

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR HARRY WHITE on 9 October 2019 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*, on **ANN CLEARE**

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

The composer Ann Cleare, whose achievements we honour here this afternoon, is one of the most innovative, imaginative and I dare to add *self-effacing* artists of sound at work in the world today. The constituency of interest surrounding her work is truly an international one, and it comprehends not only an impressive litany of prestigious commissions from music festivals, professional ensembles and broadcasters throughout Europe, but also from India, Australia and North America. Merely to survey the commissions she has received over the past decade from ensembles including Ensemble SurPlus, 175 East, the Crash Ensemble, The Chiara String Quartet, the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, the Divertimento Quartet, the Austrian Ensemble for New Music, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and the Fidelio Trio among many others, as well as from leading soloists and from classical radio stations throughout the world, is to recognize an exceptionally gifted and prodigiously esteemed musician.

And yet: it is not even the mildest disparagement of these glittering attainments to add that beyond the immediate domain of contemporary music, there are many people in Ireland, and I specifically mean people more generally engaged or interested in the arts, who remain largely innocent of Ann's deeply-embedded international standing. This, I would add in passing, is not at all an

unusual state of affairs. Irish composers generally (and one might add *scandalously*) proceed under a veil of silence, at least insofar as their indifferent reception in Ireland goes. Sometimes this indifference extends to the entire domain of twentieth and twenty-first century music, whether by Irish composers or not. To read in an examination script, for example, that Anton Webern was ‘a member of the second *Vietnamese School of Composition*’, or that ‘the English composer Peter Grimes’ restored the fortunes of British opera gives this sad game of indifference away. The jewel in my own private collection of such misprisions is that ‘Richard Wagner was *anti-semantic*’, an inspiring inadvertence which nevertheless takes us close to the abyss that lies between what composers do and what we *think* they do.

In truth, a good deal of contemporary composition is indeed anti-semantic, at least insofar as it dispenses with those formal jurisdictions which guaranteed a reassuring degree of intelligibility between a composer and her audience in favour of an entirely original, and therefore supremely challenging idiolect in which the artist is a mediator between sound and experience. The word ‘composer’ strains under the duress of this challenge, because its proverbially semantic connotations continue to summon a male-dominated, authorial presence which is frankly inadequate to the artistic enterprise of contemporary composition, especially when it conflicts with (or even undermines) this authorial superego. Many of Ann Cleare’s compositions steer us gently away from this imaginary museum of musical works (to borrow a phrase) and present us instead with an acutely original and attentive custodianship of sound, in which the composer is a steward, rather than a Promethean thief of fire. When, for example, she entitles a composition *the physics of fog, swirling* (written for alto flute, B-flat clarinet, two trumpets, horn, trombone, tuba, harp, piano, percussion, violin, viola and cello), she [and I quote] ‘imagines this ensemble as an ocean of various fog waves in motion – suspending, swirling and absorbing the space in which they dwell. Although fog muffles, it also allows for a way of seeing and sensing familiar things anew’. This affordance – ‘a way of

seeing and sensing anew’ – lies at the heart of Ann Cleare’s compositional aesthetic. Through her stewardship, her skilful and subtle representations of and meditations upon the environment of sound, we hear the world anew.

But these affordances are anything but casual or impressionistic soundscapes. A comparatively early work, *Dorchadas* (‘Darkness’, from 2007) ‘scales the density, gravity and depth of a fear of the dark. This darkness is akin to a boundless, open space where the mind moves illogically between racing to find illumination and allowing itself to revel in fear. The piece encapsulates an attempt to shine the light of sound upon darkness, probing a thought that the fear that scares one witless is the very same one that can bring understanding.’ ‘To shine the light of sound upon darkness’ privileges sound, and the sound environment, as language cannot do. This encounter with sound extends the boundaries of composition in a notably courageous and original act of imagination.

I have dwelt on the visionary and intensely personal originality of Ann Cleare’s work as a composer in this brief testimonial perhaps at the expense of her formidable academic achievements: she holds a PhD in composition from Harvard, and took her first degree and Master’s degree at University College Cork, and she currently teaches as an assistant Professor of Composition at Trinity College Dublin. She was awarded the extremely prestigious Ernst von Siemens prize for composition in Munich earlier this year (March 2019). But I think that we honour her here today because her music so compellingly and so courageously asks us to hear the world differently. In her concert music, opera, hybrid instrumental design and perhaps above all in the creation of strikingly arresting soundscapes, Ann Cleare is, if I may say as much, an *artist of the floating world*, or perhaps better yet an *artist of the sounding world*. I hope this likening will not displease her: to say that her work summons the supremely modest, but supremely moving persona of an artist like Kazuo Ishiguro is the highest compliment available to me. What a privilege it is to bestow

the same on an Irish composer. Thus I commend Ann Cleare to the university, and to this distinguished gathering.

**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.**