2012 at the Kennedy Center prior to a performance of *Elijah* with the University of Maryland Concert Choir and the National Symphony Orchestra. As Ed recalls, “We are in the warm-up room downstairs, and Helmuth arrived to thank the choir for their collaboration. It is one of my most treasured memories with him.”*

was divided between Matthew Halls and Helmuth Rilling. The most obvious result of that arrangement was that some performances were at A415 and on period instruments and some performances were at A440 and on modern instruments. So the students were able to compare and contrast, directly and practically in real time, what those two approaches sounded like and felt like as conductors. And believe me, within that compressed timeframe, the differences were stark, at times even jarring. But the best part was that both Halls and Rilling were focused on the text, the structure, the shapes, and most importantly, the meaning of the music much more than they were on the issues of what might constitute the best “performance practice.”

What I remember specifically about Rilling’s teaching in those years was a more direct approach to the student, as in, “It goes best if you do it this way. So do it this way.” Still gentle and kind, but much more definitive. I should also mention that Helmuth was always very “sneaky funny” in those classes. He had a way of knowing when the room needed a breath of fresh air, so to speak, and he could insert a punch line or provide an ironic facial expression at exactly the right moment. Just brilliant.

Paine: In 1970 I graduated from Occidental College in Los Angeles with a BA in economics. I possessed lit-

tle by way of musical skills, having had no training outside of choral singing, which I loved. On my first day as a Pacific Telephone Company office manager, I decided to return to school and become a choral conductor. This I did in 1972, studying at Cal State Fullerton with Dave Thorsen—whose own life was changed inexorably when Royce Saltzman, a friend since the early 1950s, talked him into participating in the 1973 masterclass following his thirteenth year as a professor of conducting. This was a Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment for Dave, and on returning home he informed me that I would be conducting in the masterclass the following summer.

In those three weeks we studied and performed a large chunk of the Mozart choral repertoire, a project made more challenging because Helmuth wanted us to use specific scores that were being shipped from Stuttgart and were not available to us until we arrived in Eugene. Time for study was hard to come by, in part because the conductors all sang in the masterclass and festival choruses. Those nine weeks spread over three years were undoubtedly the most influential experiences in my development as a choral musician. I learned what it meant to be a professional and how much work I had yet ahead of me. I also learned that I could have had no better teacher.

Romey: As someone who studied with Helmuth in Germany and in the OBF conducting masterclass, I was greatly influenced by his approach to score study/analysis and his Socratic method of teaching. I am among the many OBF conducting students who can recall the question, “How do you like this tempo?” Should you choose to relate your given tempo to one used in a Rilling recording, he would often respond, “Ah...that is a very old recording!” implying he had since changed his mind (and you should change yours).

On a deeper level, this remark provided me with incredible insight into the mind of Helmuth Rilling and his approach to process and interpretation, which was ever evolving. This, combined with his ability to illuminate the score for amateurs and professionals alike, as witnessed in his lecture-demonstration Discovery Series concerts, had a profound impact on my development as a teacher and conductor.



Maestro Helmuth Rilling's Teaching, Influence, and Legacy: An Interview

What is Helmuth's lasting influence on the Oregon Bach Festival? What has made the Oregon Bach Festival so unique?

Maclary: The creation of the Oregon Bach Festival by Helmuth Rilling and Royce Saltzman has had tremendous influence on the American choral culture and its community of musicians. Helmuth's legacy is his dedication to the highest standards of music making and his dedication to teaching. So many artists and scholars from around the world—conductors, singers, players, composers, musicologists—have passed through the program's almost six decades of existence. And in turn, those artists have spread throughout this country and elsewhere passing on the lessons and the legacy of performances, rehearsals, masterclasses, seminars, coachings, and camaraderie it has provided. If you count yourself among that number, you are not just someone who attended the OBF, you are a member of the OBF family, and that's a real thing and a unique thing. There have been plenty of changes and challenges, but I hope that with the present artistic leadership in place the festival will continue to grow and thrive and to make good on its mission of high-level education, unique programming, and superior musical artistry.

Paine: Excellence and education will surely be Helmuth's legacy. The OBF was so unique principally because of its founders. Royce and Helmuth were visionary musicians with exceptional and complementary abilities and strengths. The historically improbable fact that they came to know each other when they did is the *sine qua non* of the endeavor that is the OBF.

Romey: Since its founding, Rilling and Saltzman dedicated themselves to the cultivation of educational opportunities, community, and artistic excellence, all of which became cornerstones of the OBF. Helmuth's commitment to education manifested itself in the Conducting Masterclass and Stangeland Family Youth Choral Academy led by Dr. Anton Armstrong. Later, under the leadership of Artistic Director Matthew Halls, the OBF founded the Organ Institute and Berwick Academy for Historically Informed Performance, and established year-round opportunities for Halls to work with Dr. Sharon Paul and the University of Ore-

gon Chamber Choir.

Community was built around artistic partnerships and creative programming, which engaged performers and audiences in special activities on a local, national, and international scale. Artistic excellence was and is seen in the festival programming, artists, and concerts presented each year. What is unique about the OBF? Rilling and Saltzman built both a festival and a musical family, which has survived many challenges and changes in leadership over the past fifty-five years. The OBF continues to hold a special place within the offerings of the University of Oregon and greater community while also retaining its position as a national summer festival of standing.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Maclary: Our art form is not unique, in that it is based on legacies that span centuries in literature, practices, styles, and change. It is somewhat singular insofar as participation is concerned. Choral singing is the most popular performing arts activity for adults and children in the United States. Of course, by far the largest percentage of those taking part are amateur rather than professional. Helmuth Rilling, though he spent much of his time working with professional singers and players at the highest level, was deeply concerned and highly motivated to work with aspiring amateurs, particularly students, and to show them what was possible for them artistically when given the tools and the opportunity. He was unafraid to mix professionals and amateurs together, and he did so successfully in high-profile performances. He did this generously, without any condescension whatsoever, and gave all those with whom he collaborated wonderfully humane musical experiences. He is one of the greatest teachers I have ever encountered. ■

NOTES

¹ Sara Maria Rilling, *My Father Helmuth Rilling*, trans. Gordon Paine (University of Oregon Press, 2010).

² Kathy Saltzman Romey, "From Father to Daughter: An Interview with H. Royce Saltzman," *Choral Journal* 51, no. 1 (2010): 34–41.

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On Conducting the Compositions of J. S. Bach: An Interview with Helmuth Rilling

Gordon Paine, Royce Saltzman,
and Dennis Shrock

Gordon Paine served as Helmuth Rilling's assistant at the Oregon Bach Festival from 1974 through 1999.

Royce Saltzman (1928–2023) cofounded the Oregon Bach Festival with Helmuth Rilling. He served as OBF's executive director for thirty-four years. He was also a national president of ACDA (1979–1981).

Dennis Shrock is an educator, conductor, and the author of multiple books related to choral literature and repertoire.



Photo courtesy of Holger Schneider.

Editor's note: This article is reprinted from Choral Journal March 1991. It has been edited for updated style rules and original typos.

This interview was conducted in Eugene, Oregon, in the summer of 1990 immediately after Helmuth Rilling concluded the Oregon Bach Festival with a performance of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion*. Under Rilling's direction, the Oregon Bach Festival Choir and Orchestra performed Bach's *Mass in B minor* at the final evening concert during the 1991 ACDA National Conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

Shrock: Tell us about the development of your approach to conducting the compositions of J. S. Bach.

Rilling: I come primarily from a vocal background. That is, when I started to conduct, I worked with a choir, the Gächinger Kantorei. This choir was the first, and for many years the only, ensemble I conducted. So the ideas I developed in music as a conductor were first vocally

oriented. It was only later, in my work as a church musician at the Gedächtniskirche in Stuttgart, that I also had the opportunity to work with an instrumental ensemble. I founded the Bach Collegium, among many other ensembles, and began to conduct instrumental and choral-orchestral works.

At first, my performances of Baroque and Classical music were influenced by my vocal experience. I used legato as the main quality of articulation, and I strove for a beautiful choral sound—one with clear diction and expression. The goal was to have the voices be of primary importance, expressing the atmosphere of the text.

The instrumental ensemble was in the background, supporting the voices. As I worked more and more with instruments, however, I discovered there was another approach to Baroque and Classical music that is instrumentally oriented. Over the years I've combined both the vocal and instrumental approaches. I've considered the possibilities of each and have worked to achieve a compromise, a balance.

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Shrock: Did your early vocal approach come from childhood training or experiences? Did you sing the music of Bach when you were growing up?

Rilling: No, though I come from a family of musicians. My father was an organist and a choir conductor; my mother was a violin player. As a child, I first studied piano, then organ, which was my main instrument. I also played some violin. I heard Bach's organ works played in my younger years. It was later that I heard the choral works. I think I was fifteen when I first heard the *St. Matthew Passion*. I had to travel very far to hear it.

Shrock: How do you go about preparing for a performance of a major Bach work that you have conducted many times before? Do your ideas change from performance to performance?

Rilling: Well, of course one must always study for each performance so that ideas are set before the first rehearsal. The young, inexperienced conductor may look at a score, see some surface things, and say, "Oh, I can easily do that." Most ideas about shape and structure will come to him or her during, not before, rehearsals. This is not a professional approach. For me, over the years, I have become more conscientious about score preparation. This is the basic change to my approach. I come to each first rehearsal knowing not only the piece itself but also what I want to do with it.

Saltzman: There are a lot of differences between this performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and the one you did several years ago, especially in terms of articulation. What caused you to make these changes?

Rilling: Of course it's my study. The *St. Matthew Passion* and *B-Minor Mass* (which I have done many times and which, after a certain pause, I will do again) always have to be new. They have to have their own immediate personality to me every time I perform them. One should never say that because a performance was done one way one time it should be done the same way another time. I think the performance that is the one of today is the most important and has to be of timely relevance. It has to be something needed at that very moment.

When we did the *St. Matthew Passion* the last time [in 1987], my focus was on the double choir and double orchestra. We performed from the two balconies and found out how much the dialogue idea of the work was important. For the performance last night, we had all the performers on the main stage—still separated—but my focus was on the clarity and characterization of the dance-type movements.

Shrock: Do you involve external sources in your study? Outside readings and influences?

Rilling: I try to be as aware as possible of the newest musicological findings, and I'm very happy that I have some of the most important Bach researchers as my friends. I not only read the work of Christof Wolff from Harvard, Hans-Joachim Schultze from Leipzig, Alfred Dürr, and Klaus Hofmann, I discuss it with them. This is a wonderful situation. The interchange between conductor and musicologist is essential for performing old music.

Shrock: Do you keep abreast of performances by other conductors? For instance, do you listen to recordings by Harnoncourt, Leonhardt, Herreweghe, or John Eliot Gardiner?

Rilling: If I have the time and the chance, I will listen to a recording. But I will not get to know a piece through a recording. I would never sit down and listen to a recording, say, twenty times until I have it in my ear and then go to a rehearsal. I think conductors should never do this because they learn a certain approach to the work as they hear it. I think a conductor confronted for the first time with one of the major Bach oratorios must first sit down and try to read it. If they are not able to do this, they must try to play it on the piano or other keyboard instrument.

Now, as to the question of early instruments, the so-called authentic historic approach, I have a very general answer. If it would be possible to reconstruct the historic situation as closely as possible—say, a performance conducted by Bach in the Thomaskirche—you could have the same types and numbers of voices, the same types and numbers of instruments, the same dynamics, the same articulation, the same tempos, and

so on (though this is really impossible to reconstruct). But if you could have this, you would have only half of the performance situation. You would not have the people—the audience, congregation, or listeners—for whom this music was intended.

I think it is not enough to just reconstruct what was. Today, you have to bring the music to a completely different audience, and this means you have to, in some ways, interpret that music, to translate that music to our modern ears. This is my basic viewpoint, and it is why I do not reconstruct music. Of course, and I've said this in other ways before, I think it is absolutely necessary for every conductor who performs old music in our times to know appropriate performance practices as exactly as possible. We are fortunate today in this regard because we have many primary sources available to us, and we have the insights of musicologist/performers like Harnoncourt and Leonhardt who have given so much of their time trying to reconstruct music as it perhaps was.¹

Shrock: What are your feelings about notational stylistic practices such as metric or rhetorical accentuation, *mesa di voce*, rhythmic alteration, and ornamentation?

Rilling: I am aware of approaches in vocal works from

some Swedish and British conductors who think that the heavy and lighter syllables of the German language must be differentiated. For example, in the chorale “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” one would say the second syllable of the word “Wunden” without any accent. In music, then, the conductors about whom I am speaking would make that syllable light, short, and with a diminuendo. I think it is a great mistake to apply this spoken accentuation to music. For centuries, congregations have sung the word “Wunden” with equal stress. Also, there are many ways of speaking; one’s approach to a chorale should not be the same as one’s approach to a madrigal. And beyond this, one must be aware that an organ cannot accentuate like spoken language.

Shrock: What are your views about determining tempos in the *B-Minor Mass*?

Rilling: Sometimes you have indications about tempo—allegro, adagio, etc. Sometimes also there are indications like the *alla-breve* sign, which indicates a fast tempo. But otherwise, we have to look at the structure of the piece to establish our opinion about tempo. The structure will basically tell you what is meant. Is it meditative? Is it a virtuosic display? Of course, the underlying meaning of text is also of great importance.

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One ought to establish temporal relationships between movements. However, I'm somewhat reluctant to pin these relations down. For my feeling, tempo must be natural. There has to be a continuation from one temporal beat to the other, and it must be done in such a way that a new view—the next piece or movement—is very clearly set with the new tempo. I sometimes have problems when someone says that the value of one note in a preceding movement has to be in thus and such a proportion to the value of a note in the next movement. I say, this could be a guideline. But in the mood of a performance, for example, you might easily change to go faster or slower; tempo must be a result not only of preconceived ideas but also of the mood of the performance.

Shrock: In your 1988 recording of the *B-Minor Mass*, the program notes state that the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (NBA) score is in need of serious revision. Can you comment on this?²

Rilling: The *B-Minor Mass* was the first volume of the NBA, published in the 1950s. The editor was Friedrich Smend, one of the most eminent Bach scholars, but one of a former generation. Unfortunately, his thinking was limited, and his editorial process did not include modern research of studies in chronology, watermarks, and handwriting. Nor did it include consideration of the autograph copies of the instrumental parts to the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Mass* written in 1733.³ Also, Smend was an authoritarian and did not take into account the views of other scholars. Today, for instance, we believe that for a critical edition, one should consider all sources and bring that together with the ideas and interpretations of many different musicologists. From this approach, one is best able to know Bach's intention as clearly as possible. Instrumental parts are a crucial ingredient for consideration because they are usually far more detailed than scores regarding articulation markings and dynamic signs. The parts more specifically represent the detailed wishes of the composer.

Shrock: How do you deal with lack of articulation markings in the Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei of the *B-Minor Mass*?

Rilling: What markings that are given should be taken as absolute guidelines. To change Bach's own markings would be a strange approach. However, in an aria such as the "Et in spiritum sanctum," which has no original instrumental parts for reference but which is almost certainly a parody of an earlier work, one must make assumptions. The articulation markings are inconsistent; the same musical material has different markings on different occasions. So, one has to step in, decide what is most prevalent, and apply it in all appropriate places.

Shrock: Your memorization, among the other aspects of your conducting, is most impressive, almost legendary. Do you memorize every work you do?

Rilling: Most of the time, yes, I do.

Shrock: Do you have a photographic memory?

Rilling: This is one of the most-asked questions. No, I do not. My memory comes from score analysis. I believe, first of all, that a conductor should analyze a piece as thoroughly as possible before they conduct it. The purpose of the analysis should be to know the music well, not to be able to conduct without music in front of you. However, if you analyze properly, you should be able to see an overall picture of the score in your mind—a tenor entrance on the upper-right corner of a page, for instance. You should analyze according to certain layers or levels of the music. One of these would be rhythm, very important for conducting. Others would be harmony, instrumentation, and text (in a vocal piece). Rhythmic analysis is especially important. It is an element of the music over which a conductor has much influence. With harmony you can only create very subtle changes by forcing certain modulations to go forward and others to relax. But with rhythm, the conductor has a strong impact on what is happening—from detailed qualities of articulation to the grouping of measures into phrases.

Analysis is also important in terms of the form and structure of a piece of music. In the Credo of the *B-Minor Mass*, for instance, we must try to understand the division of the text into movements. Then we must discover the relationship of the movements and charac-

teristics of their compositional styles: old (Renaissance) or modern (concerted).

Paine: From the standpoint of a student who has worked a long time with Helmuth, I find that the number of levels of his understanding of a piece, and the depth of his understanding of them, set his preparation apart from that of many conductors. My college education in analysis never even mentioned what Rilling has described. My training was largely looking at baroque and classical forms and giving them labels. Labeling chords is not analysis. Rather, analysis is understanding where the harmony is going and trying to figure out why the composer is doing what he is doing harmonically.

The problem most conductors face, particularly in dealing with larger works, is sorting out the significant from the insignificant. There are so many details. If you use Rilling's approach to analysis—i.e., starting with the most general and moving to the more specifics—the significant and the insignificant sort themselves out. If you can understand the architecture on the most general level, you've begun to establish a framework on which you are going to hang details in your mind. Rilling was asked about memorization. If you don't have a framework on which to hang the details, then they are simply unrelated events. If you have a framework and can progressively relate events together more and more, then there's something to hold the piece together in your mind.

Shrock: There are some conductors who advocate for a concertist's approach—using solo voices on some of the choral parts—in performance of the *B-Minor Mass*. Can you respond?

Rilling: I want to stress the fact that we don't know what Bach would have done with the *B-Minor Mass*. He performed his cantatas and passions, and because of this we have some guidelines for performance. But Bach never performed the *B-Minor Mass*; he never heard it. Was Bach in a different situation than we are in our times in terms of change? I have changed my practices over the years. I'm quite sure Bach changed too. So, should we just universally apply the rules of the performances of Bach cantatas in 1724 in Leipzig where he

used some concertists in some of the cantatas? Should we just apply these rules automatically to the *B-Minor Mass* of twenty-five years later? I don't think so.

You see, the *B-Minor Mass* is not an everyday piece. It's not a piece like all of the cantatas, composed for one service and later on used again. The *Mass* is Bach's sole and absolutely unique approach to the central text of Christianity—beyond denominations and also beyond the possibility of it being used, liturgically, in a church service. So I think you have to avoid everything that trivializes the music.

I regard the use of soloists in this way. It might be wonderful to be aware of the structure of the work with concertists—to have soloists sing the first exposition of a fugue and the tutti chorus sing the second. This makes sense up to a certain point, but, of course, it also makes the music smaller. It takes away from the breadth of the piece; or, it at least endangers the grand concepts of great lines and great architecture. There are many other reasons why I am personally against concertists. One is that in live performance, soloists are not capable of singing everything.

Shrock: What are your thoughts about the separate entities, the *Missa*, *Symbolum Nicenum*, *Sanctus*, etc., that have been combined into this one work we call the *B-Minor Mass*?

Rilling: I think the *Mass* is one work. It is very clear, in my opinion, that Bach wanted one important work—one *Mass*—for posterity. In the *B-Minor Mass*, Bach brings together all he has done during his life. He shows very clearly that he can compose in the old, Palestrinian style, demonstrating sophisticated techniques of fugato and imitation. He also shows many contemporary, eighteenth-century techniques. He never uses one style twice, and every piece has a very clear, unmistakable identity.

Shrock: How about the identical music for the “*Gratias agimus*” and the “*Dona nobis pacem*”?

Rilling: The origin of both these pieces is the opening chorus of Cantata BWV 29, which has, in German, the same text as the “*Gratias agimus*.” Therefore, the text for the *Mass* had to be altered only very slightly, chang-

On Conducting the Compositions of J. S. Bach: An Interview with Helmuth Rilling


ing the theme according to the syllables of the text. As for the “Dona nobis pacem,” there are people who say that this is weak, that Bach had no strength left for an original composition. I am not of this opinion, nor of the opinion that Bach took the “Dona nobis” from the “Gratias,” or rather from Cantata 29. I think it is very typical for Bach to use the old motet style for the “Dona nobis pacem.” He, therefore, doesn’t make it personal. Instead, with the old style he says that the church, music history, his predecessors, and all Christianity join in saying “Dona nobis pacem.”

Paine: It might be of interest to talk further about Bach’s parody procedures; for example, the “Crucifixus” from “Wein, Kalgen, Soregn, Zagen.” An awareness of Bach’s original materials represents another level I see as very important to a conductor’s analysis. Great insights can be gained from comparing original compositions to their parodies.

Rilling: I think many of us have colleagues who are tempted to think of an original composition as better than a parody—that if a later text is used for music originally conceived for another text, the wonderful first connection between music and text is somehow lost. I think this is not necessarily so. A composer has the right to change the connection between words and music, to say that the music is good enough to exist with a different text, and that the new marriage is absolutely sufficient.

An interesting example of this is seen in the “Et in unum” duet from the Credo of the *B-Minor Mass*. Bach originally composed the duet for a text including the “Et incarnatus est.” You can clearly see the relationship of the textual phrase “descendit de coelis” with its descending melodic contour—going from the high instruments to the basses and symbolizing the descending of Christ to earth. When Bach later added the chorus movement to the text “Et incarnatus est,” he had to lengthen the “Et in unum” text within the duet. The music remained completely the same, but the text had to be stretched out to fill the music previously heard to the words “Et incarnatus est.” In this way Bach changed the wonderful original connection between the words and the musical motives. Obviously,

ly, he thought that the result was better than his first, original version. This teaches us that if Bach does such a thing (omitting the union of the meaning of the word and the motif that came from it), we have to accept this as the decision of a great composer.

But, of course, this is an exception. In most instances of parody, Bach adapts the old music to the new text in very important ways: changing the structure completely, making a five-part vocal movement out of a four-part movement, adding completely new instrumentation, writing new measures, etc. Many times we see that he strives for a very close connection between text and music. I think many colleagues will agree that the *B-Minor Mass* is one of the most demanding, but certainly also one of the most rewarding, choral pieces we have in our heritage. You need skills that go beyond those you need for other repertoire. You especially need a mental approach that goes beyond the superficial, which gets you involved with the most essential thoughts of Christianity. This is a great challenge but a wonderful fulfillment because it will make you grow. You will be able to be a part of great music of the past, which still is ours in our time. 

NOTES

- ¹ Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929–2016) was an Austrian conductor known for historically informed performances specifically from the Baroque era. Gustav Leonhardt (1928–2012) was a Dutch keyboardist known for historically informed performances with period instruments.
- ² The *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (NBA)—New Bach Edition (NBE)—features two authoritative releases for Bach’s *Mass in B minor*. Rilling mentions the original 1954 edition by Friedrich Smend. A revised edition was published by Bärenreiter in 2010 (NBA rev), edited by Uwe Wolf, a director of research at the Bach Archive Leipzig.
- ³ Regarding the 1733 parts, the Bärenreiter website says of the revised edition, “For the first time the Dresden parts of 1733, which were largely written by Bach, are included as valuable additional source material to the autograph score,” www.barenreiter.us/products/bach-mass-in-b-minor-bwv-232-barenreiter-1.



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GRADES 5-7 TREBLE CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Elise Bradley, Conductor

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who will be in grades 5, 6, or 7 in March 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026 at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 payable by debit/credit card at the time of application.

II. REGISTRATION FEES & COSTS (if selected)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Registration/participation fee of ~\$375
 - This fee covers two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - This fee does NOT include hotel accommodations. Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Financial, need-based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome).

III. EXPECTATIONS

- Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.
 - Students participating in a performing choir or any other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choir. Students will not be released from honor choir rehearsal for any reason to attend other activities.
- Singers must be well prepared on all music prior to arrival. Re-auditions will take place before the first rehearsal on Sunday, March 7. **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**
- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.
- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

IV. COMMUNICATION

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers/guardians should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (www.acda.org) for updated information.
- Direct questions to Jared Berry & Andrea Galeno, ACDA Honor Choir Chairs, at nationalhonorchoir@acda.org

V. AUDITION PROCESS

- The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
- **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
- Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card.
- DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
- The Sponsor will upload two separate sound files of the following for the student.
- Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

Recording 1: Vocalise; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

The student will sing four (4) legato five-tone scale passages, ascending and descending, beginning on the given pitches. All vocalises must be sung *a cappella*. The starting pitch or chord may be given for each of the four vocalises on piano, pitch pipe, guitar or voice. Vocalises are to be sung on the syllable "mah." The first pitch of each phrase should be voiced on "mah" with the following four notes sounding the extension of "ah." (Please follow the metronome markings and do not stop the recording until all four phrases are completed.)

mm = 80 - 100



Soprano

D above middle C

F# above middle C

A above middle C

Fourth line D

Alto

A below middle C

middle C#

E above middle C

A above middle C

Recording 2: Repertoire Excerpt; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

The student will perform an excerpt from the honor choir repertoire listed below. The specific excerpt will be announced with the audition application on September 1, 2026.

Tyger - Elaine Hagenberg • *Moon's Lament* - David Hamilton • *Firefly* - Andy Beck
Semangat Membara - Tracy Wong • *Yamo* - arr. Shireen Abu-Khader • *Matariki* - Takerei Komene



GRADES 7-9 SATB CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Rollo Dilworth, Conductor

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who will be in grades 7 (tenors and basses only), 8, or 9 in March 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026, at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 paid by debit/credit card at the time of application.

II. REGISTRATION FEES & COSTS (if selected)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Registration/participation fee of ~\$375
 - This fee covers two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - This fee does NOT include hotel accommodations. Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Financial need based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome).

III. EXPECTATIONS

- Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.
 - Students participating in a performing choir or any other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choir. Students will not be released from honor choir rehearsal for any reason to attend other activities.
- Singers must be well prepared on all music prior to arrival. Re-auditions will take place before the first rehearsal on Sunday, March 7. **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**
- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.
- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

IV. COMMUNICATION

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers/guardians should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (www.acda.org) for updated information.
- Direct questions to Jared Berry and Andrea Galeno, ACDA Honor Choir Chairs, at nationalhonorchoir@acda.org

V. AUDITION PROCESS

- The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
- **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
- Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card.
- DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
- The Sponsor will upload three separate sound files of the following for the student.
- Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

Recording 1: Vocalise; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

The student will sing four (4) legato five-tone scale passages, ascending and descending, beginning on the given pitches. All vocalises must be sung *a cappella*. The starting pitch or chord may be given for each of the four vocalises on piano, pitch pipe, guitar, or voice. Vocalises are to be sung on the syllable "mah." The first pitch of each phrase should be voiced on "mah" with the following four notes sounding the extension of "ah." (Please follow the metronome markings and do not stop the recording until all four phrases are completed.) **mm = 80 - 100**



Soprano	Alto	Tenor	Bass
D above middle C	A below middle C	F below middle C	G2
F# above middle C	middle C#	G below middle C	B-flat 2
A above middle C	E above middle C	A below middle C	C3
Fourth line D	A above middle C	middle C	E-flat 3

Recording 2: Repertoire Excerpt; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

The student will perform an excerpt from the honor choir repertoire listed below. The specific excerpt will be announced with the audition application on September 1, 2026.

Identities - Paul Rardin • *Connected* - Brian Tate • *Yukayeke* - Suzzette Ortiz
 • *Belong* - Jocelyn Hagen • *Song of the Revolution* - Rollo Dilworth

Recording 3: Solo; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

Sing 30 seconds of a range-appropriate folk song or a song taught in voice lessons, class, or in chorus, accompanied or unaccompanied. It is important that the piece chosen best demonstrates the tone quality and musicality required of a choral singer. If accompaniment is used, limit the introduction to 5 seconds at the most. Clearly state the title of the prepared solo and the name of the composer/arranger at the beginning of this part of the recording.



GRADES 10-12 SATB CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Jeffery Redding, Conductor

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who will be in grades 10, 11, or 12 in March 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026 at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 at the time of application paid by debit or credit card.

II. REGISTRATION FEES AND COSTS (IF SELECTED)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Option A) ~\$615 estimated
 - This fee covers three (3) hotel nights, two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - Students will be assigned to quadruple-occupancy rooms (two queen beds per room) in the honor choir hotel for three nights, March 7-9, supervised by ACDA-provided chaperones. Students are expected to depart after the concert on Wednesday, March 10.
- Option B) ~\$375 estimated
 - This fee covers two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - This fee does NOT include hotel accommodations. Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Financial, need-based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome). Apply at the time of registration, if selected.

III. EXPECTATIONS

- Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.
 - Students participating in a performing choir or any other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choir. Students will not be released from honor choir rehearsal for any reason to attend other activities.
- Singers must be well prepared on all music prior to arrival. Re-auditions will take place before the first rehearsal on Sunday, March 7. **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**
- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.

- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

IV. COMMUNICATION

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers/guardians should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (www.acda.org) for updated information.
- Direct questions can to Jared Berry & Andrea Galeno, ACDA Honor Choir Chairs, at nationalhonorchoir@acda.org

V. AUDITION PROCESS

- The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
- **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
- Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card.
- DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
- The Sponsor will upload three separate sound files of the following for the student.
- Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

Voice Part	Starting pitch for ascending scale	Starting pitch for descending scale
Soprano I	B flat above middle C	C above middle C
Soprano II	A above middle C	B above middle C
Alto I	E above middle C	A above middle C
Alto II	D above middle C	G above middle C
Tenor I	A flat below middle C	E above middle C
Tenor II	F sharp below middle C	Middle C
Bass I	E flat below middle C	G below middle C
Bass II	C sharp below middle C	E below middle C

Recording 1: Vocalise; 1 recording upload; .mp4

Sing the ascending and descending major scales appropriate to the voice part. Scales should be sung on the vowel “ah” as in father. Only the starting pitch may be played. No accompaniment.

Recording 2: Repertoire Excerpt; 1 recording; .mp4

The student will perform an excerpt from the honor choir repertoire listed below. The specific excerpt will be announced on September 1, 2026.

Lift Every Voice and Sing - arr. Roland Carter • *Dixit Dominus* (mvt. 1) - Marianna Martines (arr. Hathaway)
In Remembrance - Jeffery Ames • *The Fire Dance of Luna* - Darius Lim Sign Me Up - arr. Brandon Boyd

Recording 3: Solo; 1 recording; .mp4

Sing 30 seconds of a range-appropriate folk song, or a song taught in voice lessons, class or in chorus, accompanied or unaccompanied. It is important that the piece chosen best demonstrates the tone quality and musicality required of a choral singer. If accompaniment is used, please limit the introduction to 5 seconds at the most. Clearly state the title of the prepared solo and the name of the composer/arranger at the beginning of this part of the recording.



GRADES 10-12 TREBLE CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Julie Yu-Oppenheim, Conductor

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who will be in grades 10, 11, or 12 in March 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026 at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 at the time of application paid by debit or credit card.

II. REGISTRATION FEES & COSTS (if selected)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Option A) ~\$615 estimated
 - This fee covers three (3) hotel nights, two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - Students will be assigned to quadruple-occupancy rooms (two queen beds per room) in the honor choir hotel for three nights, March 7-9, supervised by ACDA-provided chaperones. Students are expected to depart after the concert on Wednesday, March 10.
- Option B) ~\$375 estimated
 - This fee covers two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - This fee does NOT include hotel accommodations. Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Financial, need-based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome). Apply at the time of registration, if selected.

III. EXPECTATIONS

- Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.
 - Students participating in a performing choir or any other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choir. Students will not be released from honor choir rehearsal for any reason to attend other activities.
- Singers must be well-prepared on all music prior to arrival. Re-auditions will take place before the first rehearsal on Sunday, March 7. **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**
- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.



- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

IV. COMMUNICATION

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers/guardians should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (www.acda.org) for updated information.
- Direct questions to Jared Berry & Andrea Galeno, ACDA Honor Choir Chairs, at nationalhonorchoir@acda.org

V. AUDITION PROCESS

- The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
- **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
- Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card.
- DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
- The Sponsor will upload three separate sound files of the following for the student.
- Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

Recording 1: Vocalise; 1 recording upload; .mp4, .mp3

Sing the ascending and descending major scales appropriate to the voice part. Scales should be sung on the vowel "ah" as in "father." Only the starting pitch may be played. No accompaniment.

Voice Part	Starting pitch for ascending scale	Starting pitch for descending scale
Soprano I	B flat above middle C	C above middle C
Soprano II	A above middle C	B above middle C
Alto I	E above middle C	A above middle C
Alto II	D above middle C	G above middle C

Recording 2: Repertoire Excerpt; 1 recording; .mp4, .mp3

The student will perform an excerpt from the honor choir repertoire listed below. The specific excerpt will be announced on September 1, 2026.

Gloria - Gyorgi Orban • *Nada Te Turbe* - Joan Szymko • *Libertango* - Astor Piazzolla (arr. Escalada)
I Want to Die While You Love Me - Rosephanye Powell • *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* - Stacey V. Gibbs

Recording 3: Solo; 1 recording; .mp4, .mp3

Sing 30 seconds of a range-appropriate folk song or a song taught in voice lessons, class, or in chorus, accompanied or unaccompanied. It is important that the piece chosen best demonstrates the tone quality and musicality required of a choral singer. If accompaniment is used, limit the introduction to 5 seconds at the most. Clearly state the title of the prepared solo and the name of the composer/arranger at the beginning of this part of the recording.



GRADES 10-12 SHOW CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Luke Warren, Director
Tori Brindis, Choreographer

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who are in grades 10, 11, and 12 in March of 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026 at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 at the time of application paid by debit or credit card.
- Students may apply to more than one ensemble, but they will only be accepted into one. The decision about which ensemble the student will be assigned to is made by the chairs.

II. REGISTRATION FEES & COSTS (if selected)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Registration Fee~\$375 estimated
 - This fee covers two (2) meals each day on Monday and Tuesday, as well as the costs of the honor choir.
 - This fee does NOT include hotel accommodations. Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Financial, need-based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome). Apply at the time of registration, if selected.

III. EXPECTATIONS

Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.

- Students participating in a performing choir or other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choirs.
 - Singers are expected to learn all music and choreography before the conference begins. *Part checks and choreography review will occur during registration.* **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**

- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.
- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

IV. COMMUNICATION

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (<https://acda.org/2027-national-show-choir-honor-choir>) for updated information.
- Direct questions to Garrett Breeze, ACDA National Show Choir Chair, at garrett@breezetunes.com

V. AUDITION PROCESS

1. The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
2. **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
3. Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card.
4. DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
5. The Sponsor will upload two separate video files of the following for the student.
6. Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

VIDEO #1: Voice Audition; .mp4 video upload

- Record a video of yourself singing the "Star-Spangled Banner" *a cappella* in one of the following keys. (You may only audition for one voice part.)
 - Soprano 1 - Key of Db (starting note Ab)
 - Soprano 2 - Key of Bb (starting note F)
 - Alto - Key of Ab (starting note Eb)
 - Tenor 1 - Key of C (starting note G)
 - Tenor 2 / Baritone - Key of Bb (starting note F)
 - Bass - Key of Ab (starting note Eb)

- Although your audition must be recorded without accompaniment, you should use a piano or other means to provide a suitable starting pitch and/or tonal center.
- You should sing the "Star-Spangled Banner" in the style and tempo that is most representative of your voice.
- The video should be recorded from the front, and your entire body, including face, should be completely visible.
- Your posture, facial expression, and general stage presence will also be evaluated as a part of your performance.
- Your video must be recorded live, in one continuous take, and may not be edited or enhanced in any way.
- Do NOT state your name or any other identifying information in your video.

VIDEO #2: Dance Audition; .mp4 video upload

Record a video of yourself performing the following dance excerpt as demonstrated by Tori Brindis in the choreography videos linked below

- The name of the song being used is "12 to 12" and the performing artist is SOMBR.
- The audition excerpt begins from the beginning of the song, which is available on music streaming platforms.
- The video should be recorded from the front and your entire body, including face, should be completely visible.
- Your video must be recorded live, in one continuous take, with the audio playing out loud in the room. You may not use headphones. You may not add or replace music after filming. Your video may not be edited or enhanced in any way.
- Do NOT state your name or any other identifying information in your video.
- **Choreography Excerpt Links:** <https://acda.org/2027-national-show-choir-honor-choir>



GRADES 11-12 VOCAL JAZZ CHOIR
March 7-10, 2027
Minneapolis, MN
Greg Jasperse, Director

I. ELIGIBILITY

- Singers who will be in grades 11 or 12 in March 2027 may apply.
- Application deadline is Thursday, September 23, 2026 at 11:59PM CST. Help desk is available until 5pm the day of the deadline. Late applications are not accepted for any reason, including technical issues. Teachers are expected to plan ahead to ensure successful submissions.
- Singers must be members in good standing of their sponsoring musical organizations.
- Application fee of \$30 at the time of application paid by debit or credit card.
- Students may apply for any of the High School Honor Choirs and Vocal Jazz Honor Choirs. Those wishing to apply for multiple choirs will need to submit all required uploads for each choir as a separate application and pay a separate application fee for each submission. If selected for the National Vocal Jazz Honor Choir, the student will not be considered for the High School Honor Choir(s).

II. REGISTRATION FEES & COSTS (if selected)

Accepted singers are responsible for all of the following:

- Registration fee ~\$375; includes two (2) meals on Monday & Tuesday, and honor choir costs
- Personal transportation to and from Minneapolis, MN.
- Hotel accommodations: Participating singers and their parent(s) or parent-appointed chaperones will be responsible for arranging and paying for their accommodations. A link will be provided after students are accepted to make reservations at a conference rate in designated hotels.
- Financial, need-based scholarships are available (need will have no impact on the audition outcome). Apply at the time of registration, if selected.

III. EXPECTATIONS

- Accepted singers must be in attendance at all scheduled rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and performances.
 - Students participating in a performing choir or any other aspects of the conference will not be able to participate in the honor choir. Students will not be released from honor choir rehearsal for any reason to attend other activities.
- Singers must be well prepared on all music prior to arrival. Re-auditions will take place before the first rehearsal on Sunday, March 7. **Singers who are not prepared will not be allowed to participate in the honor choir.**
- Singers are expected to abide by all ACDA Honor Choir policies. If rules are broken, singers will be sent home at their personal expense.
- Singers must have an ACDA sponsor (or a representative named by the sponsor) staying at a conference hotel who can provide ACDA with a working cell phone number and be available on-site.

- **All information regarding the Honor Choir experience will be communicated through the ACDA Sponsor.** Singers/guardians should check regularly with the sponsor and on the Honor Choir Announcement page (www.acda.org) for updated information.
- Any questions can be addressed to John Stafford, ACDA National Vocal Jazz Chair, at jstafford@kckcc.edu

IV. AUDITION PROCESS

- The application will open on the ACDA portal on September 1, 2026.
- **ONLY THE SPONSOR can submit the online application information.** The Sponsor **MUST** be an ACDA member and hold active, life, paying life, or retired membership.
- Include a non-refundable application fee of \$30.00 paid online at the time of application via debt/credit card..
- DO NOT state the student name, sponsor name, or organization for any uploaded recordings.
- The Sponsor will upload four separate sound files of the following for the student.
- Not following the instructions may result in the student audition being disqualified.

Recording #1: TWO PARTS: 1 upload; .mp4, .mp3

- a. **Db Chromatic Scale:** Sing the Chromatic Scale ascending and descending, unaccompanied on "Meh." Please perform the scale at **Quarter note=100 BPM**. Your starting pitch may be played in your audio file.

Chromatic Scale



b. Db Blues Scale

- a. Sing the Blues Scale ascending and descending, unaccompanied on "Doo." Perform the scale at **Quarter note=85 BPM**. Your starting pitch may be played in your audio file.

Blues Scale



Recording #2: Sing the assigned excerpt of "I'm Old Fashioned"; 1 upload; .mp4, .mp3

Perform excerpt at Quarter Note=72 BPM, *a cappella*. Your starting pitch may be played in your audio file.

Soprano/Alto

♩=72

1
 I'm old fash - ioned, I Love the moon - light, I

5
 Love the old fash - ioned things. The

9
 sound of rain up - on a win dow pane, the

13
 star - ry song that Ap - ril sings!

Tenor

♩=72

1
 I'm old fash - ioned, I Love the moon - light, I

5
 Love the old fash - ioned things. The

9
 sound of rain up - on a win dow pane, the

13
 star - ry song that Ap - ril sings!

♩ = 72

I'm old fash - ioned, I Love the moon - light, I
 5
 Love the old fash - ioned things. The
 9
 sound of rain up - on a win dow pane, the
 13
 star - ry song that Ap - ril sings!

Recording #3: 24 bars of improvisation (scatting) over the Blues in Db; 1 upload; .mp4, .mp3

- i. Accompaniment track for Recording #3 & #4 can be found at <https://acdda.org/2027-national-vocal-jazz-honor-choir>
- ii. Humming is not permitted.

Recording #4: Bebop Line; 1 upload; .mp4, .mp3

Perform excerpt at Medium Up Swing Quarter Note=160 BPM

Use the Accompaniment Track (appropriate for your voice part). The track needs to be audible in your recording. The track is longer than the written chart, so you only have to perform the written line

- i. Soprano/Alto

(INTRO) B^b7 G7 C7 F7 B^b7 E^b13(#11)
 VA OO VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO VA
 5 B^b7 Fmi7 B^b13 E^b7
 DOO DIT VA DOO DIT VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO VA DOO VA DOO DN DOO WAY

ii. Tenor/Bass

(INTRO)

C7 A7 D7 G7 C7 F13(#11)

8 VA OO VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO VA

C7 Gmi7 C13 F7

12 DOO DIT VA DOO DIT VA DOO DN DOO VA DOO VA DOO VA DOO DN DOO WAY__

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENT FOR SOPRANO 1 AND BASS 2

Are you auditioning as a Soprano 1 or a Bass 2? Please include the following 4th recording in your audition application. Perform excerpt at Quarter Note=85 BPM, *a cappella*. Your starting pitch may be played in your audio file.

Lead soprano 1 vocal range exercise

♩ = 85

Do vah do vah Do vah do vah Do vah do vah Do vah do vah Dah

Bass vocal range exercise

♩ = 85 Sing on "Dum" or "Doon"

5



Call for Research Poster Sessions
2027 ACDA National Conference
Application Opens: October 1, 2026
Application Deadline: November 3, 2026, 11:59pm CDT

The American Choral Directors Association will sponsor a research session at the 2027 National Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 7–10, 2027. The intent of the research poster session is to bring current research to light that impacts and informs our profession and to encourage our colleagues in the choral world to stay in touch with research in choral music.

We seek research reflecting the breadth and depth of choral music teaching, learning, and practice, including studies that may be completed or currently in progress. This session is designed to showcase a wide range of scholarship—such as investigations of rehearsal techniques, performance practice, repertoire selection, and emerging trends within the choral field—and to provide a forum for collegial dialogue around research.

Of particular interest are studies focused on repertoire, performance practice, conducting pedagogy, rehearsal pedagogy, vocal development, critical editions, theoretical analysis that informs performance, research in the K-12 setting, research with unique ensembles and in unique settings, research that spans the life of a singer from birth through adulthood, and research on vocal or compositional practices in contemporary choral music.

The poster session space will include an easel that will accommodate up to a 36" x 48" poster. Your poster should be a single full-color document no larger than 36" x 48" inches in size light enough to be pinned on the display board with push pins (the conference venue will have pins available). You will transport your poster to the conference site.

1. Abstracts submitted for presentation must comply with the following guidelines:

(a) If the data have been presented in whole or substantive part in any forum or at previous research sessions, a statement specifying particulars of the above must be included with the submission. Papers presented at other conferences will be considered only if the audience was substantially different (e.g., a state meeting or a university symposium). A statement specifying particulars of past presentation and venue must be included with the submission.

(b) The paper may have been submitted but must not be in print or in press prior to the submission deadline of the conference.

2. The research may be of any type, but a simple review of literature will not be considered for presentation.

Manuscript style of articles representing descriptive, quantitative, or qualitative studies must conform to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th edition, 2020). Authors of other types of studies (e.g., historical, theoretical) may submit manuscripts that conform to either *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (K. L. Turabian, 9th edition, 2018) or *The Chicago Manual of Style* (18th edition, 2024).

3. The following items are required for submission: An abstract of no more than 3000 characters (including references) summarizing your research purpose, method, findings, discussion, and implications. The name(s) or affiliation(s) of anyone involved in the submission must not appear in the abstract. Incomplete submissions (e.g., those discussing proposed research without any preliminary findings) will be rejected.

The submission form will also ask if this is your first time submitting to the research poster session as well as if you are a member of a historically marginalized group. These questions, in an effort toward equity and inclusion, will have no bearing in the blind review process, but will help ensure that emerging scholars as well as scholarship from diverse perspectives appear on the national research program.

Presenters must be current members of ACDA, and all persons whose work is selected for inclusion on the program are expected to register for the conference. It is understood that ACDA will not assume financial responsibility for travel, food, or lodging for poster session presenters. Your submission implies that you are prepared to travel and present at the conference if accepted.

4. To apply, visit <https://acda.org/resources/research-and-publications-committee>. The submission window will open on October 1, 2026, and the deadline is November 3, 2026, at 11:59pm CDT. The helpdesk will be available until 5pm CDT on the day of the deadline. Extensions will not be granted for any reason. Additionally, you must be an active, international, or student member of ACDA to submit for a research poster session.

5. All submissions will be reviewed blind by a committee of scholars. Applicants will be notified of the status of their submission via email by December 15, 2026.

The research poster session will be held at the 2027 ACDA National Conference in Minneapolis, MN, between March 7-10, 2027. A specific date and time for the presentation during the overall conference schedule will be published in the fall.

For questions, contact Jamey Kelley at Jamey.Kelley@unt.edu.

For technical or membership support, email membership@acda.org.



An example of poster session boards from the 2023 National Conference in Cincinnati.



2027 Student Conducting Masterclass Application Information

Application Opens: September 1, 2026

Application Deadline: October 15, 2026, 11:59pm CST

The ACDA Student Conducting Awards and Competition were initiated during the 1993 ACDA National Conference in San Antonio, Texas. In 2019, the event was reconceived as a masterclass model, shifting the emphasis from competition to mentorship.

For 2027, this opportunity will again be offered as the Student Conducting Masterclass, featuring both Undergraduate and Graduate categories.

Objectives

1. To acknowledge and reward outstanding undergraduate and graduate student conductors
2. To encourage score preparation and the advancement of conducting and rehearsal skills
3. To promote greater engagement in student activity at the ACDA National Conference

Selection Criteria

Acceptance will be based on:

- Conducting technique
- Rehearsal pedagogy
- Expressive musicality
- Use of appropriate performance practice

The student conducting masterclasses will take place at the 2027 ACDA National Conference in Minneapolis, with the undergraduate session scheduled for March 8 and the graduate session scheduled for March 9.

I. ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Applicants must:

- Hold a valid ACDA active or student membership.
 1. To confirm membership status or locate your membership number, visit www.acda.org and click "Sign In" in the upper right corner.
 2. To join, visit www.acda.org/membership.
- Applicants must be either a full- or part-time degree-pursuing student at a college or university in the United States or U.S. Territory at the time of the application and at the time of the masterclass (March 8 & 9, 2027). Status will be verified by submission of a student ID card and sponsor verification.

- Submit a complete application portfolio via the ACDA application portal, which will include:
 1. Personal information (not visible to video adjudicators)
 2. Verification of video validity (faculty sponsor name and faculty sponsor ACDA membership number)
 3. Verification of student status; Student ID upload (.png, .jpg, .jpeg)
 4. Audition video upload (.mp4)
 5. Fully marked PDF scores of the two selections (2 separate PDF uploads)
 6. Résumé of conducting experience (.pdf)
 7. Headshot (.png, .jpg, .jpeg); for conference website and publicity, if chosen
 8. 900-character biography (for conference website and publicity, if chosen)
 9. \$20 entry fee (online payment only via debit/credit card at time of application)*

*If an applicant is experiencing financial hardship and cannot pay the \$20 entry fee, contact Dr. Jenny Bent, Collegiate Activities Coordinator (bentje@sonoma.edu) by September 15, 2026.

II. AUDITION VIDEO INFORMATION

Musical Submission Requirements

1. Applicants will rehearse and conduct two choral compositions. The video should show the conductor's ability to communicate and rehearse effectively with the ensemble and use appropriate and expressive gestures when conducting.
2. A fully marked, color PDF score analysis of both works must be uploaded (2 pdf uploads)
3. Repertoire Requirements:
 - a. One selection must be by a historically marginalized or underrepresented composer. One selection must be from the 17th, 18th, or 19th century. One selection must be from the 20th or 21st century. One of the selections must include mixed and/or asymmetrical meters (eg. 7/8, 5/4).
 - b. *Graduate applicants only*: One selection must be conducted with baton.

Additional repertoire considerations:

- Selections must contrast in tempo and style.
- Selections may be accompanied or unaccompanied. Keyboard reductions may substitute for orchestral accompaniment.
- Excerpts from larger works are permitted.

Repertoire resources (not exhaustive and not an endorsement by the committee):

- <https://www.composerdiversity.com/>
- <http://chorosynthesis.org/esvdatabase>
- <https://guides.library.yale.edu/music-diversity/repertoire>

Format & Duration

- Both selections must be recorded consecutively without stopping the device.
- No editing, sound enhancement, or post-production is permitted.
- The total conducting time, for both works, is a minimum of 10 minutes and maximum of 12 minutes.
- Rehearsal time should be balanced between selections.
- Applicants are encouraged to begin the uploading process early to avoid any technical issues. Late applications will not be accepted FOR ANY REASON, including technical issues the applicant may experience.

Camera & Audio Requirements

- Camera angle showing all conducting movements (full-frontal view is recommended and preferable)
- Clear, audible choral sound
- The applicant must announce title and composer before each selection.

Anonymity

- The applicant must not identify themselves or their institution in the video.
- No institutional logos, clothing, or signage may be visible.
- No spoken or written identification may be made.

Sponsor Verification

- The applicant will be required to provide the name, email address, and ACDA member number of one faculty sponsor who can verify the recording and student status, if asked.
- The sponsor must have either been present at the recording or viewed the final submission.

It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure compliance with all guidelines.

III. APPLICATION DEADLINE

All materials must be submitted by 11:59 PM CST on October 15, 2026.

All materials become the property of the American Choral Directors Association.



Technical support will be available via membership@acda.org until 5:00 PM CST on October 15, 2026.

Late applications will not be accepted for any reason, including in cases of technical difficulty. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit early. Applicants are responsible for planning ahead to ensure they can complete the application process on time.

Incomplete or erroneous applications will result in disqualification.

IV. AUDITION REVIEW PROCESS

The National Student Conducting Masterclass Committee will appoint a review panel to evaluate submissions.

- Up to four undergraduate and four graduate conductors will be selected.
- Review panelists may not evaluate their own students.

Applicants will be notified by email on or before December 4, 2026.

V. CONFERENCE SESSION INFORMATION

The Masterclass Sessions will be held during the 2027 ACDA National Conference.

Each selected conductor will:

- Participate in a pre-conference coaching session with a masterclass clinician.
- Receive live feedback on gesture, rehearsal technique, and score study during the conference session.

Selected conductors will receive complimentary conference registration and a \$250 honorarium. Additionally, they will be formally recognized in ACDA publications and acknowledged publicly at the 2027 National Conference.

Disclaimer

No person connected with the selection of masterclass participants may be involved with any decision involving that person's student (over the past three years) who has applied or been selected as a participant in the ACDA Student Conducting Masterclass.

For questions about the application process, contact Jenny Bent, Collegiate Activities Coordinator (bentje@sonoma.edu)

For technical support or membership support, contact membership@acda.org

Application Opens: September 1, 2026

Application Deadline: October 15, 2026, 11:59pm CST

Access the application at: <https://acda.org/resources-for-student-members>

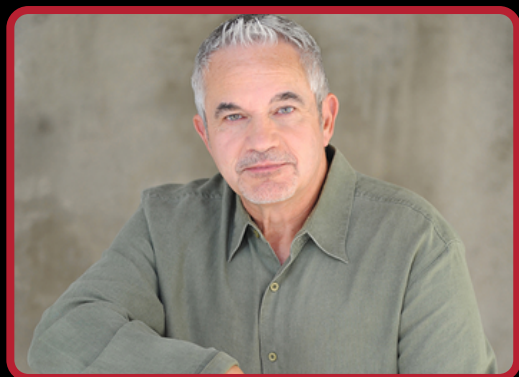


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Repertoire & Resources

Lifelong Choirs

Cultivating Excellence in Lifelong Singers

by Jack A. Cleghorn

When I learned of the death of Helmuth Rilling, I reflected on the profound influence his work made on generations of singers, teachers, conductors, and institutions. For many, his work is linked with a precision of style and the interpretation of Bach; therein, musical excellence. For others, his impact lived in the rehearsal room, where his love and knowledge of music and economy of language shaped their very craft.

During my time at Westminster Choir College, I had the opportunity to observe Rilling in rehearsal and participate in group conversations with him off the podium. Like many young conductors, I was curious to know his process. What were his outlooks and pedagogical practices that distinguished good ensembles from exceptional ones? At some point during a rehearsal, one of my colleagues asked him a question that has stayed with me for years and, in many ways, shaped my thoughts on ensemble singing. The question invited a complicated yet direct answer.

“How do you get a better choir?”

Rilling responded without hesitation: “Get better singers.”

The room erupted in laughter, partly because the an-

swer was both obvious and profoundly true.

Admittedly, my first assessment of Rilling’s response was not what I have now come to believe it means. What remains most striking is that the answer did not come from a conductor concerned only with the performance outcome. Rilling’s career reflected a deep investment in formation. He cultivated educational environments built around long-term artistic growth that extends beyond the recordings and performances. This context matters because his response did not emerge from abstraction. It came from a teacher who spent a lifetime cultivating excellence.

We, as stewards of the lifelong choir community, are invited to consider how excellence is formed in environments where singers arrive with different levels of preparation, whose voices are changing, and who have varied motivations for participation.

Rilling’s answer remains difficult to dispute. Better singers very often create better choirs. Musical literacy, vocal technique, stylistic awareness, listening skills, and experience all contribute to the success of an ensemble. In auditioned choirs, conductors have the ability to shape an ensemble and its quality through recruitment and selective membership. Conservatories, professional choruses, advanced collegiate ensembles, and at times even our music in worship and community choirs can function



within this framework—which, for those of us working in lifelong choirs, makes the answer far more complex.

Rarely do conductors of community choirs, worship ensembles, senior choruses, or volunteer-based organizations, to name a few, begin with a curated roster of singers. Rather, we tend to inherit a broad community and spectrum of experience, training, motivation, and confidence. While some may come to us with extensive musical backgrounds or experience, many others will not read music fluently. Some members return after years away from singing, some join seeking a creative outlet, purpose, or connection. So, within such ensembles, our question and our goals shift. At this point, it is not about *finding* better singers; it is about *creating* them.

Lifelong choirs operate according to a different pedagogical model than a highly selective or elite ensemble, which is why this distinction matters. In those advanced ensembles, excellence is often shaped through

selection. In lifelong choirs, excellence is often shaped through formation. This poses a unique challenge. Formation is a process, not an event. It is a slow, cumulative act dependent on cultivation instead of filtration.

As lifelong choir conductors, we serve voices that are evolving across multiple stages of life. Older singers adapting to vocal changes, young adults learning ensemble habits, and middle-aged singers returning after years away from music making all inhabit the same space. Unlike an academic environment where singers come and go at predictable intervals, we are challenged to sustain participation over years and, in some cases, decades. This creates a pedagogical environment and an ensemble that becomes, in itself, part of the teaching process.

True, singers learn from their director; but they also learn from each other. Veteran members of an ensemble model rehearsal etiquette, diction, and proper

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alignment. Confidence and musical vocabulary are absorbed by younger singers through participation, listening becomes instructional, and repetition becomes development. It is this belonging that creates conditions where singers are willing to take more risks, become more vulnerable, and grow as artists.

We all see the value, both socially and emotionally, of being a member of a choir. Participation itself, the communal experience, is also a pedagogical function. Participation is a mechanism of growth. The practical experience and research we have all encountered remind us that singers are not static. The dynamic nature of our singers is particularly evident when working with changing voices. Health, age, life, and use all contribute to this evolution. The effects of aging are often evident in changes to stamina, breath support, and vocal range. Because of these factors, conductors of lifelong ensembles cannot rely on fixed assumptions about sound and capacity. We must adapt. Adaptive work is not second to artistry; it is artistry.

Conductors of lifelong choirs navigate the intersection of pedagogy, community, and musicianship. It requires—indeed, demands—that we maintain the highest standards of excellence while recognizing that our singers develop along different timelines. It requires us to pursue musical and pedagogical excellence, and a commitment to learning as a director and as an individual, all without losing sight of the human continuity that sustains our ensembles.

For these reasons, the definition of a better choir calls for expansion, or perhaps a new lens. I firmly believe that lifelong choirs expand the held definition, or current focus, of excellence and “better” beyond precision alone. True, a better choir may demonstrate a command of diction or stylistic nuance or finer intonation, but what is the purpose and goal of the ensemble? We are taught from early in our careers to have a critical ear that constantly and meticulously catches any error. It can be a daunting task to step back from those ingrained perceptions.

Better choirs may reflect increased confidence, deeper listening, stronger attendance, or a greater sense of shared ownership. Better choirs are ensembles that provide the tools for hesitant singers to trust their voices. Better choirs are places where singers remain engaged

rather than excluded. Better choirs may be those where community strengthens artistry rather than competing with it.

We are reminded through lifelong choirs that excellence and belonging are not in opposition; they are mutually reinforcing. Rilling’s answer to us young conductors all those years ago remains true. But we conductors of lifelong choirs ask different questions. Not simply where better singers are found, but how they are formed.

This is a distinct contribution of lifelong choirs to the choral ecosystem. Here, we are reminded that artistry is not merely a byproduct of selection but rather one of consistency, patience, and care. We do not bend finely tuned singers to our vision. We walk with our singers in change and development through new seasons of life.

I ask us to value the process in conjunction with the product. I suggest that musical excellence emerges not only from mountain-top artistic experiences but also from a group of individuals, willing to commit itself to one another as a community. Repeatedly. In a way, it is more of a covenant.

Our profession is one whose metric is often polish and precision. Those qualities should not be discounted or diminished, and lifelong ensembles should not be excluded from those abilities. However, lifelong choirs offer another measure of success: singers who remain engaged, singers who grow in knowledge and ability, singers who feel heard, singers who return because they believe in the ensemble and what they are creating.

Lifelong choirs and the choristers who inhabit these ensembles don’t exist for performance alone. We, the stewards and participants of lifelong choirs, sustain voices, shape identity, and cultivate communities capable of singing together across a lifetime. **□**

Jack A. Cleghorn is choirmaster and organist at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and the national R&R coordinator for lifelong choirs for ACDA.

jack@stpaulsfay.org



Music in Worship

The Holy Act of Singing

by Jennaya Robison

This article was adapted from a plenary speech given at the National Conference of the Hymn Society of North America and reprinted in “Journal of Congregational Song” Volume 74, No. 4 (Autumn 2025). Reprinted by permission.

There is a quote long attributed (perhaps mistakenly) to Saint Augustine: “The one who sings prays twice.” Misquotation or not, the phrase names a truth every choir has felt in its bones: the human voice becomes a thin place between heaven and earth. Tom Trenney, a composer, conductor, and organist, calls the space between conductor and choir “holy ground.”¹ That space is built on trust, vulnerability, and shared longing of the people who gather there. It can trace the lines that run from our first infant lullabies to the anthems that accompany our funerals, and that prove, again and again, that singing is no mere ornament; it is sacred.

The Holy Act of Creation

Long before the church had creeds, it had choruses. Songs wandered with the exiled Hebrew people, and Paul and Silas shook a prison’s foundations with midnight hymns. There is a soundtrack of singing that accompanies every poignant moment in our lives. Why? Because singing gathers the self. The inhale disciplines the body, the vowel shapes focus the mind, and the act of resonance draws emotion out of hiding. When you sing, you do not merely say, “I believe,” you embody belief. Breath becomes Spirit (the Hebrew *ruach* knows no difference), and flesh becomes Word. No wonder Augustine, or whoever first uttered the phrase, heard a double prayer in a single song.

Singing serves a didactic purpose that is obvious to anyone who has ever taught a child the ABCs or used music to memorize something for a test. During ancient times, this was essential when there weren’t printed resources. For those who could not read, singing and

memorization became the way we conveyed the stories of our people. Frank Senn’s *Christian Liturgy* notes:

[T]he Hindu did not regard music only as a useful aid in the memorization and recitation of texts; chanting also fostered a state of meditation that enabled the person to break away from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and be absorbed into the spirit of the universe.²

J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* narrates the creation myth of Tolkien’s fictional universe. Scholar Bradley Blazer describes Tolkien’s creation myth: “Music, art, and literature are all acts of sub-creation expressive of the divine essence in [humans]. In this way, [humans] share in the creative power of God.”³ A story from Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*:

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Iluvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad...

Then Iluvatar said to them: “Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been awakened into song.”⁴

Tolkien’s creation myth can be viewed through a lens that aligns it with the biblical creation story. God exists outside of all time and space but is the sole origin of existence. The angelic beings (the Ainur), as divine offspring, are not physical, but spiritual beings who each embody the mind of God. These beings establish a hi-

erarchy, one of creator and cocreators.

Humankind has equated music with the divine for our entire existence. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who lived in the second half of the sixth century BCE, proposed that the cosmos was governed by relationships so profound that only heaven could explain these mysteries. These ideas predate Christianity with the concept of *music of the spheres*, a Pythagorean doctrine that postulates harmonious relationships among the planets.⁵

The Hebrew tradition of music is evident throughout the Old Testament, most prominently in the Psalms and in the prophecies in Isaiah and Ezra. These songs of praise and community were meant to give voice to every human experience, the worship and praise of God, and the rebuilding of a community plagued by exile and destruction. In Job 38, God answers Job, saying:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”⁶

We are the cocreators. As in Tolkien’s myth, the Creator imparts to us themes of music. Each theme is carefully and uniquely created for each individual. We are gifted these themes to become collaborators in the universe. The Creator calls to us to “make in harmony together a Great Music,”⁷ and God calls us to respond to these gifts as individuals, but also in community. God has created a theme within us, but we are called to create harmony with each other.

The Holy Act of Singing

Communal singing is not only an act of worship in a faith community or an artistic endeavor in a choir, but

it is a physical transformation. The holy act of singing bonds individuals on an artistic level in ways that we can see and hear. At the same time, the act of singing impacts the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of participants in a way that nurtures the sacred ground of being human. In an article about choral singing, researchers at Oxford University note:

[S]inging has been shown to improve our sense of happiness and wellbeing. Research has found, for example, that people feel more positive after actively singing than they do after passively listening to music or after chatting about positive life events.⁸

Singing individually certainly has health benefits. There is the simple act of creating something beautiful

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for others to enjoy—elevating the human experience to something artistically transcendent. As a solo artist, we can give voice to many human struggles through text, melody, and expression. It is a vulnerable act and one that can be humbling and terrifying for even the most confident person. It is no wonder that public speaking is one of the most common adult phobias (ahead of fear of death, spiders, and heights!).⁹ Research has also concluded that singing can combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and release endorphins and oxytocin.¹⁰ These feelings can be heightened by singing *together* in a group setting. Our breathing and heartbeats sync up

when we sing together.¹¹

For many, the roots of singing are deeply personal and formed early. Memories of singing alongside family in church—whether from the pew or the choir loft—often linger with particular clarity. A familiar hymn such as “Holy, Holy, Holy” can hold layers of meaning shaped by childhood curiosity, family voices, and questions first asked in wonder. Musical formation often begins in these intimate spaces, shaped by parents or mentors whose instincts for harmony and expression seem almost effortless. Moments of shared singing, whether in a local congregation or in a grand concert hall, become lasting imprints.

Later experiences in academic and church settings can bring these early impressions into sharper focus. Conversations about the role of hymnody, liturgy, and contemporary expressions of worship often reveal tensions between spontaneity and tradition. For some, liturgical music may initially feel constrained or overly prescribed. Yet the deeper insight remains: hymns, songs, and choruses tell the stories of the people. They carry collective memory, giving voice to generations who have grappled with the same questions, joys, and struggles. In doing so, they offer a framework for understanding the present, grounding individuals and communities in a shared narrative that continues to unfold.

Holy Ground

There is an invisible triangle that exists between the conductor, the choir, and the music. The space between conductor and choir can be a chasm, or it can be a bridge. The relationship between these two is, as James Jordan describes it in *The Musician’s Soul*, “a union, a bond, a connectedness that brings human beings so close spiritually that they almost become one equals on the same playing field.”¹²

There is an implicit level of trust that one must demonstrate as a conductor whose hands do not make the sound; they only invite it. There must be trust on the part of the singer, too, whose instrument is their body. There is no room for blaming a faulty reed or a sticking key when the music produced comes from you. Both sides proceed from trust and with an incredible amount of vulnerability. Hymnbooks are often placed

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in the hands of children before they can read, and music has a way of lodging itself more deeply than many sermons. In one congregation, a typically reserved senior pastor came to the choir in tears between services. He shared that his ninety-five-year-old mother could no longer remember his name or recognize her family, despite being brought to church each week. That Sunday, as the choir sang the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” in the arrangement by Peter J. Wilhousky for Veterans Day weekend, something unexpected happened. Looking out into the congregation, he saw his mother, usually unresponsive, singing. For a brief moment, music became a sacred vessel for memory, reconnecting her to something deeply embedded within her.

Conclusion

The holy act of singing is older than scripture and wider than denominational borders. It has pulled communities out of exile and many of us through pandemic livestream fatigue. It will, if we steward it well, carry the community (whether that be the church, the classroom, or community choirs) into whatever brave new worlds await.

But this future is not guaranteed. It depends on what we choose to value, what we choose to teach, and what we choose to sing. If we reduce singing to product, polish, or performance alone, we risk losing its deeper power. If, however, we honor it as a practice of presence, of listening, of shared breath, then it remains what it has always been: a means of forming people, not just programs. 📖

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NOTES

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