

The Departments of English Studies and of Music are delighted to present Rachel Unthank and Becky Unthank for an honorary Doctor of Letters, in recognition of their significant contribution to UK culture via music that blends Northumbrian traditions with international influences, and wider work that encourages public audiences to become active participants and to find their own voices.

Rachel and Becky were brought up in Ryton, Tyne and Wear and their commitment to the shipyards and to the long history of seafaring has marked their work. Together with their band The Unthanks they have released 14 critically acclaimed albums, from 2009's *Here's the Tender Coming* which is still much played and discussed, to their live album with the Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band which launched with a concert here at Durham Cathedral in 2011, to 2012's *Songs from the Shipyards* which aimed to record the sacrifices and achievements of shipbuilding on the Tyne, Wear, and Tees.

Their 2024 album *In Winter* was described in *The Times* as a 'beautiful, atmospheric and profound' work in which Rachel and Becky's voices 'bring the ancient material alive'. Contributing to a living heritage through re-invigorating traditional music and song, alongside contemporary arrangement and composition practice with their collaborators, has been central to the sisters' career achievements.

They have long run public singing weekends on the Northumberland coast, and during the Covid-19 pandemic staged a major online singing event that ran for 23 glorious hours. Despite the widely acknowledged magic of their voices and sibling harmony, they prioritise an equal footing with their audiences, viewing the act of singing as available to all. It is tempting to turn here to the praise lavished upon Rachel and Becky by folk luminaries; to tell you that, for example, Martin Carthy is deeply moved by their work. Given their focus on the voices of ordinary people, however, I want to cite a recent participant in their singing workshops who has written that 'the vocal harmonies of Becky and Rachel make my heart simultaneously sing with joy and break with agony. Which is a wonderful thing [and] a treasure map to the essence of what matters'.

A literature department has got to admire musicians who, in their *Lines* triple album project of 2018, troubled themselves to draw on the writing of Emily Brontë and Vera Brittain for inspiration. A music department can only approve of an approach that allows all people to articulate their region and their heritage through song. Our University's civic commitments mean we are proud to recognise those rooted in the North East who bring its distinctive qualities to an international stage, as the sisters are shortly to do once again via the BBC Proms programme.

For all of these reasons: *Vice-Chancellor I present Rachel Unthank and Becky Unthank to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.*