

**Neil Tennant**

**Doctor of Letters**

**Durham Cathedral, 31 March 2022**

As singer, musician and main lyricist in Pet Shop Boys, Neil Tennant has made an indelible mark on British and world culture in an entertainment career of more than 40 years. Since 1984 Pet Shop Boys have released 14 studio albums, 4 remix albums, 2 live albums and 7 compilation albums. With his co-writer Chris Lowe, Tennant has brought art to pop and pop to art, producing music that has endeared itself to new generations of listeners. In addition, Pet Shop Boys have starred in a movie, have written a musical, a ballet score, a soundtrack for the 1925 silent movie *Battleship Potemkin* and an oratorio, *A Man From the Future*, based on the life and death of Alan Turing. They have worked with a plethora of other artists, including Dusty Springfield and Liza Minnelli in music, Derek Jarman in film and Jonathan Harvey in theatre. In March 2016, Edinburgh University held a two-day academic conference on the work of Pet Shop Boys.

Raised in Newcastle, he left with a haversack and some trepidation for student life in London, started a career with Marvel Comics and then became deputy editor of music magazine Smash Hits. His chance meeting with Chris Lowe in 1981 was a turning point for his life and for British music. As a team, they survived their early chart success, able to adapt as Tennant's lyrics adopted a maturity and sophistication that cultivated and retained new audiences. Full of literary, political and historical allusions, Tennant's words are layered with multiple meanings that can be read lightly and superficially or deeply and philosophically. Is 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' merely an immigration status or a firm relationship commitment? Was 'The Forgotten Child' a missing refugee or our lost compassion? In 2018, Faber & Faber published a collection of Tennant's work: *One Hundred Lyrics and a Poem*.

It is easy to mistake Neil's work for London-centric yet, in many senses, Pet Shop Boys are a Northern band, bringing a wry Northern perspective to their commentary on British, European and Global life. The 2002 album *Release* was recorded here in County Durham and their recent single 'Burning the Heather' evokes the County's

landscape. Consistently profound and thoughtful, Tennant's words nevertheless speak to a universality in the human experience, there for us in times of pain or pleasure, love or sorrow, through life's mistakes and joys, there is a song for each mood and occasion. Here, the listener will find resonance, encapsulated in memorable verse. 'We all make a mess of our lives from time to time. It's part of the process that you stumble as you climb.' Everyone needs solace such as this at some point in life.

Pet Shop Boys never set out to produce great art. They work in pop and pop music is immediate, accessible and disposable. It is clear, nevertheless, that something enduring evolved, and whether it is definitive of great art or not, we know that Neil Tennant's words will be heard and enjoyed as long as there are people in this world free to listen.

*Chancellor, I present Neil Tennant to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.*