

**OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH**  
**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY**

**Text of the Introductory Address delivered by DR AIDAN THOMSON, National University of Ireland, Galway on 16 October 2018, on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*, on SHARON SHANNON.**

**A Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle...**

In 1920, the Irish musicologist, Annie Patterson, wrote that ‘The history of Irish Folk-Music’—that is, traditional music—‘reads like a romance; but it is, nevertheless, a living art reality that ... has interpenetrated the music of other countries whilst still preserving its own distinctive qualities, and has, possibly, a yet more vibrant and perhaps individually assertive part to play in the international music of the coming era’.

Patterson’s words have proved prophetic, as Irish traditional music has flourished during the last hundred years. Within Ireland, the tradition has been preserved through organizations like Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Irish Traditional Music Archive, while advances in technology have enabled the genre to attract a significant international following.

But, as Patterson acutely observed, traditional music is a ‘living art’: it can absorb, and be absorbed by, other national traditions without losing its own identity. This has been particularly the case over the last half-century, during which time, thanks to the imagination of its leading performers, Irish traditional music has been combined fruitfully with many genres of popular music from all over the world.

Few Irish musicians illustrate the celebration of the best of Irish music while being open to the influence of other traditions—a celebration of the local and the global, one might say—than Sharon Shannon.

Her background is that of the Irish traditional musician *par excellence*. Born in Corofin, Co. Clare, to a musical family, she began her musical training on the tin whistle before switching to the instrument for which she is best known today, the button accordion.

Along with her siblings, Gary, Majella and Mary, she was a member of the group Dísirt Tola, while at University College Cork she played alongside Matt Cranitch (a noted authority on the Sliabh Luachra fiddle style), Dave Hennessy and Aidan Coffey. In short, she is a musician with deep roots in the Irish tradition.

But she is also an exemplary practitioner of Patterson's 'living art', for her professional career has been characterized by an openness to engage with other types of music.

In 1990, she toured Europe with the folk-rock group, The Waterboys, where, as she recalls, there were 'no rules as to the type of music played... we could move very easily from a punk song to an old timey American waltz to Irish jigs and reels and onto New Orleans-type blues'.

Her first solo album, *Sharon Shannon* (1991), was characterized not only by 'a steady, contemplative and highly rhythmic traditional style', as Fintan Vallely has observed, but also by its eclecticism. This has remained a feature of her later albums, where she has combined traditional Irish music with reggae (notably in *Out of the Gap*, 1994), Cajun, country, Native American, bluegrass, rap, dance, tango and French-Canadian influences. A roll call of figures with whom she has performed attests to her versatility: The Chieftains, Christy Moore, Bono, Willie Nelson, Dennis Bovell, Sinéad O'Connor, Kirsty MacColl and Nigel Kennedy to name but a few.

Her most recent album, *Sacred Earth* (2017), breaks further new ground through its creative mastery of African/Irish crossover: an

‘interpenetration of the music of other countries’, but in a way that celebrates a shared humanity through the coming together of different cultures. Her interest in Africa is by no means purely musical: she is an Ambassador for the Missionvale Ireland Trust, which provides financial support, poverty relief and education to the Missionvale township near Port Elizabeth in South Africa.

Sharon Shannon has a long and close association with Galway, where she has lived for many years. During her student years, she provided music for the Druid Theatre’s production of Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*, and became a founding member of Arcady.

In 2000 she recorded Steve Earle’s ‘The Galway Girl’ and in 2008 collaborated with Mundy in a cover of this most iconic of songs. The recording with Mundy became the most downloaded track in Ireland that year, and is in the top ten highest selling singles of Irish chart music. She and Mundy were foremost among the musicians who led the performance of the song by a record-breaking 15,000 people in Galway in June 2016, as part of Galway’s successful bid to become European City of Culture in 2020. Few musicians have been so tireless in their advocacy of the cultural life of this city.

Sharon Shannon's career is the perfect example of how traditional Irish music can be celebrated nationally and internationally: through her excellence as a performer, and through the possibilities that it offers to enrich and be enriched by other musical traditions. It is a pleasure to welcome her here today to acknowledge the huge contribution that she has made to music—locally, nationally and globally—by conferring on her the degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*.

**PRAEHONORABILIS 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 Musicae, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**