



ERIC WHITACRE

COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR, LECTURER

WWW.ERICWHITACRE.COM

JULY 2012

BIOGRAPHY

“Whitacre is that rare thing, a modern composer who is both popular and original.” The Daily Telegraph



Eric Whitacre is one of the most popular and performed composers of our time, a distinguished conductor, broadcaster and public speaker. His first album as both composer and conductor on Decca/Universal, *Light & Gold*, won a Grammy® in 2012, reaped unanimous five star reviews and became the no. 1 classical album in the US and UK charts within a week of release. His second album, *Water Night*, was released on Decca in April 2012 and debuted at no. 1 in the iTunes and Billboard classical chart on the day of release. It features seven world premiere recordings and includes performances from his professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, the London Symphony Orchestra, Julian Lloyd Webber and Hila Plitmann. His compositions also feature on multiple other recordings made in Europe, North America and Australasia.

His ground-breaking Virtual Choir, *Lux Aurumque*, received over a million views on YouTube in just 2 months (now 3 million), featuring 185 singers from 12 different countries. Virtual Choir 2.0, *Sleep*, was released in April 2011 and involved over 2,000 voices from 58 countries. Virtual Choir 3, *Water Night*, received 3,746 submissions from 73 countries and launched at Lincoln Center, New York and revealed online in April 2012.

Eric has written for the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Chanticleer, Julian Lloyd Webber and the Philharmonia Orchestra, Berlin Rundfunkchor and The King's Singers among others. His musical, *Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings*, won both the ASCAP Harold Arlen award and the Richard Rodgers Award, and earned 10 nominations at the Los Angeles Stage Alliance Ovation Awards. A versatile musician, he has also worked with legendary film composer, Hans Zimmer, co-writing the Mermaid Theme for *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*. In 2011, Eric was one of the judges and conducted the winning entries of the Abbey Road 80th Anniversary Anthem Competition, recording the London Symphony Orchestra and his professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, in Abbey Road Studio 1.

His latest initiative, Soaring Leap, is a series of workshops and festivals. Guest speakers, composers and artists, make regular appearances at Soaring Leap events around the world.

An exceptional orator, he was honoured to address the U.N. Leaders programme and give a TEDTalk in March 2011 in which he earned the first full standing ovation of the conference. He has addressed audiences at Duke & Harvard, The Economist, Seoul Digital Forum and JCDA Conference in Tokyo.

Many of Eric Whitacre's works have entered the standard choral and symphonic repertoires and have become the subject of scholarly works and doctoral dissertations. Whitacre has received composition awards from the Barlow International Composition Competition, the ACDA and the American Composers Forum. In 2001, he became the youngest recipient ever awarded the coveted Raymond C. Brock commission by the ACDA, despite coming to classical music relatively late in life when he joined his college choir in Las Vegas. The first piece he ever performed - Mozart's *Requiem* – changed his life. Inspired to compose, his first piece *Go, Lovely Rose*, was completed at the age of 21. He went on to the Juilliard School (New York), earned his Master of Music degree studying with Pulitzer Prize and Oscar-winning composer, John Corigliano.

Eric Whitacre is currently Composer in Residence at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, UK.

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2012

Grammy® Award Winner

Eric's first album as composer and conductor on Decca/Universal, *Light & Gold*, won a Grammy® in 2012, reaped unanimous five star reviews and became the no. 1 Classical Album in the US and UK charts within a week of release.

Soaring Leap

His latest initiative, Soaring Leap, is a series of dynamic workshops for singers, instrumentalists, conductors and composers to read, rehearse and perform his works, digging deep into the poetry and exploring compositional tools. Guest speakers, composers and artists, make regular appearances at Soaring Leap events around the world.

Goodnight Moon

Eric was the first composer to be allowed to set the text of Margaret Wise Brown's beloved, best-selling children's book, *Goodnight Moon*, published by HarperCollins. Written for soprano, harp and string orchestra, he recorded the piece for his album, *Water Night*, released in Spring 2012.

Virtual Choir 3, *Water Night*

Virtual Choir 3, *Water Night* received 3,746 submissions from 73 countries and was released in April 2012. The final video appears online, but bespoke projections and audio-visual installations are being created at venues across the world with HD video and surround sound to produce an immersive and visceral audience experience. Virtual Choir 3 was launched at Lincoln Center, New York on 2nd April 2012, where Eric Whitacre was joined by the curator of TED, Chris Anderson, and Oscar and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Corigliano, for a discussion about music, technology and the future.

New Album on Decca

Released in April 2012, Eric's second album for Decca, *Water Night*, went straight to no.1 in the US classical chart on the day of release and includes multiple world premiere recordings, including *Alleluia*, *Oculi Omnium*, *The River Cam*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Sleep My Child*, *Equus* (for orchestra), and *Water Night* (for strings). The Eric Whitacre Singers, London Symphony Orchestra, Julian Lloyd Webber and Hila Plitmann perform on the album.

Eric Whitacre Singers

Within two years of formation, Eric has conducted the Eric Whitacre Singers on national TV in the UK (Classical Brits), at Abbey Road studios and at Cadogan Hall as part of the renowned Choral at Cadogan series. This professional choir draws in audiences of all age ranges, performing works from Monteverdi and Bach to Whitacre, Lauridsen and Britten. Future performances include venues such as the Royal Albert Hall, London and a US tour in 2013.

"technical and expressive excellence" BBC Music Magazine
"sopulily addictive and beautifully sung" The Observer

Carnegie Hall with Morten Lauridsen

At the start of April, Eric conducted a choir of hundreds of singers from across the world at Carnegie Hall, New York, with revered composer, Morten Lauridsen. The concert was presented by Distinguished Concerts International, New York.

Berliner Philharmonie

Having premiered his substantial and dark work, *Songs of Immortality*, at London's Barbican Centre with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in 2010, Rundfunkchor Berlin's commission of an additional movement for the piece was performed in Berlin's Philharmonie with Rundfunkchor Berlin and Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester in April.

Speaking Engagements

Speaking engagements in 2012 include FMEA, The Economist (London), Lincoln Center (New York) and AACD (Washington).

Compositions in 2012 include

- *Alone*, commissioned by Gustavus Adolphus College in celebration of its sesquicentennial year
- Rundfunkchor Berlin (New movement, *Songs of Immortality*)
- *Goodnight Moon*
- Commission for The Tallis Scholars

"Whitacre makes me feel that contemporary choral music has finally come of age, where depth, honesty and artistry can meet populism without loss of integrity." CBC Radio 3

VIRTUAL CHOIR

In 2010, Eric launched the Virtual Choir singing *Lux Aurumque* featuring 185 singers from 12 different countries. It received over a million views on YouTube in just 2 months, and the number is now approaching two million.

The launch of the Virtual Choir 2 was met with an even more staggering response. Virtual Choir 2 *Sleep* has over 2,000 singers from 58 countries. Eric premiered the Virtual Choir 2.0 as a guest speaker at the TED conference in California before the release in April 2011.

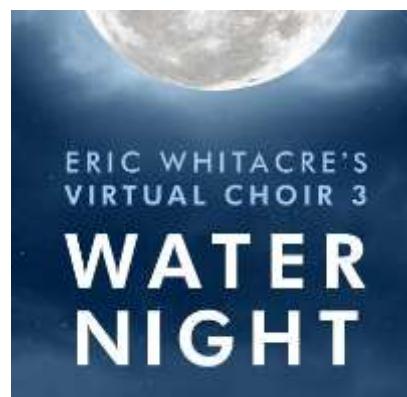
Virtual Choir 3, *Water Night*, made use of advanced technology using an online platform to capture each singers video and audio whilst playing the conductor video and displaying the sheet music. The deadline for submissions was 1st February 2012, and 3746 videos were received from 73 countries. VC3 was posted to YouTube and launched at Lincoln Center, New York on 2nd April 2012 and will not only be available online, but also as beautiful and visceral audio-visual art installations in cities around the world.

"his enthusiasm for the collective experience of music-making is utterly infectious."
BBC Music Magazine



Participants from Virtual Choir 3

United States	2515	Turkey	10	Venezuela	3
Canada	268	Argentina	9	Bermuda	2
United Kingdom	209	Switzerland	9	Cameroon	2
Germany	90	Indonesia	9	China	2
Australia	78	Malaysia	9	Croatia	2
Italy	48	Colombia	8	Guatemala	2
Spain	39	Finland	8	Iran	2
Netherlands	29	Puerto Rico	8	Kazakhstan	2
Norway	27	Taiwan	8	Namibia	2
Philippines	26	Czech Republic	7	Qatar	2
Sweden	26	Portugal	6	Serbia	2
Singapore	22	India	5	Syria	2
Ireland	21	Romania	5	Costa Rica	1
Japan	18	Bulgaria	4	Cyprus	1
Austria	17	Chile	4	Kuwait	1
Belgium	16	Greece	4	Lithuania	1
France	16	South Korea	4	Macedonia	1
New Zealand	15	Latvia	4	Moldova	1
South Africa	15	Russia	4	Peru	1
Hong Kong	13	El Salvador	4	Slovakia	1
Israel	13	Estonia	3	Slovenia	1
Hungary	12	Faroe Islands	3	Tanzania	1
Brazil	11	Sri Lanka	3	Vanuatu	1
Mexico	11	Malta	3	Total no. of entries	3746
Poland	11	Ukraine	3	No. of countries	73



WATER NIGHT

Recording with Decca: Water Night

Eric's second album as both composer and conductor, *Water Night*, was released on Decca in April 2012 and debuted at no. 1 in the iTunes and Billboard classical charts. It includes performances from the Eric Whitacre Singers, London Symphony Orchestra, Julian Lloyd Webber and Hila Plitmann and features world premiere recordings including *Alleluia*, *Oculi Omnium*, *Sleep my Child*, *Goodnight Moon*, *The River Cam*, *Equus* (for orchestra) and *Water Night* (for strings).



Eric Whitacre: Water Night

Whitacre conducts Whitacre

1. Alleluia
Eric Whitacre Singers
2. Equus
London Symphony Orchestra
3. Oculi Omnium
Eric Whitacre Singers
4. The River Cam
Julian Lloyd Webber
London Symphony Orchestra
5. Her Sacred Spirit Soars
Eric Whitacre Singers
6. Water Night
London Symphony Orchestra
7. Goodnight Moon
Hila Plitmann
London Symphony Orchestra
8. When David Heard
Eric Whitacre Singers
9. Sleep My Child
Eric Whitacre Singers



LIGHT & GOLD

Recording with Decca: Light & Gold - GRAMMY® Award Winner

In May 2010, Eric Whitacre agreed a global deal with Decca, joining an elite handful of composers to have secured an exclusive, long-term recording contract with a major label. Whitacre recorded his debut Decca album *Light & Gold* in London, with performers including the Eric Whitacre Singers, Laudibus, The King's Singers, Pavão Quartet and Christopher Glynn. The album includes some of Whitacre's best-loved choral works as well as three world premiere recordings. *Light & Gold* was the first time Whitacre has both recorded and conducted his own music. Released in the Autumn of 2010, *Light & Gold* became the No 1 classical album in the UK and US charts within a week, reaped unanimous five star reviews and won a Grammy for Best Choral Performance in 2012.



Eric Whitacre: Light & Gold

Whitacre conducts Whitacre

1. Lux Aurumque (Light of Gold)
2. Five Hebrew Love Songs:
 - i. Temuna (A Picture)
 - ii. Kala Kalla (Light Bridge)
 - iii. Larov (Mostly)
 - iv. Eyze Sheleg! (What Snow!)
 - v. Rakut (Tenderness)
7. The Seal Lullaby
8. A Boy and a Girl
9. Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine
10. Three Songs of Faith:
 - i. i will wade out
 - ii. hope, faith, life love
 - iii. i thank You God for most this amazing day
13. The Stolen Child
14. Water Night
15. Nox Aurumque (Night of Gold)
16. Sleep

5★ BBC Music Magazine

5★ Gramophone

5★ The Scotsman

5★ Classic FM Magazine

"It is grateful to sing, scrumptious to listen to, and rejoices in those ecstatic harmonic suspensions that turn dissonance into consonance and make something highly seductive of the thoroughly chaste."
The Independent

"Don't miss this."
American Record Guide

"This one will be big."
The Observer

"Simply Glorious!"
Gramophone

"Whitacre's music, here as elsewhere, is inescapably haunting". *Gramophone*

"its weightless tempo and mysterious harmonies instantly establishing the aura of mild euphoria which often radiates outwards from his music."
The Daily Telegraph

"Now, Decca brings the composer himself to the podium to conduct his music, and the results are marvelous once more."
American Record Guide

"Soupily addictive and beautifully sung."
The Observer

"This disc is a revelation."
San Francisco Classical Voice

RECORDINGS

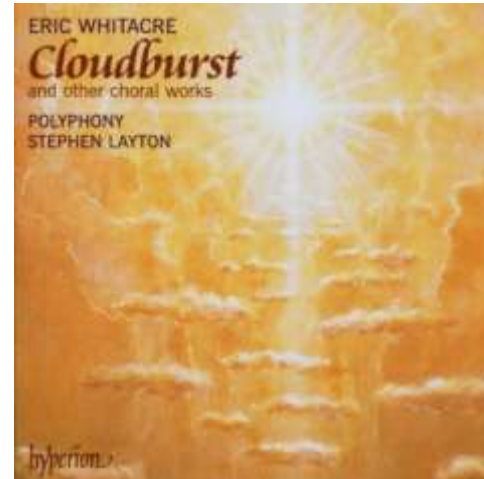
The music of Eric Whitacre can be found on countless recordings worldwide. The following represent a small number of recordings that feature Eric's work exclusively, as well as *High Flight* which includes the world premiere recording of *Alone*.



Eric Whitacre: Choral Music

Elora Festival Singers
Noel Edison, Conductor

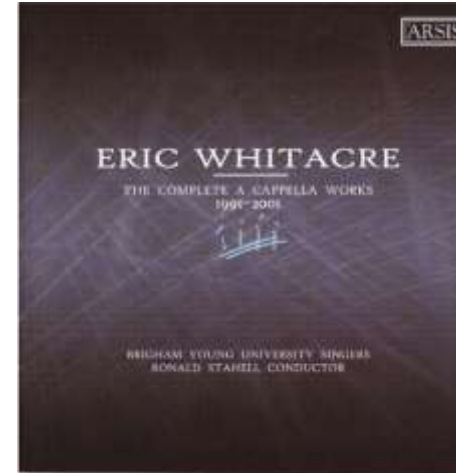
1. Her Sacred Spirit Soars
2. A Boy and a Girl
3. Water Night
4. This Marriage
5. Lux Aurumque (Light of Gold)
6. little tree
7. When David Heard
8. Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine
9. i thank You God for most this amazing day
10. Sleep
11. Little Birds



Cloudburst and Other Choral Works

Polyphony
Stephen Layton, Conductor

1. i thank You God for most this amazing day
2. I hide myself
3. Sleep
4. Go, lovely Rose
5. When David Heard
6. hope, faith, life, love
7. Cloudburst
8. With a lily in your hand
9. This Marriage
10. Water Night
11. A Boy and a Girl
12. Her sacred spirit soars



The Complete A Cappella Works 1991-2001

Brigham Young University Singers
Ronald Staheli, Conductor

1. Water Night
2. i will wade out
3. hope, faith, life, love
4. i thank You God for most this amazing day
5. Cloudburst
6. Sleep
7. I Hide Myself
8. With a Lily in Your Hand
9. Go, Lovely Rose
10. When David Heard
11. Lux Aurumque
12. Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine



High Flight

The King's Singers
The Concordia Choir
René Causen - director

1. BC: Oculi Omnium
2. ML: O Nata Lux
3. EW: Lux Aurumque
4. BC: anyone lived in a pretty how town
5. BC: A flower given to my daughter
6. BC: Days
7. BC: Even such is time
8. EW: Cloudburst
9. BC: High Flight
10. EW: This Marriage
11. ML: O Magnum Mysterium
12. EW: Alone
13. EW: The Stolen Child
14. BC: A Thanksgiving

2011

United Nations, TED, Harvard, Duke, The Economist, Tokyo, Seoul Digital Forum

An exceptional orator, Eric was honoured to address the U.N. Leaders programme and give a TEDTalk in March 2011 which earned the first full standing ovation of the conference. He has addressed audiences at Duke & Harvard, The Economist, Seoul Digital Forum and JCDA Conference in Tokyo.

The River Cam Premiere

On 14th April, he appeared as guest conductor with the Philharmonia Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall in a concert to celebrate Julian Lloyd Webber's 60th Birthday. Eric conducted the premiere of his new piece *The River Cam* for cello and strings, written at Julian's request. The evening was hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Guest artists included Tasmin Little, Danielle de Niese, Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber and Dame Cleo Laine.

Abbey Road 80th Anniversary Anthem Competition—Juror and Conductor

In 1931 Sir Edward Edgar opened Abbey Road Studios and conducted his most distinguished anthem *Land of Hope and Glory*. To celebrate their 80th Anniversary, Abbey Road Studios ran a competition to find a new anthem. Eric was among a panel of judges selecting the winning entries, and conducted the recording of those pieces with the London Symphony Orchestra and his professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, in Abbey Road Studio 1.

Paradise Lost: Disney Hall, LA & Roosevelt University, Chicago

Premiered in 2010 at Carnegie Hall, *Paradise Lost* was performed twice in 2011, at the Auditorium Theatre at in, Chicago and at Disney Hall, Los Angeles.

Reviews

"The solos and ensembles they sang suggested the work of a younger, hipper Andrew Lloyd Webber, with fleeting hints of Bernstein and Sondheim." Carnegie Hall - *The New York Times*

"Musically lush, committed and smart, tuner will appeal to a demographic far beyond comic book fans (who'll adore it), for in composer/librettist/co-lyricist Eric Whitacre it introduces an exciting new, and potentially important, figure in the musical theater." The Boston Court Theatre — *Variety*

Classic Brit Awards, 2011

Nominated for *Composer of the Year* at the Classic Brit Awards, Eric conducted the Eric Whitacre Singers performing live at the Classic Brit Awards as part of an event which was broadcast on ITV (television) and watched by 2.3million people.

Guggenheim, Bilbao

Eric's visit to Bilbao included a performance at the spectacular Alhondiga with over 150 singers from the Sociedad Coral Bilbao, to celebrate their 125th anniversary. He also conducted a semi-virtual performance in the atrium of the Guggenheim museum while singers were filmed in several locations throughout the building.

New Honours, Cambridge University

Hot on the heels of his post as Visiting Fellow, Eric has been appointed the Composer in Residence at Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge, for a five year period from September 2011. Following his residency at the Japanese Choral Directors Association in June 2011, Eric was also made the first non-Japanese Honorary Member of the JCDA.

Compositions in 2011

- *The River Cam* for Julian Lloyd Webber/ Philharmonia Orchestra
- *Chelsea Carol* for Birmingham-Southern College, Alabama
- *Alleluia* for Sidney Sussex choir, Cambridge University, UK
- *Mermaid Theme* for *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* with Hans Zimmer.
- *Sleep My Child* transcription for String Orchestra and Soprano .
- *Equus* transcription for Orchestra.
- *The Seal Lullaby transcription* for Wind Ensemble and Piano.
- *The Seal Lullaby transcription* for String Orchestra and Piano.

LIST OF WORKS

SATB Choral

A Boy and a Girl
 Alleluia
 Alone
 Animal Crackers Vol. I
 Animal Crackers Vol. II
 Cloudburst
 The City and the Sea
 Five Hebrew Love Songs
 Her Sacred Spirit Soars
 Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine
 Little Birds
 Little Tree
 Lux Aurumque
 Nox Aurumque
 Oculi Omnium
 The Seal Lullaby
 Sleep
 Sleep My Child
 The Chelsea Carol
 The Stolen Child
 This Marriage
 Three Flower Songs
 Three Songs of Faith
 Water Night
 What If
 When David Heard

Orchestral & Chorus

Songs of Immortality

Solo Voice

Five Hebrew Love Songs
 Goodnight Moon

Wind Symphony

Cloudburst
 Equus
 Ghost Train
 Godzilla Eats Las Vegas
 Libertas Imperio
 Lux Aurumque
 Noisy Wheels of Joy
 October
 The Seal Lullaby
 Sleep

Orchestral

A Boy and a Girl
 Equus
 Lux Aurumque
 Sleep
 Sleep My Child
 The River Cam (solo cello)
 The Seal Lullaby
 Water Night
 Winter

SSA Choral

She Weeps Over Ragoon
 Five Hebrew Love Songs
 The Seal Lullaby

TTBB Choral

Lux Aurumque
 The Seal Lullaby

Musical Theatre

Paradise Lost

Film Scores

Co-wrote the Mermaid Theme with Hans Zimmer for
Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides

www.chesternovello.com

www.waltonmusic.com

www.halleonard.com

PARADISE LOST



10 Los Angeles Stage Alliance Ovation Award Nominations (2007)
including Best World Premiere Musical

Winner of the ASCAP Richard Rogers & Harold Arlen Awards

- "Fans travelled from over 40 states, 11 countries
- Over 8,000,000 YouTube views
- A million unique web visitors
- Thousands of fan postings and email

Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings is the stunning new creation from world-famous composer Eric Whitacre.

The most exciting musical to hit the stage in decades, *Paradise Lost* fuses rich electronica, soaring operatic scores, choral, techno, breathtaking martial arts and incredible special effects. The result is a dazzling and epic theatre spectacle, told through a timeless story with a thoroughly modern production.

Young angels are living in a world ruled by the fear of unknown forces that lie shrouded in the darkness around them. Dissent is forbidden as they hone their skills in preparation for the unknown fate which awaits them. Rebellion is stirring and questions are being asked of Logos, their leader, who hides secrets even deeper than his forbidden love for Extasis. She dreams of regaining her wings, and with them, her immortality. A ray of hope is shining through the fear which clouds their rigid and martial society. The fate of the race depends on the courage of a brave few, who dream of Paradise.

Paradise Lost pushes the boundaries of musical theatre, promising a modern phenomenon that will sweep audiences into its thrall and become the must-see show for generations of theatre-goers.

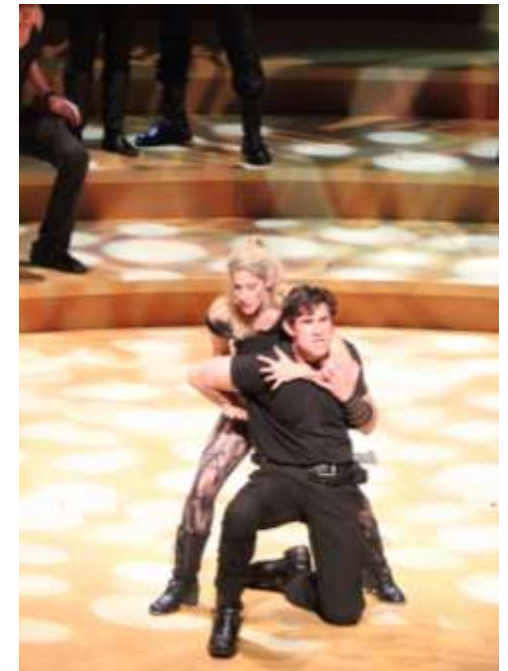
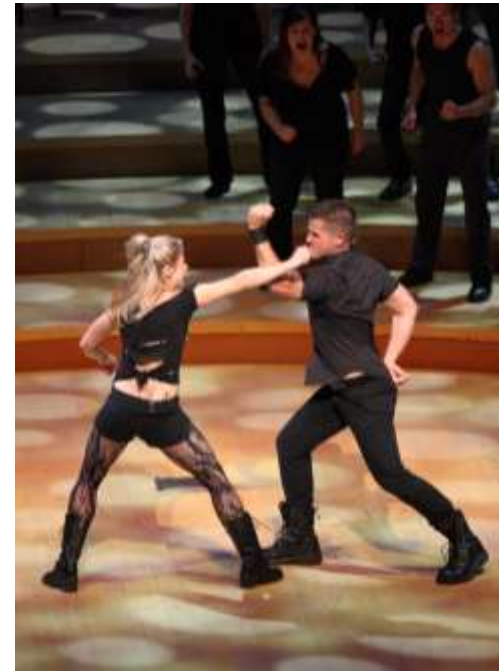
"In my opinion, Eric Whitacre is an authentic genius; his meteorically-rising reputation is more than merited. His music is unfailingly inventive, melodic, highly personal and stunningly skilful"
Stephen Schwartz, Composer/Lyricist *WICKED*, *PIPPIN*, *GODSPELL*

"A younger, hipper Andrew Lloyd Webber, with fleeting hints of Bernstein and Sondheim"
New York Times

"Whitacre is that rare thing, a modern composer who is both popular and original"
The Daily Telegraph

A final frisson that many another ambitious musical would envy"
Variety

"A roar of youth, speed and metal!"
Los Angeles Times



PARADISE LOST



New York Times

A Juggernaut Rolls Into Carnegie, Chorus in Tow

By Steve Smith

Published: June 16, 2010

You felt a buzz of electric anticipation in the air at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday night long before a single note had sounded. The event at hand was mounted by Distinguished Concerts International New York, a producing organization that regularly presents choral extravaganzas with participants from around the world. Thunderous applause and illicit camera flashes greeted a 425-member choir as it efficiently crowded onto the stage.

The singers, who ranged in age from 14 to 73, had come from throughout the United States, Canada and Ireland to perform with Eric Whitacre, a handsome, charismatic 40-year-old composer whose profile among choral enthusiasts amounts to a rock star's adulation.

Bounding to the podium with a pumped fist, Mr. Whitacre took the frenzy in stride. "Tonight you're all coming home with me," he announced brightly to the audience. An isolated shriek rang out. "Thanks, Mom," he responded.

To call Mr. Whitacre a phenomenon is to sell his rapid ascent short. Having pursued a high school passion for classical choral music through training at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Juilliard School, he developed a style based on clear melodies, thrilling harmonies, evocative effects and sensitive text handling. His self-published scores sell in the hundreds of thousands; discs of his music on the Hyperion and Naxos labels are also best sellers. In May he signed an exclusive contract — a relative rarity for a composer — with the Decca label.

Knowing all of this, you could still question what he presented here.

Instead of his choral compositions, Mr. Whitacre conducted a condensed concert version of "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings," a musical-theater piece he created with David Noroña, a lyricist and director, and Edward Esch, a poet.

Inspired by Japanese manga and anime, the work details struggles among a band of young angels deprived of their wings and abandoned by their parents during a war. Logos, eldest of the company and a well-meaning but overzealous guardian, is confronted by Exstasis, his secret lover, whose visions have revealed where the angels' wings are hidden. Leading a band of rebels whose feisty interplay had a "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" chemistry, Exstasis delivers transcendence at a terrible personal cost.

To accompany his melodramatic apocalypse fantasy, Mr. Whitacre concocted an eclectic mix of whooshing synthesizers and thumping techno beats, accented by two taiko drummers and rich, melancholy contributions from a splendid cellist, Fang Fang Xu. A cast of bright theatrical singers played their roles winningly; Hila Plitmann, a crystalline-voiced soprano and Mr. Whitacre's wife, stood out as Exstasis. The solos and ensembles they sang suggested the work of a younger, hipper Andrew Lloyd Webber, with fleeting hints of Bernstein and Sondheim.

Efficiently boiled down through narratives read by Mr. Noroña, the show was worth hearing. As a vehicle for a titanic choir, however, it fell short; choral passages, though predictably ravishing, made up only a tiny fraction of an agreeably bombastic affair. Opportunity lost, perhaps; still, no one in the frenetic audience complained.



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EDITORIAL

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NEW MUSIC ISSUE

Eric Whitacre
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the composer's compelling sound world

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as an outsider'*
Eric Whitacre

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CHORAL KING OF COOL

Eric Whitacre's searingly honest works and his inspired use of YouTube have attracted thousands of new listeners to choral music. Michael White meets him



Recording his new album, *Water Night*, in St Albans Church, London

It's the fate of modern Britain to be overwhelmed by cultural forces crossing the Atlantic from America and a recent musical example has been our happy surrender to the supreme force that is Eric Whitacre. With just a handful of short pieces, persistently re-recorded and accessed by millions via the internet, Whitacre has found stardom at the level of rock musicians, taking care to cultivate the look. It helps that he's a paradigm example of a 21st-century composer exploiting 21st-century social media: one of his many projects has been to connect, online, thousands of people from all over the world to perform his work. But, bizarrely, he's done all this with choral music. And, what's more, choral music that manages to combine popular appeal with serious quality – owing much to English tradition, aimed at English performance standards but bringing its own new-world contribution to the table.

If nothing else, Whitacre's timing has been good. For years, the great choral tradition of this country was admired but marginal, maintained on the one hand by cathedrals and collegiate foundations at risk of decline and on the other by a diminishing network of choral societies that was looking/sounding tired. The age of oratorio was all but gone and few composers of distinction were coming forward with alternatives.

But then a new species of small professional choir emerged out of the age: Des of Osleidge emerged, providing leadership and inspiration. 'Holy minimal' composers such as John Tavener kept into spotlight profile, with younger figures from James MacMillan to Tárk O'Regan in their wake. Community singing edged back into fashion, with assistance from the religious: likes of Gareth Malone. And, as if to confirm that choral music was now sexy, in came Whitacre: a golden-haired American whose origins could scarcely have been more remote from any of this; but who brought with him a sound – distinctive, engaging, visceral – that suited English choral singing well. Despite its otherness.

Whitacre was born in 1970 in a small town close to the gambling haven of Reno, in the Nevada desert. It wasn't without musical life – there's a middle-ranking symphony orchestra in Reno, handiwork by the oil heir-turned-composer Gordon Getty – but the young Eric Whitacre

EDITORIAL

I LEFT JUILLIARD WITH MY OWN VOICE STILL INTACT BUT CAPABLE OF GRANDER STRUCTURAL GESTURES



Recording Julian Lloyd Webber's 60th birthday piece at Henry Wood Hall, London



Sikhies Sussex College, Cambridge to Whitacre, 'a magical land that appears at will'

had no part in it beyond ideas about joining a rock band. Somehow he managed to major in music education at Nevada State University without being able to read or name music. But, as he tells me when we meet, 'I had no idea what I wanted to do, no sense of direction, and I spent a long time finding one.' He was a freshman for seven years, drifting through courses as whatever took his interest ('It was a State school so it was cheap'). And it was only in his fourth or fifth year that he 'stumbled' into composing.

The story of the stumbling is well known. He joined a choir, intended to meet girls, but found to his surprise that singing was itself the turn. So at 21 he wrote a choral setting, *Gin, Lerdy Rar*, based on the classic text. 'I wrote it down as best I could and had some friends help me with the harmonic spelling: it was in six sharps, and I'd never had a formal composition lesson. I taught myself by ear.'

In 1992, aged 22 and still at Nevada, he then wrote another choral piece called *Cloudburst*. And on the strength of those two scores, together with *Ghost Train*, a fun piece for wind band that became successful on the American university circuit, he was accepted, at the age of 25, on to a Masters programme at the Juilliard School, New York.

Arriving there as an autodidact from the back of beyond, Whitacre found Juilliard tough – and was unlucky with his first composition supervisor David Diamond, whose policy with mavericks like Whitacre was to crush and rebuild. 'I wrote just one thing when I was with him,' recalls Whitacre. 'It was a Frankenstein piece that sounds like me trying to write like a 1940s New York sophisticate. I was paralysed during the process.'

The only solution was to find a different tutor with a more accepting view of raw talent. It turned out to be John Corigliano – composer of *Red Planet* Concerto for Joshua Bell in 2005 – who gave Whitacre what he needed without trying to suppress what he already had. 'From John I learned how to structure what I was writing,' says Whitacre. 'He told me to take a giant piece of paper and draw the entire architecture of a piece from beginning to end, before I'd written a note of it and then he has served me well ever since. There's a tyranny of harmony – the second you sit down at a piano, detail takes over and you can't see the forest for trees. John's method opened things up. So I left Juilliard with my own voice, the voice of *Cloudburst*, still intact but capable of grander structural gestures.'

This last point is significant. Unpacking Whitacre's life – he's now 42 – you find that the essentials of his musical language were in place from the beginning, before he ever had a serious composition lesson. He was, and remains, a natural phenomenon. And from the depths of this naturalism has come a distinctive Whitacre sound that sometimes works. Or, at least, the work on which his reputation rests.

Since 2010 he's best signed to Decca, with one CD, *Light and Gold*, released in 2011 (and winning this year's Grammy for Best Choral Performance) and another, *Water Night*, due for issue on April 2. Before that, in 2006, came the disc, performed by Stephen Layton's Polyphony, that first brought Whitacre to international attention: 'Cloudburst' on Hyperion. And before 'Cloudburst' came a handful of releases on small-time American labels.

Surveying the repertoire on these discs, you find it based around a nucleus of half a dozen pieces written in Whitacre's twenties/early thirties, between 1992 and 2001. They exist in varying forms as he's revisited and revised them but they name the less comprises the 'core' Whitacre we've come to know. And they establish an unmistakable sound world: a world of chamber choirs that move in bloc with slow, ecstatic, ceremonial intensity through jaded-up sevenths, ninths and other dissonances without resolution. Texture takes priority over melody and rhythm. And the combination of hypnotic staidness with soft, smooth-flowing, cloudy radiance suggests the sound equivalent of a 1960s low lamp as forms emerge, swell and recede.

There's no denying the allure and beauty of all this but you might question its potential for development. Whitacre's output almost in-

like one slow-turning wheel in progress, with elements of self-becoming that he calls 'consolidation'. But he insists that there is development, and always has been with every piece he writes. 'Never once in my compositional process have I thought: this is what made me successful so I'm going to do it again.'

'It makes me smile that there's this sound associated with me, based on a few scores – *Sleep, Water Night, Los Angeles* – as though that's it, that's what I do because as I hear it, there's more. If I look back in 30 years and find I've been writing the same piece all along I'll be very disappointed. Right now it feels like a confident, relaxed evolution.'

But accepting that there is indeed a Whitacre sound, it isn't hard to track its precedents. He cheerfully admits to 'poetry thefts' from sources like Morten Lauridsen, another West Coast American who gave Whitacre practical encouragement after he left Juilliard and settled in Los Angeles. John Adams comes into the mix as well. But so does a whole range of English choral writing from Tallis to Taverner, absorbing Howells and Britten on the way.

Whitacre learned this music from recordings back in Nevada, and it's significant that he cites *Peter Grimes* as his favourite opera because there's a fragment of atonal DNA in the Act 2 female-voice quartet in *Grover* – a piled-high cluster chord with unresolved dissonance – to which most core Whitacre could probably be traced. He all but quotes it in one of his scores, *Huge, Farth, Life, Love* – though when I say so he claims never to have noticed.

An undeniably noble feature in his music, however, is warmth: a feel-good, therapeutic force that gets written up as New Age spirituality. He'd rather it didn't because the label is usually dismissive, as though what I do is surface-level. It isn't. I look deep into my notes. But I do think all music is sacred, and my pieces certainly have a spiritual dimension.'

That the music also has a sense of the transcendent has given it a place in Anglican worship, although Whitacre's texts are almost invariably secular (even when they come in Latin) and he's not a committed Christian. Agnostic is as much as he admits to. And although that places him alongside Howells, Vaughan Williams, Rutter and a good few others who supply the soundtrack to Anglican liturgy, it isn't clear how comfortably he fits into the tradition. Stephen Layton, his champion, thinks he doesn't, except as 'a temporary visitor'.

But, citing a remark of Ned Rorem, Whitacre tells me he 'believes in belief'. And he believes in the church as a purveyor of wonder, mystery and sublimity – especially now he's living in Britain with a residency at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and part of the chapel community there.

The five-year appointment, which began in 2010, isn't too onerous, allowing him to be based elsewhere (in London). And he describes it with awe-struck, schoolboy pleasure as 'like going into Brigadoon once a week: a magical land that appears at will, and I get to come and go'. He doesn't reach – 'I'm not an academic' – but he does lead masterclasses, involve himself with the choir, and write. To date, there's been a setting of a college grace and an *Advent carol*, his first-ever piece specifically written for performance in a Christian context, although its text still manages to avoid any reference to Jesus. 'Text is important to me,' he stresses. 'On past occasions when I've been asked to set words I didn't believe in, it was musically disastrous. So I'm way off doing a Mass setting. I don't say it will never happen, but for the moment I'd struggle.'

Struggling or not, he loves to go to choral evenings – 'I'd never actually been before,' he says enthusiastically. Let's help thinking that, in Cobridge choirs, you don't too often hear Stephen Cleobury and other chapel choir directors gabbling about 'truth and beauty' the way Whitacre does. 'But I'm sure they feel it,' Whitacre counters. 'As an outsider from the American West Coast, I can say it: we put other people's hearts on our sleeves. There's a romantic innocence, a naivety about me. It's my lifestyle choice.' From a critic's

point of view, the innocent enthusiasm of an Eric Whitacre can be unsettling, as can the benign goodwill and calm his music radiates. It rarely challenges or slaps you in the face (except with its own sense of being absolutely genuine). Whitacre is not by temperament a face-slapper. He believes 'the idea that you have to punch the public on the nose is what's turned classical music off the rails for the past 50 years. Ultimately, what I write is me, and perhaps I'm not that cosmic a personality, but thus far, I've lived a gentle life. I've not experienced great tragedy. And since I can remember, I've been pretty popular at what I do. My music can only reflect that.'

Francis Poulenc once said of his work that it was there not to be analysed but loved. Maybe the same applies to Eric Whitacre who, from the goings-on on his website, isn't short of adoration. A serious operator when it comes to social networking, his latest attempt at a 'virtual choir' was early last year when nearly 2000 singers from 18 countries performed *Sleep*. This and other projects have given him celebrity beyond the reach of normal art-music composers, fuelled by Eric Whitacre merchandise and roadshows. He isn't shy of commerce. And, as everyone now knows, he's signed to a modelling agency – although the rumours about Calvin Klein are not true: 'You can imagine the debates I had about going into this,' he says, 'and so far I haven't done a campaign for anyone, it's got to be the right thing.' I tell him it's a joy that someone in his position should be modelling, though I can't see Harmon Blawie diversifying in the same way. It takes a brave man to be so unconcerned about his credibility.

But in his way, West Coast way, Whitacre does have that kind of bravestness. 'Growing up as I did,' he says, 'I found my voice before it occurred to me that I needed to be credible. I've approached the world of new music as an outsider.' And that's exactly what he is: a smooth, successful but sincere outsider who discovered in himself a very specific gift.

What it finally amounts to is anyone's guess. But, as Whitacre says, 'I don't think about my legacy. Just the next piece.'

ERIC WHITACRE ON DISC

Cloudburst
Polyphony / Stephen Layton
Hyperion (CD) DG05543
AVOC

The disc that brought Whitacre to the attention of English audiences, showcasing most of what are now his standards: of the 1990s, *Cloudburst*, *Sleep*, *I Thank You God etc.*

Light & Gold
Eric Whitacre Singers
King's Singers / Eric Whitacre
Decca (CD) 274 3059 (2011)

Another companion disc, revisiting established favourites *Box Sleeps* and *I Thank You God*, plus a more recent work, *The Golden Child*, for the King's Singers.

Water Night
(released on April 2)
Eric Whitacre Singers
LSO / Eric Whitacre
Decca (CD) 279 8332

A mix of old and new repertoire but with more emphasis on larger orchestral and instrumental writing, with alongside all the choral music, a piece written for Julian Lloyd Webber.

FURTHER LISTENING

Morten Lauridsen: Lux Informis
Polyphony, Britten Sinfonia / Stephen Layton
Hyperion (CD) DG07490 (2010)

The much-performed O magnum mysterium and other works by this West Coast American that stand as obvious precedents for the distinctive Whitacre sound.

Morten Lauridsen: Nocturnes
Polyphony, Britten Sinfonia / Stephen Layton
Hyperion (CD) DG07580 (2011)

A second Lauridsen round-up including a powerful 1990s suite of Robert Graves settings, *Mid Winter Songs*.

Paul Mealor: A Tender Light
Tenderness RPD / Nigel Short
Decca (CD) 476 4604 (2012)

Music by a British Whitacre disciple, famous for his Royal Wedding anthem *Ubi caritas*, which features on the disc.

EDITORIAL

THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

ERIC WHITACRE



The American composer and conductor talks passionately about his love of 16th-century English choral music, and how he thinks he might just have found his natural musical home – here in Britain

PHOTOGRAPHY ROB SCOTT

It's quite a long way from Reno, Nevada, to Cambridge. When Eric Whitacre was growing up in the desert in the seventies, it would have been fantasy for him to imagine that he might end up as a composer in residence in Sidney Sussex College, working in a chapel where there still rests, concealed in some secret spot, the head of Oliver Cromwell. Everything else would have been fantasy, too – worldwide fame, the creation of a 'virtual choir' of thousands on YouTube, and the knowledge that a great deal of his choral music is popular enough to guarantee that it will be known by more than one generation.

Yet he did dream. When he was invited to speak at TED, the astonishing phenomenon that is a twice-yearly conference streamed on the worldwide web taking as its theme 'Ideas Worth Spreading', he began a speech that won him a riotous standing ovation with the words: 'I wanted to be a rock star. I dreamed of it, and that's all I dreamed of.' Classical music was nowhere. He was taken by his grandmother once a year to see *The Nutcracker* in Reno and remembers that the last thing that occurred to him was that there was such a thing as a composer, a job that someone like Tchaikovsky might do for a living. That would come later, when the Las Vegas undergraduate ended up at the Juilliard School in New York and his first teacher spent a year, as he puts it, breaking him down. He'd spent his high school years writing



BORN TO PERFORM:
'I wanted to be a rock star,' says Eric Whitacre

**'It's a dream here:
King's, the cobbled
streets, everything...'**

songs for the school rock band, and the view was that he had to be cleansed of that habit. 'I was paralysed. I couldn't write a note.'

The trouble was that his teacher, the notable composer David Diamond, wanted to give him a composing technique that would enable him to write on the days when inspiration

just wouldn't come. 'There are days like that,' he told Eric, 'when you've got to write. What are you going to do then?' But the student couldn't adapt to the idea of the composer as the steady craftsman. 'It has never worked for me. I've never learned to be a carpenter, with the skill of the trained workman. Let me put it like this – I really wish I could write a piece of functional music. I can't.'

This takes him off to Bach. We're sitting not far from that Sidney Sussex chapel, where he's going to spend some time at the piano in the afternoon, and he talks about what moves him in music. Bach is never far away. 'He's the one that I think of when I'm struggling and not completing enough music – always him. The output – the amount of music – and the consistent, inhuman brilliance. How do you do that?' He mentions the *St John Passion* and shakes his head. 'Perfect.'

Yet his own sources of inspiration, mysterious as they seem to him, are obvious. Popular choral works like *Sleep, Clouds* and *Lux Aurumque* show how naturally he writes for voices, and his own experience on arriving in Cambridge seems to have unlocked in him something that is close to the authentic Whitacre: he finds that he is drawn inexorably to the glories of the English choral tradition.

'It's a dream here. A fairy-tale world. King's, the cobbled streets, everything. I'd never been somewhere like Cambridge. Remember that



CAMBRIDGE BOUND:
Eric Whitacre in the Christen
Court at Sidney Sussex College



DIRECT COMMUNICATION:
"I believe that there is a deep physiological response to music."



I'd been living in Los Angeles, where there's no autumn. Here, I remember thinking that I had been transformed by the experience.

The collaboration has been happy enough for the college to announce, a few weeks ago, that his residency would be extended for five more years, and when he speaks of his experiences with the college choir, which David Skinner has turned into one of the glories of Cambridge, he reveals how profound the satisfaction has been in getting to know the greatest music in the Anglican tradition. "It is utterly unique and, of course, breathtakingly beautiful. Byrd and Tallis – near perfection."

His musical education had allowed him to glimpse their world, but from a distance. "It was completely foreign to me, and I had a very abstract concept of it. I heard John Rutter with the Clare choir, random groups of Renaissance singers, but it really was another world. I didn't make the connection in my mind that they were human beings. Getting to know the sound – the lineage of this music, the writing, the vocal technique – is about as exciting a thing as I can imagine."

One of the reasons for his absorption in that tradition is his reverence for text. He describes himself as neither Christian nor atheist (we have no time for a philosophical discussion about religion and myth) but he is convinced by the power of the text. As when he's using his favourite poets as sources – e.e. cummings, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, for example – he says his connection with the text has to be absolute. If not? "The music is crap."

'You fall asleep in L.A. There is no weather, no time, no season'

So somewhere in the Sidney Sussex chapel he's found the connection he needs. He found that he could write his *Alleluia* for the chapel choir, *The River Cant* about the surroundings he was coming to know, and there is no doubt that, at 41, he feels that he is entering what could be the most productive phase of his writing career. He has moved to London with his wife, the soprano Hila Pittmann, and their son and it's intriguing that one of the discoveries that he's made on this side of the pond is something you might describe as the power of time. He escaped, he says, from a city – L.A. – where they are trying to abolish it.

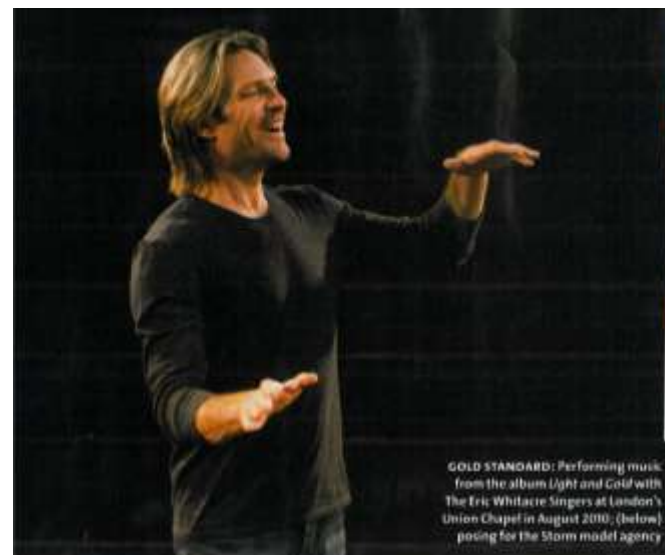
"You fall asleep in L.A. There is no weather, no time, no season. People

actively fight the passage of time. We all wear jeans and T-shirts to pretend that we're all 18. To be honest, I think it's a city – a culture – that's permanently in denial."

That observation explains in part his attraction to the liturgical calendar. David Skinner has revived the singing of Latin vespers in the chapel, and Eric has found himself caught up in the happy rhythm of regular services and the passage of the Christian year in a way that clearly satisfies him. He speaks rather longingly of a time where there was more certainty, a church that could set the pace of the year, most of all a collective experience in which everyone could join. Of all his innovations, his attempt to create a mass experience of his own is maybe the most remarkable.

The virtual choir assembled on YouTube for a recording of *Sleep* last April consisted of submissions from 58 countries by 2,052 people, each of them recording a part. They were able to watch a video of Eric conducting the piece and imagine that as they sang they were part of a vast worldwide choir, even if it was in a bedroom in a Suffolk village or Tokyo or Reno, Nevada. Put together they produced a remarkable phenomenon. The earlier test run, with *Los Ansurumque*, was the spark: the take-up for *Sleep* was much greater, and he expects 'Virtual Choir III', soon to be assembled, to be double or triple the size... or even bigger.

Eric's enthusiasm for the project reveals his conviction about the power of music to produce – let's put it simply – a good feeling. To him, it's much more than the satisfaction



GOLD STANDARD: Performing music from the album *Light and Gold* with The Eric Whitacre Singers at London's Union Chapel in August 2010. (below) posing for the Storm model agency



of fine writing and a polished performance. "I believe that there is a deep physiological response to music, and music-making especially. Everyone is in the same room breathing together – singing essential poetry or religious texts. You are physiologically helped by that experience. I know it."

He then makes an assertion that underlines the strength of that conviction, by arguing that music that doesn't succeed in inducing that spirit of well-being is not simply neutral, but damaging. "I believe that there are certain kinds of music – particularly rigorously atonal music – that produces the opposite physiological response. It causes the listener to feel or experience angst or distress, and it does something else. It isolates the audience, and makes you as an individual feel apart."

This doesn't mean that he is excessively conservative in his own style, or in his taste in music, but he is convinced that although artists must challenge, "they must be aware of the effect – the physical effect that they're causing. It's not good enough to say to someone: 'you just don't understand what I'm trying to do.' You need to come out of the experience changed in some way, transformed."

For him, the thrill of live performance is clearly the feeling that keeps him going. And he speaks of communication as the obligation that's never far from his mind. "I'm not sure I'm the kind of composer who will break new ground in terms of writing – but I'm always trying to break new ground for myself. I'm always hoping to. That's why I'm here. It's a

bit of a tightrope because I'm hypersensitive to the audience. I'm not pandering to them, but I desperately want to communicate with them. Now that my music has gained some popularity I feel an obligation to touch them, and to give them what they want from me."

So, with the autumn sun spilling into the

'I'm starting to hear music in terms of colour, not just form'

court of Sidney Sussex, the old trees turning brown and gold below us, Eric Whitacre talks about what he thinks he is learning. "For the first time, really, I'm getting a real picture of the architecture of music, the building blocks underneath. A great deal is being revealed. And I'd say something else about my writing – I'm starting to hear music in terms of colour, not just as simple forward movement or form."

It brings us back to the Cambridge experience. He's working on new pieces for the choir, as well as 'Virtual Choir III' being launched in December of this year, and with his commitment to the college now extended, he has the ability to think through the years ahead with that

rediscovery of lost time, which he believes has rejuvenated him. In truth, it's hard to imagine him ever having gone to sleep in Los Angeles: his compositional output is huge, his energy doesn't seem to flag and his enthusiasm for the collective experience of music-making is utterly infectious.

There is therefore a surprising footnote to our conversation. We talk about favourite composers. He mentions Bach again. Then, opera. "There is no question who is first and foremost for me – Benjamin Britten. *Peter Grimes*, *The Turn of the Screw* – they are magnificent. I can't believe how young he was when he wrote *Grimes*."

Yes, amazingly, an experience still to come is Aldeburgh. He thinks he knows what he'll find on the seashore and in the reed beds. "Britten is everything to me – I hear all the loneliness and innocence in his music and it always moves me."

The surprise is that loneliness has such a pull on him, and that it is Britten's voice that he hears. Yet, perhaps not. His passion for the collective experience of music, whether in a worldwide choir connected by the wonders of the worldwide web or through the intimacy of a small group of singers in a college chapel on a winter Sunday evening, is a response to the power of precisely the same feeling: that music not only has the ability to describe isolation and loneliness, to feel the experience, but also to banish them. ■

The world premiere recording of Whitacre's choral work 'Alone' is out now on The King's Singers new album 'High Flight' on Signum. Review next issue.



AROUND THE WORLD: Eric Whitacre conducts his 'Virtual Choir' in *Sleep*

EDITORIAL



Eric Whitacre's choir is famed for its mix of professional singers

“I want to see conviction, emotional attachment and passion

How to start a choir...

You've read about carols, now form a choir to sing them! **ANDREW STEWART** tells you how

Christmas brings the singer out in most of us. The office party or school carol concert can tell you who can hold a tune and just a handful of people with singing experience can be the basis of a choir. With a motivational music director you could set the foundations before the New Year arrives.

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WHY START A CHOIR?

Singing with others belongs to human nature. I want to see conviction, emotional attachment and passion in choirs' faces arising from the expressive power of 10, 20 or 100 individuals sharing the energy, spirit and ritual of singing together. It feels like a chore or the vehicle for a conductor's ego trip, but...

HOW DO WE BEGIN?

My early do-it-yourself choir fixing blunders could have been spared by helpers ready to book rehearsal times and concert venues, promote events and cover countless details that never care for themselves. Find a charismatic conductor, yes – but you'll also need a competent support team to create a choir with roots.

WHERE DO WE FIND THE SINGERS?

Cathedrals and university towns usually have the edge over rural spots but a village choir is likely to attract local people. I once found five extras to staff a Verdi Requiem performance in Oxford by stopping people in the street! You need volunteers to commit to weekly rehearsals, so tell them about choral singing's feel-good benefits.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO RUN A CHOIR?

A single rehearsal can easily cost £100. Beware of false economies. My keyboard skills may be no great shakes but I know how to lead weekly choir rehearsals and prepare performances, which carries a price. Most choirs charge a subscription to help offset costs and work all year round to raise

www.classicfm.com



CLASSIC FM
STARTING A CHOIR

MY CHOIR...



Eric Whitacre

Composer & conductor

Choirs thrive based in the UK. The Eric Whitacre Singers, which is a group formed of non-professional singers. The speed with which they start and react to new and old music is absolutely incredible. That's the only way you can get it up. You have to have a level of the boundaries in terms of what we expect of being a new member. Rehearsing a work is not an easy task in your bedroom or an arena is a strange and lonely experience, and yet so many members tell us about their first night. A participating in this international choir. There's a feeling of community and a strange togetherness is stronger than the music itself. It will never replace the music-making of course, but rehearsal and experience has been a long way.

Eric will be conducting a programme of music of his own. Recent works including 'Sleep', 'Ave Maria', and 'A Day and a Night', performed by his professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, at Cadogan Hall, London, on 1 February. For tickets, call 020 7730 4300.

MY CHOIR...



Howard Goodall

Composer

As anyone who's heard will tell you, the more difficult things about setting up a choir is

finding enough singers. Recruitment of potential singers has been attempted in a variety of ways, with no guarantee of success – but another solution is to start with a small group and then expand. I've found that the best way to do this is to start with a small group of singers, and then expand. I've found that the best way to do this is to start with a small group of singers, and then expand. I've found that the best way to do this is to start with a small group of singers, and then expand.

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additional funds. Making Music offers public liability insurance as part of its membership fee. It's worth every penny, believe me.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE REHEARSE?

Once a week during school terms for two hours should suffice. Settle for an evening that suits most people and stick to it. Timetable a week in which to that and form friendships.

DO WE NEED A PIANIST FOR REHEARSALS?

Not unless they can play the instrument well, a tentative pianist can do more harm than good. If you know a confident player, and have access to an in-tune piano, there's a lot to be said for using an accompanist, but don't allow the piano to mask inaccurate singing.

WHAT SHOULD WE SING?

Survey the local choral scene and consider where you might fit. Check Making Music (makingmusic.org.uk) and National Voice Practitioners Network

(naturalvoice.net) to find out what amateur choirs are singing. Spare a thought for your audience: gloomy Requiems are not everybody's cup of tea.

WHAT ABOUT THE MUSIC?

Thousands of non-copyright works can be downloaded free from websites such as the Choral Public Domain Library (choralwiki.com) or the International Music Score Library Project (imslp.org). Members of Making Music, the UK's leading umbrella organisation for amateur music makers, can borrow scores from its 'music bank'. Local libraries can also help source performing materials. View never to photocopy works or editions in copyright: 'everyone else does it' won't wash in court.

WHAT SHOULD WE WEAR IN CONCERT?

Choirs like to dress up for a show, so ask what they want to wear and accept the majority verdict. The idea is to present a comfortable, smart-looking group. What matters more is the spirit and conviction of a choir's performance – so get out there in your finest scholastic and sing!

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EDITORIAL

The Independent, London

London Symphony Chorus & Orchestra/Whitacre, Barbican Hall

By Edward Seckerson

October 25, 2010

Eric Whitacre made us wait for the choral moment that has so quickly become a global phenomenon. *Lux Aurumque* (Light of Gold) went viral on YouTube launching Whitacre's "virtual choir" from cyberspace in a haze of far-reaching, mystical, harmonies. Whitacre writes choral music that is as old as time and yet as immediate as the here and now. It is grateful to sing, scrumptious to listen to, and rejoices in those ecstatic harmonic suspensions that turn dissonance into consonance and make something highly seductive of the thoroughly chaste. Most of all, he is a natural melodist with a touch of Broadway in every hook.

A timely commission from the LSO Chorus turned this event into something of a well-earned showcase for the choir. It was a whistle stop voyage around Eric Whitacre – charmingly acting as our personal guide - but more than that it was a flavoursome taste of the America that gave his music breath. Melodically and harmonically speaking you knew you were in the land of the free from the moment Aaron Copland's Old American Songs began invoking homespun ditties from "Long time ago". The singing was a bit proper – more old country, or better yet home counties, than new world. But the spirit moved "At the River" while the muted trumpet-led salvation band played on.

Whitacre made no secret of his influences, either, introducing the lusty and lustful Mid-Winter Songs of his mentor Morten Lauridsen and Samuel Barber's little masterpiece "*Knoxville: Summer of 1915*" to hint at where his own way with words found inspiration. His wife Hila Plitmann sang the latter with honesty and real understanding of what it means to feel secure in the loving embrace of family.

And family – namely his father – was behind his choice of poems for the evening's world premiere, Songs of Immortality. Two poems, actually, in effortless elision: Dylan Thomas' "*Lie still, sleep becalmed*" which clung to tenuous harmonies, not waving but drowning until asserting fabulous defiance with the words "*Open a pathway through the slow sad sail*". Emily Dickinson then chronicled the "letting go" on a final tone that was in every sense eternal.

"*Sleep*" (words: Charles Anthony Silvestri) is already Whitacre's most successful musical export and is all set to become his next and biggest adventure with the "virtual choir". Surrender to the dreams of "a thousand pictures" comes on a refulgent swell of sound – the most consonant dissonance imaginable. Music can do that.

Whitacre's music loves to do that.

"The music is so unfailingly pretty and inhabits such a specific harmonic world."

[The Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

"it's the music that lingers most in the mind, with its antiphonal juxtapositions, close harmonies and discords that rattle your eardrums".

[The Daily Telegraph](#)

"Whitacre's skills seem the perfect gift, come at the perfect time."

[The Times](#)

"Works of unearthly beauty and imagination with electric, chilling harmonies."

[Los Angeles Times](#)

"Whitacre is that rare thing, a modern composer who is both popular and original."

[The Daily Telegraph](#)

"*Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings*" employs not just original anime sequences, but the very structure and attitudes of classic Japanimation to spin out its post-apocalyptic allegory about angel children's struggle to build a new world. The result may resemble a musicalization of "*Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*" but it's neither pretentious nor kitschy. Musically lush, committed and smart, tuner will appeal to a demographic far beyond comic book fans (who'll adore it), for in composer/librettist/co-lyricist Eric Whitacre it introduces an exciting new, and potentially important, figure in the musical theater."

[Variety](#)

EDITORIAL



February 2011

RECORDS
TO DIE FOR**ERIC WHITACRE: *Light & Gold: Choral Music***

Eric Whitacre, Eric Whitacre Singers. With: Grace Davidson, soprano; Stephen Kennedy, baritone; Laudibus; The King's Singers; Pávao Quartet; Hila Plitmann, narrator; Christopher Glynn, piano.

Decca 80014850-02 (CD). 2010. Raphaël Mouterde, prod.; Andrew Mellor, eng. DDD. TT: 71:16

This, the only CD to feature Eric Whitacre conducting his own, handpicked choir in his own music, is a revelation. Umpteen versions of the title work, *Lux Aurumque* (Light & Gold), may be available, not least of which are renditions by Polyphony (justly praised by John Marks), Cantus (the all-male choir spectacularly recorded by John Atkinson), and the YouTube/Whitacre Virtual Choir (a multi-million-hit worldwide sensation), but none offers the host of accents, volume gradations, and shadings that Whitacre and his singers lavish on this transcendently beautiful work. The textures in every track are so personal, the quiet passages so intimate, and the silences so profound, that it's as if we've been invited into Whitacre's inner sanctum. To hear his *Five Hebrew Love Songs* narrated by the poet herself (Whitacre's wife, Hila Plitmann), or *The Stolen Child* performed by its dedicatees (The King's Singers), is icing on the cake.

STRINGS

FOR PLAYERS OF
VIOLIN, VIOLA, CELLO,
BASS & FIDDLE

Cellist Julian Lloyd Webber's 60th Birthday
Gala

Public event was a celebration of a 'beautiful, temperamental instrument'

By Andrew Palmer posted June 13, 2011

Cellist Julian Lloyd Webber's 60th birthday gala at London's Royal Festival Hall on April 14 was a celebration of the "beautiful, temperamental instrument" (his words) that dominates his life. It was also a reminder of his remarkable versatility—he shared the stage with his wife, the cellist Jiaxin Cheng; and his composer brother, Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber; violinist Tasmin Little; soprano Danielle de Niese; jazz singer Dame Cleo Laine; and the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Christopher Warren-Green.

Notwithstanding a heartfelt performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto, Lloyd Webber was keen to look ahead rather than to bask in past glories, which is why he ended the program playing alongside schoolchildren drawn from the In Harmony project that he chairs. It also explains the inclusion of the premiere of a work written specially for him: Eric Whitacre's *The River Cam* for cello and strings, which the American composer also conducted.

"It's just a little postcard [of the countryside near the English university city of Cambridge, where he spent the fall of 2010 as a Visiting Professor and Composer in Residence]," Whitacre told the orchestra during rehearsal.

Unnecessary modesty: the wistful beauty of this ten-minute work charmed audience and players alike.

After the piece had come together for the first time, Lloyd Webber was heard to exclaim, "I'm stunned."



EDITORIAL

SPECTATOR.CO.UK

19 November 2011 | by: PETER PHILLIPS |

[Comments \(0\)](#)

Brain gain

The arrival of the composer Eric Whitacre and his family in London as permanent residents brings a ray of Californian sunshine to our cloud-bedraggled lives. American [musicians](#) who have chosen to move to Europe to work have always made an interesting group, headed by jazz players of the calibre of Josephine Baker and Sidney Bechet. Of course they had reasons for seeking work elsewhere which do not apply to the very white Whitacre. But, given that at a casual glance the US appears to offer so much opportunity to everyone, why come all this way?

In Whitacre's case I get the impression that he really likes the UK. Since he is probably the most listened-to composer of his generation, it doesn't really matter where he puts pen to paper, meaning that the move must either be because he has had enough of long-distance flights, or, like Tom Lehrer, he is actually more celebrated here than there. Either way, his genius for turning the internet to advantage (and landing a modelling contract with an internationally established men's clothing house) has given him enviable freedom. There is also the small matter of how much he admires English [singers](#).

I have wondered how he is finding it here. In one sense the difference between California and London is as great as between Delhi and London, and rather less than between London and Paris. How is he faring with a people who follow a game which may last five days and end, thrillingly, in a draw? Or with those who habitually maintain a distinction between 'momentarily', 'presently' and 'right now'? Or living alongside those who, as the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once observed, are unique in the world in looking over their shoulder, when you point a camera at them, to see who the real object of your attention is. Not very Californian, is it? Nor is the irony that underlies so much of our expression.

I hope he has found his feet in all this, since he cuts a glamorous figure and writes very good [music](#). I can measure his popularity by the sheer number of performances I hear about every week. His *Lux Aurumque* is currently being prepared by my son in his school chamber choir, and was performed last Sunday by the choir of Queen's College Oxford as the anthem at Evensong. Merton College Choir has just released a recording of his *When David heard*. The Tallis Scholars have just commissioned him. In addition he will be Composer in Residence at Sydney Sussex College Cambridge for the next five years. And now his own Eric Whitacre Singers, recently formed of London professionals, has started to appear in the concert hall and on disc.

With these titles and with such groups taking him up one would be forgiven for thinking he was a quasi-Anglican composer. In fact, if I understood him correctly, he is not interested in setting religious texts per se, but needs the words — any words — to work on his imagination and release musical ideas. The result, in pieces like *Lux Aurumque*, is a sound-world of chord clusters, or blurred harmonies, which seem to have their roots in that old chestnut the distant choir in the vast Gothic cathedral, their sound drifting down immense corridors to the listener as if from heaven. Such a model won't do for renaissance polyphony, but it does do very well indeed for the slow gestations of Whitacre's more chordally-based idiom. And it appeals. One enthusiast writes online: 'I feel like I'm floating on a cloud with a harpe and angels fly by singing this song to me while I'm on my way to heaven.'

Nothing shows off the success of Whitacre's music better than his inspired invention of the virtual choir on YouTube (Arts, 20 November 2010). In the first place he recorded himself conducting it to a click track. He duly appears on a big black screen, centre stage. In front of him is his 'choir', which is made up of many hundreds of people — including Ed Rex of this parish — sitting at home singing into some form of video camera while their voices are transferred on to the general tape. When I last looked, 2,722,388 had watched *Lux Aurumque*; and 2,052 people from 58 countries had taken part in the virtual choir performance of *Sleep*.

And this from a composer who originally made his mark in the symphonic wind repertory. My guess, though, is that the sounds he can inspire from his London professionals — surely in a different category from what he can have in the US — will give him a new lease of creative life. And keep him rooted here.

EDITORIAL

Los Angeles Times

Eric Whitacre Soars beyond World of Choral Music

The classical composer broadens his reach with forays into the modeling and movie industries, plus a successful online project.

By Chloe Veltman, Special to the Los Angeles Times

June 19, 2011

Classical composers don't generally attract hordes of screaming fans. But when Eric Whitacre appears at a convention, concert hall or college campus, groupies have been known to line up around the block hours in advance for the chance to meet the man with the flowing locks.



With his latest album, "Light & Gold," debuting at No. 1 on the classical charts on both sides of the Atlantic, an enormous global following and a modeling contract to his name, Whitacre is arguably the first bona fide rock star to have emerged from the decidedly unglamorous field of contemporary choral music.

The composer, who counts Björk and Radiohead as influences alongside Bach and Debussy and tends to polarize classical music aficionados for his populist stance, is fast developing a reputation for himself beyond the stuffy church halls where choruses are most often heard.

Earlier this year, 2,052 singers from 58 countries participated in Whitacre's "Virtual Choir" project, uploading videos of themselves singing the soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts from the composer's 2000 piece "Sleep" to YouTube, which were then spliced together into an online performance conducted by the beatifically smiling maestro. Whitacre spoke about the project, which has grown exponentially since he launched it last year with 185 singers from 12 countries, at the high-profile TED innovation conference in March.

Whitacre's recent collaboration with Hollywood composer Hans Zimmer ("Inception") on the choral sections of the "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides" movie soundtrack is further broadening the conductor's reach. The same can be said of his involvement with the 80th-anniversary celebrations of Abbey Road Studios, for which he is judging and conducting an anthem-writing competition with the London Symphony Orchestra this year.

"The composer in me wants to think that it's happening because I'm tapping into the deepest part of our collective psyche with my music," said Whitacre, who grew up in Reno and lives for the moment in Los Angeles with his singer-wife, Hila Plitmann, and their 3-year-old son, of his exploding popularity. "But the marketer in me thinks maybe it's the hair."

Tall, athletic and endowed with golden, surfer-boy tresses that belie his reputation as the world's biggest choir nerd, the 41-year-old Whitacre is as good-looking as he is self-deprecating. "I don't feel like I'm an artist with a capital A," the composer said over an egg-white omelet at a Studio City cafe. Yet behind the Jon Bon Jovi smile and form-fitting T-shirt are serious musical chops.

One of the most frequently performed composers of his generation, Whitacre has received commissions from vocal ensembles, including the Kings Singers, the Berlin Rundfunkchor and Chanticleer. "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings," his music theater work about an angel's dreams of flight involving seven soloists, a DJ, a solo cello and a chorus of angels, was presented at Carnegie Hall in 2010 and will receive a concert performance conducted by the composer at Walt Disney Concert Hall on June 25.

The U.K.-based Decca label, to which Whitacre signed last year, has gone as far as to create a professional chorus, the Eric Whitacre Singers, specifically to record and perform the composer's works. In August, Whitacre is moving his family to London where, in addition to moonlighting as a composer-in-residence at Cambridge University, he will work with the Whitacre Singers on his upcoming Decca album.

"Eric Whitacre is the defining voice of American choral music at the start of the 21st century," said Matthew Oltman, music director of Chanticleer. He said that only a few choral composers, such as John Rutter, David Willcocks and Morten Lauridsen, carry similar name recognition in choral music circles.

The composer's instantly recognizable musical style, which frequently employs dense chord clusters requiring singers to split into as many as 18 parts, soaring soprano accents and polyrhythmic meters, has spawned many imitations. Oltman said half the entries Chanticleer receives for its annual student choral composition competition are "Whitacre-esque."

Singers relish the lushness of Whitacre's sonic palette. "Eric has this extraordinary ear for vocal color," said Grant Gershon, music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale, which is launching its upcoming season with a Whitacre piece, "Her Sacred Spirit Soars." "I think of him as a painter of sound with the human voice."

The composer's use of clear-cut, emotionally upfront poetry by authors such as Octavio Paz and e.e. cummings also wins him admirers. "The voicing is very natural. The phrasing and dynamic swells seem inevitable," said Rebecca Schonberg, a Bay Area-based singer who has performed many of Whitacre's works.

The son of a Nevada state unemployment benefits manager and a graphic designer, Whitacre didn't get off to a particularly illustrious start as a musician. The composer made several half-hearted attempts to learn the piano as a child and spent his high school years writing what he describes as "Erasure and Depeche Mode rip-offs" for a pop group in which he played synthesizer and drum machine. He was persuaded to join the chorus at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas when a fellow undergraduate lured him with promises of cute sopranos and an upcoming choir tour to Mexico.

As soon as Whitacre sang bass in Mozart's "Requiem Mass" as part of that ensemble, he became hooked on choral music. He began creating pieces for the university groups, which he used as "laboratories" to develop his skills. At that time, Whitacre also started writing for wind ensembles, which impressed him for their sheer volume. Soon, his music started gaining the notice of vocal and wind music aficionados beyond campus. "He at times made the impression of being a bit of a flake," said Virko Bailey, a music professor at UNLV. "But whenever he was really interested in something, he worked extremely hard."

It took Whitacre seven years to complete his undergraduate degree because he kept dropping out of classes. But by the time he enrolled at the Juilliard School for a masters in composition in 1995, the composer had already received commissions and published pieces.

EDITORIAL

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He also cultivated a canny business sense. Unlike many composers with burgeoning careers, Whitacre chose early on to retain copyright control over most of his works and avoid hefty publisher commissions by self-publishing with the aid of a distributor. He entered into a deal with a traditional publisher in 2007 (G. Schirmer) only under terms that would allow him greater copyright control than is typical and was marketing himself online long before other composers understood the power of the internet. (Today, Whitacre streams all of his works at ericwhitacre.com free and maintains close contact with his fans through social media.)

Focusing at the start of his career on writing for choruses and wind ensembles instead of orchestras also proved to be a smart business decision for the composer, who has branched out to symphonic music more recently as his reputation has grown. "A young composer writing a symphony struggles hard to get that symphony played," said the composer John Corigliano, who taught Whitacre at Juilliard. "But Eric wanted to get his music out to people and wrote for bands and choruses where there was a real demand."

Unsurprisingly, Whitacre's enviable commercial success has earned him some detractors. His recent signing with the London-based Storm modeling agency, which counts the pop musicians Lily Allen and Michael Bublé among its talent roster, hasn't improved the composer's reputation in classical music enclaves. Singers and conductors sometimes question his artistic sensibility. "While his music is aesthetically beautiful on the surface, it has all the depth of a Hallmark greeting card," said one New York-based chorus director. "He's like the Deepak Chopra of choral music."

Yet alongside "Glee" and "The Sing Off," Whitacre's efforts are undeniably making a profound impact on the world of ensemble singing. Many welcome the composer's appetite for marrying the rigors of classical music with a populist approach.

"Choirs are typically about the power of the collective, so it's not often that stars emerge," said Ann Meier Baker, president and CEO of Chorus America, a choral service organization. "Eric Whitacre is an unusual exception. He understands the potential of choral music to connect people, and that reaps benefits for all of us who care about the future of the art form."

WHEELS UP // Business

Road Warrior // Eric Whitacre, Composer

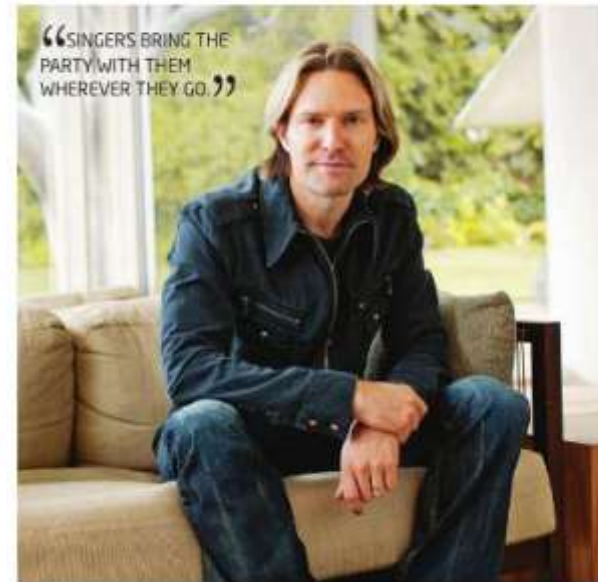
Current Role: World-renowned composer, conductor and lecturer

Based: Los Angeles

Days Spent on the Road: Concerts, guest lecture appearances and other work keep Whitacre on the road for about six months each year.

Street Cred: Juilliard-trained Whitacre has gained a following in the classical and pop arenas for his work that glides effortlessly between traditional choral elements and more contemporary ambient and techno sounds. His works such as "Lux Aurumque" and "Cloudburst" are becoming standards in choral repertoires. Last October, his debut album *Light & Gold* topped the U.S. and U.K. classical album charts, and he gained international acclaim for his virtual choir project, in which he combined the submissions of more than 100 singers from around the world into a single digital choir performing "Lux Aurumque." Coming up, Whitacre will speak at TED 2011 in March and unveil his second virtual choir project, "Sleep," during an April concert at Lincoln Center in New York City.

"SINGERS BRING THE PARTY WITH THEM WHEREVER THEY GO."



• **BEST PLACE TO FIND INSPIRATION**
Cambridge University, England
I love taking long walks around Cambridge University, where I just spent the last three months as a visiting fellow at Trinity College. The mix of the architecture, the green—its perfection is unusual.



• **BEST PLACE TO DINE WITH FRIENDS**
Jumpin' Java, Los Angeles
When I am home in Los Angeles, I go to Jumpin' Java on Ventura Boulevard for pancakes every Sunday morning with my wife, son and friends.

• **BEST PLACE TO UNWIND AFTER A CONCERT**
Anywhere
Singers bring the party with them wherever they go. I recently had a concert in Hamburg, and afterward the choir found a small, quiet local Turkish restaurant in a joyous, rustic concert hall.



• **FAVORITE PLACE TO TAKE THE FAMILY**
Tel Aviv
I like the white-sand beaches in particular. My wife is from Israel, and we visit every year. My son and I bodyboard all day until the sun sets into the Mediterranean.

• **FAVORITE RESORT**
Post Ranch Inn, Big Sur, California
My wife and I went here for my birthday last year. We spent three gorgeous days hiking and visiting wineries. It is easily one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. post ranchinn.com



• **BEST PLACE FOR A GUILTY PLEASURE**
São Paulo
After concerts in the gorgeous Teatro Municipal, we go for dancing and capoeira in the Vila Madalena District. The nightlife in São Paulo only begins after midnight.

28 February 2011 thebitchmag.com

EDITORIAL



Leading the world in song—virtually

By Richard Galant
April 8, 2011

New York (CNN) — The lights come up on the stage. The red curtain parts. The conductor begins leading a large chorus, its resonant voices chanting, in Latin, the words of a poem: "Light, warm and heavy as

pure gold and angels sing softly to the newborn babe."

But it's no ordinary choir. The conductor stands in his own video rectangle suspended against a dark background on your computer screen. His chorus — all 185 voices — is arrayed before him, all the singers in their own webcam boxes, singing from their houses and apartments, in their living rooms, bedrooms and offices, at different times of day and in many countries and continents — the world's first virtual choir.

A year ago, the release of "Lux Aurumque," composed and conducted by Eric Whitacre, caused a YouTube sensation in the world of choral music, gaining a million views in the first two months. On Thursday evening at the Paley Center in New York, Whitacre unveiled the Virtual Choir 2.0, taking the concept to a new level of complexity, with 2,051 voices from 58 countries singing another Whitacre composition, "Sleep." Video of the event is available on the Paley Center's website.

Whitacre received two standing ovations when he gave a talk about the Virtual Choir at the TED conference in Long Beach, California, in February. TED is a nonprofit dedicated to "Ideas Worth Spreading" which it distributes through its website, and it has a partnership with CNN.com.

The virtual chorus got its start in 2009 when a young woman named Britlin Losee posted a fan video on YouTube, singing the soprano part of "Sleep," an a cappella composition by Whitacre.

"The video was so beautiful and moving and intimate in a way," Whitacre recalled in an interview with CNN, "that it struck me instantly that this would be incredible if we could get 50 people to do this all at the same time, all around the world. They would sing their parts — soprano, alto, tenor, bass — upload it to YouTube and then we could cut it together and make a virtual choir."

Whitacre recorded a silent conductor track, which he posted to YouTube. He put the music on his website for people to download for free. When the webcam videos started coming in,

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producer Scott Haines put all of the parts together, scrubbing the audio tracks to optimize the sound.

"The reception really caught me completely off guard. It went viral and ... I started getting the craziest e-mails, including one from Chris Anderson, the head of TED here, who invited me to come speak."

Knitting together the parts of the virtual choir requires a huge amount of technical work, and it forces him to conduct in silence while trying to imagine "the perfect performance in my head." Still, there's something about it that's similar to a conventional choral performance. "The virtual choir would never replace live music or a real choir, but the same sort of focus and intent and esprit de corps is evident in both," he said, "and at the end of the day it seems to me a genuine artistic expression."

Is the virtual choir a stunt — or the start of something new in music? "I'm not sure where it's going," Whitacre said. "In my wildest dreams I think that in a few years, technology will have caught up, and my iPhone 7 or my iPhone 8 will have a live virtual choir, ... a thousand singers around the world singing in real time to my conducting."

Much of the appeal of the virtual choir is its ability to build a community. "The biggest benefit is that you can become part of a community from your kitchen or from your garage or your dorm room," Whitacre said, "that you can connect with people, with like-minded people around the world, and you never have to leave home. I'm not saying you shouldn't leave home and join a real choir, but this gives you a chance to connect with people all over the world."

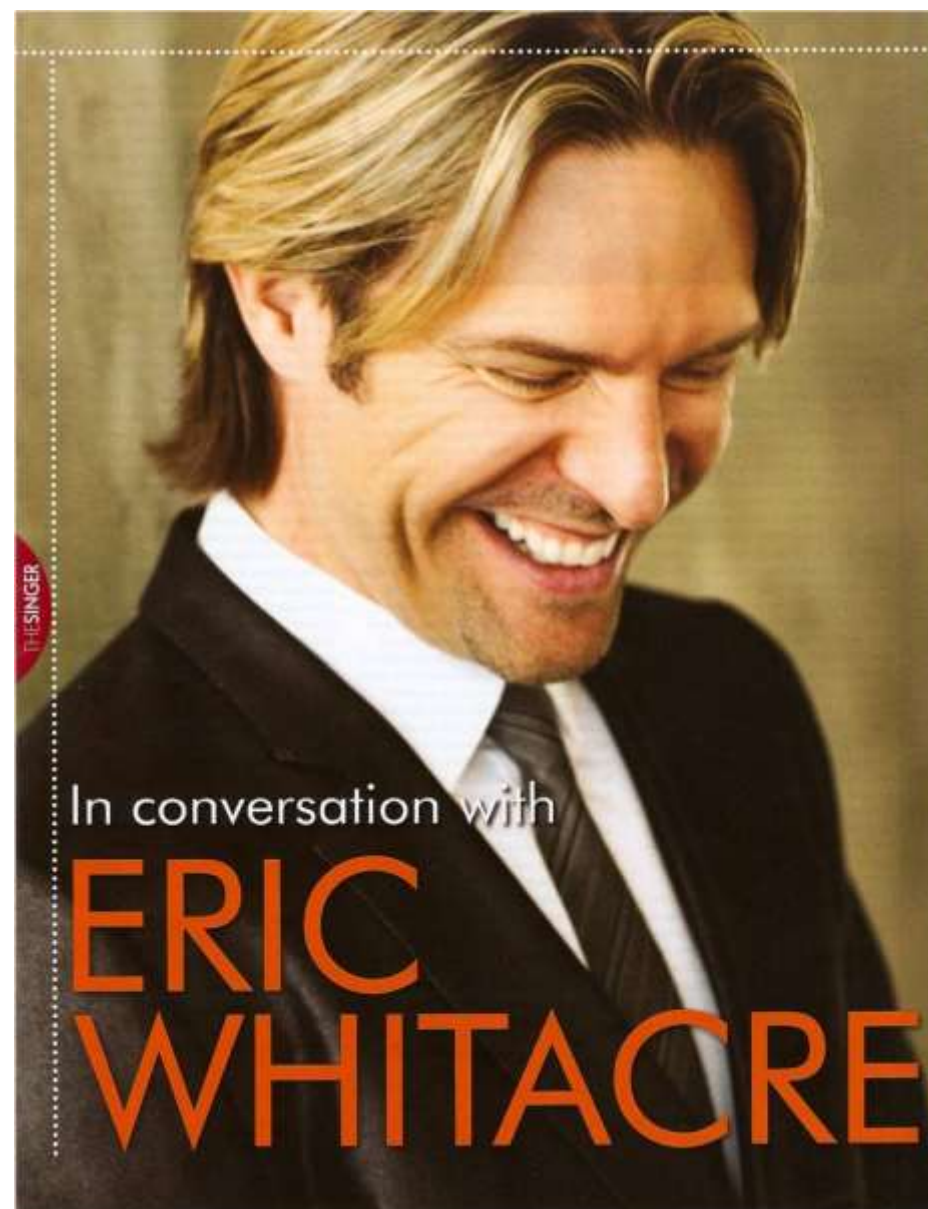
Whitacre's YouTube choirs have also led to the discovery of talent, in something like the way British singer Susan Boyle came to the world's attention through an audition for "Britain's Got Talent."

"I heard some singers that were just phenomenal, truly excellent, excellent musicians. The kind of singing that they're doing, choral singing, is a little different from what Susan Boyle might do. ... (She's) singing in a solo way, trying to express something. Choral singing is more contained, and even virtually, you're trying to be part of a group of people."

"But I certainly heard a number of people, including Melody Myers, the soprano in 'Lux Aurumque,' I think she should have a record deal. She's phenomenal and she's gotten a lot of attention from it. Just her video on YouTube has been seen something like 80,000 times." Myers is a college student in Tennessee, Whitacre said.

He says he feels lucky to be alive at a time when more and more people are showing an interest in singing as part of a group — and when "Glee" is a popular program on television. "Maybe it's a reaction to heavily produced pop music," he suggested. "It's real voices and it's quite beautiful and genuine. It's just fun to do. Millions and millions of people all over the world sing together in choirs and I guess now their voices are finally being heard."

EDITORIAL



EDITORIAL

American composer Eric Whitacre seems to be one of those forces of nature that comes along every now and then, threatening to turn things on their heads. With a recording industry that seems to be flailing around somewhat, where the promotion of classical music is concerned, he is a rare bird – being both popular and of quality at the same time. And as full to the teeth as we may be with all the hype and spin around these days, there is, nonetheless, no getting away from the fact that he is indeed 'one of the most popular and most performed composers of his generation'. His recent signing to Decca seems to be even more proof of his popularity among listeners and choral singers alike. Growing up in a small town in a totally non-classical background, Whitacre only came to the genre at the age of 18, and experienced what he describes as an epiphany when he joined the college choir. **Antonia Couling** meets the man himself to find out more about his path to success and enthusiasm for writing choral music.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW THIS EPIPHANY YOU EXPERIENCED MANIFESTED ITSELF TO YOU?

It was as if I was blind and suddenly I could see. I came from a very, very small town and I didn't even know that classical music in general existed. I had just heard film scores and maybe seen *Amadeus* in high school. And then during that first rehearsal it was as if here was the music and language I had been looking for my entire life and suddenly someone had dropped it on my head. It was liberating.

YOU WASTED NO TIME IN THROWING YOURSELF INTO WRITING – MANY WOULD SAY YOU HAD A LOT TO CATCH UP ON!

I think that kind of benefitted me, because it took a long time before I even acknowledged that there seemed to be established ways of doing things. I'm not saying that I broke the rules or had any kind of brilliant approach to it because of my innocence, but it seemed natural to me. I wanted to try writing for choir so I just did it! I know many young composers who are completely freaked out – they haven't taken enough theory or haven't studied enough or maybe they've taken too much theory or every time they sit down to write they feel they have to replicate Beethoven or Stravinsky. Maybe it's my personality that I just jump into the deep end of the pool and then learn how to

"I take great pride in choosing the very best poems and then just getting the hell out of the way of the poet's words and doing what they say to me to do."

swim. But for a long time, it just seemed perfectly natural to me. At the university that I was at in Las Vegas, there were no other composers and the choir teacher and the concert band teacher were more than willing to let me experiment.

WHAT FREEDOM? MOST STUDENTS AT CONSERVATORIES, WITH ALL THE COMPETITION AROUND, WOULD BE TERRIFIED OF EVEN PUTTING SOMETHING ON THE TABLE.

Exactly. When I went to Juilliard, my first teacher, David Diamond, was really tough, very nurturing – he had this famous red pen – and you'd bring your music to lessons and he'd just start crossing things out and he yelled a lot. His whole philosophy was to



Whitacre's debut album for Decca, *Light & Gold*, is scheduled for release in October 2010. The recording will be sung by the newly formed Whitacre Singers, conducted by Eric Whitacre.

break the student down and rebuild them as a good composer. And for the first six months or so I was really paralysed and couldn't write a note. It was the first time I came into contact with that stern academic authority. And I'm so grateful that I didn't experience it till I was older. By that time I was 25 and I'd had some success with my pieces. I think I was stubborn and resistant to it, and ultimately, I think it made me stronger. But I have friends who started at 18 and they had the music crushed out of them.

YOU HEAR OF THAT SO OFTEN. WHY DO YOU THINK IT HAPPENS?

I think – not to rail against academia, because it's certainly important – but within the arts there seems to be, particularly in the last century, this need to dissect and quantify everything in a scientific way. Mark Twain had this great saying: 'If you dissect a frog he won't be able to jump any more'. And I feel that way about art. This micro-analytical approach masks the meaning of the whole. And second, I think there's a culture among professors that's been happening for about 150 years where these stern, ivory-tower teachers are teaching faithful and loyal students who then become professors and then teach more faithful and loyal students and then you have this complete disconnection from reality.

I think that it's a kind of protective bubble for all these academic composers who either truly believe that music should be advanced to such a place where we, the little people, don't understand it any more, or it's defensive in that they can't really write music that people want to listen to, so the easiest thing to do is to call everyone else stupid! I don't know.

SO HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH WHAT YOU WERE FACED WITH AT JUILLIARD?

At first I tried the Romantic approach where I'd take a bottle of wine into the rehearsal room – it seemed to work for all these other composers – but that didn't go too well. And I tried writing a couple of pieces and they were kind of weird Frankenstein things where I



Eric Whitacre: 'a force of nature'

was trying to make him happy and find my own voice in there. And then at some point I think I just surrendered, you know? This is what I do and this is what I like to listen to and I just have to do it. And I think it helped that I was having some success. Even at Juilliard I was being commissioned. I had real pieces to write for real people. And there's a real pragmatism that comes into play there.

CLEARLY YOUR MUSIC IS AWARE OF THE AUDIENCE AND THE PEOPLE YOU WRITE FOR. HOW DO YOU KEEP THAT CONNECTION? WHAT STOPS YOU FROM ELEVATING YOURSELF TO THOSE PLACES WHERE YOU ARE DISCONNECTED?

I guess it's just my personality. And I feel that the very best artwork has a primer – an instruction manual – built into the piece itself, so that you don't have to be smart, you just have to be there and listening. For me, the great example of this is Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It is really dense, tough, modern music on the surface. But everything you need to know is there in the music: the language, the way he teaches you. So when I'm writing, I'm constantly thinking about teaching the audience. First we establish this, now we're going to go here, then I'll take them here – okay this is the moment where we'll be breathless. So I think that when I'm writing I've always got the audience in the room with me.

THAT'S THE THEATRE, THE DREAMS, EVERYTHING HAS TO HAVE THAT TO TAKE AN AUDIENCE WITH YOU.

Yes. And although I didn't grow up with classical music, I'm a huge fan of the movies and I wondered if, like you're saying, a sense of drama and theatre was for me formal very early on in the movie theatres.

THE VISUAL ASPECT IS ALSO VERY IMPORTANT FOR THE LISTENER. YOUR MUSIC, LIKE MOVIE MUSIC, IS VERY PICTORIAL. IT ALSO CONNECTS WITH NATURE AND OUR NEED AS AUDIENCE MEMBERS TO HAVE IMAGES IN OUR HEADS WHEN WE LISTEN TO MUSIC. WOULD YOU SAY THAT WAS TRUE? AND IS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU AIM FOR?

I would, absolutely. I don't consciously do it – 'Now I'll try and put this picture in someone's head', for example. But I think that if I look back at my music then I am endlessly choosing texts that are incredibly visual. I don't think I do it intentionally, but I don't think I'd know how not to do it.

A LOT OF YOUR SUCCESS IS THANKS TO THE EAGERNESS WITH WHICH CHOIRS ALL OVER ARE PERFORMING YOUR WORKS. WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES YOUR COMPOSITIONS ATTRACTIVE FOR A CHOIR TO SING? First, I'd like to think that the texts that I'm choosing are really great. I take great pride in choosing the very best poems and then just getting the hell out of the way of the poet's words and doing what they say to me to do. It's always strange for me when I'm taking credit for some of these pieces, because for me it's the poet that has done most of the heavy lifting. And second, from my very earliest experience of singing in a choir I loved to sing in either major seconds or minor seconds with other voices. Still it makes me giggle, makes me tingle all over. And for some reason it only happens with voices. I love the sound of it with strings or brass but somehow with human voices when they're that close together, it's exquisite for me. And so I think that because I tend to use those

gestures quite a bit, that singers are maybe having a physiological response when they're singing my music – that it tingles them in the same way it does me. And then, I think – and I hope this is true – because I am not a very good singer, my writing has a heavy dose of pragmatism. So if we're all going to sing a big cluster – unlike Penderecki, we don't all start on an E and then leap into the middle of this 16-note cluster – it's generally approached by trial and half the choir moves one note down or there's a scale that builds up and then we find ourselves in a cluster. So it's relatively easy to perform. There's an accessibility for not-so-great a singer to find themselves in the middle of one of those shimmering moments.

PERHAPS YOUR OWN AGENCY – YOUR KIND OF DANCE TO CREATE YOUR OWN SOUND – HAS SOMEHOW WORKED ITS WAY THROUGH THE MUSIC AND PEOPLE ARE PICKING UP ON THAT IN SOME WAY? I hope you're right. That would be nice if people were responding to what you're calling the defiance, but what I think of as the blue-collar approach to it. That it is what it is – there's no pretension, no preening and hopefully, there's a kind of directness to that.

RECENT RELEASES

- **Three Flower Songs** (SSAATTBB + two soprano soloists, Chester Order No CH75427). This set of songs are heady fantasies in homophonic harmony. Like Cloudburst, they are student works from the nineties.
- **Sleep My Child** (SSAATTBB, Chester Order No CH75229). This piece was written in 2008 and is much more texturally complex.

● A landmark in the career of any composer is the first anthology, and Chester has obliged with the release of Eric



Whitacre: Collection (SSAATTBB, T and S solos, Chester Order No CH73975), containing *A Boy and a Girl*, *Go, Lovely Rose*, *Lux Aurumque*, *Nox Aurumque*, *Sleep*, *This Marriage*, and *Water Night*.

EDITORIAL

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Eric Whitacre's Grand Experiment in Virtual Collaboration

2nd March 2011, Anthony Tjan

My highlight so far at this year's TED conference in Long Beach, California, has been meeting the extraordinary composer and conductor, Eric Whitacre, after his moving and highly inspiring talk. Over 12 years, I have seen my share of TED presentations, and this was one of the most special.

Whitacre is a contemporary composer known for his choral and symphonic works. In 2009, he received an email from a friend with a YouTube link of a young girl, Britlin Losee, singing the soprano part of his choral work, "Sleep." The video viewing became much more than another piece of fan mail, because it served as inspiration, as a "what if" moment.

That "what if" was: What would happen if dozens of people could virtually participate in the singing of "Sleep" — could he conduct one of the first virtual choirs and make it something beautiful, actually make it into music? The experiment began in 2010 when Whitacre asked online for people to download from iTunes the same recording of "Sleep" by the British choir Polyphony and to submit an entry for the Virtual Choir by singing an individual part of alto, soprano, tenor, or bass. Whitacre videotaped himself conducting the piece and imagined the participants in front of him; choral singers imagined him in front of them. Whitacre asked for 900 entries and received more than 2500 responses from countries all around the world. After he

parsed through what became tantamount to a series of mini-auditions, a gentleman Scott Haines volunteered to edit, mash, and compile the Virtual Choir into one cohesive six minute video. The result of 185 voices from 12 different countries is shown here in this finished YouTube video production "Lux Aurumque" (Light and Gold).

This talk and the Virtual Choir project are so fascinating not only because the project created a thing of such beauty, but also because the implications of its success touch on so many of today's most pertinent technology shifts. The Virtual Choir is an overlay of analog and digital worlds creating its own version of augmented reality in the music world. For me, this is one of the first "virtual" experiences that translate into something real. But beyond the emotional impact of this augmented reality, consider how this project evolved and you can see the trends of social networking — viral video sharing, crowd-sourcing, open source, cloud storage; co-production — all at work.

Think about it. The instigating inspiration for the project was a YouTube video socially distributed first to Eric and then to others all around the world. The 185 voices recruited represent a vivid example of how crowd-sourcing talent can work. The desire by thousands around the world to participate highlights the desire by consumers and users to be co-participants and collaborative — does that now sound like open source?

Indeed the Virtual Choir should be seen as not just a performance spectacle and social experiment, but as an important case study and reminder for how businesses might shift their orientation of traditional modalities of production, business process rules, and constituent and customer outreach. How might videos better inspire and train and on-board your workers; how might companies like fellow TEDster Bill Trenchard's ReadyForce) change the way we crowd-source and recruit talent into companies; or how might businesses think about how to have their customer's co-

participate in the curating or production of their goods and services? Consider the innovation in businesses such as Threadless and minted — both of whom have created creative community platforms for their designed goods that hit squarely on the theme of collaborative design. These businesses and the Virtual Choir experiment work not because they are faddish, novel, or efficient in their production, but because there is — as Whitacre shares on his own website, "a poetic symbolism about our shared humanity and our need to connect."

EDITORIAL

Los Angeles Times

It used to be that joining a high school chorus was tantamount to committing social suicide. Now being in choir is hip in great part due to the Fox TV series "Glee." But give a nod as well to the the choral music of Eric Whitacre.

As told in Sunday's Arts & Books profile of the 41-year-old Los Angeles-based composer, the careening, soaring harmonies and heart-on-your-sleeve emotions of Whitacre's compositions have garnered him a devoted following in the choral music community. And his most obsessive groupies tend to be on the younger side.

"Singers, especially high schoolers and college kids, line up for blocks to get his autograph," said Vance George, the director emeritus of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, of Whitacre's fame.

So healthy is the appetite for Whitacre among teens, that high school chorus directors are using the composer's pieces as bait to help recruit and retain talent. As a result, works like "Cloudburst," "Lux Arumque" and "Sleep" have become standard repertory for youth and school choirs across the United States and beyond.

"Whitacre's music is extremely teachable and it instantly gets the kids hooked," said Todd Wedge, director of vocal music at the San Francisco School of the Arts. "It's like crack to high school students."

Here Whitacre conducts the VocalEssence Chorus & Ensemble Singers, the St. Olaf Choir and the 160-voice Minnesota High School Honors Choir in a performance of "Cloudburst" two years ago in Minneapolis.

June 18, 2011

Billboard

Kerri Mason, 2nd April 2011

Teenage girls wear T-shirts bearing his image and swarm his Facebook page with declarations of love. He plays to sold-out houses all over the world. He just locked in a contract with Storm models, the London-based agency that represents Cindy Crawford and Alek Wek. And his original sheet music has sold more than 1 million copies worldwide, according to the artist and his management.

But he's not a mainstream pop artist or crossover vampire movie star. Eric Whitacre is a choral composer—and a good-looking one, at that.

"From where I'm standing," he says, "choral music is really cool."

If that's true, it's safe to say that Whitacre, 41, has had a thing or two to do with that.

The Nevada-born artist has harnessed the power of social media to thrust his form of music—which last visited the mainstream in the '90s with fluke singing-monk hit "Chant" - into the digital age, forming a community of students, local musicians and fans who perform his work, connected through his Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages (more than 67,000 followers combined). In the process, he created something so unique that he was invited to speak about it at the recent TED Conference, the bleeding edge through-leader symposium in Long Beach, Calif.

The project is called Virtual Choir, and the idea is elegant yet simple: Create a singing group that exists only online, composed of individual singers performing separate vocal lines into their webcams. After a trial run in 2010, Whitacre is set to debut the second Virtual Choir video in early April,

timed with the first official wide release of his album "Light & Gold" (Decca), following an Amazon-only release in October 2010.

The notion of a crowd-sourced choir first came to Whitacre in early 2010. "A young woman from New York posted a video on YouTube of her looking into the camera and singing the soprano part to one of my choral pieces, like you might cover a pop tune," he says. "It was really beautiful and very intimate, and I wrote immediately on my blog, 'I've got this idea.'" That small call to action to his fan base resulted in 185 video responses from 12 different countries.

After painstakingly scrubbing and overlaying the audio and video ("Sound quality was all over the map; you could hear some people's mothers screaming in the background," Whitacre says), the first Virtual Choir, of Whitacre original "Lux Aurumque," was posted on YouTube on March 21, 2010. An amalgam of voices and faces from all over the world singing in harmony, like a global community action for the sake of art, it was as moving as it was beautiful. It garnered more than 1.8 million views.

The next edition, of Whitacre's "Sleep" (also on "Light & Gold"), is a decidedly bigger production. This time, Whitacre received more than 2,051 performance videos from 58 countries, and has enlisted the help of London production company rehabstudio to assemble it.

Decca is using the video as a promotional vehicle for the "Light & Gold" rerelease, which the label hopes will find a new audience through its natural one. "Eric has a younger demographic than the average classical music consumer: the young people who are actually performing his music," says Joseph Oerke, VP of Deutsche Gramophon and Decca Classics. "They have the drive of already being a part of it, and they know who Eric is. The next level is their parents of their friends."

EDITORIAL

The Washington Post

All together now (on YouTube)! Last chance to join virtual choir

By Lonnae O'Neal Parker

December 23, 2010

The curtain opens, the voices rise, but it takes a moment or two for a viewer's senses to sync with the component parts of the "choir." The layered notes of American composer Eric Whitacre's "Lux Aurumque" register first. Then the earnest faces of singers engaged in a startling unanimity of purpose come into focus on dozens of small screens.

The 185 singers from 12 countries recorded their pieces individually, over six months, and uploaded them to the video channel YouTube, where Whitacre assembled and broadcast the "performance" in March 2010 as the Internet's first virtual choir.

Since then, the video has received nearly 1.6 million views. For his next virtual concert - to the music of his composition "Sleep" - Whitacre hopes to assemble a choir of thousands. The deadline for online submissions, open to all voices, is Friday.

The virtual choir is viscerally a marriage of art, connectivity and social media. It plays with ideas of scope and accessibility in music. And, in some sense, seems to portend the future of music itself - at least one future, where those who can't buy a \$100 concert ticket can still experience the art.

"People will do anything necessary to communicate and connect with each other," Whitacre says. "I don't think it will ever replace people being together in a room, but I'm sure people said the same thing about the telephone."

Whitacre got the idea after watching a video of a young girl singing one of his chorale pieces. The intimacy of her performance moved him and made him want to get more voices virtually together.

He uploaded a silent video of himself conducting "Lux" and invited singers to send in their parts. As long as they were largely in time and in key, they made the choir.

In the YouTube performance, the camera alternates between Whitacre, the wide frame of all the videos together, and screens of individual singers. The emotion of the music plays across their faces, while just over their shoulders viewers see photos or bookshelves or the artifacts of their lives.

Whitacre says he has been "awestruck" by the response. Singers send their videos and say, "It's such an honor to have been able to make music with you," he says.

A precursor to Whitacre's experiment held the same promise. The YouTube Symphony Orchestra began two years ago as a notion to expand the range of material on the video channel. Musicians were invited to audition online and winners became part of a live orchestral performance at Carnegie Hall in 2009 and, of course, broadcast on YouTube.

Three hundred finalists from this year's contest were voted on by YouTube viewers and winners - to be announced Jan. 11 - will perform at the Sydney Opera House in Australia in March.

The reaction has been "uniformly positive," says Ed Sanders, a YouTube marketing manager who was involved in the idea's inception. "For music and the arts in general, it's showcasing the power of technology in creating new fronts."

It aids in talent discovery. And it gives people a chance to "meet, interact and develop ideas from conception to performance that breaks barriers," of time, resources and geography.

"Art that embraces these things is better," Sanders says.

Whitacre says he hopes one day to be conducting his virtual choir of thousands in real time. There will be an app for it in three or four years, he says. "And if there's not, I'll make one," because the love of music and the need to connect will always find a platform.

The composer expects a crush of submissions before Friday's deadline, but says he has already received 500 - "from little, little towns in Indonesia, Syria, Malta and three or four from American soldiers in Iraq, somehow singing as part of a choir, which I find beautiful and touching."

EDITORIAL

Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada

Focus Eric Whitacre - page I • The Scene Musical highlights from across North America - page IV • Reviews The latest North American CD releases - page IX • New releases index - page XIII



What is the special appeal of Eric Whitacre's music? Since 1991 the American composer has been writing choral works that have proved immensely popular in the US. But his recent online project, the Virtual Choir, has taken that popularity beyond the choral world and, indeed, American shores. As if to prove it, he has just been signed to Decca – how many other classical composers have exclusive, long-term recording contracts with a major label? – and, this fall, he takes up a three-month residency in England, at the University of Cambridge. With a London recording session in the pipeline and a London Symphony Orchestra commission, it looks like Eric Whitacre has finally

Without fuss or fanfare, Eric Whitacre has finally achieved international recognition with his unique choral works, writes **James McCarthy**

arrived on the international scene. But back to the Virtual Choir, which helped propel Whitacre to a worldwide audience.

The idea for the project came when a teenage fan of Whitacre's posted a video of herself on YouTube singing the soprano part of Sleep (Whitacre's most performed and recorded work), accompanied by Polyphony's renowned recording. Whitacre was, obviously, touched (and a little bemused) by the tribute, but it occurred to him that if he asked others (also, tenors and basses) to do the same he could stitch the videos together to form a "virtual choir". The experiment was a YouTube hit and was taken

further earlier this year when Whitacre developed the idea by recording a video of himself conducting *Lux aurumque* for singers to watch and follow while singing their individual parts, which allowed for a genuinely interactive choral experience.

The individual parts were then sewn together and cleaned up by Scott Haines and the complete performance posted on YouTube (see Gallery View, page 16). At the time of writing this video has received more than 950,000 views.

Whitacre's music is characterised by a uniquely emotive harmonic language which emerged, apparently fully formed, at the age of 21 with his first

published work. He is typically self-deprecating when I ask him how this voice came about. "The only thing I can think is that right before I wrote my first piece, *Gix, Lady Rose*, I went to a concert in Phoenix. It was the American Choral Directors Association, their national conference, and in this one concert were seven or eight pieces that completely blew my mind. There was music by Pärt, Taverner, Bernstein... I don't know whether I happened to be exactly at the right place in my learning or if it was just coincidence but this collection of music just struck me. I think I may be still trying to recover from the effects of that concert. Right around that time Charles Anthony Silvestri [the poet and collaborator on many of Whitacre's choral works] gave me two CDs – one

was Pärt's *Pavane* and the other was an album called "Hearing Solar Winds" by David Hylos and the Harmonic Choir. In my memory all of those influences came within a week of each other and all of those things struck me so deeply. And that, combined with all of the film music that I knew from the 1980s, I think that's probably where the sound came from."

An interesting feature of Whitacre's choral music that has always struck me strongly is how "un-American" that sound is – is that something of which he is aware? "That's an enormous compliment," he says, genuinely pleased. "I am never consciously trying to place the music geographically but I think that I just naturally gravitate towards sounds that I love. And for me the English choral tradition – going all the way back – is really some of the most beautiful music ever written." So is he an admirer of Howells, Elgar and the other great English choral composers? "Of course, and even further back into the early Renaissance: Thomas Tallis, William Byrd. It's just exquisite music. And then I also have a whole French fetish, I suppose, so I'm always trying to exercise the ghost of Debussy."

This devotion to the vocal music of the Renaissance explains a great deal about Whitacre's approach. For many, the appeal of music from this period is in the use of harmonic suspensions – the tension between changes in prevailing harmony when two or three notes cluster together briefly before moving apart and "resolving".

These clusters of harmony provide colour as well as a sensation of tension followed by release – an ebbing and flowing of emotion. In Renaissance music these suspensions are generally held for very short periods of time before resolving, whereas in Whitacre's music they can be sustained over the duration of an entire piece. The resulting music bubbles the listener in myriad colours that follow the emotional contours of the text.

It's Whitacre's ability to immerse listeners, and indeed performers, in his music that continues to motivate and inspire choirs around the world.

By the time you read this, his musical *Paradise Lost* will have

choirs at the university as well as compose a piece for his last college itself.

I wonder if he is at all anxious about being confronted by the centuries-old English choral traditions that are so ingrained

I'm just going to go out there and have a blast and pretend like I'm a Formula One racing driver

been performed at Carnegie Hall in June. Then, in August, he will form his own professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, to perform alongside Landis during sessions in London for his first Decca recording. Called "Light and Gold", the album will be released in October and will feature Whitacre conducting his own interpretations of his works for the first time on disc. That same month, in a concert at the Barbican, he will conduct a work that's been commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra. And then there's his visiting fellowship at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he will lead workshops for the

in the Cambridge choirs? "Well, I wasn't anxious about it until you mentioned it!" Whitacre laughs. "The truth is, my music tends to be relatively conservative – that is, I don't consciously think I'm writing conservative music, but I'm hoping that it's a nice fit for some of the groups there at Cambridge."

For now, though, Whitacre is focusing on the LSO commission – a major new work for choir and orchestra and an important milestone in his career. It is his most high-profile commission to date and I tentatively ask how he is progressing with it. "The piece is coming along pretty well, I think. I go from day to day,

One day I'm thinking, 'I think this works.' And the next day it's, 'Oh no, I should have been an architect, I have no idea what I'm doing with my life!'"

As a composer myself, I confess that every time I start a new work I feel like I haven't learnt anything about how to write a piece of music. Whitacre agrees. "Exactly! Plus, it's the LSO for heaven's sake... and they're letting me conduct! Part of me is just trying to keep a sort of lightness about the process, a sense of whimsy, you know?"

"It's like somebody is letting me drive a Ferrari. They shouldn't be, but they're letting me. And so I'm just going to go out there and have a blast and pretend like I'm a Formula One racing driver and try not to crash. I think that what I'm writing is a little crancier than what I might normally do and I'm hoping that the users themselves give me an opportunity to push a little. Even as it's coming out it sounds to me very... not conservative... it sounds like Prokofiev or Britten. Neo-romantic."

Whitacre's openness and willingness to talk about his compositional process and his anxieties are as disarming and endearing as the music itself. Virtually all of his works stem from words, from poetry, and his facility for setting text is what distinguishes him as a truly exceptional composer. Of course, you have to start with the right text and the right text can be hard to find. "I think it's a gift and a skill that is underrated. I think a lot of composers choose poems that aren't that great. Schubert can set anything – the laundry list – and make it sound beautiful. But most composers aren't aware of how deeply the poem can affect the quality of the music that is coming from it. The really great poetry is full of music already. You just need to quiet yourself enough and listen so what the poet is telling you to do. You know, one takes the credit as the composer, but really the poet does all of the heavy lifting." ■

FIVE ESSENTIAL WHITACRE WORKS

Sleep

Whitacre's most famous work is the best place to start exploring his musical style. A perfectly formed, exceptionally powerful choral miniature that climaxes magnificently and then drifts off into a soft whisper.

When David Heard

One of Whitacre's few liturgical works. An exploration of the suffocating feelings of grief that a father feels on learning of the death of his son. The work's power is amplified through the use of carefully weighted silences.

Water Night

The surreal imagery of Octavio Paz's poetry (for example, 'night brings its witness to beaches in your soul') is the perfect foil for Whitacre's lush and unpredictable harmonies.

Lux aurumque

The piece that made Whitacre and his Virtual Choir project a YouTube hit. Based on a poem by Edward Esch translated by Whitacre's close friend and frequent collaborator, Charles Anthony Silvestri.

The above works are all included on "Columbus & Other Choral Works" (Hyperion CD 6457543)

Animal Crackers, Vols 1 and 2

Based on humorous poems about animals by Ogden Nash ("The cow is at the boy's milk. One and is moo. The other moo's, these ones mooes demonstrate a relatively rarely heard facet of Whitacre's writing – his flawless comic timing.

Hear the on ericwhitacre.com

P H O T O G R A P H Y

