

## Judith Monk talks about 25 years of LACCS

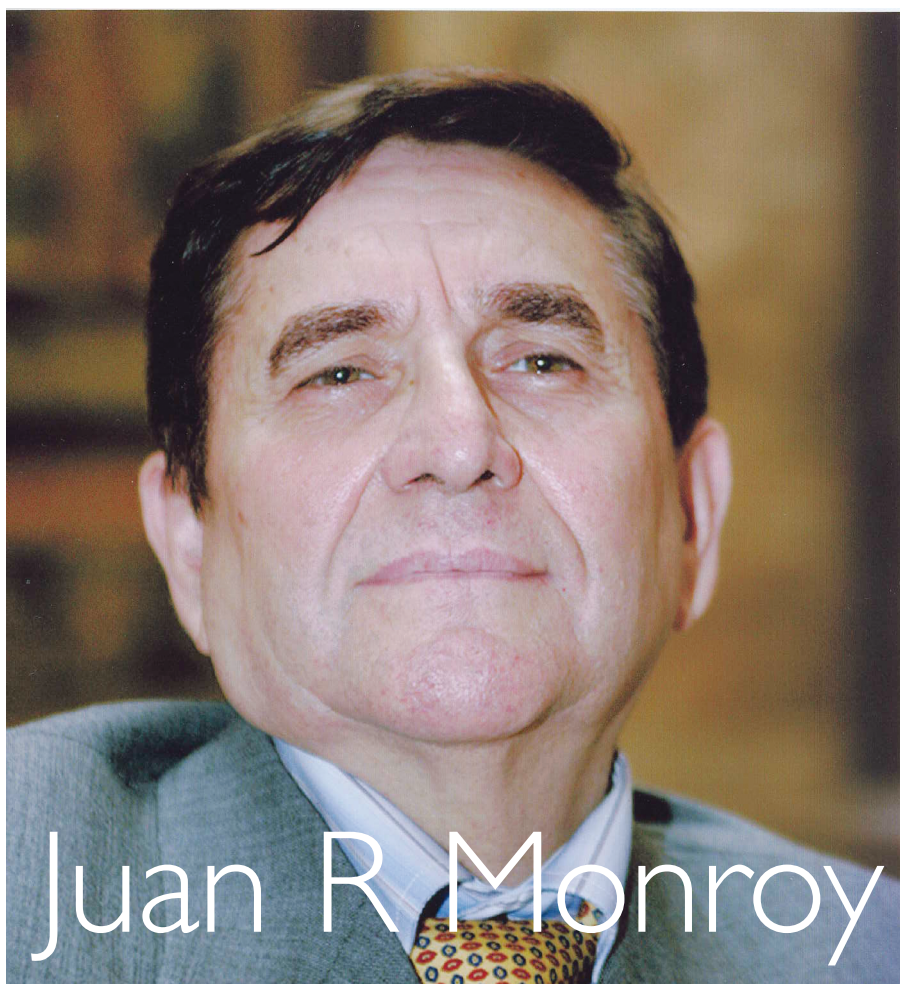
Chilean born, Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Society president and founder, Professor Juan R Monroy, talked to me about the arduous but rewarding task of bringing classical musicians from all over the world to the UK.

There is a commonly used phrase in Latin America taken from the famous Colombian singer and 'King of the Tango' Carlos Gardel's song *Volver*, which asserts that *Veinte años no es nada* (twenty years is nothing). Well, for LACCS twenty five years seems like no time at all!

Senor Monroy, who studied history at University in Chile, has a lifelong and immensely strong interest in music: a talented guitarist, he was astonished to discover that the classical music of Latin America and the Caribbean was virtually unknown in Britain when he arrived here in the '70s. He determined to do something about this deficiency and the result was the founding of LACCS. The first Festival of Latin American and Caribbean Culture took place in September 1984 and since then the Society has done notable work over the past twenty five seasons and LACCS concerts are now some of the most important and innovative fixtures of the London season.

A thoroughly enjoyable raconteur Juan told me the tale of how nylon guitar strings came into being. Luthier, Albert Augustine, and guitarist Andrés Segovia engineered the early development of nylon guitar strings in 1947. At first DuPont's, who were the leading plastics manufacturer at the time, were sceptical that plastic strings could be made but Augustine persisted and proved them wrong. Today his strings grace the guitars of most classical guitars. Monroy himself, after seeing plastic strings for the first time as a youngster, rushed out and bought a fishing line to try on his guitar!

Professor Monroy was able to point out to me many of the 'firsts' that LACCS has engineered to enable London concert goers to understand and appreciate South American music. "LACCS was the first organisation to include in its concert programmes a new repertoire and not just that of Segovia", he



Juan R Monroy

told me. "For the first time, in 1987, Carlos Barbosa-Lima performed a full concert of Brazilian classical music at the Wigmore Hall and then at St John's, Smith Square."

"Another example", he enthused, "was that we were able to première Ariel Ramirez's *Misa Criolla* at the Royal Festival Hall in 1994, with its composer in attendance." I, for one, am grateful for that, as I just love this music. "Another important point to make", Juan energetically points out, "is that although *Misa Criolla* was renowned internationally and had its première in Buenos Aires in 1964, it had to wait 30 years before its first performance in London!"

Other 'firsts' were the celebration of the centenary of the birth of the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos at St John's Smith Square, the first concert of Mexican symphonic music at the Barbican, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, having the English Chamber Orchestra present a number of concerts of Latin American music; and in the Royal Festival Hall LACCS introduced the music of Eduardo Falú, Francisco Migone, Radamés Gnattali, Antonio Carlos Jobim and Laurindo Almeida, with the great Brazilian guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima among many

others. Another resounding success was the celebration of 100 years of tango, with the orchestra of Mariano Mores and its 1997 première at the Royal Festival Hall with more than 100 musicians, dancers and chorus, a great musical and cultural spectacle that is still fondly remembered.

Today, the energetic Juan Monroy and LACCS have expanded both their artists and music from its early Latin American and Caribbean borders to world-wide. From Slovenia to Egypt: from Finland to Czechoslovakia, musicians can be grateful to LACCS for their exposure to London concert audiences, and London audiences can be grateful for hearing exciting music and musicians from other cultures on their own doorstep.

Should funding and facility present themselves, Juan would be happy to reverse his success and take English music and musicians and introduce them to South American audiences. Now there's a challenge for the champions of home grown music and talent – talk to Professor Monroy and make it happen! Happy Anniversary LACCS, may there be many more. ■

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