

**The New York Times** |

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# Elliot Forbes, 88, a Scholar Whose Specialty Was Beethoven, Dies

By DANIEL J. WAKIN    JAN. 14, 2006

Elliot Forbes, a retired Harvard University professor of music whose revision of "Thayer's Life of Beethoven" became a pillar of Beethoven scholarship, died at his home in Cambridge, Mass., on Tuesday, family members said. He was 88.

A much-loved fixture on the campus, Mr. Forbes also conducted the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society in the 1960's and mentored several generations of Beethoven scholars. He retired as the Fanny Peabody professor of music in 1984 but stayed on as a professor emeritus.

Mr. Forbes was the scion of an old Boston family with deep roots at the university. One great-grandfather was Ralph Waldo Emerson; another was John Murray Forbes, a major 19th-century industrialist. His father, Edward Waldo Forbes, was an art history professor at Harvard and curator of the Fogg Art Museum.

Known as El, Elliot Forbes was one of those eminent scholars who never earned a Ph.D. He received a master's degree from Harvard in 1947, and the university awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2003.

His list of published books was not large, but Beethoven scholars consider what he produced to be of enormous importance.

In the middle of the 19th century, a Harvard alumnus named Alexander Thayer traveled to Germany to translate a biography by Beethoven's friend Anton Schindler. Frustrated by inaccuracies and confusion, he embarked on a new work and a new view of Beethoven. With his "Life," Thayer left behind romantic hero worship, stripped away legend and produced a modern, objective and chronological account.

A century later, a mountain of new Beethoven scholarship had accumulated. One of America's leading music scholars, Oliver Strunk at Princeton, suggested to Mr. Forbes, who was then a junior faculty member there, that an update might be a good idea. And so "Thayer's Life of Beethoven," in two volumes, was published in 1964. Mr. Forbes revised the text to reflect modern scholarship and added his own material as a sort of commentary.

"That put the entire field on a new footing," Maynard Solomon, a musicologist and prominent Beethoven biographer, said of the revision.

Elliot Forbes was born Aug. 30, 1917, and attended Milton Academy. The day after graduating from college in 1941, he married Kathleen Brooks Allen, a Harvard graduate student in music, who survives him. He is also survived by a sister, Anne Forbes of Groton, Mass.; three daughters, Diana Forbes Droste of Watertown, Mass., Barbara Forbes Purser of Skye, Scotland, and Susan Forbes Johnson of Plymouth, Mass.; four grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter.

Mr. Forbes taught at secondary schools before returning to Harvard in 1945. He was a music professor at Princeton from 1947 to 1958, when he came back to Cambridge permanently.

In 1950, while at Princeton, he was one of the last people in New Jersey to contract polio, Ms. Droste said, which led to an askew but still effective conducting style.

Mr. Forbes also edited Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 for the Norton Critical Score series and wrote a number of journal articles as well as entries for The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

It was not all classical music for Mr. Forbes. Students and friends would often go to his home to hear him perform jazz and blues standards at the piano. Louis Armstrong, Ms. Droste said, was a favorite.

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