

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
HONORARY CONFERRING
Friday, 18 March 2022

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LUCY COLLINS** on 18 March 2022, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **MARY BLACK**

Deputy-President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A singer of remarkable grace and subtle expression of feeling, Mary Black's achievement extends from the purity of her 1983 debut album to the atmospheric setting of some of her best-known songs by the National Symphony Orchestra, just over two years ago. Despite the scale of this recognition, she remains attentive to the individual composition, with an ear attuned to the exact relationship between the shape of the lyric and its instrumentation. In addition to this instinct for musical form, her unerring sense of how a group of talented musicians will combine to produce a near-perfect performance is, by now, legendary. But it is her voice – a voice of unparalleled clarity and control – that draws these elements together into a singular and lasting art.

Mary Black was born in 1955 and reared in Charlemont Street, Dublin. Through her family she absorbed both traditional and popular music: her father brought his talent for fiddle playing from Rathlin Island, while her mother – who was born in the Liberties – loved to sing. Black remembers their home being full of musical instruments, and has spoken of the importance of this encouragement both to herself and her siblings as they were growing up. From an early age she

knew that she wanted – in her words – to make ‘lots of room’ for music in her life. This act of ‘making room’ captures the pleasure in music-making and openness to the talents of others that has characterised her artistic growth.

Black’s career as a performer developed in the late 1970s. She sang with the band General Humbert and, in the mid-eighties, with De Dannan. These collaborations offered her the increased profile that came with international touring but, from the beginning, she needed both confidence and determination to hold her ground within an accomplished ensemble, and to forge her own musical style. She released three solo albums in the early 1980s – including her eponymous debut in 1982, which reached number 4 in the Irish charts – but it was the work she produced after leaving De Danann that consolidated her reputation: *By the Time It Gets Dark*, her 1987 album featuring ‘Katie’ and ‘Once in a Very Blue Moon’, achieved multi-platinum status in Ireland. In the space of five years, three further albums – *No Frontiers*, *Babes in the Wood*, and *The Holy Ground* – would ensure her dominance of the Irish music scene and see her named best female artist at the IRMA awards five times between 1987 and 1996.

Though traditional music has had a strong influence on her artistic development, Black continues to resist easy categorisation. The diversity of her styles and influences – part folk, part country, part pop – has reinforced her artistic independence. This breadth of engagement was fostered by collaboration: her relationship with key Irish songwriters such as Noel Brazil, Mick Hanley and Jimmy MacCarthy has been central to the development of her repertoire but also to her evolving style as vocalist and performer. Equally esteemed by international artists, she has recorded with figures as prominent as Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris and Janis Ian. Yet despite her extraordinary profile as a singer,

it is always emotional connection that determines her choice of which songs to interpret: 'I prefer something that isn't perfect,' she says, 'so long as it has that emotion.'

By her own admission, being in the right place at the right time has contributed significantly to her success. Being at home one day in 1982 when Christy Moore knocked on her door, inviting her to support him for two nights at the National Concert Hall, might be one such example. This opportunity gave her valuable exposure as well as the chance to work with Declan Sinnott in what would become a sustaining musical collaboration for the next fifteen years. She recalls their rendition of 'The Rose of Allendale' during that first performance, describing how 'he breathed the song with me', and affirming the instinctive processes that have shaped her musical journey.

Another breakthrough came seven years later, with the album *No Frontiers*, which spent 56 weeks in the Irish Top 30 and propelled Black to international fame, with record deals in the US and Japan. Unlike so many other popular successes, though, this work has endured – not only because of the beauty of the individual arrangements but because the album as a whole expresses the shaping power of Black's voice, from the jaunty rhythms of 'Carolina Rua', to the haunting drift of 'Columbus'. This melancholy turn, this capacity to convey the darkness within human experience, may be a less remarked aspect of her work, yet it extends beyond musical interpretation. The candour with which she has spoken about her experience of depression brings to public conversation the emotional honesty which has characterised her musical achievement.

With her strong work ethic and generosity of spirit, Mary Black has paved the way for a generation, and more, of remarkable women in the Irish music industry. If the extraordinary success of the compilation album *A Woman's Heart* tells us anything, it is that women have always been central to sustaining our musical traditions, to preserving and enriching our expressions of sorrow and joy, of empathy and protest. We respond to these songs as individual listeners, from our own place of experience, yet we find ourselves part of a shared musical experience – one that knows no borders – and we draw energy, and solace, from this awareness. Mary Black's accomplishments bridge space and time – from Dublin to Tokyo, from the cherished memories of her own parents to the talents of her children, with whom she has collaborated in both song writing and performance. It is this connective energy that expresses her enduring achievement. Her music brings Ireland to the world, both sustaining and remaking our traditions through the power of her singular voice.

Praehonorabilis Pro-Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad Gradum Doctoratus in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.