Remembering Wilbur Held
1914–2015
— By Nancy M. Raabe

Wilbur Held, composer, teacher, and servant “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:28), died on March 24, 2015, in Claremont, California, a few months shy of his 101st birthday. A deeply thoughtful and meticulous musician, Held crafted elegant preludes, postludes, and hymn settings that remain central to the repertoire of church organists around the globe. Substantial yet accessible, his music reveals the truths of Scripture in the shape of a line, the content of a progression, the evolution of emphasis than originality. Typical was his claim, really, for originality. Everybody’s had it’s just the starting phrase that is distinctive. As the piece develops you can kind of railroad in that starting phrase or sequence." Held has always been deferential about his music, even with the success it has enjoyed. “I hope the presence of this instrument has been an important factor in my happiness at the farm at Christmas time,” he once said, “and Dad takes them over to the church and says, ‘And what will you play?’ Well, how about page 34 in the Gleason book?”

Students and colleagues urged him to submit the collection for publication, and to his surprise it was accepted. This led to putting the finishing touches on pieces first and lots thrown away. Finally, I came up with a pattern that saved me.” Held has said that the gestation of every piece starts with an idea. ‘I’ll take the hymn and look for distinctive lines in the melody that could be worked into a kind of sequence that would indicate the piece,” he said. ‘Often there’s a phrase that repeats itself, or maybe it’s just the starting phrase that is distinctive. As the piece develops you can kind of railroad in that starting phrase or sequence.”

In a letter last year to Manor executives about the organ in high school, going on to attend the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago where he studied organ and began to develop his compositional voice. A conscientious objector, Held spent years of the final years of World War II cooking food without vitamins for a path-breaking project on nutrition now known as the Minnesota Semi-Starvation Experiment. His findings were later published as The Biology of Human Starvation.

In 1946 Held was named professor of organ at the Ohio State University for what became a 30-year tenure. His organ studio grew quickly. Former students recall him as detailed and thorough, patient and kind. Hospitality was the order of the day as Held and his wife, artist Virginia Held, frequently hosted organ and began to develop his compositional voice. A conscientious objector, Held spent years of the final years of World War II cooking food without vitamins for a path-breaking project on nutrition now known as the Minnesota Semi-Starvation Experiment. His findings were later published as The Biology of Human Starvation.

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After years of summer study in liturgy and hynology at Union Theological Seminary, Held was able to significantly expand the church music program at OSU. Sadly, both the organ and church music degrees were phased out after his retirement.

In a letter last year to Manor executives urging much-needed renovation, Held included the poignant note that “the presence of this instrument has been an important factor in my happiness at the farm at Christmas time.” When Morn- ing Golds the Skies” in New Every Morn- ing, “Well, it has some good measures.”

Above: Wilbur Held, ca. 1946
Left: Nancy Raabe and Wilbur Held

The Helds then moved to Southern California. In 1997, following Virginia’s death, Wilbur moved into the Claremont Manor, a retirement community in that college town. He was belov’d by all for his warmth and his delightful sense of humor. A few years ago the list of his “Responses” once again made the rounds. They include: “Preferred: Aye, aye; Nay, nay; Well, well (not Biblical). Acceptable: Piffle, Phay, Heavens above; Goodness gracious. Questionable: Fiddlesticks, Shoot, Holy Moses (Moley Hoses is not quite so bad). Absolutely forbidden: Gosh, Darn, Heck, What the Devil, Holy Smoke, Ye gods (better with ‘and little fishes’).”

Visitors to Held’s apartment were often regaled with stories about his extensive collection of Southern California Cali- ne on Old Hundredth for the final years of World War II cooking food without vitamins for a path-breaking project on nutrition now known as the Minnesota Semi-Starvation Experiment. His findings were later published as The Biology of Human Starvation. Visitors to Held’s apartment were often regaled with stories about his extensive collection of Southern California Cali- ne on Old Hundredth for the final years of World War II cooking food without vitamins for a path-breaking project on nutrition now known as the Minnesota Semi-Starvation Experiment. His findings were later published as The Biology of Human Starvation.

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