

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

HONORARY CONFERRING

Friday, 18 March 2022

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR BAIRBRE NÍ FHLOINN** on 18 March 2022, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **MARTIN FINBAR FUREY**

Deputy-President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to give this address here today in honour of Finbar Furey, and I would like to say that I'm delivering this citation not only on my own behalf but also on behalf of my colleague, Dr Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Director of the National Folklore Collection here in UCD. Críostóir and I have both had the pleasure of knowing Finbar and his family for many years now, and it is a source of great satisfaction and delight to us to see his remarkable achievements acknowledged and celebrated today by UCD.

Finbar Furey is an exceptional person by any standards. He first saw the light of day in the heart of Dublin city, spending his early childhood in the historic Liberties area before moving with his family to the then recently established

suburb of Ballyfermot in the west of Dublin when he was still very young. Ballyfermot might not have been the wealthiest part of Dublin in conventional terms, but Finbar was born into a world which was richer by far than that lived in by most Dubliners at the time, or indeed in the present. In terms of art, culture, music and creativity, the milieu in which Finbar grew up was privileged indeed. Born into a family of gifted musicians, Finbar was exposed from his earliest years to a living and vibrant tradition of music, music-making, storytelling and singing which most of the rest of us will never be so lucky to know. The Furey household in Ballyfermot was a centre for the elite of traditional music, and regular visitors to the house when Finbar was growing up included the likes of Leo Rowsome, Séamus Ennis, Felix Doran and other members of the piping aristocracy of Ireland at that time. As I'm sure you know, Finbar's father, Ted, was a highly regarded fiddle-player, with a vast range of traditional tunes in his repertoire some of which appeared on his own album, *Toss the Feathers*, released in the late 1960s. Perhaps not so well known is the fact that Finbar's mother, Nora, was also a musician, being an accomplished banjo player and singer, and Finbar would always credit both his parents as being of fundamental importance to his own subsequent development as a musician. In terms of lineage and connections, therefore, Finbar's background could hardly have been more high-ranking or auspicious for his future career.

The most exclusive musical conservatories and academies could never have provided Finbar with the inspiration and experience which he used so well to become the brilliant piper and virtuoso musician whom we all appreciate so much and honour here today, and we can only be grateful for the way in which he has succeeded in enriching our lives by drawing on his own.

Finbar's career in music could hardly have been more illustrious. While still a teenager, he won the All Ireland Uilleann Piping Junior Championship at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann as well as winning all four provincial titles and other awards during roughly the same period. Not surprisingly, he then went on to win the All Ireland Senior Championship award two years in succession, in 1965 and 1966. While also in his teens, Finbar won the Oireachtas medal for uilleann piping, for which the famous Co Clare uilleann piper, Willie Clancy, was one of the adjudicators, describing the young Finbar as a prince among pipers – a title which has deservedly stayed with him over the years.

Having attained the highest of accolades from his peers in the world of traditional music, Finbar is somewhat unusual among traditional musicians in having gone on to achieve huge popularity among the broader populace in Ireland and abroad, establishing himself as a major figure in the national consciousness and playing a central part in the revival of Irish traditional and folk music which took place from the late 1960s onwards. Finbar thus performed the

almost impossible feat of pleasing purists and proletariat alike, for which he most certainly deserves yet another medal.

Finbar started touring abroad with his brother, Eddie, in Scotland and elsewhere, in the late 1960s, joining up in the 1970s with their brothers Paul and George, and with Irish-Scottish singer and instrumentalist, Davey Arthur. This combination went through a number of names and incarnations before finally settling on the title of The Fureys and Davey Arthur, and it was with line-up this that the group started to achieve worldwide success and recognition for their unique sound and extraordinary talent. Chart-topping albums and hit singles were the order of the day from then on, taking Finbar from Carnegie Hall to the Albert Hall with an occasional stop-off in Donoghue's Pub on Merrion Row along the way. Since the mid-1990s, Finbar has pursued a solo career, leading to fresh success and acclaim and to the further evolution of his music and artistry. His solo work has also allowed him to develop his talents as a prolific songwriter, and his creativity continues, thankfully, right up to the present, with albums and CDs still appearing on a regular basis.

With his access to a global audience, Finbar has acted as a unique cultural ambassador for Ireland on countless occasions in many parts of the world, helping to establish a global following for, and an international appreciation of,

Irish music in general and uilleann piping in particular, thereby making his own contribution also to an awareness and to the popularity of world music.

Typically, however, Finbar has never forgotten his roots and he has devoted much of his life to promoting the uilleann pipes and making them more easily available to those who want to play them. In this context, he has done extensive work with the Irish uilleann pipers' organisation, Na Píobairí Uilleann, and his efforts in this area bring us right up to the present day with the publication by that organisation just a couple of weeks ago of a series of reedmaking videos with Finbar and two other expert reedmakers. Similarly, Finbar has never forgotten his background and proud heritage in the Travelling Community and has long been a tireless champion for the rights of Ireland's only ethnic minority, who have made such an extraordinary contribution to our musical and oral tradition and to the survival of that tradition with such vibrancy into the present day. In this context, it must also be said that Finbar's achievements are all the more remarkable given the widespread racism which all Travellers had to deal with on a regular basis in the past and also, sadly, to some extent in the present. Happily for us, Finbar was able to rise above such prejudice and injustice and follow his vision.

Of the many awards which Finbar has been given throughout his long career, one tribute makes mention of the way in which his music represents the values of courage, honesty, diversity and compassion. In this connection, mention should be made of Finbar's longstanding work with the Irish prison service which has involved him performing in prisons and organising workshops with prisoners as part of his unflagging commitment to the less privileged in Irish society. On a similar note, Finbar's most recent single, appearing in the middle of our recent lockdown, focuses on the topical issues of environmental destruction, climate change and ensuing problems of homelessness and displacement. And at this point, I can't resist mentioning that I attended a vigil at the GPO in support of the people of Ukraine last week, at which various pieces of Ukrainian music were played. The only Irish musician who was played was, however, Finbar Furey, which somehow seemed entirely fitting given Finbar's lifelong commitment to the downtrodden and the dispossessed.

There is so much more I could say about Finbar but time, unfortunately, won't allow it. He is, for example, not only an extraordinary piper but an amazing banjo player as well, with his multi-instrumentalism extending to the flute, the guitar, the tin whistle and probably a number of other instruments too. He even helped invent an instrument, that being the now well-known Overton flute. And as if that were not enough, we could add to his name the titles of storyteller,

poet, composer, arranger, producer and actor. His life, like his music, has been a rich tapestry which has attracted admiration from all imaginable quarters. Suffice it to say that not many people can claim as their fans the late great BBC DJ John Peel, the film director Martin Scorsese and the Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil, Seán Ó Fearghail, all in the one breath.

Before I finish, I would like to say that it's particularly appropriate that UCD should be honouring Finbar's achievements here today, as he has long-standing connections with the University and especially with the National Folklore Collection which is housed here in UCD. Finbar's daughter, Áine, studied Irish Foklore and Ethnology at postgraduate level in UCD, and Finbar very generously donated a valuable music manuscript compiled by his father, Ted Furey, to the archives of the National Folklore Collection some years ago, presenting the volume at a special ceremony presided over by the then President of UCD, Professor Art Cosgrove. Indeed, this was especially apt as one of the nicknames enjoyed by Ted Furey because of his musical prowess was 'the Professor'.

So a heartfelt thanks to Finbar for sharing his genius and his gifts with us, and a heartfelt thanks also to Finbar's wife, Sheila, and to his children, Martin, Áine, Caitríona, Robert and Finbar, for sharing Finbar with us. The world would be a much duller place without him, and Irish life and culture would be very much the poorer. Ár mbuíochas ó chroí leat as an éacht atá bainte amach agat, Finbar; nár laga Dia do láimh agus go maire tú an céad. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Praehonorabilis Pro-Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad Gradum Doctoratus in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.