

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 9, 2008,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Elliot Forbes  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **ELLIOT FORBES**

BORN: August 30, 1917

DIED: January 10, 2006

Elliot Forbes, Fanny Peabody Professor of Music, *Emeritus*, died January 10, 2006, at the age of 88 at his home in his native city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The descendant of a Boston Brahmin family, he had deep roots at Harvard University, going all the way back to Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great-grandfather. His father, Edward Waldo Forbes, was an art historian and director of the Fogg Museum. Elliot, affectionately known as El, was born August 30, 1917, and grew up in Cambridge. After attending Shady Hill and Milton Academy, he received the A.B. from Harvard College in 1941.

After college, El Forbes first taught at secondary schools before returning to Harvard in 1945 as a graduate student. He earned the A.M. degree in 1947. Professor Walter Piston, the noted composer, was one of his principal teachers. While a graduate student, Forbes served Professor G. Wallace Woodworth “Woody” as assistant conductor of the Glee Club. Choral conducting really was his passion, and it became his profession and primary function when in 1951 he was appointed director of the Princeton Glee Club. He taught at Princeton University for eleven years before returning to Harvard in 1958 to become conductor of the Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society.

Following in the footsteps of Woody and the Glee Club’s first conductor, Archibald T. “Doc” Davison, El prepared the Choral Society and Glee Club for their annual performance with the Boston Symphony Orchestra—what became more than a fifty-year-old tradition. As conductor of the Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society he also toured extensively throughout the world and trained a generation of conductors, among them William Christie, founder and director of the baroque ensemble Les Arts Florissants of Paris.

As he had contracted polio in 1951, which mildly affected his conducting ever since, he decided to step down from his conducting post in 1970. In the following years he focused primarily on undergraduate teaching. His Music 2, dealing with basic principles of elementary composition through exercises in writing and analysis, became his signature

course. There he taught many an enthusiastic non-concentrator how to engage in musical fantasies, invent sensible musical ideas, and work them out according to sound principles.

Professor Forbes chaired the Music Department from 1972 to 1976 and became an emeritus professor eight years later, in 1984. That year also saw the publication of a festschrift, *Beethoven Essays: Studies in Honor of Elliot Forbes*, edited by Lewis Lockwood and Phyllis Benjamin. Harvard awarded him the Alumni Medal in 1991 and an honorary doctorate in 2003.

As a scholar Forbes is best known for his revision and critical annotations of Alexander Wheelock Thayer's *Life of Beethoven*, originally published in three volumes, 1866–1879. Also a Bostonian and a Harvard alumnus, who graduated in the class of 1841, exactly a century before Forbes, Thayer had written the first authoritative biography of Beethoven. It had long become a true classic in the field and continues to retain its status thanks to Forbes's revised edition of 1964.

Besides editing the Harvard-Radcliffe Choral Music Series and publishing a number of scholarly articles El Forbes wrote two sequels to Walter Spalding's 1935 book *Music at Harvard*, the first *A History of Music at Harvard to 1972*, the second *A Report of Music at Harvard from 1972 to 1990*. El Forbes, the quintessential Harvard man and himself deeply rooted in the university's history, always felt a very deep commitment not only to furthering the institution's progress but also to recording it.

El Forbes continued to be a steady presence at Harvard for the more than twenty years of his retirement right up to his death. He regularly attended concerts given by the undergraduate student groups, joined the long table at the Faculty Club (for as long as it was there), and in nearly half a century rarely missed Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel. A much-loved figure on and off campus, El Forbes was, as the Reverend Peter Gomes so fittingly put it at his memorial service, "a man always preceded by his smile."

The day after graduation in 1941, El Forbes married Kathleen Brooks Allen, then a Radcliffe graduate student. She survives him, as does his sister, Anne Forbes of Groton, Massachusetts. Kay and El Forbes had three daughters, Diana Forbes Droste of Watertown, Massachusetts; Barbara Forbes Purser of Skye, Scotland; and Susan Forbes Johnson of Plymouth, Massachusetts; as well as four grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas Forrest Kelly  
Lewis Lockwood  
Jameson Marvin  
Christoph Wolff, Chair