

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR HARRY WHITE, on 6 NOVEMBER 2025 in the Aviva Stadium, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*, on **AIBHLÍN McCRANN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Cuireann sé an-áthas orm tráthnóna inniu Aibhlín McCrann a chur i láthair anseo don chéim dochtúir sa cheol (*honoris causa*).

Chancellor, members of the university, distinguished guests: it is indeed an honour and a sovereign joy to introduce to you this afternoon Aibhlín McCrann, and to present her for the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*, at this gathering of the National University of Ireland. Aibhlín McCrann is without doubt the most

distinguished, the most consistent, and the most persuasive advocate of the Irish harp at work in the world today. I can say with certainty that no other person in the past forty years has done so much for the Irish harp: as director of An Chúirt Chruitireachta, the International Festival for the Irish Harp for almost thirty years, Aibhlín McCrann has succeeded in integrating the harp within the instrumentarium of Irish traditional music to a pioneering degree. Her incessant work for Cairde na Cruite over many decades has been dedicated to the same resilient purpose. More recently, as Founder and Chair of Cruit Éireann/Harp Ireland, she has been responsible for a veritable renaissance in the performance, dissemination and indeed manufacture of the Irish harp throughout the north and south of this country. At every point in this productive enterprise, Aibhlín McCrann's strategic genius and sheer capacity for leadership have been characterised by a truly striking ability to inspire other practitioners and advocates of Irish harping with her own visionary prowess and determination. Given these qualities, it is scarcely surprising



to find that they are so much in demand in other domains of Irish musical practice: as chair of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, as deputy director of the Irish Arts Council and as a member of the board of the Irish Traditional Music Archive and of the UCH Concert Hall (Limerick), Aibhlín McCrann's record of public service to the musical life of this country has been exemplary. And beyond the sphere of cultural engagement in which she has been heroically and selflessly immersed for so many years, this record of service also extends to higher education and to the protection and welfare of women: she has served, for example as Deputy Chair of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and currently sits on the Governing Body of the University of Limerick.

But on this occasion, it is most especially her exceptional enrichment of the harp as a central agent of Irish musical discourse that we celebrate and honour here today. Her infrastructural achievements in this regard are legion, and they attest to a lifelong commitment to the harp as a primary expression of Irish musical culture. One recent result of this commitment (among so many others) is her work with the Department of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Heritage and Media in 2019 in which she secured recognition for Irish harping on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. As with so many of her endeavours, this singular attainment has decisively contributed to the well-being and cultivation of Irish harping for future generations.

I have known Aibhlín for almost half a century (an admission that I hope she will forgive, especially because it is belied by her vivacity, elegance and sheer grace). I met her first in 1976, when she was in the course of completing her Bachelor of Music Degree at University College Dublin (having achieved an honours BA Degree in Music and Irish), and shortly afterwards I met her future husband Peter, with whom she has collaborated so closely in her professional working life. What a truly remarkable partnership this has been, in the most comprehensive and inspiring sense imaginable. Over the years that followed, I had the supreme good fortune to witness at first hand Aibhlín's prodigious and unceasing work on behalf of Irish harping, as well as her formidable achievement as a distinguished harper in her own right. Indeed, the word 'formidable' is one I always associate with Aibhlín, notwithstanding her softly-spoken demeanour and sensitively receptive intelligence in the promotion of Irish music. Given my own preoccupation with Irish musical history over the past forty years, it is perhaps not surprising that my sense of Aibhlín's achievement, particularly insofar as Irish musical infrastructures are concerned, compares in significance with that of other pioneering figures in the musical landscape of this country. When one

thinks, for example, of Tom Walsh's achievement in opera in Wexford or John Ruddock's promotion of chamber music in Limerick and Dublin, or indeed of Muiris Ó Rócháin's stewardship of the Willie Clancy Summer School in Clare, one forms, I think, a sharper perspective on Aibhlín McCrann's comparable attainments in the development of Irish harping. This is indeed the exalted company to which she belongs. The record of concerts, cross-border harp festivals, workshops, partnerships and audiences which Harp Ireland has fostered under her direction over the past six years alone comprises a breathtaking achievement in the annals of Irish music-making.

The history of music in Ireland also affords another context in which to situate and indeed understand Aibhlín McCrann's stellar accomplishments. That history can legitimately be construed as a cultural (and thereby political) conflict between the harp and the crown – an *chláirseach agus an choróin*, to borrow the title of an Irish-language study of the symphonies of Charles Villiers Stanford – (to say little of David McCullagh's recent study of the Anglo-Irish treaty and its aftermath, *From Crown to Harp*). To this day, the rival claims of European art music and Irish traditional music continue to exert pressure on the Irish musical imagination and indeed on the Irish educational and cultural establishment. In this divisive environment the parity of esteem achieved by Aibhlín McCrann, as between traditional music and art music, is all the more desirable and all the more impressive. The harp itself may account in part for this inclusive pluralism: it is at once the very emblem of Irish cultural, political and legal authority and the defining symbol of Irish music for over a thousand years. Uniquely perhaps among Irish instruments it has inhabited both traditional and art music with surpassing skill, and in Aibhlín McCrann it has found an advocate of formidable (that word again) conviction and intelligence. 'Is treise an dúchas ná an oiliúint' says the old Irish proverb ('Instinct is stronger than learning'), but in Aibhlín McCrann both of these qualities harmoniously co-exist in the advancement and integration of Irish music. *Go leanfaidh an dá cháilíocht seo ag fás ina saothar.*

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, 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 Musica; idque tibi fide
mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**