

Helmuth Rilling
May 29, 1933–February 11, 2026

What to do for the holidays? For aspiring musicians, there's no question: Make music together. But how, where, and what? It must have been like this at the end of 1953. The family of a fellow student owned a weekend house in a small village near Urach called Gächingen. They drove there, in the Swabian Jura, at the beginning of January. Those who played instruments brought them and the others sang. They performed the product of their week of work in the village church. For the sake of simplicity, the troupe called itself the "Gächinger Kantorei." During rehearsals, one Helmuth Rilling, twenty years old, made a name for himself as conductor. The son of a well-known Stuttgart choir director stood out with his indefatigable rehearsals, instilling his fellow students with his personal aspiration for perfection.

Thus, in an environment shaped by young people, the starting shot for an unprecedented success story resounded in January, 1954. Rilling studied music education as well as organ and learned to build organs from Walcker, in Ludwigsburg. He earned a bit of money from South German Radio, pulling stops for an organ recording. This was how the inquisitive student met Fernando Germani, the famous organist of St. Peter's Basilica, who invited him to study in Rome. Later, the Swabian protestant told of the mischievous delight he had when playing Max Reger's fantasy on "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" inside the lion's den, as it were!

Even though he recorded a few records of organ music, Rilling's instrument remained the Gächinger Kantorei. With audacious programs spanning the breadth of choral-music history, including numerous premiere performances, it made a name for itself. Most of the singers had studied singing or were at least talented musicians. The choir sounded correspondingly professional and could work with professional speed and competence. In addition to his work with the Gächinger, Rilling assumed the cantorate at the rebuilt Stuttgart Memorial Church. (The radial pedalboard of its organ still bears witness to his organistic experience.) Here the ambitious musician worked with dedicated amateurs who signed on to his aesthetic ideals and strove to present the music they performed at the highest level they could.

The pedagogical abilities of this extraordinary musician were quickly recognized elsewhere. Via the church-music school in Spandau, he came to the music conservatory in Frankfurt, where he established the first choral-conducting program in a German University. At the same time, he took over the Frankfurter Kantorei from Kurt Thomas, directing it until 1981.

A chance meeting in 1969 with an American music professor, Royce Saltzman, of the University of Oregon, led Rilling to the USA a year later. An organ course at Royce's school in Eugene was to give rise to the "Oregon Bach Festival," which still prospers today. Of course, Rilling had already been involved with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The first performances of the Mass in B minor with the Gächinger in 1969 impelled him increasingly toward the works of the *Thomaskantor*. The commission by a Munich record company to record rarely heard cantatas expanded into a recording of all the sacred cantatas that was to conclude in 1985 and is now distributed by Friedrich Hänssler and his publishing house in Neuhausen.

Helmuth Rilling was a meticulous person. Many questions of philology and performance practice arose in connection with his Bach activities, and without hesitation he turned to the most renowned Bach scholars. Not wanting to keep to himself that which he had learned, he shared it with the public. To that end, Rilling transplanted to Stuttgart the system that had been successfully developed and tested in Eugene. In 1979 this summer university in the center of the state capital began offering education and insights.

Enthusiastic young people made a pilgrimage in droves to the Hospitalhof campus, learning and rehearsing works under the guidance of well-known teachers. They performed them each afternoon, after the academy director had explained the composition to the audience in a pre-concert lecture with musical examples.

The next step was to institutionalize this work: In 1981, Rilling and his right-hand man, Andreas Keller, founded its International Bach Academy, Stuttgart. Music festivals with spectacular projects grew from the summer academies. The Bach anniversary year of 1985 yielded the *Requiem of Reconciliation*, in 1995 came four commissioned works, then the *Passion 2000*, and subsequently the founding of the "Festival Ensemble" for young musicians. A complete CD recording (1996–2000) of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, produced to the Bach Academy's high standard of quality, should also be mentioned.

The Gächinger had become a "brand" years earlier. Their dedicated concert series in Stuttgart electrified the audiences, while the most renowned orchestras, including those in Berlin, Vienna, and New York, engaged the choir and its conductor. Rilling had a special relationship with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. He was the first German conductor to lead this remarkable ensemble, and his choir always came with him. All those who were there found these repeated concert series to be inspiring experiences in German-Jewish understanding and reconciliation.

During the difficult years of Germany's division, Rilling served as deputy chairman for the New Bach Society from 1978 to 1990. After the Wall opened, he assumed the role of chairman until 1996, skillfully overcoming barriers with optimistic pragmatism and wise personnel choices, and bringing together Bach lovers from East and West.

Helmuth Rilling, who recently died in his 93^d year, cared deeply for people. He took his musicians seriously and had great confidence in their abilities and creativity. His authority was of a professional nature, with his rehearsal work—characterized by humor and serenity on one hand, discipline and high expectations on the other—and his animated conducting that radiated enthusiasm and spontaneity. The performance was always the goal—the concert, the moment in which the music touches an audience and strives to engage it. This was true whether in Stuttgart or Milan, Madrid or Tokyo, and above all in Eastern Europe, whose political systems Rilling sought to contextualize with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. All this earned the conductor, who was honored and received awards many times, monikers such as "Bach's Pope" or "Bach's Ambassador."

Most importantly, he managed to gain the lasting support of many people for his ideas and efforts. He was thankful and glad that the Bach Academy—after a difficult transition—has been thriving for several years and is at the forefront of Bach interpretation internationally under the leadership of Hans-Christoph Rademann.

Creating joy through music is one side of this coin, and “Thinking about Music”—the long-time motto of the Stuttgart Bach Academy—is the other. Helmuth Rilling's dynamic work, which lasted more than half a century, now culminates in deep gratitude: How wonderful to have experienced him, to have had him!

Dr. Andreas Bomba

Andreas Bomba is connected to the Bach Academy in many ways. As a dramaturge, he was involved in many projects, including the complete CD recording of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach (*Edition Bachakademie*). From 2006 to 2025 he served as artistic director of the Ansbach *Bachwoche*. In 2025 the board of directors of the *Neue Bachgesellschaft* elected him as their new chairman.

Translated by Gordon Paine, emeritus professor of Music at California State University, Fullerton, and Helmuth Rilling's assistant at the Oregon Bach Festival from 1977 to 1999.