

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

HONORARY CONFERRING

Friday, 18 March 2022

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY PROFESSOR THERESE SMITH on 18 March 2022, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa on MARY O’HARA

A Leas-Uachtaráin, a Mhuintir na hOllscoile, agus a dhaoine uaisle, Fáilte romhaibh go léir chun an ócáid tábhachtach seo, ag deireadh “seachtain” na Gaeilge agus féile Lá le Pádraig. Tá áthas orm bheith i measc na gceoltóirí tábhachtacha seo agus a chur ós bhur gcomhair cruitire Mary O’ Hara.

Deputy President, colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am very happy to be here in the company of such distinguished musicians, particularly at the end of “seachtain” na Gaeilge, and the St. Patrick’s Day festival. It is with great pleasure that I present to you the distinguished singer and harper Mary O’Hara.

Arguably the most influential singer-harpist of the 20th century, Mary O’Hara brought the harp to worldwide audiences, playing concerts to full capacity audiences at the Royal Festival Hall, in New York City at Carnegie Hall, and in London at the Royal Albert Hall. As a solo singer with harp, singing songs in Irish, Mary O’Hara was a unique artist showcasing traditional music at a time

when Ireland was experiencing a recession akin only to that which we are now facing. Let the music play!

Born in Sligo, she won her first competition, Sligo's annual Music and Drama singing competition, at the age of eight. She attended the Dominican Convent, Sion Hill, Blackrock (just down the road from us), and she was selected (with Kathleen Watkins and Deirdre Keller) to participate in the school's 1951 Thomas Moore pageant. Although at the time she was primarily a singer (soprano), she was chosen to learn to play the harp to accompany herself.

Mary made her first radio broadcast on Radio Éireann before she left school at the age of just 16, bringing the harp to large audiences before the Irish traditional music revival had gathered true momentum here. This initial broadcast was to be followed by many other highly successful ones, although arguably the most prominent (and controversial) one was when she appeared on the Ed Sullivan show in New York city for St. Patrick's Day, when she was seated (to her dislike) in a large green shamrock. Not least because of events such as this, Mary O'Hara found herself negotiating, of necessity, not just the musical landscape, but also that of Irish tourism (epitomised perhaps by *An Tóstal* campaigns of the time), and cultural nationalism, and this she managed to do with remarkable success.

After establishing a successful touring and broadcasting career, in 1962 she decided to join the convent and became a Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey in England, where she stayed for 12 years

Upon leaving the monastery in 1974 for the sake of her health, Mary O'Hara found that her musical reputation had grown during her time in the cloister, and she returned to performing and touring. Her career continued to grow and in a matter of months, she became one of the biggest international recording stars to come out of Ireland. She has released numerous recordings which have continued to be influential after her retirement from an active career in 1994. In addition she has hosted several TV series. Her UK series for the BBC included 'The Starlight Series' in 1956 and 'Minstrel of the Dawn' in 1985. Her two TV series for ITV entitled 'Mary O'Hara and Friends' were broadcast in 1984 and 1985 in the UK. She also had her own TV specials and guested on all the major TV shows of the day, including, of course, The Late, Late Show.

Mary retired from performing and recording in 1994 and in 1996 moved to Kenya (and then Tanzania).

She returned to England in 2002 and subsequently went to live on the Aran Islands, Inis Mór. Although she had now retired from performing, she found herself in demand as a speaker, with requests to give her 'Travels With My Harp' talk and multi-media presentations in Ireland, England, Wales, Australia, USA and Canada. During this period she also published her harp accompaniments in five volumes and in May 2012 her new autobiography was published, her fourth book. She has moved in exalted cultural and musical circles, mingling with friends such as Seán Óg Ó Tuama, Joan Baez, and Val Doonican, and of course, Kathleen Watkins and Gay Byrne, to mention but a few.

We here in UCD are happy to acknowledge Mary O'Hara's important contributions to the Irish musical and cultural spheres, as a unique artist when Irish culture was in flux and arguably under challenge, by conferring on her the title of Honorary Doctorate.

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.*