



## Don Monro, 1942–2014

Donald Martin Monro, born in Montreal, Canada on 10 January 1942, was a larger-than-life character – a man of enormous energy, of action, innovation and courage – an innovative scientist and the creator of ‘Messiah from Scratch’ and The Really Big Chorus. He was an ardent champion of choral singing for all and raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for charity at Royal Albert Hall concerts over a period of more than 35 years. He died at his home in Beckington, Somerset on 25 May 2014 at the age of 72. Diagnosed with cancer in 2013, he bravely shared his experiences via social media in a bid to raise funds for his chosen cancer charities: Cancer Research UK, Dorothy House Foundation Ltd, Friends of Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre and Macmillan Cancer Support.

After being awarded a Masters degree at the University of Toronto, Don Monro moved to the UK in 1966 to study for a PhD in Digital Information Systems at Imperial College, London. A keen amateur clarinettist and opera-lover, he was seduced by the musical life in London and remained at Imperial College as a lecturer in the Electrical Engineering department, living with his family less than 200 yards from the Royal Albert Hall. The famous ‘Messiah from Scratch’ was born simply out of the desire to perform in that celebrated building and in 1974 Don and three colleagues, calling themselves the Tuesday Partnership, agreed to share the cost of hiring the Hall and to promote a performance of Handel’s Messiah.

The basic format of ‘Messiah from Scratch’, with an all-comers amateur orchestra and a huge unrehearsed chorus, was decided in the spring of 1974. On the day of the concert (5 December) a predicted musical disaster turned out to be a triumph, and The Really Big Chorus was well and truly launched. When the Tuesday Partnership dissolved Don took on, single handed, all aspects of the operation from booking the hall to playing in the orchestra. At the same time he continued his working life as a scientist, doing innovative work in the fields of digital information systems, digital video and audio compression, signal and image processing and auto-identification technology.

In 1991, after 25 years at Imperial College, he accepted the Chair of Information Systems at the University of Bath, where he applied his expertise in image processing and pattern recognition to the techniques of iris recognition and other issues related to the use of auto-identification technology in today’s world. Throughout this ground-breaking work he continued to develop the scope of The Really Big Chorus and in 1979 he recruited Sir David Willcocks, then Director of the Royal College of Music, to be the conductor. With Sir David’s encouragement the singers’ repertoire at the Royal Albert Hall was expanded to include popular choral works such as Orff’s *Carmina Burana* and Haydn’s *Creation* alongside Handel’s *Messiah* and Mozart’s *Requiem*, and a professional orchestra replaced the amateur players. Foreign singing trips and cruises were introduced, and more and more singers flocked each year to the Royal Albert Hall; ‘Messiah from Scratch’ now annually fills every available seat in the Royal Albert Hall, and is a unique event in the choral calendar.

Don's running of TRBC also benefited greatly from the involvement of his wife Ann, with whom he had made the journey from Canada. With the couple's three children now demanding less of her attention, Ann took over the arduous role of handling bookings, the distribution of tickets and liaison with singers. Together she and Don ran TRBC from a small office in their home until by 2003 the project had grown so large that further help was enlisted.

All TRBC concerts act as a fundraising platform for a chosen charity, and the Chorus's most consistent charity partner, since the early years, has been the British Heart Foundation. In February 2010, in recognition of the hundreds of thousands of pounds raised for the Foundation by TRBC concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, Don and Ann Monro were presented with the BHF's 'Heart Hero' Award at a ceremony in London. Tens of thousands of pounds have also been raised in total for a variety of other charities, among them the Alzheimer's Society and the National Autistic Society.

Don's energy and capacity for innovation were huge, and nothing was ever done half-heartedly. In addition to his musical activities he included orienteering, skiing, sailing, scuba diving, campanology and photography among his interests. He was a member of the Bath & Wells Association of Diocesan Bell Ringers, and a PADI Divemaster, and his thousands of photographs of TRBC concerts record the organisation's progress from 2001 until the present day. A great champion of his adopted country and its natural heritage, he purchased an ancient, quintessentially English, bluebell wood in Wiltshire in 2004. Not content merely for himself and his family to enjoy the bluebells, he obtained a licence to gather and sell sustainably harvested (i.e. by hand!) English bluebell seeds over a period of five years.

Today, choral participation events are a regular feature of the UK choral scene; large-scale choral events and contests are shown on prime-time television, the music has spawned reality TV shows, and choral directors are awarded celebrity status. This is a far cry from the scene in 1974, when choral societies were beginning to feel the effect of the demise of school singing and educators no longer thought it necessary to teach the skill of reading music. The arrival of The Really Big Chorus created a safe environment for singers of mixed ability and experience, enabling them to sing together and engage in making music on a scale not possible for individuals and small choirs. It helped to regenerate choral singing and its success has resulted in countless imitators. Alongside his innovative scientific work, Don's musical legacy is one of which he can be justly proud.

A memorial service in celebration of Don's life was held on Friday 20 June 2014 at St George's Church, Beckington, with music chosen by Don and Ann and performed by Brian Kay, Jane Watts, Mary Bevan and the inevitable 'Scratch' choir. Don is survived by his wife Ann, their three children Andrew, Heather and Douglas, and their six grandchildren.