**A Musical Blessing from God**

*Organist Dolly Kepner retires after decades at the Covenant organ*

Elma “Dolly’’ Harnish was only 6 years old when she scooted up to the keyboard of her parents’ player piano to practice music lessons assigned by a teacher from Covenant United Brethren in Christ Church.

The connection between Dolly and the keys beneath her fingers was immediate and enduring. She would later attend and join what is now Covenant United Methodist Church. In the meantime, Dolly continued to study piano before expanding her instrumental repertoire to the organ.

Her extraordinary music ministry at Covenant spans 70 years, Dolly serving as assistant organist and children’s choir director before becoming organist. Now, after thousands of worship services, funerals, weddings and choir rehearsals, Dolly Harnish Kepner is closing her sheet music and packing up her organ shoes.

Glaucoma has claimed the sight in her left eye, and there have been concerns with her right. “How many 91-year-old blind organists are there?’’ she asked. “If I could have kept my sight, I would probably do it forever.’’

Dolly’s musical gifts remain a source of joy, comfort and inspiration to generations of Covenant members and friends. That is why the church family that years ago established the Dolly Kepner Organ Fund in her honor will come together August 28 to again celebrate the organist who has spent a lifetime glorifying God with her every touch of key and pedal.

**The prelude**

The younger of two daughters, Covenant’s organist-to-be was named after her mother, Elma, but quickly answered to “Dolly.’’ She was reared in the Mennonite faith and lived for 72 years in the big white house that fronted the dairy firm her father, Christian, operated in New Danville. Among his milk customers were Wissler family members actively involved in the life of Covenant.

Dolly’s first piano teacher, Pauline Wissler, was the sister-in-law of Covenant organist Mildred Wissler. Together, the women held annual music recitals at the former Troup Music Hall downtown. Newspaper articles dating to 1936 listed Dolly and future husband, Don Kepner, among the young performers. One of their pieces was a duet, “March of the Wee Folk.’’ Of the Jessie Gaynor piece, Dolly said, “I can play it yet.’’

She continued with formal piano instruction, Dolly’s parents buying her a Kimball baby grand piano when she was 8. Hymns and classical music were lesson staples; “What a Friend We Have in Jesus’’ and “Short’nin’ Bread’’ were favorites. As her piano abilities advanced, Dolly worked with new teachers including Lancaster’s well-known Earle Echternach. He required prospective students to audition, and Dolly made the cut.

As a teenager, she played the piano for Sunday School kindergartners and the Covenant Girls Guild, in which she became a regular. Relationships there – included those with two future Kepner sisters-in-law -- fostered her eventual decision to join Covenant in 1946. During those early years at Covenant, Dolly also shared her talents on the marimba. Who knew?

Dolly was 18 and teaching piano students of her own when Mildred Wissler urged her to start studying the organ. Dolly seized the opportunity that necessitated not only new teachers, but also learning the foot pedals, multiple keyboards, pipe registrations and finger lifts a well-played organ would require.

**The anthem**

In a short time, Dolly began to fill in as assistant organist for worship services. Her first wedding in the 1950’s was officiated by Dr. Harold Peiffer. Dolly remembers playing the “Bridal Chorus’’ at the planned start of 2 p.m. No one ventured down the aisle; unbeknownst to her the bridal party was waiting for a late attendant. The red-faced senior pastor fixed his gaze on the congregation as Dolly, grateful to be hidden in the organ pit, played Wagner’s familiar “Here Comes the Bride’’ processional -- over and over and over again.

“It was the most embarrassing thing,’’ she recalled, laughing but adding that it was also a lesson learned: “Never start playing till you’re told everybody is ready.’’

More opportunities opened up. Mildred Wissler asked Dolly to direct the children’s choirs. Reluctant because she lacked directing experience, Dolly nevertheless answered the call. As always, Mildred and Covenant had faith in her abilities, but also provided the instruction and training Dolly sought. Dolly went on to direct hundreds of young vocalists in the Cherub Choir, her children and grandchildren included, for 30 years and the Carol Choir for 15. In 1973 she succeeded Mildred as organist, a post Dolly’s mentor held for 52 years.

Dolly has served alongside seven senior pastors, always working to accommodate their varied music preferences. The Rev. Eugene Hostetter liked a “nice and peppy’’ hymn pace, Dolly said. She remembers watching him sing and move to the music like he wanted her to play even faster.

She regards Christmas Eve candlelight services as the most beautiful -- spiritually, musically and aesthetically. Of the countless sacred music selections she knows, literally by heart, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness’’ continues to speak clearly and profoundly to her.

It was the organ that provided therapy for Dolly when she was a caregiver for her husband and father. The time was prayerful, and the playing restorative. “I’d hide behind my music and play with tears,’’ she said.

Accompanying the Chancel Choir during the 35 years son Bill Kepner served as director was a gift. “I loved it,’’ Dolly said. She also treasured opportunities to play with Metropolitan Opera bass John Darrenkamp, Lancaster Symphony violinist John Hamilton and other soloists.

“Sunday mornings will never be the same not sitting on the organ bench.’’

**The postlude**

Dolly married her former piano partner, Don Kepner, in 1950. Together 54 years, they reared three children – Bill, Patty Willard and Cindy Dale. Musical talent has made its way through generations of Kepners, the family having grown to include seven grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

“My husband was supportive of me, which was wonderful,’’ Dolly said, remembering that Don, who died in 2004, drove her to church for Thursday night choir rehearsals and Saturday organ practices. He provided feedback on the worship services and music.

Despite the rehearsals, weddings and funerals plus decades of two services every Sunday, there was no skimping on time at home. Dolly always had roast beef, potatoes and, if her family was lucky, one of her scrumptious apple pies ready for a big dinner after church.

Dolly said she is indebted to Mildred Wissler for getting her into the Covenant music program. Being organist “was not a job,’’ she said. “I was so thrilled I could use my talent in my own church.’’

“Music,’’ she said, “was my life.’’

And to that, a grateful Covenant proclaims: “Amen!”

*-- Barbara Hough Huesken*

*Former Dolly Kepner piano student, Cherub and Carol choir member*