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Alexander Gibson was born in Motherwell on 11 February 1926 into a family that was not especially musical. As a pupil at Dalziel High School the young Alex appeared as the Major-General in *The Pirates of Penzance* and it was soon clear that he was exceptionally gifted. He went with friends on Saturday nights to hear the Scottish Orchestra, as it then was, in St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow.

His early musical education took place at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and, at the age of 17, he became Organist at a nearby Congregational church. At Glasgow University he graduated with an MA in English Literature and Music.

Between 1944 and 1948 Alex served as a pianist in the Royal Signals Band making arrangements for them of concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Grieg and Rachmaninov. He left the forces in 1948 and soon afterwards won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music where he was told that he could not join the Conducting Class as his theoretical knowledge was inadequate. By way of response he formed his own orchestra and the college authorities subsequently recognised his enormous talent. He won the Tagore Gold Medal and in 1950 attended the Conducting Class of Igor Markevitch at the Salzburg Mozarteum.

The following year he went to Sadler's Wells Opera as a répétiteur and in 1952 was appointed Assistant Conductor of the BBC Scottish Orchestra. This two year contract was of untold value to him and he learned the standard concert repertoire under the direction of Ian Whyte. Returning to Sadler's Wells as a Staff Conductor in 1954, he was appointed Musical Director to the Company in 1957. Alex was then only 31 and the youngest ever holder of the post.

The years 1959-84 encompassed his finest achievements. No one has done more for music in Scotland this century than Alex. In 1959 he was offered and accepted the post of Conductor of the Scottish National Orchestra. He once recalled how he spent a sleepless night writing down the pros of such a move on one side of a large notebook and the cons on the other. The headline in *The Scotsman* read: 'The SNO gets a new conductor - and he's a Scot!'

Alex arrived in Glasgow determined that his operatic as well as orchestral experience should be of benefit to Scotland. Within three years he had created and launched Scottish Opera with a production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. The first ten years of the company unfolded splendidly under the guidance of Alex, with Robin Orr as Chairman and Peter Hemmings as Chief Executive. Together they wrote letters, raised funds and chose casts for the productions. The result was Scotland's first permanent opera company and a host of memorable productions. These included *The Ring*, a complete performance of *Les Troyens* and a much acclaimed *Così fan tutte* with Janet Baker and Elizabeth Harwood. It was Alex who enticed Janet Baker from the concert platform on to the operatic stage and fostered her remarkable skills as an actress. Many new operas were commissioned or premiered including Robin Orr's *Full Circle* and *Hermiston*, Iain Hamilton's *The Catiline Conspiracy*, Edward Harper's *Fanny Robin*, Thomas Wilson's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Thea Musgrave's *Mary Queen of Scots*.

Alex established an international reputation for the SNO. There were regular and outstanding contributions to the Edinburgh Festival and, in 1965, it was Alex who persuaded Lord Harewood, the Director, to found the Festival Chorus. He took his players abroad - to the Vienna Musikverein and to Carnegie Hall. He gained for them their first recording contracts and was particularly successful in performances of music by Sibelius and Elgar, two composers close to his heart. His first season was devoted to the Symphonies of Sibelius and his last to the music of Elgar. In 1975 he took the SNO on the first North American tour by any British orchestra outside London.

First performances of works by Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle were triumphantly received and he brought compositions by Berio, Henze, Ligeti, Lutoslawski, Schoenberg and Stockhausen into the repertoire of the SNO. His commitment to Scottish music and to Scottish composers was unstinting. In 1971, with Frederick Rimmer, he established *Musica Nova*, a triennial festival of contemporary music. His work on behalf of the Scottish Musicians' Benevolent Fund was yet another example of his desire to help music in Scotland.

From 1981 to 1983 he was Principal Guest Conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra. In 1985 he left Scottish Opera but was honoured with the title Conductor Laureate. Thereafter he continued his operatic work mainly in the USA, notably in Los Angeles and Kentucky. He became Honorary President of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and maintained his long association with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

He was a Fellow of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and President from 1991. At the Academy he was always ready to offer advice and encouragement to staff and students alike and he frequently conducted there. Shortly before his death he conducted the Academy Orchestra in exhilarating performances of the *Sixth Symphony* by Sibelius and the *Second Symphony* by Elgar, drawing outstanding playing from the young instrumentalists.

At Christmas 1994 Alex conducted Scottish Opera for the last time. Appropriately, as on the first occasion, it was with a performance of *Madama Butterfly*.

Alex's interpretations had enormous zest but he was principally concerned with musical architecture. His beat was much maligned but to sensitive musicians it was wonderfully expressive and he could certainly conduct clearly when necessary. He was a superb accompanist and knew exactly where a singer needed to breathe and when an instrumentalist required time in order to shape a phrase.

My first meeting with Alex was for performances of the Bach *Passions*. Peter Pears was the Evangelist and I was the harpsichord continuo player. Alex had not conducted these works before and he was at great pains to learn everything that he could about them. The performances were most moving for both musicians and audiences alike.

His wife Veronica, whom he married in 1959, and three sons and a daughter survive him. Alex and 'V' (as she is universally known to their innumerable friends) loved to entertain in their beautiful home in Glasgow's West End. Whilst a modest and deeply private person, Alex was a splendid raconteur and mimic. Above all, he had the capacity to inspire both loyalty and affection from his friends and colleagues.

He was appointed a CBE in 1967, knighted in 1977, elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1978 and received a number of honorary doctorates. He was awarded the St Mungo Prize in 1970, the ISM Distinguished Musician Award in 1976 and the Sibelius Medal in 1978. He died on 14 January 1995, aged 68.

PHILIP LEDGER