

HELMUTH RILLING, IN HIS OWN WORDS

Sally Messner



Helmuth Rilling, the preeminent Bach scholar and conductor, was born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1933. After years of study in Germany and Italy, he founded the Gächinger Kantorei in 1953 and the Bach Collegium Stuttgart (the Kantorei's orchestra) in 1965. With Royce Saltzman he co-founded the Oregon Bach Festival in 1970 and still serves as artistic director of the festival. In 1981 he founded the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, an institution committed to education. Rilling was the first German conductor to conduct the Israeli Philharmonic in Israel after World War II and has appeared as a guest conductor with many major orchestras throughout the world. He has recorded the complete works of Bach with Hänssler Verlag, which released all of them on 172 compact discs to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Bach's death in 2000. This interview took place at the Oregon Bach Festival in July 2008.

SM: How did you become interested in Bach?

HR: I come from a very musical family. My father was a teacher and an organist, and my mother was a violinist. So as a child I heard a lot of music and a lot of Bach. Later I went to boarding school, a place in the long-standing tradition of the Lutheran church, an evangelical theological seminary in Stuttgart. For centuries the church has educated their theologians in boarding schools like this. They were originally planned to be institutions where poor families could send their gifted children to get a high-level education, and many in the intellectual life in the southern part of Germany have gone through these schools—poets, writers, theologians, artists, scientists, everybody. This school had a very strong Lutheran curriculum, so I was influenced very much from the theological side. You could call it something between boarding school and monastery. So of course Bach played a role there; we heard many cantatas.

SM: And then you were a church musician for quite a while, right?

HR: First I studied music education in Stuttgart, but my main instrument was the organ. From there I went to Rome, where I studied with the organist of St. Peter's, Fernando Germani, for two years. And then I took over the position at the church in Stuttgart, called Gedächtniskirche (Memorial Church). This church had been destroyed in WWII and was then rebuilt with a new organ. We started something which has become a model for many people, what we called Kantatengottesdienst (cantata worship service), and every month we had a special Sunday service where a Bach cantata was performed. The minister would preach the sermon to the text of this cantata, and we would perform the cantata not in one piece but split over a whole service, with the liturgical music and the hymns in between. In cooperation with the minister, I opened those services to everyone, so everyone could come and sing in the choir for the Sunday cantata, even people who could not read music. This was such a stunning success. In the beginning a hundred people came, and then sometimes we had up to four hundred people wanting to sing a Bach cantata. There were parents with their children and people from senior citizen homes who at one time had sung in choirs and now could not sing anymore. These Sunday services were full to the last seat, for church music was something attractive and important to many people. I did this for a very long time, over thirty years, and that same place has become a model for many other churches. Today you have, I would not say hundreds, but maybe forces of fifty trying to do the same thing in churches all over Germany.

SM: Why is Bach so compelling for you?

HR: Bach is a very important composer, one of the most important composers. To answer why, I would begin by saying that he has brought together

the music of Europe from centuries before him and molded that into a language which he then enriched with new musical ideas. For example, the form of the fugue, in that great way Bach composed fugues—the fugue has become prominent architecture in music only because of Bach's fugues.

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I think another reason why Bach is so important is that he has always influenced composers after him. This started with his sons, of course, but it went on with music and musicians like Mozart. Mozart's *Requiem* or *Mass in*

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c Minor would not have been possible without Bach. Mozart wrote in his letters that he got to know the fugues of Bach and learned from them. This goes for Beethoven and especially for Mendelssohn and throughout the whole nineteenth century; they all admired him. And still, Krzysztof Penderecki, who is a close friend of mine, tells me that without Bach he would not have written his *St. Luke Passion*. So Bach is a composer who, as no other composer, has influenced other composers.

SM: You mentioned that in the Kantatengottesdienst anyone could come and sing Bach. What are some ways conductors and particularly church musicians can make Bach's music accessible to amateur musicians?

HR: In that choir, of course, we had people from my own choir—experienced people who could sing the music so that the others heard it over and over and could join them. I also found it important to explain to people, especially to people who are not professional musicians, what this music means—the background, what Bach wants to express, etc. If you do that, the musicians are so much more interested and want to be part of the music-making. Bach's music is, in the deepest possible meaning of the word, enriching. For people not just to listen to a cantata but to be part of the performing forces is very enriching.

SM: How do the different voices (soloists) play their roles in Bach's works?

HR: In the tradition of European church music since the sixteenth century, the bass was usually the voice of Christ. Bach took up this tradition, so the words of Christ in the passions and in many cantatas are in the bass range. In Gregorian chant-type passions, the evangelist was always the tenor part—another tradition Bach followed. The contralto had the role of the human being asking for mercy—observing God's grace. The soprano usually represents the idea of the soul trying to be the bride of the bridegroom Jesus. In Cantata 140, there's a dialogue between the soul (soprano) and Jesus (bass).

SM: Which would you say is more important—Bach's choral music or his instrumental music?

HR: Well, of course, his instrumental music is great, but Bach was always

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primarily a church musician. Other than five years in Cöthen, he was always in the service of the church, which says very clearly that Bach wanted to work as a church musician. He could have gone from Cöthen to the opera house in Dresden and made a big career there, but he wanted to pursue a profession in church music and ended up in Leipzig. His productivity in his early years there was outstanding—he wrote a cantata for every Sunday for three years. In order to compose cantatas for every Sunday, you must have an absolute will to do it. Otherwise, it would be much easier to use cantatas from other composers. But Bach wanted to compose them; and even in his second year he composed chorale cantatas, pursuing this idea that the chorale is property of the congregation, using the chorale as a foundation for church music.

SM: Why do you think Bach used chorales in his compositions more than his contemporaries did?

HR: Telemann was not a church musician in the way that Bach was throughout his life. The chorales were for Bach something of utmost importance because they were part of the church service. Ever since Bach and Luther, a church service couldn't happen without a chorale. That is, by singing the chorales, the congregation is participating in the service, not just sitting there and listening but being part of it. I think this is central for the Lutheran idea of faith and also for the church service. It's not only the minister preaching and telling the people what they should do, but also the congregation responding to that. And I think Bach knew that, of course. He wrote many organ chorales, from the short ones in the *Orgelbüchlein* to the great pieces of the *Organ Mass*. The chorale was very important to him. I also think that Bach was aware of the fact that the chorale gave him an opportunity to be connected with the simple people of the church. They were not educated, but they understood the chorales because they sang them every Sunday in the church; and these people went to church, all of them, every Sunday, and also on many feast days of the church. And they knew all these chorales by memory.

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Many of them could not read music but they knew them by memory. So when chorales came up in these cantatas, the congregation got to be part of them. How wonderful! This music is not something exotic—strange music coming from the balcony—but something they knew, something they could

sing. They did not sing during the performance, but they knew them.

SM: What is your favorite chorale?

HR: Maybe this one from the *St. John Passion*, “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein,” but there are so many good chorales.

SM: At what point in your career did educating people—particularly young people—about Bach’s music become a focus for you?

HR: Conducting is also teaching. From the very beginning, a conductor must tell the chorus and orchestra how to perform the music and so must also tell them why. A good conductor will not keep his knowledge to himself but will pass it on to the performers. I was teaching when I still was quite young in Berlin at the church music school in Spandau. Later I taught for many years at the State Music Academy in Frankfurt. Then I founded the Bachakademie in Stuttgart, and since that time I have taught there. The Oregon Bach Festival has been the most important in this country. We have hosted young conductors here for many years and from all over the world. The influence on these conductors is quite strong, and they will not forget these experiences.

SM: Why should pastors engage Bach in their preaching or in their congregations?

HR: Bach has preserved the heritage of the Christian faith of centuries in Europe and has put that faith into his art and music. This is clear on a general level, like recognizing that the *Mass in B Minor* is a wonderful piece, but this is also clear in many details which can be quite personal for the listener. Some of Bach’s thoughts are so contemporary and applicable to twenty-first century contexts. It seems that

he understood certain basic human problems, and it’s not only that he understood them but wanted to offer possible solutions. Take the *St. Matthew Passion*, for example. Here Bach composed the wonderful aria “Erbarme dich,” which comes after the denial of Peter. You can think of this denial as

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saying “no” to someone or something that you really believe in. This reality is very contemporary, something which happens to every person. Then when the moment comes where you are stuck with this, to whom do you turn? Bach says “Erbarme dich,” and you must turn to the Lord. You understand, of course, that this is only one example. I find this hundreds of times in Bach’s music.

Something else to mention is this: isn’t it incredible that Bach, in the story of the passion (*St. John*), points to the resurrection without it being said by the narrator? This connection of words, “Jesu, der du warest tot” (Jesus, you who were dead) following “und neiget das Haupt und verschied” (and he bowed his head and died), is an intended contrast. The question whether you believe in the resurrection yourself is something very personal; you cannot force people to believe that. But isn’t it great that we have a composer for whom there is no doubt about his faith? We go from “and he gave up his spirit” to “Jesus, you *have*

been dead.” Encouraging faith in people can be a wonderful thing because it always contains hope. And with Bach we have someone who just told us about this faith, which can reach you on a different level from a minister guaranteeing this with his words. The final chorale in the *St. John Passion* is also a prime example and perhaps the most moving example pointing to the resurrection. “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein” (Ah, Lord, let your dear angel) [to the tune of *Herzlich Lieb*] asks for angels to bear the body away after death, to wait in peace until the day when Christ will awaken it. This chorale is a common request for funerals in Germany. A dying person always wants this chorale.

SM: Often it seems that Bach goes beyond text-painting—that the text is really the center for him. Why do you think that is?

HR: Bach thought that he should do the same thing with his music that the minister did with his sermon. Take the example of the *Orgelbüchlein* [a collection of chorales composed for organ]. There he wrote, “Dem höchsten Gott allein zu Ehren, dem Nächsten, draus sich zu belehren.” “To the praise of God above and to teach the next [student] so that he may learn.” This is the purpose of Bach’s music. *LF*

SALLY MESSNER is a professional soloist and church musician in Minneapolis.

Your Hymnist:

WILFRED (WILLIE) KARSTEN is the Pastor at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Moline, Illinois. This hymn was written for the 2000 LCMS Eastern District convention.