

Former Music Professor Dies

By JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER January 18, 2006



Elliot Forbes '40, a much-loved Harvard music professor who inspired generations of students and opened new doors for Beethoven research, died in his sleep on Jan. 10 in his Memorial Drive home, family members said. He was 88.

Forbes, a fixture on the Harvard campus for more than a half-century, joined the Music Department in 1958 and led the Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society through the 1960s. He retired from his post as Peabody professor of music in 1984.

A native Cantabrigian, Forbes' Harvard roots ran deep: he was the great-grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, class of 1821, and his father was an art history professor and the curator of the Fogg Art Museum.

Forbes attended Milton Academy, and after graduating from the College, he became a secondary school teacher. He returned to Harvard in 1945 to earn a master's degree in music and taught at Princeton after graduation.

In 1958, he left New Jersey for Massachusetts to become the third conductor of the Harvard Glee Club, a post he held until 1970. But even after he gave up the baton, Forbes maintained a quiet presence at Harvard music events.

"I'm like that singer who's always doing his last concert," he told The Crimson in 1970.

Known to students and faculty as "El," Forbes won the adoration of many young singers who enrolled in his courses and performed in his concerts.

Richard E. Wilson '63, the Glee Club's accompanist in the early 1960s, said that Forbes was an indefatigable source of advice and encouragement for many students.

"When you talked with him, you got the sense that he was more interested in you than your own parents were," said Wilson, who is now a music professor at Vassar.

At Forbes' invitation, Wilson would attend Thanksgiving dinner each year at the professor's 182 Brattle St. home. The house was rife with bits and pieces of Forbes family memorabilia, Wilson said, including Emerson's own piano.

Forbes was also always concerned about the well-being of his students, Wilson said. In one instance, Wilson found himself busy with schoolwork and called Forbes to get out of a Glee Club rehearsal. After telling Forbes that he had come down with a headache, Wilson said that Forbes rushed over in his car to deliver him some medicine.

Forbes' central contribution to the field of Beethoven research was his 1964 revision of "Life of Beethoven," the authoritative biography of Beethoven written by 19th-century Harvard graduate Alexander Thayer.

Maynard Solomon, a distinguished Beethoven biographer, said Forbes' revision came at a pivotal time in Beethoven scholarship. It

was Forbes, he said, who put together the pieces of nearly a half-century of uncoordinated and fragmented research.

“Forbes reestablished a solid basis for future research in the field,” he said. “He touched off a very fruitful period in the study of Beethoven’s life. And now again, 40 or 50 years have passed and we need Elliot Forbes to do another revision.”

Forbes also enjoyed sailing and swimming, and was known to kick up his heels and invite students over for boisterous renditions of show tunes and jazz at his home.

He also had a sense of humor. After 414 students signed a petition in 1975 calling for more support for musicians from the College, he told The Crimson the petition was “music to my ears.”

In his years as the Peabody professor and after retirement, Forbes expanded the historical account of the Music Department with the publication of “A History of Music at Harvard to 1972” and an additional update in 1990.

Those endeavors were central to the Music Department’s development in a changing academic environment, said Adams University Professor Christoph Wolff.

“He was intensely aware of the fact that there was generational change that would influence the department of the time,” he said.

Peabody Research Professor of Music Lewis H. Lockwood said Forbes’ “sunny personality” brought joy to students and faculty in the Music Department.

“He cared enormously about Harvard undergraduate education and worked very hard on it,” Lockwood said. “[He] took very good care of many students in many different ways.”

The University awarded Forbes an honorary doctorate of music in 2003.

Deeply religious, Forbes attended Morning Service in Appleton Chapel every single day starting in 1958.

He contracted polio in 1950, but his colleagues and students said that he remained musically unharmed by the illness.

“I think he as a conductor increasingly felt uncomfortable with his handicap,” Wolff said. “But it didn’t discourage him from making great music.”

He is survived by his wife Anne, 88, three daughters, four grandchildren, and a great-granddaughter.

Rev. Peter J. Gomes, one of Forbes’ longtime friends, will preside over a memorial service at Memorial Church at 11 a.m. on February 25.

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