

THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

ERIC WHITACRE

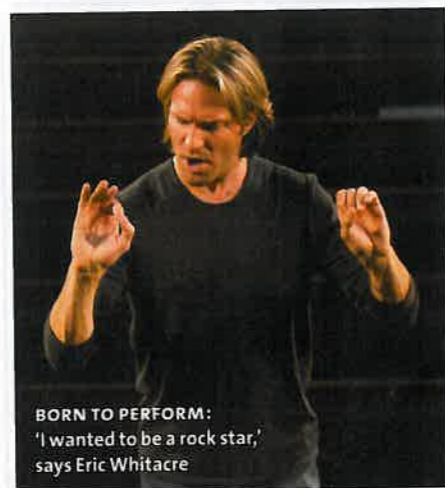


The American composer and conductor talks passionately about his love of 16th-century English choral music, and how he thinks he might just have found his natural musical home – here in Britain

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:
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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*, *Cloudburst* 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 Cloister
Court at Sidney Sussex College