

# A. Irving Forbes P'67, P'68, P'87

## *Emeritus Chair of the Music Department*

### *(1922-2008)*

Alexander Irving Forbes, “Irving,” was born on September 11, 1922, in Milton, MA, scion of an old and distinguished Boston family whose heritage he at once wore loosely, yet proudly on such occasions as when he kitted himself out in the Forbes tartan. His great-great-grandfather on one side was John Murray Forbes, a 19th-century capitalist who worked the China trade, was a director of some of our nation’s largest railroads, and who in the family is known simply as JMF. On another side was his great-grandfather Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Irving in his name came from his great-great-uncle, Washington Irving, via his mother.

He grew up in Milton, the son of Charlotte and Alexander Forbes—a distinguished professor in the newly emerging field of neurophysiology at the Harvard Medical School. His family home was located not that many blocks from Milton Academy, first founded in 1798, then re-established in the 19th century by JMF and other Forbeses. Irving was the second of two boys. As he recounted years later in a Phillips Church Thursday Meditation, he was an unplanned “replacement child” for an older brother who had died in infancy, and he told the congregation of the hours he spent as a child contemplating what it might have meant never to have been.

As a boy, Irving was not a strong student, hampered by what are now recognized as learning disabilities. “I was dyslexic, had ADD, XYZ, you name it,” he once said. He attended the Brush Hill School, where he was fortunate to encounter one Miss Black, an iconic figure of a bygone era who taught him to love music and to sing all the traditional folk songs, American and international. Years later, he could not think of Miss Black without getting emotional about her early influence on him. After Brush Hill, he went to The Fenn School in Concord, MA, as a five-day boarder, repeating sixth grade. Only in ninth grade did he transfer to Milton. By 10th grade he was boarding, but he was



*A bassoon aficionado, Irving Forbes taught in the Music Department for 28 years, serving as department chair from 1971 until his retirement in 1987. Named the Wheaton J. Lane '21 Bicentennial Professor in the Humanities in 1981, Forbes was also the recipient of Exeter's Founder's Day Award in 2006.*

not at all pleased with being placed in the eponymous dormitory, Forbes House, embarrassed as he was by the connection. He later commented, only half jokingly, that he was such a terrible student—he hated to read—that, had he not been related to JMF and the other Forbeses, he would have been asked to leave. His poor grades led him to be confined to campus with no weekend privileges. [He went] home only three times a year, at Christmas, Easter and for summer vacation—although he admitted that he would often slip into the family car after school chapel on Sundays and take a quick trip the short distance home, returning for required Sunday lunch. Repeating 10th grade, in part because of his poor reading abil-

ity, he found that he could, nevertheless, read music.

He joined virtually every musical organization on campus and took both harmony and music history courses. In his 11th-grade year, he fell in love with “two things, the bassoon and Ellen Fuller,” a 15-year-old Milton schoolmate. On a trip to see his grandmother at 1000 Park Avenue in New York, he prowled pawnshops in the city. In the 45th shop he visited, he found a bassoon wrapped in newspaper for the price of \$50, bought it, and started taking lessons. His first teacher was not very accomplished, but he charged Irving only \$2 a week for as long as Irving could stay. As Irving built up his embouchure, his lessons went to almost three hours. Thus began his lifelong interest in playing the bassoon. [During his] senior year, understanding that he might have to go off to war and never return, he moved back home as a day student and was elected president of Milton’s choir, glee club and orchestra. He had found his passion and life’s work.

With World War II on the horizon and a building interest in music, he informed his family that he was thinking of going to college, not at Harvard—“the” family college for generations of Forbeses—but at Oberlin. His choice was met with dismay by

relatives who had never heard of Oberlin or thought, as he said, that he was going to “Berlin.” Irving graduated from Milton one morning in 1942 and was on the train to Oberlin the same afternoon, with college starting the next day. His father wanted him to study math and engineering in order to get a commission and be more useful to the military, but [during] his first semester he took all music courses and majored, as he once said, in extra-curricular activities. In late 1942, he joined the Navy and went off to the Solomon Islands as a quartermaster second class, entertaining himself on watch at night in the South Pacific by singing the folk songs Miss Black had taught him as a child. He returned to Oberlin in 1944 married to Ellen Fuller, whom he later referred to as Opus One, and graduated with a Bachelor of Music Education degree in 1947.

His first job was teaching music in the Colebrook, NH, public schools from 1947 to 1952, then in the Portsmouth, NH, junior high school from 1952 to 1955, earning a Master of Music degree from Boston University the same year. From 1955 to 1959, he moved across the river to become music director of the Kittery, ME, public schools. In May of 1959, he was appointed part-time instructor in music at the Academy, becoming full-time a year later. Here for the next 27 years, until his retirement in 1987, Irving was the embodiment of the ubiquitous and indefatigable “Music Man” of Broadway fame. Principal Steve Kurtz ’44, ’46, ’78, ’87 (Hon.); P’77 noted [to Irving] at Irving’s retirement ceremony that Professor Harold Hill, “a man of dubious credentials, must convince the people of River City that there are troubles and sins abounding that only music can cure. Your role since coming to Exeter in 1959 has been similar, your lasting success greater, your credentials far more impressive for the role of Music Man, and your following even more devoted. We have watched you and sung along with you for many years and have never left your presence without feeling better about ourselves. You have brought joy to thousands of Exonians, their teachers and their neighbors. In return, you have been greatly loved, which is no small reward.”

When Irving came to Exeter, the Music Department consisted of two full-time teachers—Arthur Landers, the chair, and Irving—and three adjunct faculty offering music lessons, although Irving himself also taught reeds and brass. The program was small and used mostly in support of the sacred music program for the required weekly Phillips Church services. Lessons were offered to students in the dungeon-like basement of Phillips Church, but, in 1960, the Lewis Perry Music Building was constructed. With Arthur Landers’ retirement in 1971, Irving—against his will and good sense—was persuaded to be department chair, a post he held for 16 years until his retirement in 1987. During his tenure in the department, Exeter quickly outgrew its first true music building as the number of students taking music lessons quadrupled and the number of the music-teaching specialists offering those lessons increased many fold. More and more of Irving’s time was spent administering the department, much to his regret and occasional frustration, especially when the administration did not properly acknowledge how much time being a department chair took. In a famous exchange with one dean of the faculty, Irving wrote: “Thank you for your letter responding to my annual report. I appreciate your kind words, but I am amazed that you still believe that being a Music Department

chair is equal to teaching one course. Either my arithmetic in computing my daily hours...is faulty or I am so painfully slow that I should have never been appointed a chairman in the first place....A typical week found me spending over 80 percent of my time running the Music Department. I suggest you try your ‘chairmanship equals one course’ theory on the occupants of the music building to see what kind of a reaction you get.”

As the Academy’s Music Man, Irving was equally concerned about educating those on the campus with little or no music background. As his 2006 Founder’s Day Award noted, “To that end, [Irving] applied his irresistible enthusiasm and musicianship to all-school sing-alongs in the Assembly Hall and to countless musically uninitiated students who would then hum the chorus from an opera or a motif from a symphony all the way to their next class.” Shades of Miss Black from the Brush Hill School, and Irving took seriously the obligation to be the Music Department’s ambassador-at-large to the entire Academy community, to teach the world to sing or enjoy the pleasures of music.

As chair, he championed the giving of academic credit for advanced study of an instrument and better integration of the adjunct music faculty into the life of the school. Many an evening was spent attending one or another faculty or student concert in Phillips Church, or simply being a presence in the music building, making it a campus home for music students. By his departmental colleagues, he was understood to be an accessible and supportive department head, and his administrative talent was easy to underestimate if viewed only from outside the music building. This can be partly attributed to his modesty, along with his “MacForbesian” determination to budget little and spend even less, but it probably also came from how rarely he wielded standard administrative power. He led, instead, through his exemplary passion for sharing what is wondrous in music and through the power of his trust in his teachers’ musicality and dedication. When the administration pressed him to coach more than the two afternoons a week that he assisted in the cross-country ski program, Irving fired back:

“I feel strongly enough about this situation that should I be *required* to coach a sport, I would resign that same day. . . . A breakdown of my work is as follows: 14 classes a week, three or four evening rehearsals a week, advising student projects...preparing soloists for concerts and plays, arranging music for dramatics, preparing music for graduation, taking students for concerts and lectures at UNH...seeing all 40 pianos on campus are in working condition...making all arrangements for approximately 14 concerts a year, keeping accurate records (financial and credit) on 165 students taking private lessons and 145 students taking courses in music. With one-third of the school circulating around the music building...we feel we best serve the Academy by being on hand for our primary job.” As a closing retort to the principal in the same letter, he wrote, “Anyone want to coach club singing or shall I draft you?”

It should be clear: Irving was a character, a feisty one at that. Examples are legion. He was ever the patrician gentleman, but when crossed or exercised, he would react. When his concerns went unheeded over the dangers posed to the dozens of pianos by the music building’s Saharan dryness, he took matters into his own hands and famously sloshed buckets of water all over the floor to raise the humidity levels. Irving resisted the starchiness of

the old Exeter; he disliked wearing a coat and tie, and the moment Principal Dick Day '68 (Hon.); P'68 announced that turtlenecks were an acceptable alternative, Irving drove to Boston to buy the fanciest turtleneck he could find and wore it proudly thereafter.

As a child, he had mastered the art of riding his bicycle backwards; and, in every faculty talent show in the Assembly Hall, Irving would perch on his bike frame and ride his bicycle backwards across the stage without falling five feet down into the senior section—a skill he kept up well into his 50s. Speaking of the one-speed black clunker of a bicycle on which Irving rode to school every day (fall, winter and spring), it was once stolen. As Irving announced its loss at faculty meeting, he added, "I hope the poor fellow gets his due, as the bike has no brakes."

Long before the Academy had a landscape master plan, Irving fought it out with Kurtz about why or why not he, Irving, should be allowed to plant three large maple trees in front of the library to fill a void left by a dying elm tree. Irving wrote Kurtz: "Of course, I agree we cannot have 'random growth,' [but] can we get our architect to discuss or preferably approve this planting now, or are we limited to parking lots at the present? Who does call the shots in this situation anyway?"

And if one thinks Irving directed his fire only at administrators, he once delivered these remarks in assembly to the student body: "There is an infant minority in this school and to it I address my remarks. ...Many boys and faculty have expressed their dismay for the rudeness of [this] minority during Tuesday's performance. ...My concern is for those students who have yet to perform on this stage, [or] for outside speakers. ...That you of the juvenile minority, ...so high in IQ and so low in manners and maturity, can come here and learn how to write masterful term papers and, at the same time, behave with such a complete lack of consideration for your fellow students, both in the audience and on the stage, ...this fractures one's faith." Yet, as curmudgeonly as Irving could appear, he always had a soft spot for students. In the era when discipline was done on the floor of the faculty meeting, perhaps remembering his own rebellious student days, he never once voted to fire a student regardless of the offense. Every student was worth saving.

Outside of the Academy, Irving was involved in numerous local musical organizations, such as the Rockingham Choral Society, which he conducted from 1962 to 1974, and the Exeter Players. He was also active in the Unitarian Church on Elm Street, a church whose creed, so he characterized in another Thursday Meditation, was belief in "the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Jesus and the neighborhood of Boston." If anything, Irving believed in the virtues and beauty of nature, and some have said that he was happiest out of doors, either clearing, bridging, or mapping the trails in the Academy woods, or, during the summers, clearing walking trails on Naushon (a private Forbes family island off Woods Hole, MA) or Harbor Island, ME—two islands that bookended his life and where he alternated spending his summer months for decades. He was a knowledgeable and skillful sailor since early childhood and later in life owned several boats, spending countless hours upon the waters around Naushon or in Blue Hill Bay. As his family written obituary said, "He found nature's song the sweetest."

In 1964, Irving married Margery Shrecengost, whom he called

Opus Two, and to whom he was married the last 44 years of his life. Irving had four children with Ellen and two with Margery. He once wrote on one of his Academy forms, "I support planned parenthood...and vasectomies enthusiastically," although that was after two marriages and six children. Opus One and Opus Two were friends for the rest of Irving's life. Margery, a professional music teacher and frequent accompanist, will be especially remembered for the evening receptions in their Pine Street home after, literally, many dozens of music concerts she and Irving performed in or attended in Phillips Church over the years.

For his service to the school and community, Irving was named the first recipient of the Wheaton J. Lane '21 Professorship in the Humanities in the Academy's bicentennial year, 1981; and, in 1987, he received an Excellence in Teaching Award from the Brown Family Fund. In the 1987 retirement ceremonies, Kurtz quoted a letter he had written Irving in 1984: "Your becoming modesty is evident throughout, and I want to tell you that your contribution to the Academy is, in my opinion, second to none. When I leave Exeter, it may well be music, as I have known it under your direction, that will remain uppermost in my fond memories." Kurtz closed Irving's retirement ceremony with these words: "That opinion is unchanged. On behalf of all your colleagues, thank you for adding to the breadth and depth and joy of our lives."

If Irving's Academy career was his *allegro con brio* years, his retirement years in Blue Hill, ME, were an 18-year-long *andante cantabile*, followed by a three-year coda of *rallentando*. He and Margery moved to a saltwater farm overlooking Blue Hill Bay, and, as he once remarked, "If my TIAA-CREF ever fails and I have no income, I am going to put a fence around my pig house and charge admission." Irving had purchased the farm of the doctor of E.B. White, the latter of whom had come across this small structure inside of which was a pig, later immortalized as Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*. Blue Hill was also the center of a thriving music community on midcoast Maine. Irving and Margery threw themselves into its active life, with Irving establishing and conducting the Peters Cove Men's Chorus and becoming a librarian for the Bagaduce Music Lending Library. He continued his bassoon performances, and he and Margery performed around coastal Maine. He offered music instruction in the local schools and even made a weekly trip offshore to Swan's Island to bring music to the island's K-8 public school in the same way Miss Black had brought it to him almost eight decades earlier. In some ways, he had another 21-year career after his 28 years at Exeter, becoming midcoast Maine's Music Man. Up through his 85th year—even after he contracted the cancer that eventually took his life—he annually conducted a Messiah sing-along in Blue Hill, a fixture on the local musical calendar.

Never a sentimentalist, he faced his slowly declining health the last three years of his life with equanimity and acceptance, rallying to receive the Founder's Day Award in May of 2006 and giving a spirited speech from the Assembly Hall stage—a stage he had graced so many times in his career—about the joys of listening to and performing music. And earlier this year, Irving was especially pleased when Principal Ty Tingley '48, '64, '68, '01 (Hon.); P'99 informed him that the Academy was naming its most recently constructed faculty residence at 42 Court Street, an environmentally friendly house, after him: Another Forbes House with values Irving would have been much more comfort— (continued on page 105)

## In Memoriam

*(continued from page 110)*

able with than the Forbes House at Milton. On April 30, 2008, surrounded by his family, he died in his own home facing the ocean on which he had spent so much of his life.

Even in death, Irving is a teacher. At his request, his body was donated to the only medical school in Maine that accepts cadavers for medical research. Some day, when his ashes are returned to his family, they will be scattered on the small island off the coast of Maine that he owned, Outer Baker, where there is a large granite boulder upon which he and Margery carved their names. As his ashes are strewn into the wind and sea he so loved, with a view forever facing the bold and restless ocean waves, these words will be said over his grave, the words being a song by Pete Seeger:

To my old brown earth  
And to my old blue sky  
I'll now give these last few  
molecules of "I."

And you who sing,  
And you who stand nearby,  
I do charge you not to cry.

Guard well our human chain,  
Watch well you keep it  
strong,  
As long as sun will shine.

And this our home,  
Keep pure and sweet and  
green,  
For now I'm yours  
And you are also mine. ●

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*This Memorial Minute was written by Peter Vorkink II, instructor in the Religion Department, and Lodowick F. Crofoot III, instructor in the Music Department, and was presented to the faculty at its meeting of November 19, 2008.*