

Howard Milner

Lives Remembered (for The Independent)

My friend Howard Milner, who has died of cancer at the age of 58, will be remembered with enormous affection by many hundreds of people – who heard him sing, who learned from his remarkable teaching, who worked with him as colleagues, or who valued him as someone with a supreme gift of friendship.

Howard was a chorister at Coventry Cathedral, won a music scholarship to Monkton Combe School, and went on to read English at Cambridge. It was there that I met – and briefly taught – him, a brilliant student with an ability for serious appreciation of poetry that never deserted him. He went on to make his career in music, though, putting his wonderful tenor voice to the service of singing. He became a member of Swingle II, the jazz vocal octet. He spent several years in Paris with the Group Vocal de France, specialising in contemporary music. And back in London he sang in West End shows and took on commercial engagements.

But after a serious motorbike accident in 1982, he decided to take the opera course at the Guildhall School, won several major prizes, and went on to carve out an international career at Glyndebourne, ENO, the Royal Opera House, Opera Factory, Sydney Opera House, Carnegie Hall, Paris Chatelet, Barcelona, Aix-en-Provence, and Menton. His opera and concert performances have been widely recorded.

The combination of a fine voice, a literary enthusiasm, an ability with languages, and a serious dedication to helping others in his field was always going to lead to more, however. In 1994 he was appointed Professor of Singing at the Birmingham Conservatoire, and then in 1997 he took up a teaching post at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He became an outstanding teacher, loved by his pupils, who would travel from all over the world to be taught by him. He had thought deeply about the way the voice worked, about the joy and spontaneity of the act of singing, and about how to draw the very best out of remarkable singers. The quality of their singing will long stand as a testament to Howard's life and work.

Howard loved the natural world, and would spend many hours in wild places from Scotland to Northumbria scanning the horizon for birds. He retained his love of literature to the end. He had a combination of seriousness and impishness which was utterly infectious. He leaves behind a mother, father, brother, two sisters, two daughters, and countless friends whose lives he inspired and touched.

Chris Smith (Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury)