

Remembering Wilbur Held

1914–2015 ————— By Nancy M. Raabe

Wilbur Held, composer, teacher, and servant “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29), 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 an idea across a work, and in the attitude of humility they embody. His musical language reaches back through the centuries and brings those influences to bear in a style that is distinctively of our time.

Published mostly in seasonal or themed collections, Held’s music is also widely popular for its appeal to beginning- to intermediate-level players. “Wilbur Held makes organists of even moderate ability sound good,” an admirer recently noted. “And he also turns even garden-variety hymn tunes into great musical settings.”

Held’s first collection, the still-popular *Nativity Suite*, was conceived for his students at the Ohio State University as a colorful alternative to the dreary exercises in common organ methods of the day. “I thought of these kids going back to 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 a demand for more, and his catalogue grew rapidly over the next half-century.

His final collection, *New Every Morning*, was released in 2014 by his longtime publisher, MorningStar Music Publishers.

Held’s final composition is a prelude on OLD HUNDREDTH for the *Concordia Hymn Prelude Library’s* Volume 8 (forthcoming in December), an assignment that proved to be particularly challenging. “My chief headache these days is OLD HUNDREDTH,” he wrote in a July 2014 letter, as plans for his 100th birthday party the following month were in full swing. (He did not recognize the coincidence of the assignment and his approaching milestone until that was pointed out.) “I thought I had a pretty good first page, but then a blank brain after that 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 some 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.” Held has always been deferential about his music, even with all the success it has enjoyed. “I hope there’s something kind of original about what I’ve done,” he reflected two years ago. “But I don’t think I have much of a claim, really, for originality. Everybody’s done what I’ve done. It’s more a matter of emphasis than originality.” Typical was his response to praise for “When Morning Gilds the Skies” in *New Every Morning*: “Well, it has some good measures.”



Above: Wilbur Held, ca. 1946



Left: Nancy Raabe and Wilbur Held

Wilbur Held was born on August 20, 1914, in Des Plaines, Illinois. He studied piano as a youngster and became serious 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 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. Its 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 students in their gracious home.

After years of summer study in liturgy and hymnology 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.

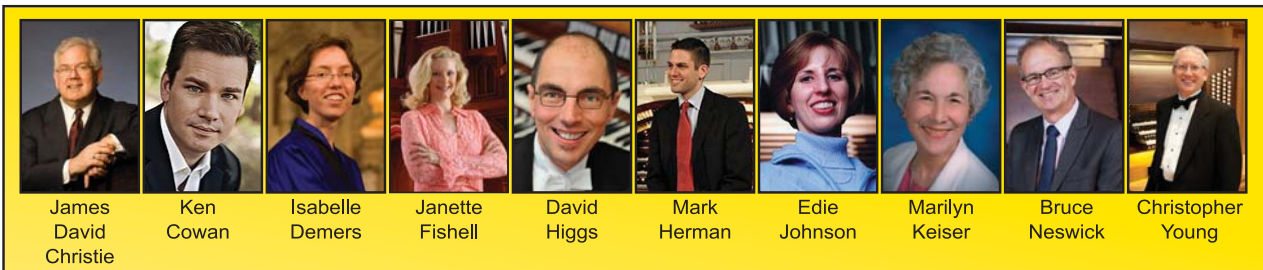
The Helds then moved to Southern California. In 1997, following Virginia’s death, Wilbur moved into the Claremont Manor, a retirement community in that college town. He was beloved by all for his warmth and his delightful sense of humor. A few years ago the list of his “Responses” once again made the rounds. They include: “Preferred: Aye, aye; Nay, nay; Well, well (not Biblical). Acceptable: Piffle, Pshaw, 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 Caliente pottery, crafted in the 1930s and 1940s and distinguished by warm glazes and flowing lines. The line had fallen into obscurity at the time Wilbur and Virginia stumbled upon it. They were captivated and eventually devised an intricate cataloguing system for their ever-growing trove. With extensive annotations, the catalogue was published as *Collectable Caliente Pottery* in 1987 with an updated edition in 1997. Through their efforts the couple’s painstaking work restored public awareness to this important part of California’s artistic heritage.

A few years before Held moved in, the Claremont Manor had acquired a Rodgers organ for its main gathering space. 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 Manor.” Privately, the organ allowed Held to put the finishing touches on pieces first drafted on his digital piano. Publicly, he was at the organ for Wednesday Vespers services nearly every Wednesday and gave periodic recitals, including one to mark his 95th birthday. But most importantly for that aging community, Held played for virtually all memorial services, most recently in February.

There is a familiar saying around the Manor that has long rung true: “First you go to the hospital, then you go to the Care Center, and then Wilbur gets you.” Now, who gets Wilbur? None other than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for the long and fruitful life of Wilbur Held, and for a musical legacy that will endure. ■

Nancy M. Raabe is an associate in ministry at Luther Memorial Church, Madison, Wisconsin, and an author, worship leader, and composer of church music.



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