

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

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and Dennis Shrock

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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-

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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.