

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

MR MEL MERCIER, on 3 June, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music honoris causa, on MICHEÁL Ó SUILLEABHÁIN

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

The composer, performer and academic, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, has played a seminal role in the shaping of contemporary Irish culture in the last three decades. Through his distinctive compositional style, captivating concert performances, perceptive scholarly writing, and penetrating cultural analysis, he has emerged as one of the most vital voices in Irish musical life in the second half of the 20th century. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, with Ó Súilleabháin in the full flow of his immense creative powers, we pause to celebrate the man and reflect upon his exceptional achievements thus far.

It is too soon to fully comprehend the significance of his contribution to Irish Cultural life, in general, but arguably, it is as an educator that Ó Súilleabháin's legacy is at its most significant.

Born in 1950 in Clonmel, his career in education began with his appointment as a lecturer in music at University College Cork in 1975. It was during his time in the Department of Music that he pioneered an approach to education that was to inform all of his subsequent work. For 18 years he contributed to its reputation as the most innovative music department in the country. Building on the foundations laid by Seán Ó Riada before him, Ó Súilleabháin began to articulate a philosophy of Music Education that located music making itself, and dialogue between diverse traditions, at its core. He first established systemic parity of esteem for Irish traditional music within the academy, thus giving it equal voice in the creative exchange with classical music. He also followed Ó Riada 's lead in his imaginative repositioning of Irish music studies within the broader discursive framework of world music studies. The resultant creative intermingling of diverse musical voices and sounds shaped a unique environment for the study of music that was to quickly attract national and international attention.

In 1994, Ó Súilleabháin was appointed to the first Chair of Music at the University of Limerick. Here he applied his philosophy of Music Education in an even more thoroughgoing fashion to his creation of the Irish World Music Centre. An interdisciplinary school of music and dance studies, the IWMC has made an enormous contribution to cultural discourse in Ireland. Just ten years in existence, it has already established itself as the primary centre for postgraduate music and dance scholarship in the Ireland. The Irish World Music Centre attracts growing interest worldwide from universities inspired by its innovative modelling, and as a result, Ó Súilleabháin has been invited by government associations and academic institutions from China to Kenya to Scotland to help advise on their music education programmes and systems.

The creative interfacing of distinct musical styles also distinguishes much of his compositional output. As a composer, the musical synthesis of diverse traditions of sound is at the heart of his creative process. In his major works for traditional, classical, jazz, and world music ensembles and instruments, distinct musical languages revel in animated conversation with each other and a new, syncretic voice emerges which is at once Irish and universal.

As a performer, Ó Súilleabháin is credited with the creation of an internationally recognised Irish piano style. His profound musicality, technical virtuosity, and deep understanding of Irish Traditional Music have allowed him to unlock the potential of the piano to bridge the sonic worlds of traditional, classical and jazz music repertoires. At the keyboard he conjures up a distinctive sound that is perhaps the most cogent artistic expression of his poly-musical persona, and, in his fluent, inventive and richly textured synthesis of musical styles, he has no equal.

Since 1976, he has recorded over 12 albums, which include major compositions for traditional flute and string orchestra, piano and chamber orchestra, choir and orchestra, jazz band, set-dancers and sean-nós dancer. He has appeared on concert stages throughout the world from Delhi to Dublin, and the Albert Hall, London to Hosford's Garden Centre in Clonakilty. A popular media personality, his many television credits include the groundbreaking series, A River of Sound, which he both devised and presented. In his many scholarly publications he weaves poetic and

academic voices together in a manner that has, in the words of the poet, Seamus Heaney, "...the ability to bring us to our senses about what is going on inside and outside ourselves". In so doing, Ó Súilleabháin illuminates the discourse on Irish Music. To all of these, and many other endeavors, he brings boundless energy, creativity and generosity of spirit. He is admired and beloved of his students, colleagues, fellow musicians and audiences alike.

Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin shapes his own sound and his own history. A champion of the profound significance of cultural work, he believes in the positive, transformational potential of artistic expression. For thirty years he has tapped into a deep well of creativity, its energy flowing irrepressibly through him. He moves with it, between the past and the future, the local and the global, and in the fluid, liminal space, between worlds, he is at his most powerful. His ultimate vision is both humanitarian and spiritual in the widest sense. It is given voice by both his own music and the musical legacy he bequeaths to his many students, colleagues and admirers. A visionary and charismatic educator and artist, Mícheál's exceptional creative gifts, in concert with each other, set him apart as a remarkable Irish man.

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