

# THE DAILY TELGRAPH

## Eric Whitacre: Sounds that haunted cyberspace

**Eric Whitacre, creator of the world's biggest virtual choir, which has had more than a million hits on YouTube, talks to Adam Sweeting about his new album .**

By Adam Sweeting

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Eric Whitacre

The narrow streets surrounding St Silas's Church in Kentish Town resemble a set for one of Guy Ritchie's gang warfare movies, so the welcoming feel of the building's interior is something of a relief. With its high ceiling and glowing acoustic, St Silas proves the ideal location for the recording of Eric Whitacre's new choral album for Decca, *Light & Gold*. As I arrive, Whitacre is teasing fine details from his singers as he adds a final polish to his best-known piece, [Lux Aurumque](#) (Latin for "Light and Gold").

The haunting melodies, agonisingly beautiful harmonies and sense of mystical anticipation make *Lux Aurumque* an excellent starting point for a voyage around Whitacre's catalogue. It's also the piece that triggered an online stampede earlier this year when Whitacre's "virtual choir" production of it became a YouTube phenomenon. Pieced together from 185 video

clips of singers from a dozen countries singing their individual vocal parts, Lux surged through the million-hits barrier, bringing a spiritual shimmer to the cold technology of cyberspace. Whitacre can't explain the phenomenon, but he's heartily grateful that it happened.

“The Lux clip started going viral more quickly than we ever imagined. At one point we were getting 30,000 hits an hour and getting emails from all over the world,” he recalls. “I was flabbergasted. After that I was invited to speak at the UN on 'Virtual Leadership in the 21st Century', and I think the Decca deal came about partly because of the momentum of the video.”

As a follow-up, Whitacre is today launching Virtual Choir 2011, a global search for singers to create the world's largest online choir in a performance of his piece Sleep.

The tech-aware Whitacre is also a keen user of Twitter and Facebook to maintain a dialogue with fans and colleagues, but his YouTube coup was the moment when household-name status came calling. His compositions have already sold more than a million copies in sheet-music form, finding favour with thousands of choirs worldwide, and his pieces have proved to be commercial gold dust on a variety of recordings (not least Polyphony's 2006 Whitacre collection, *Cloudburst*, on Hyperion).

He regularly conducts concert performances of his works with ensembles around the world, but his Decca contract brought the opportunity to make his first ever recordings of his pieces with his own hand-picked choir. The album features his Eric Whitacre Singers alongside *Laudibus* (the latter comprising the cream of the National Youth Choir of Great Britain), and all the singers are British.

“It's finally a chance for me to conduct my music the way I'd always imagined it sounding,” says the composer. “The newer pieces haven't been recorded before, but recordings of the older ones have never been exactly what I was hoping they'd be. Being able to hand-pick my own group and mould them from the start is pretty thrilling. I'm learning through them an entirely new subtle language I've never had the chance to use before.”

His jeans, sweatshirt and long blond hair, plus a rather cool Nevada accent, lend the 40-year-old Whitaker a distinctly rock-and-roll air, and as a teenager he cut his musical teeth as a wannabe electro-pop star mucking about with synthesizers and drum machines in emulation of his idols Depeche Mode. But, ever since he caught the choral music bug after he reluctantly joined the choir at the University of Nevada, he has been fascinated by the expressive power of the human voice.

“We sang the 'Kyrie' from Mozart's Requiem, and I left a completely changed human being,” he boggles. “I became the world's biggest choir geek.”

Lacking all formal training until he was 18, Whitacre speedily made up for lost time. He attended the Juilliard School in New York, and though feeling buffeted by the competitive frenzy among his fellow students, he flourished under the guidance of composer John Corigliano.

“For the first six or eight months at Juilliard I felt paralysed. I didn’t know what I was doing,” he confesses. “Then I began studying with John, and that changed everything. I got my mojo back.”

Whitacre has composed instrumental pieces, mainly for the community-based concert bands popular in the USA, and is working on a spectacular high-tech stage musical called *Paradise Lost – Shadows and Wings*, but a capella work feels closest to his heart.

It’s no coincidence that Whitacre should cite Benjamin Britten as a favourite composer, since he shares with the Suffolk maestro an exceptional sensitivity to the written word, whether he’s setting poets e e cummings, Octavio Paz, or his friend and regular collaborator Charles Anthony Silvestri. (The latter has provided texts for several key pieces on *Light & Gold*, including *Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine and Sleep*).

Trademarks of Whitacre’s instantly-recognisable music are its arresting dissonances and – although he says he grew up in a household “without religion” – its uplifting, ecstatic aura.

“When I had my first experiences of choral singing, the dissonance of those close harmonies was so exquisite that I would giggle or I would tear up, and I felt it in a physical way,” he recalls.

“Those dissonances – that’s the sound that is me. And I aspire to make ecstatic music. I guess it seems like almost a religious experience for me. I try to make every moment an ecstatic experience, either small or large.”

'*Light & Gold*' is released by Decca on Oct 18

'*Lux Aurumque*' video: [www.youtube.com/EricWhitacresVrtlChr](http://www.youtube.com/EricWhitacresVrtlChr)