

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

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**H**elmuth 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> In 1965, Rilling established the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart as its instrumental counterpart, and concerted repertoire from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries increasingly came to dominate programming. Rilling remained conductor of both ensembles until 2013.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

# 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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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).<sup>10</sup> The ensemble later returned for individual engagements, including performances with the New York Philharmonic in 1989 (*Messa per Rossini*)<sup>11</sup> and 2009 (Handel's *Messiah*),<sup>12</sup> as well as an appearance at the 2004 Oregon Bach Festival.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

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.<sup>18</sup> 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).<sup>19</sup> This monumental set won the 2000 Cannes Classical Award as "Bach Collection of the Year."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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*.<sup>24</sup>

## **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

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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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

## *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.

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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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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.

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## *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.<sup>38</sup>

## *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.<sup>39</sup>

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)<sup>40</sup>
- 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)<sup>41</sup>

## 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

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network—continue to shape its trajectory.<sup>42</sup>

## 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.<sup>43</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.bachakademie.de/files/bachakademie/content/bachakademie/publikationen/jahrbuch_gmg_bw_2022/jahrbuch_gmg-bw_2022_bachakademie_en_web.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

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

<sup>6</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”

<sup>7</sup> “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.

<sup>8</sup> Helmuth Rilling to Hartwig Eschenburg, July 21, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Hartwig Eschenburg to the Internationale Bachakademie, May 21, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> *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”).

<sup>11</sup> “Messa per Rossini,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 23, 2026, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messa\\_per\\_Rossini](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messa_per_Rossini).

<sup>12</sup> 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>.

<sup>13</sup> 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>.

- <sup>14</sup> Helmuth Rilling, address, February 13, 1987, performance of the Gächinger Kantorei and Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, Stuttgart, Germany.
- <sup>15</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- <sup>16</sup> Helmuth Rilling, address February 13, 1987.
- <sup>17</sup> 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](https://www.bachakademie.de/files/bachakademie/content/bachakademie/rilling/Nachruf_Helmuth_Rilling_IBA_Andreas_Bomba.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> Rilling’s groundbreaking recording cycle was the first complete recording of Bach’s cantatas and choral orchestral works on modern instruments.
- <sup>19</sup> Helmuth Rilling, “About this Artist,” Los Angeles Philharmonic, accessed April 5, 2026, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/4484/helmuth-rilling>.
- <sup>20</sup> “H. Royce Saltzman, “Helmuth Rilling (1933–2026),” accessed April 14, 2026, [https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/rilling\\_helmuth\\_1933\\_/](https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/rilling_helmuth_1933_/).
- <sup>21</sup> 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.
- <sup>22</sup> Festschrift zum 25-jährigen Bachakademie-Jubiläum (2006).
- <sup>23</sup> 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>.
- <sup>24</sup> Los Angeles Philharmonic, “Gaechinger Cantorey,” MusicDB, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/7488/gaechinger-cantorey>.
- <sup>25</sup> International Federation for Choral Music, “Royce Saltzman Obituary,” accessed April 16, 2026, <https://www.ifcm.net/uploads/content/2023%20news/Saltzman%20Obituary%20Family.pdf>.
- <sup>26</sup> “Oregon Bach Festival, ‘History of OBF,’” accessed April 19, 2026, <https://oregonbachfestival.org/history-of-obf/>
- <sup>27</sup> 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.
- <sup>28</sup> “Oregon Bach Festival, ‘History of OBF.’”
- <sup>29</sup> 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/>.
- <sup>30</sup> “Oregon Bach Festival, *Part of the Plan*, program book (1993), 38.
- <sup>31</sup> John Haberlen, “From the President,” *Choral Journal* 34, no. 2 (February 1994): 3.
- <sup>32</sup> Haberlen, “From the President.”
- <sup>33</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- <sup>34</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- <sup>35</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- <sup>36</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- <sup>37</sup> Paine, “Helmuth Rilling and the Gächinger Kantorei.”
- <sup>38</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- <sup>39</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- <sup>40</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider.
- <sup>41</sup> *Forum Bachakademie*, no. 80 (November 2013).
- <sup>42</sup> Bomba, Bey, and Schneider, “The International Bach Academy Stuttgart.”
- <sup>43</sup> *Forum Bachakademie*, no. 80.