

## **Citation for Cecilia Bartoli Honorary Conferring Presented by Professor Harry White, UCD School of Music**

President, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests and colleagues: it is a supreme privilege as well as a great pleasure to present Cecilia Bartoli to you today and to welcome her most warmly to University College Dublin.

Although this great artist has been showered with honours from France, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and of course from Italy, this is the first occasion, so far as I am aware, that she has consented to accept the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*.

On that account alone, it is especially fitting that she should appear in this capacity *solo e pensoso*, and that the University should assemble this convocation especially in her honour.

As everyone here will know, the acclaim which has greeted this uniquely gifted, uniquely thoughtful Roman Ambassador of music throughout Europe and North America rests upon her recordings, her recitals and her appearances in the great opera houses of the world over the past two decades. But the fame which Cecilia Bartoli enjoys as one of the greatest singers of the age – attested by the stupendous success of her recordings which have made her the best-selling classical artist of her day – is more than a matter of supreme artistry.

The triumph of popular culture in general, and of popular *musical* culture in particular makes it all the more remarkable that Cecilia Bartoli's voice, lustrous, beautiful and incomparable in terms of technique and expression, should be heard above this clamour by millions of ordinary people. Through the agency of that voice, she has brilliantly retrieved and miraculously re-incarnated a whole sound-world which otherwise would remain lost.

She is, among much else, the master-intelligencer of Neapolitan, Roman and Venetian dramatic music of the early eighteenth century. She is the most persuasive advocate of the Italian Baroque which the contemporary world knows, and because of her artistry, her research, her instinctive originality and her intellectual curiosity, "the dark ages of opera", as this period once was described, are dark no more. Instead, Cecilia Bartoli's recordings have magnificently illuminated the rhetoric, passion and ceremony of the Italian Baroque. Quite literally, she breathes new life into old and hitherto forgotten music.

Her recoveries in this respect are legion: together with such brilliant ensembles and conductors as Il Giardino Armonico under Giovanni Antonini, or Les Musiciens de Louvre under Marc Minkowski, she has decisively revealed the animating genius of the Italian Da Capo aria and the dramatic intelligence of some of its most able practitioners, including Vivaldi, Nicola Porpora, Antonio Caldara and Leonardo Leo. Although all of those names are familiar to students of the Italian Baroque, it is Vivaldi's name which reaches out to posterity and sounds most familiar. But I am not alone when I add that I would gladly exchange much of Vivaldi's instrumental music for the astonishing range of dramatic feeling engaged by the arias which Cecilia Bartoli recorded in her *Vivaldi Album* of 1999. Six of these arias are premiere recordings and all thirteen of them attest to the quality of Vivaldi's dramatic imagination which stands revealed through the agency of performances of such perfectly-pitched musicianship that the composer in his own lifetime could not have hoped for a more intelligent and *simpatico* interpreter than Cecilia Bartoli herself.

If pressed on this point, I would simply refer the listener to the aria, 'Gelido in ogni vena' (from the 1731 version of *Farnace*) which not only transcends the dark-veined and haunted orchestral ritornello (itself reminiscent of the opening of 'Winter' from *The Four Seasons*) but which allows us to experience the *Da Capo* at its most searing and compelling. In such moments we are given access to a quality of musical utterance that has otherwise slipped away from the auditory imagination. The same album reveals in dizzying plenitude the vocal technique which has made Cecilia Bartoli so revered as a *virtuosa* without rival. It may please her to know that my colleague, Dr Wolfgang Marx, regularly uses this very album to exemplify the brilliance of High Baroque vocal style in his own teaching, and that his students are constantly surprised that the human voice is capable of such technical brilliance, and that opera before the French Revolution can articulate such spirited, vigorous and powerful emotion.

So, long before this day arrived, Cecilia Bartoli has indeed been a friend to us in the UCD School of Music, as she is to so many millions of listeners around the world. That, I think, is one of the hallmarks of an enduring and singular artist: she conveys with unrivalled intimacy and skill something essential about the human condition which cannot otherwise be imparted. For many people, music does this more immediately and more potently than any other art form, and often it transcends the spoken or even the written word in its capacity to move the soul and frequently to reassure it.

The ascendancy of music in Italian culture, especially in the invention of opera as the principal domain for artistic expression of this kind, is of course a commonplace.

In Ireland, by contrast, other modes of artistic expression have prevailed, so that the spoken or written word – in drama, in poetry and in fiction – has tended to take precedence, even if an aspiration to the condition of music is something which binds together the work of so many Irish writers who draw upon opera as a vital presence (and sometimes as a *rival* presence) in apposition with language itself. (The writings of James Joyce, whose university education took place in this very building, is an exemplary instance of what I mean).

Nevertheless, the long love affair which Ireland has conducted with Italian opera over the past two centuries counts for a great deal, especially on an occasion such as this. One of the very few Irish composers to have contributed decisively to the genre of Italian (and later English) opera was Michael William Balfe, whose *Bohemian Girl* echoes like a mantra through the works of James Joyce. But Balfe comes to mind on this occasion for a very different reason, namely his friendship and artistic collaboration with the great mezzo-soprano, Maria Malibran, whose life and work Cecilia Bartoli has done so much to restore to prominence. I shall return to the relationship between Balfe and Malibran in a few minutes.

Here it is Cecilia Bartoli's engagement with Maria Malibran that preoccupies me, and in particular her recordings, concerts and staged performances of the repertory which made Malibran famous. These have resulted in a much wider revival of interest in French and Italian romantic opera, and in composers such as Halévy and of course Bellini than would otherwise have been possible. Just as in her work on the Italian Baroque, so too Cecilia Bartoli's enterprises on behalf of the early nineteenth century, reveal an artist who has significantly widened our understanding and reception of this repertory through the agency of her patient research and stellar performances alike. Once again, I feel bound to refer the listener to *Maria*, a CD which magnificently apostrophises Cecilia Bartoli's ability to recover the forgotten past and make it live again. Speaking for a moment as a musicologist, I hope she will understand why I pause to salute her scholarship in

this way. It would be easy to overlook this aspect of Cecilia Bartoli's work in favour of her amazing gifts as a singer and her spectacular powers of communication as an artist. Had she been content simply to confine herself to the already demanding role of a Prima Donna, or to record a repertory well-known and therefore more likely to enjoy dissemination and commercial success, Cecilia Bartoli would still be a world-famous name today, so memorable and compelling are her musicianship and technical mastery.

But we honour her this morning not only on this account, but also because of her unmistakable commitment to scholarship, and through scholarship to the retrieval and restoration of so much music which resonates with the value-systems and historic circumstances that gave it life in the first place.

I don't believe there is any other singer who combines the roles of scholar and performer in quite this way. I am certain that the consistency and intellectual verve with which Cecilia Bartoli has created and extended her repertoire as an artist – that is, precisely through the agency of historical research- is entirely singular. Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that 'great readers are rarer and more numinous than great writers': this is an observation that deliberately goes against the grain of contemporary aesthetics, in which originality (in concept, as in execution) takes precedence over every other consideration. Borges wanted to redress this point of view, and to claim for criticism and interpretation a rarer and less acknowledged gift. It is a gift which Cecilia Bartoli possesses in abundance and it is also one which makes her in turn a 'great reader' (which is to say a great interpreter) in the creative sense applied to this term by Borges himself. It is for this reason that I described her a few minutes ago as a 'master-intelligencer' of the Italian Baroque.

When the President of University College Dublin, Dr Hugh Brady, invited me to present Cecilia Bartoli for this degree, the significance of this event for musicology in UCD was not lost on me for an instant. We are a very small School, even if our performance ensembles, in particular the UCD Choral Scholars and the UCD Symphony Orchestra give us a much wider presence across the university than we would otherwise enjoy. But musicology remains our claim to intellectual autonomy, and in particular historical musicology, ethnomusicology and analysis. Because Cecilia Bartoli is no stranger to the archive – she is, on the contrary, completely at home there – she will understand how grateful my colleagues and I feel that she should have accepted this honour. Since the inception of the School of Music in 2005, the DMUS degree has been bestowed only once previously, on the great pianist Alfred Brendel. I hope that Cecilia Bartoli will feel that she is in good company.

As is so often the case in these circumstances, we know all about Cecilia Bartoli, but she must know very little about us. This is not the occasion to enlighten her further, but I might be permitted, perhaps, to dwell on a tiny co-incidence (hardly even that, in truth) which nevertheless illustrates the timeliness of this occasion, as well as its relevance to the practice of musicology in this university. As some people here will know, the *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, now in the final stages of preparation, represents the largest research project in music ever to have been undertaken in this country. It will be published by University College Dublin Press in 2011. As one of its two general editors, I seem to be working every hour God sends to complete the text in time for this publication date. In any case, last week, while editing the article on Balfe, I read the following aloud to my fellow editor, Barra Boydell:

In 1834 Maria Malibran, who had befriended Balfe in Paris, arrived in Milan for her debut at La Scala. Through her influence Balfe joined her in the cast of Rossini's

*Otello* in May 1834. Early in 1835 he again sang with Malibran, this time at the La Fenice theatre in Venice in several leading roles. Malibran called Balfe 'The English Rossini', saying that she wanted him to write an opera for her for London. His friendship with the prima donna had a significant influence on his subsequent career.

As soon as I had finished reading, there was a pause, and then I said, very slowly: "Cecilia Bartoli". Barra replied, with equal deliberation: 'Of course!' For one precious moment, the friendship between Balfe and Malibran and the otherwise great distance between the history of Irish music and one of the world's greatest singers seemed to be tantalizingly in alignment. Even though Balfe was Irish (and not English), and Malibran was Spanish (and not Italian), Balfe did in fact write an opera for her, *The Maid of Artois*, in 1836. And here we are, 174 years later, in an Irish university, paying tribute to Malibran's great redeemer, Cecilia Bartoli. Perhaps there is truth in the harmony of the spheres after all.

There is certainly truth in the consolation and refuge which Cecilia Bartoli's voice provides, in the value of great art which her musicianship affirms, in the sound-world which her scholarship has uncovered. These three dimensions of her art seem to speak even more eloquently in the context of a country such as this one which, for all its enthusiasm for opera, has never quite succeeded in emancipating the genre from its spurious connotations of privilege, elitism and condescension. And now, when the very economic sovereignty of the country lies in question in a saga of mismanagement, corruption, complacency and sheer misfortune that would make even the most sensational and lurid opera seem tame by comparison, our hopes for the educational and financial infrastructure which opera itself entails are once again diminished. In these somber circumstances, the redress and refuge of great music seem to me more important than ever. If only on that account, the achievement of Cecilia Bartoli richly merits the great gratitude with which we acknowledge and honour her today.

But my last thought remains with that supreme admixture of scholarship and artistry, of history and musical utterance, which distinguishes the work of this great singer. So many of her individual recordings attest these qualities in abundance that it is very difficult to single any one of them out without feeling an imperative need to draw attention to all of them. Thus her album devoted to Antonio Salieri with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (from 2003) or her sequence of oratorio arias by Handel, Alessandro Scarlatti and Caldara from 2005 dramatically uncovers a repertoire previously known (if at all) only to a handful of scholars. Perhaps her most audacious project in this respect is the magnificently produced *Sacrificium* album from 2009, subtitled 'The Age of the Castrato'. Audacious, because the album itself asks us to confront 'the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of boys in the name of music'. This juxtaposition of magnificent art and the barbaric means of its original production reminds us, in no uncertain terms, that history and music are not innocently involved with each other and that no one period in European affairs (including ours) has a monopoly on the brutal abuse of children. And yet: the music, through the agency of Cecilia Bartoli's own ineffably perfect art, prompts us to contemplate the pity and waste of the whole Castrato cult, invented by a society even more pathologically indifferent than our own.

*La musique avant tout chose* remains the watchword of European society, indeed of the whole western world, whether as a source of intimacy, emotional remembrance, physical exuberance or expression of power. At the last, Cecilia Bartoli's extraordinary gifts as a singer confirm that music is indeed the 'supreme mystery in the science of humankind'. We may never be able to account properly

for its astonishing presence in our lives, but we can at least acknowledge and very warmly salute those great artists whose astounding skill, intuition and technique allow it to arise and sound. In that rare company, Cecilia Bartoli is foremost. Thus I commend her to you.