

IN MEMORIAM EDITH HO

**“You Will Not Have Time to Sit Down” – A Tribute to Friend and Mentor, Edith Ho.
–Mark Dwyer, Organist & Choirmaster, The Church of the Advent, Boston.**

The daughter of devout Seventh-Day Adventists, Edith June Ho was born in Canton China, on August 16, 1932. One of three children, Edith grew up during the troubled years of the Chinese Civil War and the rise of Communism. Perhaps as a result, Edith rarely spoke of her growing-up years. All three Ho siblings were able to immigrate to the United States. While still a teenager, Edith arrived in the US and studied for her first Bachelor's, in piano, from Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland, which she earned in 1958. Immediately afterwards, she began her long-time association with Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, earning a second Bachelor's in organ in 1962, a Master's in 1966, and additionally, an unfinished DMA, on which she worked until 1969.

As a protégé and prize organ pupil of Arthur Howes, Edith was strongly influenced by the Orgelbewegung. In these early years, Edith was a most persuasive player of Bach, and counted the Art of Fugue amongst her recital repertoire. It was natural that she should study in Germany, both with Helmut Walcha and Heinz Wunderlich, which led to scores of recitals across Europe, particularly in Germany and Holland.

Edith was a member of Arthur Howes's choir at Mount Calvary Church in Baltimore, where she had her first exposure to renaissance choral music amid a rather severe Anglo-Catholic musical aesthetic. In 1961, Charles Fisk's Andover Organ Company installed the all-mechanical two manual 36-stop Silbermann-inspired organ, an instrument that became seminal to Edith's development as a player.

Following a number of church and teaching positions in the early 1970s, in September of 1977 Edith was appointed Organist & Choirmaster at Boston's Church of the Advent. Edith's appointment seemed unlikely, to be sure, but the Advent has always attracted larger-than-life characters. In that regard, she was certainly equipped for the job.

Until the 1960s, the Advent had a typical parish boy choir, common for most Episcopal churches of the time. Organist-composer John Cook was hired with the idea that he could “save the boy choir,” but due to changing urban demographics and the demolition of Boston's residential West End, even Cook couldn't push that boulder uphill. By the time he left in 1968, Cook had established a new mixed choir, with female sopranos and altos joining the tenor and bass back rows of the by-then-defunct boy choir.

In 1968, Phillip Steinhaus arrived with auspicious plans for the music program. A fine player of both repertoire and service music, Steinhaus was also chorally accomplished, and gradually raised the standards and repertoire of his all-professional choir to new heights. Highlights of his tenure included concert presentations of both the Bach B minor Mass and Matthew Passion. Perhaps the apex of Steinhaus' Advent career was conducting Haydn's Lord Nelson Mass at the 1976 AGO National Convention. Much-beloved but plagued by personal and professional difficulties, Steinhaus departed in 1977. He left a fine legacy, but also a program that had stagnated somewhat. It proved a fertile field for the self-discipline of Edith Ho.

I first attended The Church of the Advent in September of 1981, and was, as so many have been, completely captivated by the place. The purity and discipline of the singing, the magical acoustic, and the cathedral-like tone of the 1936 Aeolian-Skinner, were all meticulously packaged in the transcendent liturgy. On any given “normal” Sunday, one might hear a complete Palestrina mass, motets, and recital-worthy organ repertoire for preludes and postludes. Feast Days were something else yet again! It became a place of pilgrimage during my school years. In 1989, I was fortunate to be hired by Edith as Associate Organist & Choirmaster. At about the same time, I purchased a beautiful brocaded wing-back chair at an irresistible bargain price. When telling Edith about it, she quipped: “I do not know why you bought that chair. Now that you are working for me, you will not have time to sit down!”

I soon discovered her to be a wonderful colleague, gentle mentor, and good friend. While Edith surely micromanaged many aspects of the music program, she was also glad to share and delegate. It became easy to trust and respect her, as she was scrupulously honest and completely direct. One always knew where one stood, and there was no passive-aggressive running of agendas. She held herself to the same high standard she expected of others. The respect one yielded to Edith was paid back in kind.

Edith had an old-school frugality in certain things. For example, she routinely saved envelopes and used the backs of them to write memos. One summer, my prankster baritone housemate and I started to save our own envelopes at home. By Christmastime, we had quite a stash, which we bundled up with string and wrapped beautifully in a large gift box. Let us just say that Edith was not amused! I hope she saw it as an act of love. But she did have a dry and most wonderfully sharp wit, as befitted her enormous intellect. One year at an Easter Vigil baptism, one baby in particular would not stop screaming. Edith leaned over and whispered: “Doesn’t that baby realize this is a Baptism, not a Circumcision?”

As time went on, my responsibilities increased, and Edith was able to make my position fulltime. She was always concerned not only for the welfare of musicians in her charge but of parishioners and friends as well. Never parading the fact, she regularly visited parishioners in the hospital. For years she had a student living in her house, who would cook and clean in exchange for room and board. Edith was forever sending checks to charities, arts organizations and others in need.

For all her organization and self-discipline—she meditated three times a day—neither her home nor her office would have been featured in House Beautiful. In the office: worn-out, second-hand furniture, piles of scores, a messy desk. In her small house: basically the same, plus a kitchen. I took no small comfort in the state of her desk when I compared it to my own.

Edith’s tunnel vision was both her great strength and a vulnerability. What concerned her most was the output and quality of the choir. Some questions were better left unasked. The best repertoire for a wedding? Without skipping a beat, Edith would reply: “A Renaissance mass setting!” Ask what new repertoire she was planning for this year’s Advent Carol Service? “Renaissance motets!” But over the years the choir’s repertoire expanded and became much more eclectic. During a particular rehearsal, she looked at me gleefully and said, “This is my first Sowerby, you know!” If her tastes weren’t exactly catholic, she was nevertheless passionate about the necessity of being exposed to all kinds of music. Edith regularly attended concerts of all sorts and conditions of music, and for almost four decades held a subscription to the Boston

Symphony Orchestra. She might have railed against Sibelius or Rachmaninoff, but she stayed and listened.

As a conductor, Edith's lack of showmanship and ego reflected a willingness to let the notes speak for themselves. She expected fastidious preparation and performance, and drew the best from those of us under her charge. And with age, she herself grew and became even better at her craft. Ultimately, many of us did more than we thought we might, not only because we respected her but because we loved her.

At age 75, Edith retired after 30 years of service. Her intellect and skill were as sharp as ever, but a heart condition forced the issue. Had her body allowed, she would have carried on. In retirement, she reinvented herself as the grande dame of the parish. She was always supportive of the work of the current Advent Choir. She rarely had an unkind or critical word, although we did develop a useful code. Following the Sunday Mass, if she asked me, "Do you like that piece?" I knew instantly that she did not. And only once do I recall a phone conversation in which I closed by saying as usual, "See you in church!" only for her to reply, "No, you will not." Why? "Because you are singing the Richard Rodney Bennett Missa Brevis, and I hate it!"

Edith's ashes will be interred in the Crypt chapel beneath the chancel, alongside those of her husband, Paul, former rectors and music directors, parishioners, and friends. While all of us will be consigned to history, and perhaps the stuff of story and legend, the legacy of Edith Ho — as musician and friend, standard-bearer and stalwart, companion and character — will loom large indeed, even at The Church of the Advent.

—Mark Dwyer

—Ross Wood, Associate Organist & Choirmaster (2001 – 2016), The Church of the Advent, Boston.

Edith Ho was, in her preferred language, *sui generis*. It was my honor to serve as associate musician during the last six years of her remarkable career as organist-choirmaster at Church of the Advent, three decades marked by consistently outstanding musical achievement. Please permit me to offer these reminiscences in a spirit of gratitude and affection.

Legendary for exacting standards long before my arrival in 2001, I approached my new position with three parts good oil of anticipation to one-part sharp vinegar of trepidation. There were certainly Sundays when the proportions were reversed, but in Edith I immediately found a colleague as supportive as she was demanding. If Mass had gone to her liking she was instantly there to compliment, to thank, and to encourage. "Ross, how do you do that? You are inhuman!" was Edith's highest praise.

Whenever Edith wished things might have gone differently, she invariably expressed her feelings in a manner that illuminated the path toward the goal. I treasure my collection of handwritten notes that had a way of finding their way under my office door for discovery on Tuesday mornings. "Hymn tempi much better now, after all the initial excitement — many thanks." "Your accompaniment of ___ excellent, especially for your first time out. Have you started looking at Judith Weir's 'Ascending Into Heaven' yet? She'll be here when we perform it." "Your beat pattern could be more precise, so the choir knows when to sing and stays together across sides. I can show you if you like."

Concluding Franck's Fantaisie in A as an appropriately festive prelude (thought I) one Christ the King Sunday, just before the doors opened for the hymn in procession Edith stage-whispered, exactly as Mrs. Danvers might to Rebecca at that high open window: "Do you *like* that piece?" Note to self: finally answer the question should we meet again.

It was impossible not to admire the single-minded passion, devotion, and tenacity Edith lavished upon her music-making. A very colorful character who happened to see the world largely in black-and-white, I couldn't help but envy her such a prodigious gift of certainty. Edith always knew exactly what she wanted and gave the pursuit of excellence her all. Her journey out of China at a dangerous time, her path all the way from Seventh-Day Adventist missionaries to Church of the Advent every seventh day make a compelling story of striving and achievement.

While Edith had given up playing the organ by the time I knew her, recordings make clear she was a blazing performer back in the day, the product of Peabody and subsequent study in Germany with Helmut Walcha and Heinz Wunderlich.

Also easily overlooked was Edith's enormous personal generosity, demonstrated in untold acts of self-effacing kindness to those in need. Edith would have given the blouse off her back if asked.

Edith also had a keen sense of humor not everyone was privileged to encounter. "Ross, why did you agree to accompany that diocesan choir festival? Massed choirs = mass graves." Gazing wistfully up at the Crystal Cathedral, down at scriptures poured into the concrete sidewalks leading up to it, then turning to us, "Gentlemen, if you will write the check for the sidewalk inscription I have chosen my scripture: JESUS WEPT."

Finally, how to forget Edith's shifting dietary choices that could have benefited from a software program to determine acceptable ingredients for a dinner party? A morning-after phone call of profuse thanks for a birthday supper ringing off with "Do your joints ache?" "No, Edith, thanks for asking; I take it yours must." "Gazpacho. So delicious. But tomatoes and peppers are NIGHTSHADES, you know." Quizzed about my food and drink preferences, her look when I pointed out gin was entirely vegetarian and that Jesus' first miracle was to make more wine for a party. Pearls of great price.

One of Edith's last requests in hospice care was for her shoes; she wanted to go home. No doubt she felt she still had work to do. You are home, Edith. Your monument — the Advent Choir — lives on. You will continue to thrive in the hearts and minds of those who admired, respected, feared, and loved you, each in appropriate measure. We all learned from you and would be the poorer without your example.

Well done, thou good and faithful servant. May angels lead you into Paradise two to a bar, may Lazarus take off an eighth, may Crecquillon and Manchicourt kneel in gratitude for your efforts to rescue them from obscurity, and may Saint Gregory grasp the concept of a square fermata without delay.

I just hope they're ready for you up there.

-Ross Wood

– Katelyn Emerson, Associate Organist & Choirmaster (2016-2018), The Church of the Advent, Boston

.Edith Ho passed away [Friday July 30, 2021] aged 89, concluding a life well-lived but too short. Ripples are being felt through the world of sacred music and beyond, as her impact on church music broadly and church music at Boston's the Church of the Advent specifically, cannot be overstated.

I knew Edith as the Advent's Organist & Choirmaster Emerita, ever aware of her presence in the back row listening to every piece of music with rapt attention and even, occasionally, critical reflection. One wouldn't think it ideal to have a former director of music at every service, but it always seemed to me that Edith took to this role with grace and a brilliant (although arguably unintended) sense of humor, always rushing to be the first one at the organ bench after each service to share her joy at the day's music and , most often, praise for how it was done. Over lunches around the corner at the infamous King & I and even an unforgettable teatime at her home in Newton, I had the incredible privilege of learning from her and hearing some extraordinary stories. Her generosity was shown through sharing her time and her resources, even, upon remembering that I would not receive one upon concluding my studies in Germany, bequeathing her masters hood to me so I "would have something to wear to Lessons & Carols," an honor that I found completely overwhelming - and still do.

Above all, Edith seemed to most treasure discussing her admiration of the work of Mark Dwyer, her worthy successor in Boston, and Ross Wood, the Associate with whom she worked before retirement, both dear friends of whom she could never speak highly or often enough. Some much of what I knew her life to be was revolved around her influence and legacy at this incredible church on Boston's Beacon Hill, yet she was and remains a woman much greater than even this great city.

Requiescat in pace, dear Edith. You are already missed, and the music you made and inspired lives on.

-Katelyn Emerson