



credit: ericwhitacre.com

Composer Profile: Eric Whitacre (1970 – Present)

Eric (Edward) Whitacre is an American composer, conductor and speaker, best known for his choral music, and is one of today's most popular and frequently performed composers.

Born in Reno, Nevada, USA, he studied piano as a child, joined a marching band at school and also played the synthesizer in a techno-pop group; dreaming of being a rock star.

Initially resisting joining a choir at college, Eric was later convinced, and described his first choral rehearsal as a turning point in his life: "In my entire life I had seen in black and white, and suddenly everything was in shocking Technicolour. It was the most transformative experience I've ever had – in that single moment, hearing dissonance and harmony, and people singing..."

His musical passions widened during his student years at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he gained a degree in Music Composition.

In 1990 Eric completed his first choral composition, and went on to further study Composition at the Juilliard School in New York, graduating as Master of Music in 1997.

In 2010 Eric released his first album as composer and conductor, 'Light & Gold'. It topped the US and UK classical album charts within a week of its release, and won the 2012 Grammy® Award for Best Choral Recording.

During Autumn 2010 he was a visiting Fellow at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, UK; composing for the college and working with students in masterclasses and workshops, becoming the college's Composer in Residence from 2011 to 2016.

Also in 2010, Eric launched his ground-breaking Virtual Choir (a decade before popularisation of online mass-choral recording during to the Covid Pandemic of 2020+).

This online project, inspired by a young singer's video upload of the soprano part of one of his pieces, was created by 185 singers from a dozen different countries, all singing his composition 'Lux Aurumque' together.

Twelve years since pioneering his Virtual Choir project, it has grown, with Virtual Choir 5 receiving over 8,000 submissions from 120 countries, the Virtual Youth Choir, in association with UNICEF, premiering at the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. And, overall, his Virtual Choirs have registered over 60 million views.

In 2012 Eric released his second album 'Water Night'.

In 2018 he composed 'The Sacred Veil'; a 12-movement work with the text written collaboratively with poet/lyricist Charles Anthony Silvestri.

In addition to his extensive output for choir, Eric's instrumental works have been performed by some of the world's most distinguished orchestras, ensembles, and concert bands.

His list of works includes prestigious commissions for, among others; the BBC Proms, the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Minnesota Orchestra, Chanticleer, Julian Lloyd Webber and the Philharmonia Orchestra, and The King's Singers.

He has collaborated with multi award-winning composer and conductor Hans Zimmer, British soul artist Laura Mvula, Annie Lennox, composer Jeff Beal, accordionist Ksenija Sidorova and Norwegian singer-songwriter Marius Beck.

He is currently based in Los Angeles, California, USA and is Artist in Residence with the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

The luminous beauty and harmonic richness of Eric's music crosses conventional borders and between different musical genres.

It has been said by commentators and reviewers, that Eric "has an open-minded, compassionate approach to acknowledging music's extraordinary capacity of uniting people from all backgrounds".

His style is described as "weightless", "full of shimmering, shuddering, shifting harmonies that awaken the ear to a contemporary yet accessible voice", "neo-impressionistic".

Programme Notes: Lux Aurumque:

Written in 1999, Lux Aurumque (translation: Light and Gold / Light of Gold) was commissioned by the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, for Dr Jo-Michael Scheibe, and based on the poem by Edward Esch.

Immediately struck by the poem's genuine elegant simplicity, Eric had it translated into Latin by celebrated American poet Charles Anthony Silvestri and 'waited for the right harmonies to shimmer and glow', believing 'that a simple approach was essential to the success of the work'.

Lux - calida gravisque pura velut aurum - et canunt angeli molliter - modo natum.

Light - warm and heavy as pure gold - and the angels sing softly - to the newborn babe.

Programme Notes: The Seal Lullaby:

In 2004, Eric met legendary composer Stephen Schwartz (*Wicked & Godspell*). Soon after, he received a call from a major film studio, to whom Stephen had recommended Eric, and they enquired if he was interested in writing music for an animated feature.

Incredibly excited, having always loved animation, he agreed. The creative executives explained that the intention was to make an epic adventure, a classic animated film based on Rudyard Kipling's *The White Seal*.

A beautiful, classic Kipling story: dark and rich and not at all condescending to children, the tale begins with the mother seal singing softly to her young pup, with the opening poem called *The Seal Lullaby*.

Oh! Hush thee, my baby, the night is behind us,
And black are the waters that sparkled so green.
The moon, o'er the combers, looks downward to find us,
At rest in the hollows that rustle between.

Where billow meets billow, then soft be thy pillow,
Oh weary wee flipperling, curl at thy ease!
The storm shall not wake thee, nor shark overtake thee,
Asleep in the arms of the slow swinging seas!

Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936

Struck deeply by its first beautiful words, "a simple, sweet Disney-esque song just came gushing out of me. I wrote it down as quickly as I could, had my wife record it while I accompanied her at the piano, and then dropped it off at the film studio".

Eric didn't hear anything for weeks and began to despair. Did they hate it? Was it too melodically complex? Did they even listen to it? Finally, he called them, begging to know the reason that they had rejected his tender little song. "Oh. We decided to make 'Kung Fu Panda' instead." Said the executive.

Eric didn't do anything further with it, except sing it to his baby son every night to get him to go to sleep, with "a success rate of less than 50%".

A few years later the Towne Singers graciously commissioned this arrangement of the work, with Eric grateful to them for giving it a new life.

The piece is dedicated to Stephen Schwartz, who has become Eric's friend and mentor.