

Helmuth Rilling

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, May 16, 2008

Q You have conducted several MN choirs during your career including VocalEssence, and St. Olaf and of course the MN Chorale. How did this long association with Minnesota choirs begin?

A As usual, these connections begin through people. I think the first person inviting me to this area of your country was Kenneth Jennings. He brought me to St. Olaf many years ago – maybe 30 years ago – and I remember enjoying very much working with the young people there.

Q We interviewed him on his 83rd birthday. MN is known for excellence in choral music. We have strong Scandinavian and German roots, in particular. What do you think helped to make this area so rich in excellent choral music?

A MN is known worldwide I could say for its excellence and its special interest in choral music. Where does that come from? I think if you look back, then, it must have been the immigrants who came here with their traditions. The Scandinavians have wonderful choral traditions. The Germans have, of course, a lot of heritage. And they brought it here and obviously they liked it so much here that it became a strong cultural influence.

Q That's very true. MN was host to the Sixth World Choral Symposium in 2002, the first time that it had been held in the US. Were you here for that event?

A I was here for that wonderful symposium and due to the worldwide recognition of the choral music here in this state, it was held here and it was an excellent festival. And it was excellent because you have so many good choirs yourself here. It was also excellent because you have very good venues – churches, halls. And I think it was also especially fantastic because Philip Brunelle is such a wonderful organizer. He put that thing together. It was just great.

Q That's certainly true. As a conductor you have devoted much of your career to choral music. What, specifically, about choral music has always attracted you?

A Choral music is a very special art because two things come together: a text and music. And out of both comes something new and I think very important. And then, choral music has also this wonderful possibility to bring together professionals and non-professionals – they can make music together. And I think this is a very important bridge in the cultural life of our times.

Q That's a good point. As a follow up, talk about the role of the professional singer and the good volunteer singer.

A Of course as a conductor, you always enjoy a good professional singer, who can do all the technical difficult things well. And maybe a non-professional will not be able to do that right away and you have to teach him. But both have their advantages and I hope that the professional always has the enthusiasm of the non-professional.

Q Music has an ability to connect and span political, ethnic and religious differences. I understand that you were the first German conductor to conduct the Israeli Philharmonic following WWII. Talk about that experience and how it impacted you as a conductor.

A Music can be a bridge because it's understood by many different people. And this has helped me in my career working together with completely different people. I was in Israel, conducting the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra together with my German choir. And we built bridges. I did the same in South America and especially in the former Soviet bloc countries, where we went from Western Europe with our group and worked together with the people there.

Q You've conducted numerous choirs, both in Europe and the US. Can you talk about any differences between the choral traditions and choral technique, if you will, in northern Europe compared to what you see in the Midwestern US or out in Oregon?

A When I was a young person, I remember that I saw big differences between choirs coming from Europe and choirs from the US or Canada. These differences mostly came from the national backgrounds – a Russian choir, a Scandinavian choir, a German choir, or an Italian choir – they would just sound differently. And here it was completely different again. But I have seen over the years that these differences have not disappeared, but they have become minor; the level of how to perform a certain piece or a given period of music has become common knowledge. And these many exchanges, which I like very much with workshops or symposiums, international exchanges have helped a lot in this understanding.

Q Most adult singers that I have come into contact with began their singing at a young age through some formative experience as a child. How do you think we can instill the love of singing in future generations? What are some of the important things we should do?

A I think the important carriers for that will always be the same. First of all, the family: do the parents sing with their children? Then of course the church. This can be a great help if there is a youth choir in a church. And, of course, the schools, and I hope that in your schools the teachers still sing with their people. From that background they will come to singing in choirs.

Q What is the current situation in schools in Germany? Is music still a strong part of the German school system?

A The German school system still provides a lot of music in the schools. But also we are fighting for preserving that advantage, which we consider to be an advantage. And of course you always have also opinions that this is too much, taking away too much time from the poor children. But I think they need that time and they will be better people when they sing.

Q There's no Bach on the program tonight, but you are well known as somebody who has devoted a lot of his career to the music of Bach. What is it about Bach that has inspired you for 50 years or more?

A Bach certainly is one of the greatest composers and especially in regards to choral music one of the most important. His sacred music is just outstanding and it is fulfilling and enriching for all those people who have a chance to perform that music.

Q You are frequently in a situation where you are conducting a performance in which the choir has been prepared by somebody else in advance, in this case Kathy Romey. How do you and that conductor discuss artistic interpretation and other matters prior to your arriving here so that the choir is prepared in a way that you can easily work with and then take into the performance?

A Of course the situation with Kathy Romey is ideal because she is a student of mine, she is also working at the Oregon Bach Festival, preparing the choruses there, and we are friends since a very long time. So there it is easy. In other situations the choir conductors who have to prepare us before scores with annotations and of course from my Bach Akademie we send them to them and sometimes there are questions, they are writing mails and I try to explain what I want to do. Usually it works and the very few times when there are problems, and you have to take the time and set up an extra rehearsal.

Q When you have the opportunity to audition and form your own choir, what particular qualities are you looking for in your singers?

A Well of course you have to look at the voice – what kind of voices you will get. I think its always better for a choir if the voices are not too big, so they can blend with other voices, they have not too much vibrato again because otherwise you will hear these voices alone. I'm looking also for qualities of sight-reading, I want the choir singers to be quick so we do not need too much time for basic rehearsals. But I'm also looking for one thing which I think is very important: this is the love for the music, the enthusiasm to perform it.

Q If you were a mentor or a teacher to an aspiring choral conductor today, what type of advice would you give them?

A Well, I've general advice that you have to study very much and to work hard, getting to know your scores, prepare them well. You should not come up to a rehearsal without knowing yourself the score very well. But in a more general way I think it's very important that a conductor can convey his love for music, his joy of making the music, to his groups. Then they will bring it to the audience and this is the most important.

Q You conducted VocalEssence a few years ago. Tell me what you did with VocalEssence and how that MN connection came to be.

A Well, I know Philip Brunelle and I regard him to be a wonderful musician, a very versatile musician with a strong accent on contemporary music and I think this is very good and absolutely necessary. I enjoyed very much working with his group, they're good singers. They're very nice people – I remember that very well – and they have that enthusiasm for music. You could feel already in rehearsals but especially in performance, their joy of making music.

Q I heard one story from Bob Berglund, who I believe had an occasion to study with you some years back; it was kind of a fun story. He talked about taking long walks,

which you would lay the score down and then practice conducting when you walked. Is that one of the ways that you study a score?

A I think for every conductor there must be a way how to concentrate to learn the scores, because having the scores in your head is something which is important. It helps you a lot in rehearsals and especially in performance. So I developed as a young person a way of walking in the woods and putting the score in some bush, walking away so if I would not remember I would have to return to that bush. It is just a small story. One of the many possible stories how to concentrate to learn a score.

Q One last question: is there any particular experience you've had with choral music either in the US or Europe or wherever, that is among the most powerful and memorable experiences that you have had in your career?

A Of course there are some stories where music had a special quality. One is from Israel, when I was there for the first time and the connection between the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and my German chorus at that time was not easy. And then we had an evening in Jerusalem where the state president came to the concert. This meant that the orchestra had to play the national anthem. They asked me to conduct it and when I got the score I thought, well we have the choir. The choir could sing that anthem. And so we learned it, and at the evening when Golda Meir, the state president, came in and I started conducting the national anthem, the choir stood up and sang. And the Israeli orchestral musicians could not go on playing; they were crying, seeing a German chorus standing behind them and singing their national anthem, in their language. One of the most moving moments of my life.