

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR DAVID COX**, Head of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences in University College Cork on 4 June 2010, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*, on **ROBERT LAMB**

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

Robert Lamb is a musician of many talents: performer, conductor, composer and arranger, educationalist and teacher. He is, first and foremost, a jazz trombonist: the finest player of his, and any other, generation.

Professors of Music and Brass Band Conductors will tell you that the trombone is not the most grateful of musical instruments, in the hands of Robert Lamb, it speaks evocatively, with a warm golden tone and long flowing, sinuous, melodic lines, in a blend of rhythm and pitch that can be at one moment, challenging and exciting, the next, elegant and evocative.

Robert Lamb was born on February 11, 1931 in 66 Dominic Street, Cork, which is just off Shandon Street. He was the eldest child of a family of five boys and six girls. As the house in Dominic Street was far too small for such a large family, Robert went to live with his grandmother, who ran a fruit and vegetable stall in Corn Market Street. As a child, Robert got up at five am every morning in order to help his grandmother set out the stall.

Robert has acknowledged that his grandmother was the most formative influence on his life: a powerful lady: energetic, strong, direct and honest, with a great passion for life. Her influence can be seen in Robert's varied career and in the boundless energy of his music.

Apart from the sound of the Shandon Bells, the only direct musical influence on the young Robert was from one of the great musical institutions of Cork: the Barrack Street Band. Under the influence of Barney O'Toole, a teacher in the Barrack Street Band, Robert learned the rudiments of music and was taught to play the euphonium. His first musical notes, both on the euphonium and then later on the trombone, were heard in the Barrack Street Band and played on instruments loaned out by the Band.

Robert decided to take up the trombone when, still weak from a bout of food poisoning, it replaced the bulky euphonium because it was much lighter for him to carry around. He first became aware of the expressive potential of the trombone by listening to recordings of the American trombonist Tommy Dorsey, one of the brothers in the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra. It was a life-changing experience: In Robert's words, he could not believe "the beautiful sounds coming from the trombone". He learned to play the trombone by listening to records on his mother's wind up gramophone and playing along with the trombone solos. The child who initially wanted to become a footballer began to discover a musical talent for which there was, at that time, no family tradition.

Most children dream of running away to join the circus, but in Robert's case, with parental consent, armed with his first trombone, bought from Crowley's Window for sixteen pounds, he joined Duffy's Circus as a circus musician. This experience helped him to develop as a player, whilst paying off the cost of his trombone by weekly deductions from his circus wages.

On his return to Cork Robert began to play with local bands like Dolly Butler's Band. At the age of 16, still too young to be admitted to a place of entertainment, he could be found standing outside the Arcadia Ballroom listening to the great English Bands, such as

Ted Heath and Jack Parnell (who he later played with in England) as they did their annual Irish gig.

In pursuit of ever greater musical challenges, Robert moved first to London where he played with Teddy Foster, Jack Parnell and Ted Heath, and then to New York to study with Charles Colin and to play with Charlie Barnet, Stan Kenton and Buddy Rich.

Robert arrived in America during the great age of jazz music when the big-band genre gave the opportunity to talented musicians to demonstrate their artistry within the freedom of the language of jazz, and a style of improvisation that emphasised individual creativity within a popular music idiom. There was considerable competition for places in the great jazz bands of the era, and his audition in Las Vegas for the Woody Herman Band provoked an intense debate between members of the band, some of whom wanted "a big name from New York rather than a nobody from Europe". Robert blew the opposition away with the aid of some forceful playing on his trombone and Woody Hermann backed his own musical judgement by giving the job to the "nobody from Europe". His judgement was vindicated as, through his evocative trombone playing, Robert Lamb became the golden voice of a golden age of music.

Robert Lamb thus became the first jazz musician from Ireland to become part of the great American jazz music scene. He played with the Woody Hermann band for three years. It was an intense and demanding experience playing with great musicians night after night, working the States from West to East and back again many times.

When Robert decided to return to London, his three years of playing with Woody Hermann made him unique; he had done something that no other European musician had done before. He had made an investment for life, he had both a personal reputation as a performer and the experience necessary to offer European musicians direct contact with the great performing tradition of American Jazz. He joined the BBC Showband and then the BBC Radio Orchestra. He embarked upon a performing career that included over 6,000 broadcasts for the BBC, frequent appearances on the BBC Television, ITV, and all the major European TV stations. He has also performed in over 200 major films for MGM, United Artists, Paramount, and numerous British production companies. He has directed broadcasting orchestras throughout Europe, appearing regularly at venues in Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Germany. When the great American popular musicians came touring Europe, including Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Sammy Davis Jnr, Barbra Streisand and Ella Fitzgerald, he joined the American contingent, strengthening the link between Europe and America and rising above both to become a truly international musician.

Once back in Europe Robert's career took on ever new challenges as he began to exploit the natural communicative language of jazz in his own "classical" music, writing several works for orchestra including symphonies and concertos, with two important additions to the concerto repertoire for the trombone. He has won the Ivor Novello award and the French Blue Ribbon Award for composition. He remains active as a composer and, in 2008, a work for eight trombones was awarded America's Emory Remington Award for excellence in composition.

From an early age, Robert has been pursued by swans, first as a child when the swans on the River Lee counterattacked the children from the northside of Cork, and then more productively, with a lifetime preoccupation with the legend of the children of Lir. Three different works inspired by the legend culminated in his magnum opus: "The Children of Lir" a work of symphonic proportions, written for narrator and orchestra and first performed in Dublin by Fiona Shaw and the National Symphony Orchestra.

His selection of the legend of the Children of Lir is indicative of the fact that despite his international success, Robert has never forgotten his Irish roots: I quote: "I believe that,

as an Irishman, I have a heritage of hundreds of years of Irish Traditional Music instilled into me" In his work "the blues" have a tinge of "green".

The story of the transformation of children into swans is also in some sense a metaphor for the life of Robert Lamb in which he was continually transforming himself into new areas of music experience firstly as a performer, than as a composer and arranger and finally as a teacher.

In 1982 Robert Lamb became the first Head of Jazz Studies at Trinity College London, the first of the four main Colleges of Music in London to introduce jazz studies into its music curriculum. Characteristically, he attacked this new challenge with verve and energy, founding, for example, the Trinity College Jazz Band and the Trinity Big Band, into which he poured his years of experience as a performer. His pioneering work in Trinity College has led to significant changes to the music education curriculum. In a few years, studies in Jazz and Popular Music have become an integral part of the music curriculum in Universities and Conservatoires around the world. The heart of this educational initiative is a close relationship between the performer and the composer typical of the jazz idiom, and the opportunity for composers to discover new areas of personal expression by combining the language of popular music with the structures of classical music.

Robert Lamb has a natural ability to communicate with young people. His communication skills combine his abilities as a performer with an understanding of the fundamentals of the power of music. They are deployed through master classes in which he passes his knowledge and experience onto future generations of musicians. The many successful master classes he has given include a return to his home ground: the Barrack Street Band, where he enthralled a new generation of young Cork musicians with his ideas on melody, harmony and, most of all, rhythm, a rhythm that arises from deep within the body, a rhythm that in jazz, is indeed the rhythm of life.

It is not possible to encompass a creative life so rich and varied as this one in a few short minutes. However, I am sure that Robert himself would be the first to admit, that he couldn't have achieved what he has in life without the support of his wife Rita, his children Deirdre, Fiona and Siobhan and his eight grand children. We welcome many members of the family to UCC today.

In this year of celebration of the life and achievement of Cork musicians:

I present to you: Robert Lamb: son of Cork, musician of the world.

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.