



## **Eric Whitacre's World**

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**He's the Facebook phenomenon and YouTube sensation who is taking classical music to the younger generations. But, as he prepares to make his Welsh debut, Eric Whitacre tells Karen Price how his own introduction to choral work was a fluke**

As a teenager, Eric Whitacre loved performing in rock bands. These days the father-of-one is still making music but now he's a world-renowned composer in the classical world.

At the age of 40, he's become one of the most popular and performed composers of his generation leading critics to dub him "the hottest thing in choral music".

And with his fashionable clothes, good looks and laid back style, he's certainly taking classical music to much younger audiences.

In fact, Whitacre's Facebook page has almost 43,000 fans and he says around 35,000 of them are between the ages of 15 and 28. He's also a YouTube phenomenon, more on which later.

This weekend he will make his debut in Wales when he joins young Cardiff-based choral group Cordydd as they celebrate their 10th birthday with a concert at BBC Hoddinott Hall in Cardiff Bay.

The composer will conduct the singers as they perform some of his greatest compositions. They will also be joined by two other Welsh choirs – Cywair and Swansea Bach.

"I've never been to Wales before – I can't wait," says Nevada-born Whitacre.

Cordydd struck up links with Whitacre three years ago.

“They wrote me a beautiful email saying they had performed my music and wanted to send me a recording of what they had done,” he says.

“For two years we were trying to arrange to get together and at one point I did a concert in London and they came to see me. Now I’m at Cambridge for three months so we could organise a concert.”

Whitacre, who is a visiting fellow at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, is full of praise for Cordydd.

“From a purely musical stand point, they are an extraordinary chorus,” he says.

“They have endless amounts of musicality and a warm rich tone – and they are Welsh so they have music in their blood it seems. I think the choir has a great personality and I really can’t wait to spend time with the singers.”

The composer, whose published works have sold more than a million copies to date, says it wasn’t easy selecting the programme.

“Probably the hardest thing was keeping it to 12 or 13 pieces,” he admits.

“And I like to introduce every piece before it’s performed. If they give me a microphone I can’t shut up,” he laughs.

Whitacre, who last month released his latest album, *Light And Gold*, with Decca Records, received no formal music training until he was 18.

“I had always played by ear rather than read music,” he says. “I played piano and synthesiser in rock and pop bands. When I turned 18 I went to college in Las Vegas and joined a choir as a fluke when a friend of mine invited me to join. That single rehearsal changed my life forever.

“I didn’t know music like that existed or was possible. I could hear the chorus singing all around me the most exquisite piece. The first thing we sang was *Requiem* by Mozart. Until then I never thought I would have a life in classical music.”

A few years later Whitacre composed his first piece and it was soon published.

“Someone then asked me to write something else and I woke up one day and was a working composer.”

Whitacre, who is married to soprano Hila Plitmann, with whom he has a five-year-old son, Esh, completed his first work, *Go, Lovely Rose*, at the age of 21 and went on to the Juilliard School, studying with Pulitzer Prize and Oscar-winning composer John Corigliano.

Many of Whitacre’s works are part of the standard choral and symphonic repertoires and have become the subject of scholarly works and doctoral dissertations. His pieces, *Water Night*, *Cloudburst*, *Sleep* and *Lux Aurumque*, are among the most popular choral works of the last decade.

Whitacre received acclaim for *Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings*, which earned the composer the Richard Rodgers Award for most promising musical theatre composer.

As a conductor, Whitacre has appeared with hundreds of professional ensembles throughout the world and his music has featured on dozens of commercial and independent recordings.

This year he became a YouTube phenomenon when he broke the digital mould with *Virtual Choir*. He conducted 185 online singers by video and their vocal parts were then painstakingly edited together.

The result was a video masterpiece attracting more than a million views within 60 days.

The piece used for *Virtual Choir* was one of Whitacre’s best-loved compositions, *Lux Aurumque* (*Light & Gold*), which has been adopted as the title for his new album with Decca.

Whitacre, who lists Bjork, Radiohead, Imogen Heap and Beck among his favourite musicians, is pleased with the reception his music has received, particularly among younger generations.

And he says he’s more than happy he made the move into the classical repertoire rather than make it as a [rock star](#).

“I do think it would be fun for sure,” he says of the rock star lifestyle.

“But I feel a life in classical music maybe has a little more depth than a life in pop music.

“That’s not to disparage it because I love it, but there’s a level of delicateness and subtlety in classical music that doesn’t relate to the rock arena.”

Cordydd Sings Whitacre is at BBC Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff, tomorrow. The box office number is 029 2063 6464