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## **Without fuss or fanfare, composer Eric Whitacre has finally achieved international recognition**



Eric Whitacre: virtual choir, real talent

(photo: UM Imaging Services)

*Feature by James McCarthy*

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 autumn, he takes up a three-month residency 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 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 (altos, 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 – it has now received more than a million 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, *Go, Lovely 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, Tavener, 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 *Passio* and the other was an album called 'Hearing Solar Winds' by David Hykes and the Harmonic Choir. In my memory all of these influences came within a week of each other and all of these 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 exorcise 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 moments between changes in prevailing harmony when two or three notes cluster together briefly before moving apart and "resolving".

These clashes 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 bathes 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.

His musical *Paradise Lost* was performed at Carnegie Hall in June. Then, in August, he will form his own professional choir, the Eric Whitacre Singers, to perform alongside Laudibus 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 choirs at the university as well as compose a piece for his host college itself.

I wonder if he is at all anxious about being confronted by the centuries-old English choral traditions that are so ingrained 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 confide 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 crunchier than what I might normally do and I'm hoping that the texts 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 to 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 wetness 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 all feature on "Cloudburst & Other Choral Works", released by Hyperion Records

[Buy from Amazon](#)

### **Animal Crackers, Vols 1 and 2**

Based on humorous poems about animals by Ogden Nash ("The cow is of the bovine ilk; One end is moo, the other milk"), these crisp miniatures demonstrate a relatively rarely heard facet of Whitacre's writing – his flawless comic timing. Hear this on [ericwhitacre.com](http://ericwhitacre.com)

Eric Whitacre conducts – and talks about – his music at [London's Union Chapel](#) on August 2

Eric Whitacre's debut Decca album "Light and Gold" is released on October 18 - preorder it at [Amazon](#)