

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Deep Field: A Cosmic Experience

Nov 8 - 10, 2019

ERIC WHITACRE (1970-)

LUX AURUMQUE

Duration: ca. 4 minutes

Eric Whitacre is an anomaly among composers, a creator of otherworldly choral works whose YouTube following ranks with rock stars. Conductor, Grammy winner, motivational speaker, and curator of virtual musical projects, the 49-year-old is among the most *vocal* artists working today, a half-Medieval, half-modern maestro in demand across the United States and Europe for his simple but indelible constructs. If you haven't heard of Whitacre or his music, you're in the presence of both tonight when he leads TFO and the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay in three of his more popular pieces.

"There's something about his music that grabs the attention of people everywhere," said Brett Karlin, Artistic Director of the Master Chorale. "So I'm curious to see the vibe in the room for this concert."

Whitacre was relatively unknown a decade ago when he launched his Virtual Choir, an online, user-generated chorus that became a global phenomenon. Singers from around the world uploaded videos of a vocal line Whitacre provided, which he synchronized into a digital mosaic with sound and visuals. The Virtual Choir project has grown from 185 singers to more than 8,000 today, with an estimated 60 million online views.

Whitacre is excited about conducting this weekend's Masterworks concerts, most notably the opening *Lux Aurumque*, and for good reason: He composed it in 2000 as a commission by the Master Chorale, and the group soon recorded it on a holiday compact disc. Whitacre dedicated the piece to Jo-Michael Scheibe, the choir's former artistic director.

"We made the premiere recording of the work, so this is a big-deal piece for us," Karlin said. "For every high school choral student who interacts with Eric, this is an entry piece, so it's sung all over the planet. He's responsible for getting many people involved, invested and passionate about choral music."

Sung in Latin, *Lux Aurumque (Light and Gold)* reflects the sound of cathedral music heard during the late Renaissance, with pauses that allow the voices to expand and echo. Whitacre set the music to a poem by Edward Esch, and said, "I was immediately struck by its genuine, elegant simplicity." Keeping that feeling was "essential to the success of the work, and I waited patiently for the tight harmonies to shimmer and glow."

*Lux,
Calida gravisque pura velut aurum
Et canunt angeli molliter
modo natum.*

*Light,
warm and heavy as pure gold
and angels sing softly
to the new-born babe.*

ERIC WHITACRE (1970-)

EQUUS

Duration: ca. 9 minutes

When Eric Whitacre first heard *Pacific 231* by Arthur Honegger, he was impressed by the composer's musical depiction of a steam locomotive as it builds power and speed before slowly coming to rest. There was something human about this grinding, pulsating machine as it struggled to overcome its own weight. Whitacre wanted to write something similar, not about a train but an animal he admired for its strength, grace and endurance.

"I started with this throw-away music, then began to develop a theme, capturing the idea of a running horse, the mythical spirit of a horse," Whitacre said. "I wanted to write a *moto perpetuo*, a piece that starts running and never stops."

Whitacre started tinkering with his idea after seeing Peter Schafer's 1973 play *Equus*, about a young man with a pathological obsession with horses. But like Honegger, Whitacre wasn't interested in a literal depiction; this would be an *impression* that listeners can translate anyway they wish: "The music is really more about a visceral experience, the muscle and power of horses, not so much a horse itself."

Composed in 2000 for the University of Miami Wind Ensemble, *Equus* is what Whitacre calls "dynamic minimalism" because of its repeated patterns. He arranged the music in groups of five, with leaps of a fifth, symbolizing the five letters in the title. In 2012, Whitacre arranged the score for full orchestra, with fragments from the woodwinds evolving into the strings, brass, and percussion, and a chorus delivering a violent edge reminiscent of Orff's *Carmina Burana*. "It's bigger and muscular," he said. "Just as I always hoped it would be."

LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)

CHICHESTER PSALMS

Duration: ca. 19 minutes

No American did more to popularize classical music than Leonard Bernstein, and no one was more successful at explaining it to the modern audience. He taught, motivated, dazzled, and made converts of the skeptical. He was the first American-born musician to lead a major orchestra in the United States, and during his time with the New York Philharmonic recorded more than 400 pieces, winning a half-dozen Grammy awards.

Conductor, pianist, composer, writer, orator, philosopher, television personality, socialite, and bon vivant, he embraced most everything to the extreme, both in music and in life. "Lenny never does anything in moderation," his wife, Felicia, once said. "If we go to an opera, we go to a midnight movie

on the way home. If he decides he must eat a raw onion sandwich, he first eats the sandwich and then (antacid) pills.”

As an interpreter, he championed young American composers, and almost single-handedly created the Mahler revival in the 1960s. He dabbled and experimented in all realms of music, often stretching himself too thin: “I’m over-committed on all fronts,” he once said.

As a composer, Bernstein made his mark on Broadway, and *West Side Story* remains his most beloved score, with the *Candide* Overture being his most-performed short piece. His three symphonies are less well known, as is the rarely heard *Chichester Psalms for Chorus and Orchestra*, which you will hear tonight. The work was commissioned in 1965 by the dean of Chichester Cathedral in England for the Southern Cathedrals Festival, which brought together choirs of the Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester cathedrals. The dean also loved *West Side Story*, and hoped Bernstein would write something just as catchy.

Bernstein composed his new work – one of only two new pieces over a decade – in his Manhattan apartment while on sabbatical from his conducting post at the Philharmonic. After completion, Bernstein wrote back to the dean, saying, “It is quite popular in feeling, and it has an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments.” Above all, Bernstein wanted *Chichester Psalms* to be easy on the ears, not the test of dissonance like so much of what was being written in the 1960s. To console listeners, he wrote a ditty:

*These psalms are a simple and modest affair
Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square
Certain to sicken a stout John Cager
With its tonics and triads in E-flat major*

Crisp and concise, *Chichester Psalms* is in three short parts that use one entire psalm and sections of others: I. Psalm 108 and 100; II. Psalm 23 and 2; III. Psalm 131 and 133. The score includes male alto soloist, full choir, and orchestra without woodwinds.

An explosive opening greets listeners with *Awake, psaltery and harp!* followed by *Make a joyful noise unto the Lord*. Section II begins with a sweetly sung *The Lord is my shepherd* over a lilting harp accompaniment, countered by tenors and basses ripping out *Why do the nations rage*. The orchestra introduces the final section with its tender *Lord, my heart is not haughty*, and the work ends in a luminous plea for unity and peace.

AARON COPLAND (1900-1990)

QUIET CITY

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

“Why be a composer?” Aaron Copland once asked. “The rewards are small. No money in the bank. No good reviews in the papers the next day. You really have to be strong.”

Copland was, and he endured. He came from a generation of American composers who competed with European music, the onslaught of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, big bands and jazz, the radio, recordings, and a public adverse to artistic experimentation. Copland fought an uphill battle. What did he do? He addressed the public head-on, and gave them music they could understand.

“I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer,” he wrote. “It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public had grown up around radio and the phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them.”

With his 1944 ballet score, *Appalachian Spring*, Copland became the most respected serious composer in America. After experimenting with avant-garde styles, he found his voice, at least one that comforted a public tiring of academic formulas. Copland acted on his promise, producing a string of works that embraced rather than alienated the public: *El Salon Mexico*, *A Lincoln Portrait*, *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid*, *The Tender Land*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and *Quiet City*. They rode on spacious and agreeable harmonies, delicate suspensions, and heartfelt tunes tilled in American soil.

As its name suggests, *Quiet City* is a soft, delicate work that hangs over listeners like a mist. It was intended as incidental music for Irwin Shaw’s failed play of the same name, but in 1941 Copland turned it into stand-alone concert piece for trumpet, English horn and strings. In the first book of his memoir, *Copland: 1900-1942*, written with Vivian Perlis, Copland explains how the work took on a life of its own, apart from the play.

“My trumpet was simply an attempt to mirror the troubled main character, David Mellnikoff, of Shaw’s play,” he said. “But *Quiet City* seems to have become a musical entity, superseding the original reasons for its composition. The work has been called ‘atmospheric’ and ‘reflective,’ and David Mellnikoff has long since been forgotten!”

The music opens with a haunting, distant trumpet call that invites the strings to follow. With no apparent effort, Copland creates a palpable atmosphere, an urban impression that could be a late night or early morning in any city or town across America. It begins in shadow, evolves gently, and ends in quiet.

ERIC WHITACRE (1970-)

DEEP FIELD

Duration: ca. 20 minutes

Next year, the Hubble Space Telescope will turn 30, surpassing its expected lifespan and continuing to snap mind-blowing images from the edge of the known universe. One of its most iconic pictures is known as the Hubble Deep Field, a mosaic of nearly 350 separate exposures taken over 10 days in 1995. This remarkable image reveals more than 3,000 galaxies never before seen, each made up of hundreds of billions of stars, all traveling away from one another in unified expansion.

Hubble had an impact on Eric Whitacre, who muses over the size and scope of our universe in his recent score, *Deep Field*. The 20-minute piece for chorus and orchestra complements the film *Deep Field: The Impossible Magnitude of our Universe*, a collaboration among Whitacre, two production companies, and NASA’s Space Telescope Science Institute. The original score included Whitacre’s Virtual Choir 5, made up of more than 8,000 online voices from around the world.

So far this year, the video has appeared at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C.; the Dolby Theatre in London; the World Science Festival in New York; the Griffith Observatory in Los

Angeles; the American Astronomical Society Annual Meeting in Seattle; and in concert halls around the world.

Whitacre takes audiences on a cosmic ride through the Milky Way, past supernovas and nebula, a spiral galaxy, and the distant realm of the Deep Field as seen through the window of the constellation *Ursa Major*. "It starts with our local solar system, our moon and the planets," he said, "and takes us to the edges of our known universe some 13 billion light years away."

Suddenly, the Hubble telescope appears as the chorus sings wordless text against hushed orchestral textures. We see our Earth, dotted with a mosaic of human faces, and soon the planet recedes into the void. Although *Deep Field* is essentially a film score, it may be Whitacre's most ambitious project, one that combined his love of music with his fascination for space.

"I spent much of my career writing choral music, but not as much for orchestra, so with *Deep Field* I tried things I'd never tried before," he said. "I was already a space nut, and this gave me access to all these physicists and astronauts, so I got to meet some of my heroes."

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.