In conversation with

# ERIC WHITACRE

American composer Eric Whitacre seems to be one of those forces of nature that comes along every now and then, threatening to turn things on their heads. With a recording industry that seems to be flailing around somewhat, where the promotion of classical music is concerned, he is a rare bird – being both popular *and* of quality at the same time. And as full to the teeth as we may be with all the hype and spin around these days, there is, nonetheless, no getting away from the fact that he is indeed 'one of the most popular and most performed composers of his generation'. His recent signing to Decca seems to be even more proof of his popularity among listeners and choral singers alike. Growing up in a small town in a totally non-classical background, Whitacre only came to the genre at the age of 18, and experienced what he describes as an epiphany when he joined the college choir. **Antonia Couling** meets the man himself to find out more about his path to success and enthusiasm for writing choral music

### CAN YOU DESCRIBE HOW THIS EPIPHANY YOU EXPERIENCED MANIFESTED ITSELF TO YOU?

It was as if I was blind and suddenly I could see. I came from a very, very small town and I didn't even know that classical music in general existed. I had just heard film scores and maybe seen *Amadeus* in high school. And then during that first rehearsal it was as if here was the music and language I had been looking for my entire life and suddenly someone had dropped it on my head. It was liberating.

### YOU WASTED NO TIME IN THROWING YOURSELF INTO WRITING – MANY WOULD SAY YOU HAD A LOT TO CATCH UP ON …

I think that kind of benefitted me, because it took a long time before I even acknowledged that there seemed to be established ways of doing things. I'm not saying that I broke the rules or had any kind of brilliant approach to it because of my innocence, but it seemed natural to me: I wanted to try writing for choirs so I just did it! I know many young composers who are completely freaked out – they haven't taken enough theory or haven't studied enough or maybe they've taken too much theory or every time they sit down to write they feel they have to replicate Beethoven or Stravinsky. Maybe it's my personality that I just jump into the deep end of the pool and then learn how to

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swim. But for a long time, it just seemed perfectly natural to me. At the university that I was at in Las Vegas, there were no other composers and the choir teacher and the concert band teacher were more than willing to let me experiment.

### WHAT, FREEDOM? MOST STUDENTS AT CONSERVATOIRES, WITH ALL THE COMPETITION AROUND, WOULD BE TERRIFIED OF EVEN PUTTING SOMETHING ON THE TABLE.

Exactly. When I went to Juilliard, my first teacher, David Diamond, was really tough, very notorious – he had this famous red pen – and you'd bring your music to lessons and he'd just start crossing things out and he yelled a lot. His whole philosophy was to

break the student down and rebuild them as a good composer. And for the first six months or so I was really paralysed and couldn't write a note. It was the first time I came into contact with that stern academic authority. And I'm so grateful that I didn't experience it till I was older. By that time I was 25 and I'd had some success with my pieces. I think I was stubborn and resistant to it, and ultimately, I think it made me stronger. But I have friends who started at 18 and they had the music crushed out of them.

### YOU HEAR OF THAT SO OFTEN. WHY DO YOU THINK IT HAPPENS?

I think – not to rail against academia, because it's certainly important – but within the arts there seems to be, particularly in the last century, this need to dissect and quantify everything in a scientific way. Mark Twain had this great saying: 'If you dissect a frog he won't be able to jump any more'. And I feel that way about art: This micro-analytical approach masks the meaning of the whole. And second, I think there's a culture among professors that's been happening for about 150 years where these stern, ivory-tower teachers are teaching faithful and loyal students who then become professors and then teach more faithful and loyal students and then you have this complete disconnection from reality.

I think that it's a kind of protective bubble for all these academic composers who either truly believe that music should be advanced to such a place where we, the little people, don't understand it any more, or it's defensive in that they can't really write music that people want to listen to, so the easiest thing to do is to call everyone else stupid! I don't know.

### SO HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH WHAT YOU WERE FACED WITH AT JUILLIARD?

At first I tried the Romantic approach where I'd take a bottle of wine into the rehearsal room – it seemed to work for all these other composers – but that didn't go too well. And I tried writing a couple of pieces and they were kind of weird Frankenstein things where I

Eric Whitacre:
'a force of nature'

was trying to make him happy and find my own voice in there. And then at some point I think I just surrendered, you know? This is what I do and this is what I like to listen to and I just have to do it. And I think it helped that I was having some success. Even at Juilliard I was being commissioned. I had real pieces to write for real people. And there's a real pragmatism that comes into play there.

### CLEARLY YOUR MUSIC IS AWARE OF THE AUDIENCE AND THE PEOPLE YOU WRITE FOR. HOW DO YOU KEEP THAT CONNECTION? WHAT STOPS YOU FROM ELEVATING YOURSELF TO THOSE PLACES WHERE YOU ARE DISCONNECTED?

I guess it's just my personality. And I feel that the very best artwork has a primer – an instruction manual – built into the piece itself, so that you don't have to be smart, you just have to be there and listening. For me, the great example of this is Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It is really dense, tough, modern music on the surface. But everything you need to know is there in the music: the language, the way he teaches you. So when I'm writing, I'm constantly thinking about teaching the audience. First we establish this, now we're going to go here, then I'll take them here – okay this is the moment where we'll be breathless. So I think that when I'm writing I've always got the audience in the room with me.

### THAT'S THE THEATRE, THE DRAMA. EVERYTHING HAS TO HAVE THAT TO TAKE AN AUDIENCE WITH YOU.

Yes. And although I didn't grow up with classical music, I'm a huge fan of the movies and I wondered if, like you're saying, a sense of drama and theatre was for me formed very early on in the movie theatres.

### THE VISUAL ASPECT IS ALSO VERY IMPORTANT FOR THE LISTENER. YOUR MUSIC, LIKE MOVIE MUSIC, IS VERY PICTORAL. IT ALSO CONNECTS WITH NATURE AND OUR NEED AS AUDIENCE MEMBERS TO HAVE IMAGES IN OUR HEADS WHEN WE LISTEN TO MUSIC. WOULD YOU SAY THAT WAS TRUE? AND IS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU AIM FOR?

I would, absolutely. I don't consciously do it – 'Now I'll try and put this picture in someone's head', for example. But I think that if I look back at my music then I am endlessly choosing texts that are incredibly visual. I don't think I do it intentionally, but I don't think I'd know how not to do it.

### A LOT OF YOUR SUCCESS IS THANKS TO THE EAGERNESS WITH WHICH CHOIRS ALL OVER ARE PERFORMING YOUR WORKS. WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES YOUR COMPOSITIONS ATTRACTIVE FOR A CHOIR TO SING?

First, I'd like to think that the texts that I'm choosing are really great. I take great pride in choosing the very best poems and then just getting the hell out of the way of the poet's words and doing what they say to me to do. It's always strange for me when I'm taking credit for some of these pieces, because for me it's the poet that has done most of the heavy lifting. And second, from my very earliest experience of singing in a choir I loved to sing in either major seconds or minor seconds with other voices. Still it makes me giggle, makes me tingle all over. And for some reason it only happens with voices. I love the sound of it with strings or brass but somehow with human voices when they're that close together, it's exquisite for me. And so I think that because I tend to use those

gestures quite a bit, that singers are maybe having a physiological response when they're singing my music – that it tingles them in the same way it does me. And then, I think – and I hope this is true – because I am not a very good singer, my writing has a heavy dose of pragmatism. So if we're all going to sing a big cluster – unlike Penderecki, we don't all start on an E♭ and then leap into the middle of this 16-note cluster – it's generally approached by triad and half the choir moves one note down or there's a scale that builds up and then we find ourselves in a cluster. So it's relatively easy to perform. There's an accessibility for not-so-great a singer to find themselves in the middle of one of these shimmering moments.

### PERHAPS YOUR OWN AGENDA – YOUR KIND OF DEFIANCE TO CREATE YOUR OWN SOUND – HAS SOMEHOW WORKED ITS WAY THROUGH THE MUSIC AND PEOPLE ARE PICKING UP ON THAT IN SOME WAY?

I hope you're right. That would be nice if people were responding to what you're calling the defiance, but what I think of as the blue-collar approach to it. That it is what it is – there's no pretence, no preening and hopefully, there's a kind of directness to that.
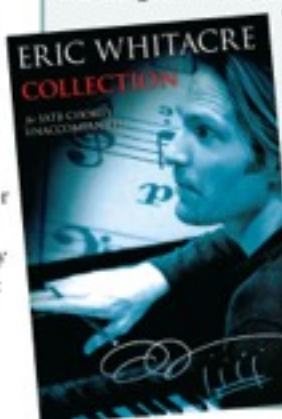
### RECENT RELEASES

● **Three Flower Songs** (SSAATTBB + two soprano soloists, Chester Order No CH75427).
This set of songs are heady fantasies in homophonic harmony. Like Cloudburst, they are student works from the nineties.
● **Sleep My Child** (SSAATTBB, Chester Order No CH75229).
This piece was written in 2008 and is much more texturally complex.
● A landmark in the career of any composer is the first anthology, and Chester has obliged with the release of Eric Whitacre: Collection (SSSAATTBB, T and S solos, Chester Order No CH73975), containing A Boy and a Girl, Go, Lovely Rose, Lux Aurumque, Nox Aurumque, Sleep, This Marriage, and Water Night.