



SARA RILLING WITH HER FATHER

A Maestro's Life Story

SARA RILLING FINDS PURPOSE WRITING ABOUT HER FAMOUS FATHER By Suzi Steffen

As Sara Rilling — musician, writer, daughter of OBF co-founder Helmuth Rilling — entered her mid-30s, she started thinking about her life. Every day since she was a young girl, she'd written in her diary about what happened, what she was thinking, what was going on.

At the same time, Maestro Helmuth, via the German version of Wikipedia, realized that people in his home country knew about his accomplishments — the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart, the Gächlinger Kantorei and much more — but little about his work in Eugene. People in Eugene, and the rest of the U.S., might know about his Bach Festival and Carnegie Hall (and Grammy-winning) exploits, but little about his work in Japan. Etcetera. No one place listed everything or brought it all together.

So, one day, the man himself asked his older daughter if she would be willing to write the biography. “I thought always that I wanted to write a book about my father,” Rilling says by phone from Germany. “But then it was him who asked me!”

They were in Eugene in 2005 when Helmuth made the request, and Sara Rilling immediately got to work.

Her daily diaries might have helped with a little of the research, she says, but she was born when he was 50 and had already established many of the events and groups for

Helmuth Rilling in May 2008, in Europe, and translated by Gordon Paine into English in time for the middle of last year's festival.

Some of the translation sounds charmingly literal or direct, and infelicitous turns of phrase show up here and there. The early parts of the book clunk along a bit as Sara Rilling attempts to weave in the stories of Helmuth's father and mother, the sounds of a concert Helmuth conducted in Israel and information about WWII, but the prose quickly evens out as the story of Helmuth's career begins to unfold.

For Bach Fest enthusiasts, Sara Rilling's biography does indeed illuminate Helmuth's background and life in music.

Those who read lives of composers could easily draw parallels between Helmuth's life and that of Haydn, perhaps, or even Bach himself. Helmuth Rilling's mother died just after he was born, and the family had little money. His musical talent meant that he moved away from his family when he was teenager, and as a young adult he became the cantor at a church in Stuttgart (among his many other appointments).

Though Sara Rilling limns a scene familiar to anyone who's experienced church politics — that is, a more conservative pastor butting heads with a young, flexible, energetic music director — she also shows how her father overcame restrictions to emerge as an organ player and

to believe like he does. He's very humble in believing.”

She also writes about, and talks about, her father's ability to discuss the music he conducts. “He always speaks without paper, and it seems like he just says what comes to his mind — but he prepared it in his head,” she says. Though he's conducted Bach's B Minor Mass hundreds of times, Sara Rilling says admiringly that every time he does a “lecture concert” about the Mass, he revises his talk. “He always finds new things in the music,” she says.

Those in Eugene may find particular interest more than halfway through the book, when the author addresses the Bach Festival and how Helmuth Rilling and Royce Saltzman met and created this thing that started out small but grew to international acclaim.

Sara Rilling, of course, grew up partly in Eugene, and she has memories to spare about everything from the Oregon Country Fair (she calls it one of her favorite things about Eugene) to Hendricks Park, which is close to the house where the Rillings stay during the festival. “I like the deer which come to our garden, and I like all of the great animals,” she says.

One of the funnier times she remembers happened during an extra-festival experience. The family decided to go camping, and Helmuth was driving in a forested area. Not surprisingly, he was speeding, and a police car made a quick U-turn and put on the sirens. When Helmuth stopped, the officer asked for his name and driver's license. “Helmuth pretended that he did not understand what the man said,” Sara Rilling says. And he didn't have a driver's license with him. But quick thinking saved the day: “He had a license for his glasses. The policeman said oh, he had never seen a German driver's license. And then we drove on.”

Sara Rilling laughs about that, but some of Helmuth's memories brought her to tears as well as laughter. The process of interviewing her father deepened her relationship with him. “It became much more strong and more connected,” she says.

Sara Rilling works as a freelance musician, but she also wants to write more. “I don't have a project yet,” she says. “I could write something about Venezuela, or about my mother's family.” But for now, she says, “I write my diary.” ♦

‘I thought always that I wanted to write a book about my father.’

which he became famous. So she had to interview Helmuth — “many times, many times,” she says — along with a variety of other people to help reconstruct the life of a man who was a young child during WWII and who grew up trying to figure out how to bridge cultural gaps between his West Germany and Bach fans across the Iron Curtain in East Germany.

The book straightforwardly recounts the chronology of Helmuth Rilling's life. Of course, Sara Rilling wrote the original in German. The book was published as *Mein Vater*,

conductor of skill.

“Life was very different when my father was young,” she says. “It was more strict.”

Anyone watching Helmuth Rilling in the OBF's marvelous Discovery Series — *Gesprächskonzert*, German for “discussion” or “lecture” concert, and Sara writes that Helmuth invented both the term and the practice — over several years understands that part of his interest in Bach comes from a heartfelt religious practice. “He has it deep inside,” Sara Rilling says, “but he never forces somebody