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Music Dept.'s beloved Elliot Forbes, 88

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"He epitomized music at Harvard in many ways and for many people, both as choral conductor and as lecturer."

Elliot Forbes, the Fanny Peabody Professor of Music Emeritus, died Jan. 10 at his home in Cambridge, Mass. He was 88.

A member of an old Boston family with numerous Harvard connections, Forbes was the son of Fogg Museum Director Edward Waldo Forbes and the great-grandson of poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Forbes grew up in Cambridge, attending Shady Hill and Milton Academy. After earning an A.B. from Harvard in 1941 and an A.M. in 1947, he taught for 11 years at Princeton University, then joined the Harvard music faculty in 1958, serving as chairman of the department from 1972 to 1976. He was conductor of the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society from 1958 to 1970 and toured with the Glee Club throughout the United States and Asia. He retired in 1984.

The author of numerous scholarly articles, Forbes is best known for editing and revising "Thayer's Life of Beethoven" (1964) and as the author of "A History of Music at Harvard" (1988).

"Elliot Forbes, who wrote the history of the Music Department, made a lot of its history himself," said Thomas Kelly, the Morton B. Knafel Professor of Music. "He leaves a huge void, one that we can fill only by remembering El's uncanny ability to make you feel that seeing you was the most important thing that had ever happened to him. You always felt better about yourself because El Forbes was so glad to see you. He was a gifted teacher, an inspiring musician, and possibly the nicest human being ever created."

Lewis Lockwood, the Fanny Peabody Research Professor of Music, who first met Forbes when he was a graduate student in a course on Beethoven that Forbes gave at Princeton in the mid-1950s, said that his own later work as a Beethoven scholar was stimulated by Forbes' work and teaching.

"'Thayer-Forbes,' as Beethoven scholars call it, is a classic text, and Forbes' annotations of Thayer's book made this 19th century book available to contemporary readers in an authoritative version," Lockwood said.

In addition to his scholarship, Forbes' personality had a powerful effect on those around him, said Lockwood, who joined the Harvard music faculty in 1980.

"He epitomized music at Harvard in many ways and for many people, both as choral conductor and as lecturer. He had a way of making everyone who met him look on the bright side of things. His enthusiasm for music, music-making, and choral singing was infectious. He loved Harvard, took pleasure in all things Harvardian, and in his retirement wrote a history of the Harvard Music Department, something that no one else had done," Lockwood said.

In his retirement, Forbes continued to be a presence at Harvard, closely following and supporting the activities of the music department as well as being a regular at morning prayers in Appleton Chapel.

"I thought the world of El," said Jameson Marvin, senior lecturer on music and director of choral activities. "He was unbelievably kind and thoughtful, a real gentleman. He came to practically every Harvard musical event, and he loved to know about all the students in the Glee Club. He was a positive spirit, a real joie de vivre sort of person."

Forbes is survived by his wife Kathleen A. Forbes; 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.; and four grandchildren.

A memorial service is planned at the the Memorial Church on Feb. 25, at 11 a.m.

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