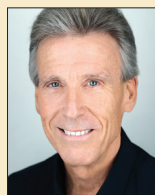


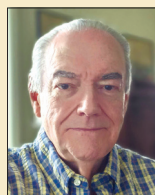


Maestro Helmuth Rilling's Teaching, Influence, and Legacy: An Interview with Edward Maclary, Gordon Paine, and Kathy Saltzman Romey

RACHEL CARLSON



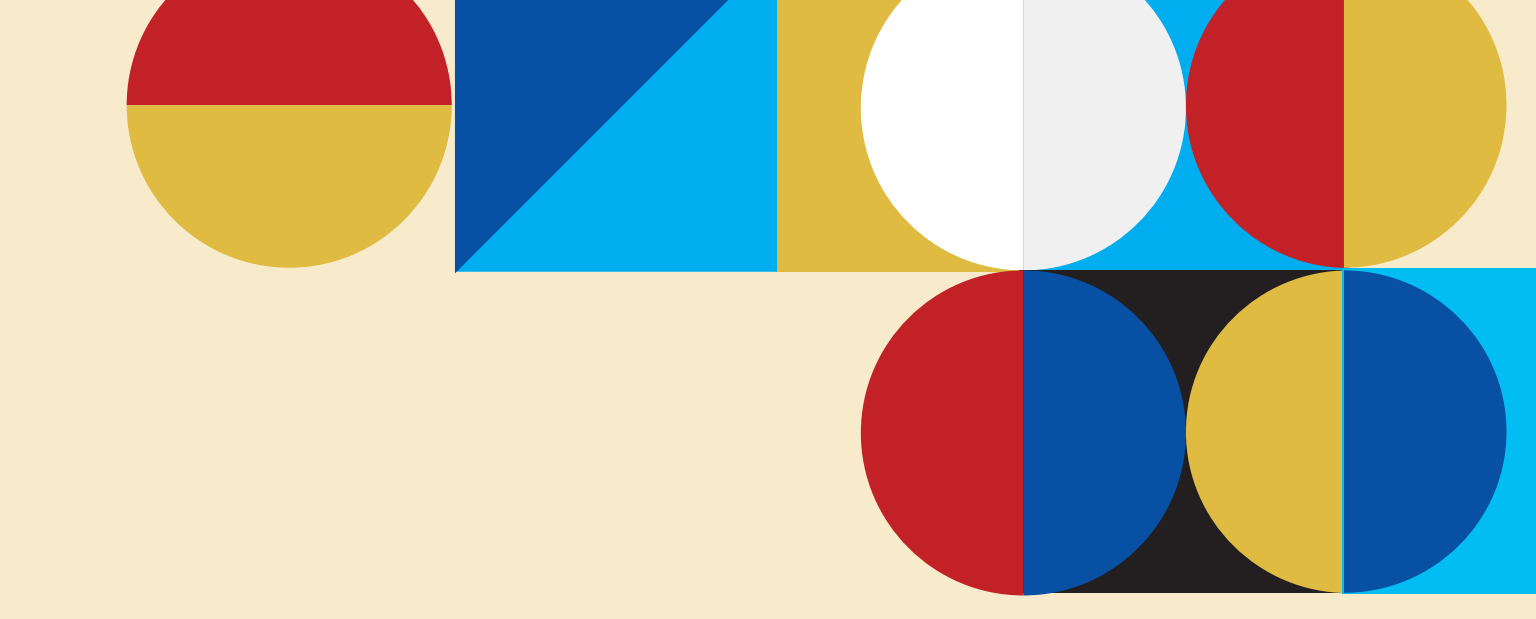
Edward Maclary is Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Maryland. He has served as a guest chorus master for the Cleveland Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. From 2014 to 2017 he was the Director of the Master Class in Conducting at the Oregon Bach Festival. He currently holds an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

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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-

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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.



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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.