

Helmuth Rilling (1933-)

By H. Royce Saltzman

In 1970, Helmuth Rilling was one of the founders of the Oregon Bach Festival. His tenure as artistic director, conductor, and teacher at the Festival has had a major impact on the international choral scene. Students attending his conducting master class have come from more than 30 countries, and from major universities and communities throughout the United States and Canada.

Born in 1933 in Stuttgart, Germany Rilling studied at the State Music Academy of Stuttgart and at the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia in Rome. His focus was on conducting, choral music, and the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach. After studying with Leonard Bernstein in New York in 1967, he became professor of choral conducting at the State Music Academy in Frankfurt, a post he held until 1985.

Rilling founded the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart (IBA) in 1981. Together with teachers and ensembles of that institution, he has conducted Bach academies in such cities as Buenos Aires, Caracas, Cracow, Moscow, Santiago de Compostela (Spain), and Tokyo.

Rilling believes that music has the power to cross political and ethnic boundaries. He was the first German conductor after World War II to conduct the Israeli Philharmonic in that country, and he was invited to conduct musical portions of Germany's official reunification ceremonies. In 1994, the IBA received the UNESCO Music Prize, and the following year, Rilling received the Theodor Heuss Prize for advancing reconciliation and international understanding.

Rilling is a guest conductor with major orchestras in Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, Canada, and the United States. The winner of a Grammy award for the Oregon Bach Festival's world premiere recording of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Credo*, he has been a champion of contemporary music, commissioning such composers as Osvaldo Golijov, Sofia Gubaidulina, Wolfgang Rihm, and Tan Dun. To commemorate the end of World War II, he commissioned a *Requiem of Reconciliation*, set to music by fourteen composers from countries that were involved in that war, and conducted an international ensemble in its world premier.

Helmuth Rilling is one of the most accomplished conductors and interpreters of Johann Sebastian Bach's music. The benchmark of his career has been intensely personal interpretations of Bach's 200 cantatas and major choral works. Under the Hänssler label, he directed the recording of the complete works of Bach on 172 CDs, released in 2000 in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Bach's death. The "Edition Bachakademie" won the 2000 Cannes Classical Award as Bach Collection of the Year.

Rilling has an honorary doctorate from the University of Oregon, where he holds the position Visiting Distinguished Professor of Music. Rilling retired from the OBF as Artistic Director at the end of his 44th season, in 2013.

Sources

History of Oregon Bach Festival

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/rilling_helmuth_1933_/