

Eric Whitacre

BBC3 CD Review

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Andrew McGregor

“This is very much the flavour of the month”

“Eric Whitacre is a global phenomenon at the moment”

“It’s music of rare immediacy”

Eric Whitacre, his singers and Laudibus did a concert back in August at the Union Chapel in Islington and I have to say it was two utterly glorious hours. This music at first listening is really quite captivating. It’s a beautiful sound and he has invented some extraordinary choral textures; they are just beautiful.”

“If you play this music on the piano it just doesn’t work, it really does only work on choir. All I can say is he has a phenomenal ear for choral textures.”

“like many converts he is so acidulous about getting to the bottom of what works on choir and that’s what he’s done. He’s just experimented with textures and also maybe his age has something to do with it. He’s 40 years old this year, he grew up experimenting in his bedroom with synthesizers and things like that. Maybe it’s going to be easier for you to write interesting choral textures if you’re not completely piano based.”

“He is a phenomenon and I have to say the atmosphere at the concert in August in Islington had more to do with a rock concert than certainly any choral concert I’ve seen, he really is a captivating personality”

“I love this, I’m not sure if the audience did as much as I did but this is actually my favourite piece of Whitacre. It’s called *Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine*. Basically, Whitacre’s mate, Tony Silvestri, who’s an excellent wordsmith, a man of great humour and extraordinarily clever has put together this poem *Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine*. It’s got wonderful images and Whitacre really responds to the occasion and what he’s essentially done is taken some renaissance and baroque gestures and he’s made something quite polystylistic but he’s mixed it in with his own style and it’s captivating to me., It also shows that he does know his choral repertoire, he isn’t just a geek in a bedroom that’s worked out that tone clusters work as he said, it’s much more than that and this piece is why I like it. He actually shows that he is a proper craftsman and he’s managed to infuse his style with something of the renaissance and the baroque and I think it works very well indeed.”

“The 2005 recording *Cloudburst* is still the best recording of Eric Whitacre’s music I think. There is just a depth to Polyphony’s sound which you don’t quite get with the young voices of Laudibus and The Eric Whitacre Singers. What I think is remarkable about the polyphony record which again you might expect

from Stephen Layton, the dynamic range is huge and there are these wonderfully spaced chords, very richly underpinned by a purring bass. You can't get that from younger singers."

"It's odd for a composer conducting their own music not to have as much intent as someone else but maybe that's what you expect. You can take risks with other people's music in a way that maybe you can't take with your own."

"The most unfortunately thing about the whole publicity surround this disc is what Decca is putting out. So for instance there is a clear reference to the polyphony disc when Whitacre explains previous recordings of Whitacre works have always been nice but never exactly what I was hoping they would be. Now that is clearly saying *we've made a disc that's better than the Polyphony one*. I don't think they have necessarily, there are pieces on this that you can't get on the Polyphony disc, I mean you could buy both. This is the flavour of the month, the Polyphony disc I think is still right up there."

"The piece that is at the moment a sensation, the one that the virtual choir is currently recording is called *Sleep*. There's a big story behind this, it was originally set to a Robert Frost poem, and Eric Whitacre found that he couldn't use the poem so he had to get his friend Tony Silvestri to rewrite the words so that the piece could be used. I think Silvestri's done a really good job, you wouldn't know unless you knew the story and again I think it's a little bit unfortunate because in the score it's all made terribly melodramatic. I mean, this is somebody that wrote a piece, and he had to change the words, you might call it a *contrafactum*. It's been happening for hundreds and hundreds of years. You want to change a sacred piece in to a secular, you change the words, we call it a contrafactum. Here's Whitacre going in the front of the score "I was crushed, the piece was dead" and using words like tragedy, you think 'no you had to make a contrafactum cause otherwise you'd have had to pay a load of money' so I'm not sure quite how tragic this is but *Sleep* is a beautiful piece."