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In His Own Words: The Choral Music of Eric Whitacre from 1991-2004

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IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE CHORAL MUSIC OF ERIC WHITACRE FROM 1991-2004

By
Phillip Allen Swan

A DOCTORAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Coral Gables, Florida
May 2016
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A doctoral essay proposal submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE CHORAL MUSIC OF ERIC WHITACRE FROM 1991-2004

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This document focuses on the early choral compositions of Eric Whitacre (b. 1970), providing a brief biographical overview, a discussion of his compositional process, and an annotated catalogue for his twenty-one choral compositions published between 1991-2004. The purpose of this study is to provide documentation of both a historical and stylistic nature and to serve as a practical resource for information on his early choral compositions. Through in-depth discussions and interviews with the composer, the author provides greater insights into Whitacre’s compositional perspective and process.
DEDICATION

This document is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Allen D. and Lydia J. Swan and my brother Tim and his family, Julie, Rachel, Ben, Jenna, and Kendra. I am grateful for their tireless and unwavering support throughout my career. For most, this would seem an obligatory family dedication. However, I am truly blessed to have parents that drove across the country to attend performances at all stages of my career. Without them, I would not have achieved this dream, for they inspired it and supported it all along the journey. I’m particularly grateful to my mother, for believing in me and helping this dream come to fruition. Without my knowledge, she left an insurance policy in my name with the express desire that I use it to complete my doctoral education. I know she would be proud to see me reach this milestone and proud to now have two sons that are “doctors.” She is missed, but I cherish her hugs and smile. Thanks Mom, Dad, and family. Soli Deo Gloria!
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) has become a major figure as a composer and conductor. This essay will focus on his early choral compositions, providing a biographical overview, a discussion of his compositional perspective and process, and an annotated catalogue of these early works.

The purpose of this study is to provide documentation of both a historical and stylistic nature and to serve as a resource for information on his early choral compositions. The biographical portion of the essay provides an overview of his life, education, and influences.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Eric Whitacre has made an impact on the choral world. Three of Whitacre’s compositions, “Water Night,” “Cloudburst,” and “Sleep” are frequent choices for all-state and honor choir festivals. In 2001, at just thirty-one years of age, Whitacre was the youngest composer to receive the American Choral Directors Association’s Raymond C. Brock commission, placing him alongside notable past recipients including Gwyneth Walker and Gian Carlo Menotti. This prestigious award is granted once every two years to a gifted choral composer, resulting in the performance of the commissioned work at the American Choral Directors Association national convention. Whitacre’s composition, “Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine,” which premiered at the 2001 San Antonio convention of the American Choral Directors Association on March 14, helped secure his prominence in the choral world.
Whitacre’s musical contributions are significant. His musical involvements from 1999-2001 placed him in the forefront of classical music interest. Regularly commissioned and published, Whitacre has received composition awards from ASCAP, the Barlow International Composition Competition, the American Choral Directors Association, and The American Composers Forum. In 2001 he was honored with his first Grammy nomination (for contemporary classical crossover). Commissioned works have been written for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, The King’s Singers, Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, Civic Chorale of Greater Miami, London Symphony Chorus and Orchestra, Rundfunkchor Berlin, and many others. His recording, *The Music of Eric Whitacre*, was named one of the top ten classical albums of 1997 by the *American Record Guide* and his 2012 release of *Light & Gold* won the 2012 Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance. Whitacre’s compositions for wind symphony, vocal arrangements for Barbara Streisand’s television special and *Timeless* album, projects for film and solo voice, commissions, and his positions as composer-in-residence of the Pacific Chorale and the Los Angels Master Chorale help to reveal an expanding breadth to his compositional creativity.

Choral music is the mainstay of Whitacre’s compositional output; the majority of his compositions are for choir. However, he continues to add to his list of wind symphony and orchestral compositions. Several of his choral compositions have been arranged for wind symphony and orchestra (to date, four arrangements for wind symphony and five for orchestra) and the work on his opera-electronica/musical, *Paradise Lost: Shadow and Wings*, emphasized his desire to explore new creative heights. His compositions are deeply expressive, highly creative, and always
challenging. These are the reasons he is respected as a composer of substance and why his compositions are frequent choices for performance by choral conductors.

DELIMITATIONS

This author has chosen to set the years 1991-2004 as parameters for the purposes of this study. This appears to be the first prolific segment of his compositional output for choir, the end of which provides a natural break for his first group of publications. The reason for this break involves Whitacre’s focused and extended work on his opera-electronica/musical, which began in 2001 and continues to be revised and reworked to this day. Whitacre confirms this natural break in a 2006 telephone conversation: “. . . it’s all so tricky because if you don’t count ‘This Marriage,’ I haven’t really written an original concert work in like four years. I’ve been just working on Paradise Lost, which is a totally different, crazy beast. It’s a musical, so you know the old joke about a musical is never written . . . it’s only rewritten. That is so true.”¹ Therefore this doctoral essay will focus on his twenty-one published choral compositions written between 1991-2004.

¹ Eric Whitacre, telephone interview by author, March 21, 2006, Los Angeles, transcript of recorded interview, 141.
Ross and Roxanne Whitacre’s first child, Eric, was born in Reno, Nevada on January 2, 1970. Two later additions to the family include younger sisters Kari and Julie. Ross Whitacre was employed by the state of Nevada for thirty-three years, serving as the Chief of Benefits for the state. Roxanne was an independent graphic artist, working for newspapers, magazines or other print media. They now reside in Yerington, NV.

Work for the State of Nevada caused the family to relocate to a variety of small towns during Whitacre’s youth. However, from sixth grade through his high school years, Whitacre identifies himself (when he thinks of home) with the town of Gardnerville, approximately ten miles from South Lake Tahoe, where he graduated from Douglas High School in 1988.

Although there was obvious artistic interest on the part of his mother, music appeared to have little influence in Whitacre’s home life. In fact, his “parent’s didn’t even really like to listen to the radio.”\(^2\) However, Whitacre does recall times that his father would occasionally listen to the Kingston Trio and there was an annual trip to Reno, organized by his Grandmother, to see a performance of the Nutcracker.

Formal musical training was very limited in Whitacre’s formative years. Sporadic attempts at piano lessons lasted for only a few weeks at a time. However, his parents apparently thought he had some ability, because they always kept a piano in the house. Periodically, Whitacre would sit at the piano and plunk out songs he heard on the radio,

\(^2\) Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 132.
whch helped to develop his good aural skills. In sixth grade, Whitacre began taking trumpet lessons and he eventually joined the marching band. However, he is quick to point out that he “certainly wouldn’t say I’d studied.” He never learned to read music during this period. He would listen carefully to what was being played by the person next to him and then play it back. Whitacre’s formal training ended his junior year of high school when he was kicked out of the marching band for insubordination. The crux of the incident centered around a confrontation with the band director “telling the conductor he was terrible and he was an idiot.” Although he did feel his assessment was accurate, in retrospect it was likely not the best way to approach the problem.

Whitacre’s real musical passion was pop music. At age 12, he “discovered rock.” A transformative epiphany came while listening to Bonnie Tyler’s, “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” This singular moment caused him to figure out how to play this song on the piano. After that, he “was a lost cause,” spending all his time purchasing 45s, pop and rock albums. Electro-pop and synthesizers soon became the focus, with important influences played by such notable bands as Depeche Mode, Duran Duran, the Pet Shop Boys, and Erasure.

Although formal school ensembles were not a major influence throughout his high school years, during three of those years, Whitacre and three other friends

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3 Ibid., 133.


6 Ibid.
and two girls) formed a band. The two guys played synthesizers and drum machines and the girls sang. They were a very active band, playing for many high school dances. Interestingly, their popularity grew through the performance of a song they wrote for Students Against Drunk Driving. The song, inspired by the death of Sarita Uhart (who died in 1986), was “picked up” and received some national play among the SADD chapters. Consequently, the band received invitations to perform in high schools throughout the states of Nevada and California.

Upon graduating from high school, Whitacre decided to attend the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. He enrolled as a music education major, “because I didn’t read music and I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so they put me in music ed.” However, after six months, Whitacre changed the degree focus to composition. This new major seemed the proper fit. Although he has not always thought of himself as a composer, he says, “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t hear a song and wish that it went a different way . . . O god, I just wish it would have done that, or, it would have been so cool if it had been like that.”

One of the greatest influences in his collegiate career came from his experience in the college choirs. Through a recruiting effort, UNLV choir director David Weiller, asked Whitacre to sing for him and placed him in the big, all-campus choir. The first piece the ensemble sang was Mozart’s, Requiem, and Whitacre’s life was changed. “I

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9 Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 129.
was an overnight convert.”

The following year, Whitacre auditioned for the elite Chamber Choir and remained in that choir for the rest of his time at UNLV. It was during his third year in this choir, that he wrote, “Go Lovely Rose,” as a gesture of appreciation to David Weiller. In an interview he explains,

David is kind of impossible to describe – the influence he had on me. He was my choir director for seven years. All seven years that I did at UNLV. He was a total mensch and a mentor. He’s the reason that I wrote, “Go, Lovely Rose.” I wrote it for him. It was my first piece. He is also the reason that I started conducting. For some reason, I don’t know why he had let me do a couple of bass sectionals. And then he said to me, well in the spring, listen . . . I think you’d be perfect for this summer stock thing. College Lite Opera Company out in Cape Cod. You could be an assistant conductor. And I went out and tried to do (chuckle) nine shows in nine weeks, fully staged. Total insanity. And my first year was “West Side Story.” And so all of that just sort of changed my life. So, yeah, yeah, I sort of owe everything to David.

It took Whitacre seven years to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Following a failed voice jury incident at the end of his sixth year, he had actually decided to drop out of school. (The voice department failed him for not memorizing an art song for the voice jury.) Fortunately, Bruce Mayhall convinced him to stay in school and complete the degree. In May of 1995, Whitacre graduated with a Bachelor of Music degree.

In the spring of 1995, Whitacre decided he wanted to go to graduate school to continue his studies in composition. He was told by the UNLV Dean and his advisor that due to his low GPA, he would not likely be accepted at any graduate school. As daunting as the advice was, Whitacre was not diverted from his goal. He decided to go to the

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10 Eric Whitacre, video interview (2001), 117.

library and research schools that would accept applications requiring only a portfolio (no GPA). The only school that fit the criteria was The Julliard School. Whitacre recalls, 

The only reason I even heard about Julliard is because I met this composer, Aaron J. Kurnis, and he heard a piece of mine and he said I should apply to Curtis. So I called Curtis to ask for an application and they asked how old I was and I said 25. And they laughed at me because at Curtis . . . I guess at Curtis you have to be 12 to go. When he had said something about Curtis, I looked it up and I saw that all these people who went to Curtis . . . Bernstein and Ned Rorum, Lucas Foss, Barber . . . that they had also all had affiliations with Julliard. So if he thinks I can get into Curtis, then I’ll try Julliard.12

Whitacre’s only graduate application was sent to The Julliard School. Fortunately, he was accepted and began classes in the fall of 1995.

Whitacre has very mixed feelings about his time at Julliard. When asked if the choice was a good decision, he responded, “I met my wife, which already makes the best decision I’ve ever made.”13 However, he felt the overall experience was both a hit and miss. To him,

Julliard was surprisingly stuffy. I expected it to be a cathedral of creativity. It’s really like a corporate office, with the walls and the rugs, and everything is very quiet and professional. You know, I was expecting “FAME.” Yeah, it’s what you’d think . . . all those creative people. And really what Julliard is . . . it’s a Finishing School. I feel like they just collect the very best of the best and then get them through so they can put the magic “J” on the resumes.14

Although the general academic experience was not what he had hoped, he felt fortunate to meet several amazing individuals, including Mary Anthony Cox (ear training 


13 Ibid., 118.

14 Ibid.
instructor) and John Corigliano (composition teacher/mentor). Whitacre says Mary Anthony Cox is, “. . . the single best teacher I’ve ever had in my life, and that made the entire educational experience at Julliard worth it.” A student of Nadia Boulanger, she approached her teaching with an old-school formality, a style of teaching which Whitacre had not previously encountered in his educational experience. Reflecting on her teaching skill, Whitacre says:

... things were just the way they were and that’s what it was. And also as a teacher, she simply wouldn’t accept “No” for an answer. If you couldn’t do something, it just didn’t matter. And every week you have this whole litany of tests where you’d have to stand in front of the class and do these different tests. And if you couldn’t get it right, you stood up there until you got it right. As bad as it was, or however much you didn’t prepare or however far behind you were . . . it didn’t matter. You were going to stay up there until you got it right. And everybody was equal in her eyes. . . . A born teacher.

When Whitacre arrived at Julliard, he was assigned to David Diamond’s studio. However, about three quarters of the way through his first year, Diamond had a heart attack and stopped teaching for a few months. This provided Whitacre the unique opportunity to move to a new studio, without having to deal with potential political turmoil. His experience with David Diamond was difficult.

For whatever reason we didn’t get along. He was kind of very old-school . . . and . . . I don’t know if it was his method to kind of tear you down and then build you back up, but, I didn’t get along with him at all. He really kind of paralyzed me. And, he actually gave me my favorite quote of all times. He said to me, “Well, it’s effective, but I certainly wouldn’t call it music.” (He said about one of my pieces.) I couldn’t run away from him fast enough. It’s just that we had completely different ways of thinking about it.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

During his first year at Julliard, Whitacre had been participating in a graduate composition seminar, led by John Corigliano. Each week, all graduate composers would meet at Corigliano’s home. They would listen to and talk about each other’s new works. Whitacre felt supported by Corigliano and consequently, asked to switch to his studio. Corigliano agreed and became the person Whitacre considers to be the only “actual teacher of composition for me.”\(^{18}\)

Another source of support came through a small group called the New Optimists, formed by upperclassman Ken Lampl. This group shared an ideology of writing “music that people actually want to hear.”\(^ {19}\) This was counter-revolutionary thinking to the mainstay academic serialists of the time.

Whitacre graduated from Julliard in 1997 and moved to California. He taught music at the Buckley School in Los Angeles for one semester and then the plan was to enter the one-year film scoring program at USC. He attended class for one day and then dropped out of the program – first, because of the $30,000 tuition with no financial aid, and second, because this would have been his tenth year of collegiate life.

Consequently, he decided to break into the film industry on his own, by writing a score to a feature film, *Alligator Alley*, written by and starring his close friend, David Noroña. They wrote six songs together, in a rock/funk style. He loved working with David, but found the overall experience to be unpleasant. He

\(^ {18}\) Ibid., 135.

\(^ {19}\) Ibid., 131.
particularly had difficulty with the director and the experience ended badly. Whitacre realized then that film scoring is less about collaboration and more about serving the needs of many different opinions. In fact, he states,

> Many of them having no knowledge about music . . . they want more orange and less blue . . . and who knows what that means? So I became kind of disenchanted with that idea and then at the same time embraced this whole career that I was starting to have with writing professionally for chorus and wind symphony and then orchestra.\(^{20}\)

The choral world has benefitted greatly from this turn of events, as the embracing of his blossoming career produced a whole new output of commissioned works for chorus, wind symphony, and orchestra, as well as extensive work on his opera, now musical, *Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings.*

Whitacre spent an entire decade (from 2001-2010), refining and reworking what began as a new, large-scale work based on a burgeoning style he called opera-electronica. The book for *Paradise Lost* began as a collaboration with friend, David Norña, with Whitacre writing the musical score. His passion for the project is evident and he states,

> . . . *Paradise Lost*, for me, has just been . . . it’s all ‘learning curve.’ And I think that’s one of the reasons I’m attracted to it. You know, I started off thinking that I was going to write some kind of cool, kind-of opera weird thing. And then more and more started learning about story and live theater. And music theater. Not necessarily musical, but music theater. And that just fascinates me. And the idea of writing for that stuff. So it’s been changed so many times you can’t imagine. Complete reworking of the story and the music. I’ve probably thrown out two-hours worth of music. Mostly, I still think it’s just a great idea. At least, that’s the way I used to think, is that it’s all about the concept. All this cool music and these angels. But now I think, it’s a great story. . . [in 2005] David Norña dropped out of the project as a writer . . . amicably. We’d just sort of come to a creative impasse. He felt like he had nothing left to

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\(^{20}\) Eric Whitacre, video interview (2001), 120.
contribute. We were really stuck. And so I started writing. And I personally rewrote the entire book and about 50% or 70% of the lyrics.  

Whitacre and David Noroña took *Paradise Lost* to an ASCAP workshop in Los Angeles in 2004, receiving constructive critiques and establishing a mentoring relationship with composer Stephen Schwartz. As a result of this workshop, Whitacre and Noroña were awarded the ASCAP Foundation Harold Arlen Musical Theater Award. Whitacre also received the ASCAP Foundation Richard Rodgers New Horizons Award in recognition of achievement as the best new composer of musical theater. By 2007, this music theater work was heavily inspired by Japanese Anime and Manga, becoming a hybrid of musical theater, opera electronica, film scoring, and Asian drumming. It starred his wife, Hila Plittman. A sold-out six week run in Los Angeles in the summer of 2007 (garnering ten Los Angeles Stage Alliance Ovation Award nominations), was followed by another sold-out concert performance at Carnegie Hall in June 2010.

That same year, Whitacre signed a long-term recording contract with Decca Records. In October 2010, *Light & Gold* was released and became a number one best selling recording in the US and UK within a week. Whitacre received his first Grammy for this recording, winning the coveted prize in 2012 for Best Choral Performance.

For the *Light & Gold* recording, Decca helped assemble the finest singers in England, establishing the Eric Whitacre Singers. This ensemble affords Whitacre the opportunity to conduct a professional ensemble of his own on a regular basis and

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21 Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 150.
allows him further creativity by exploring a variety of literature from the choral
canon, as well as new compositions (his own and other composers). For instance, the
Eric Whitacre Singers co-commissioned a new work with the Los Angeles Master
Chorale by Jeff Beal, called *The Salvage Men*, based on texts by Pulitzer Prize winner
Kay Ryan and Oscar Wilde. Whitacre premiered the work in London in March
2015.22

In 2011, Whitacre picked up stakes and moved his family to London,
beginning a new chapter in his career. He accepted an offer to serve as a Visiting
Fellow and Composer in Residence at Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge, UK, for
five years.23 This was a very fruitful time for his career, reenergizing his
compositional output and developing important relationships in the European musical
market with groups such as the London Symphony Chorus and Orchestra and the
Berlin Rundfunkchor, writing new compositions for both of these organizations, as
well as opportunities to serve as a guest conductor.

Likely, much of his current success is due to hiring a new manager and producer
in 2010, Claire Long. Whitacre said, "I had thought of myself as a businessman, but I
realized I was holding myself back by thinking that. Now almost all of my headspace is

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22 “News – Jeff Beal’s latest recording, ‘The Salvage Men,’ by the Eric Whitacre
Singers.” Music Sales Classical, January 26, 2016, accessed March 2, 2016,

23 Press release, “Eric Whitacre, Grammy Award-Winning
Composer/Conductor, Appointed Los Angeles Master Chorale's First Artist-In-
Residence.” Los Angeles Master Chorale, March 2, 2016, accessed March 3, 2016,
creative, which is a dream. Now I can do what I actually do well, which is write music. Long opened new doors for him, working to establish the Whitacre “brand.” One unusual venture, outside of the world of music, is modeling. Storm Model Management signed Whitacre in 2011 in an effort, “to provide prestigious multi platform brand development and commercial opportunities for talent outside the traditional fashion industry.” As Whitacre explains it, "I shouldn't say it's modeling . . . It's what they call 'special bookings,' for actors and musicians. I'm representing a product, like if it's Hugo Boss then I'm wearing Hugo Boss suits at appearances." Although this may seem too commercial for the “serious” musician, this marketing and PR strategy helps to keep the Whitacre juggernaut moving forward.

Whitacre also made a return to film scoring. In 2011, he joined forces with legendary film composer Hans Zimmer, to co-write the “Mermaid Theme” and conduct for some of the choral sessions for Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides. And, in November 2015 he joined forces again with Zimmer to record music for Kung Fu Panda 3, conducting a Chinese choir in the last scene of the movie.


26 “Model citizen: Composer Eric Whitacre, dashing star of high-school choruses worldwide, makes the big bucks.” POLITICObeta. April 13, 2011.

Having fulfilled his five-year commitment to Cambridge, Whitacre returned to Los Angeles in 2016 and immediately began work on new projects. His latest coup was announced in a press release on March 2, 2016. Whitacre was appointed as the first artist-in-residence for the Los Angeles Master Chorale. This is a two-year appointment, beginning with the 2016-17 season. Whitacre is excited about this new adventure, stating on his Facebook page, “Amongst other things, I’ll be composing new music for the group (first premiere is June 2017), guest conducting (June 2016 and December 2016) and working on a big, super-cool project for the 17-18 season. Thrilled and honored to be a part of this incredible organization.”

In the past twenty-five years, Eric Whitacre has made significant contributions to choral music, particularly in terms of adding to the repertoire and choral music advocacy. He has recruited a new pool of young choral singers and helped energize interest in choral music around the globe. Undoubtedly, he will continue to challenge our musical ears and push the creative boundaries of collaborative efforts between music and technology. We are fortunate to have this forward-thinking creative colleague lead us into a new millennium of choral exploration.

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Chapter 3
COMPOSITIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND PROCESS

Eric Whitacre has referred to his eclectic musical influences, such as Arvo Pärt, Morten Lauridsen, Depeche Mode, and Duran Duran. This chapter will explore stylistic and philosophical concepts that influence his compositions. Through a series of directed questions, Whitacre, in his own words, shares significant, detailed information that reveals expanded insights into his compositional perspective and process. The exploration of Influences, Compositional Style, and Compositional Process will aid musicians as they explore and interpret Whitacre’s compositions.

INFLUENCES

Composition as a profession

*Why did you choose composition as your profession?*

I don’t think I’ve always thought of myself as a composer, but I can’t remember a time when I didn’t hear a song and wish that it went a different way. Like I said as a little kid, “O god, I just wish it would have done that” or, “It would have been so cool if it had been like that.” I do remember having this experience with . . . we were singing in choir with David Weiller and he was working on a Kirke Mechem piece, and at that time, I think probably in my mind I thought, “Yeah, I’ll be a choir director. This is what I want to do.” I’d been singing in choir for a couple of years and I was just enamored of the whole thing, David had a question about the score, and he said, “I don’t know, I’ll call Kirke this afternoon and see what he meant by that.” And suddenly, to see that in the hierarchy of things, there was someone who the conductor had to ask. And I remember
that distinctly, it was very appealing to me in thinking, wow all right, so there’s . . . on
the food chain . . . there appears to be someone to whom everybody defers.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Why do you compose?}

That’s just what I do. I learned pretty early on . . . that, I guess when I was in
high school I’d listen to music and think that could be . . . oh, it would have been so great
if it would have done this . . . or . . . what would have happened if they would had done
this. And with that sort of deconstruction, then I started slowly writing my own stuff.
Now I just can’t stop. And, some days I don’t want to do it anymore.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Life philosophy and religious perspective}

\textit{What is your philosophy of life . . . in a nutshell?}

I guess I would say that my actions, I would hope, speak about my philosophy of
life. That I work hard and I’m grateful for the opportunities I have and I really try to use
what I’ve been given to the best of my abilities. My artistic sensibilities are much like
my life ideals in that there are certain subjects that I think . . . they’re \textit{verbotten}, that I just
shouldn’t be broached with art. And I think that the subjects that should be, are beauty
and truth and freedom and love. I sound like \textit{Moulin Rouge}. I mean really, all the
Bohemian ideals. I believe that art should transcend, and transcend to a place of
evolution. So I don’t want to work on pieces or have my life be involved in things that
are destructive or are depressing, or . . . no, I shouldn’t say depressing . . . destructive or
speaking to the more degraded part of the human sensibilities. It’s not to say that (that’s

\textsuperscript{29} Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 129.

\textsuperscript{30} Eric Whitacre, video interview (2001), 124.
why I qualified with depressing), that you can’t write music that’s profoundly sad or explore that kind of thing, but at the same time there’s a way of approaching it with a sense of awe and a sense of wonder, which is what I really try to do with my life and with my music. And then I think, just in life I try to be true to myself, I just try to be really honest.

*Do you identify religiously with a particular philosophy?*

I have two opposing and equally powerful known philosophical systems that I tend to adhere to. One is objectivism, which is Ayn Rand. This sort of powerful confident celebration of the self and of the ego. And the other one is the complete polar opposite which is Zen Buddhism. I was heavily into both in my early twenties and I feel like I now have this strange mix of the two of them. Maybe they’re the same thing. Religiously . . . this implies there is some practice involved. I would say for me, at least, religion is the practice of a faith. For me the faith is completely in the art and in my life. And so, I try to pour my understanding and my wonder of the universe into my art and try to make pieces that help other people feel the way I do about the world and about the universe. Which is interesting, because then I can look at pieces that I wrote ten years ago and think, wow, I actually felt a little differently about the world. I can hear that in the music. And, I wonder if other people can hear that too? I’m not sure that’s a whole ‘nother topic. You know, after you write a piece, its got a life of its own. So I guess that’s it. Mostly, I’m quite wary of organized religion. Generally, I would say that it’s difficult to have good come out of a massive organized religion. History sort of says otherwise. But at the same time, religion has been for some people, the way in.
“When David Heard” is pretty profoundly sad.

Yeah . . . This is the thing. I do believe that pain is an important and vital part of the human experience and it’s something we all must go through on some level or another. Some people seem to experience and live through pain that is truly beyond my comprehension. So I believe that it’s worthy of exploration, artistically . . . and of exaltation, because that’s what you’re doing when you create a piece . . . is that you’re really exalting that ideal. “When David Heard” is a perfect example of that because I think that if it hasn’t happened to somebody, it’s a fear that happens and it’s so primal and so . . . it reminds me of being a young child when I think of it. Probably, I don’t know, maybe everybody’s like this, you know maybe, your earliest fear is that you’ll lose someone close to you or you’re abandoned. So I think that’s worthy of exaltation. Now, that has to be done with kid gloves because you can easily start hammering. You can use the topic to have an artificial emotional effect on the audience.

Are you walking a thin line of exploitation?

Exploiting. Exactly. Which I think is the worst possible thing you can do. A lot of Hollywood movies these days are doing that. And I just think it’s disgusting. It’s really terrible. It’s one thing to explore the thing for what it really is, but it’s another thing to artificially create it. When I think about degrading art, I think about pieces that . . . that speak to the evils of mankind and exalt that. And I just can’t agree with that. I’m not saying that people sit in the audience and think, “Wow, it’s great to be evil.” But why waste your time and energy and everybody else’s time and energy on exploring the dark side of human nature? And you know when I say dark, I’m not talking about pain.
I’m talking about something else. And it’s not worthy, it’s not worthy of . . . It’ll be interesting to see if I feel the same way in ten years.

_**Will it require time and effort?**_

Yeah . . . everybody’s time and effort. And it’s not worthy of laying upon the alter of this thing we call art, because that’s the most sacred alter I can think of.\textsuperscript{31}

**COMPOSITIONAL STYLE**

**Populist Approach**

_I understand you were part of a quasi club or a fraternity of some sort at Julliard._

Ken Lampl, who was also a composer, I think a year or two ahead of me, started this little group called the New Optimists. And basically the idea was, you know, this revolutionary idea, “let’s write music that people actually want to hear.” There were sort-of two streams of thought at Julliard. There was this atavist group of us in New Optimists. I mean, it’s not like we had a formal meeting or anything. We just kind of aligned ourselves as people who shared the same ideology. And then there were all the academic serialists and the guys who were doing the opposite of what we were doing.

_Were there many people in this group?_

I don’t know? Maybe four or five? Actually, most of them ended up being at BCM (bcminternational.com). Steve Bryant and Jonathan Newman. But like I said, It’s not like we had lunches together or had a year-end dance. It was just like a bunch of guys

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 122-124.
who all felt the same way about music and would sometimes hang out and have lunch together.

*Was John Corigliano in line with that thinking?*

Yeah, I think we all looked up to John as someone who was like that. Although I would have to say, where we were at, or at least where I was at, was sort of even more populist in a way. I was writing for concert band and everybody, including John, was telling me, “What are you doing writing for concert band? Why don’t you write for a serious ensemble like the orchestra?” I got such a kick out of band and even choir because it just reaches so many people. And a certain kind of people. It’s not just a mass appeal, it’s relatively untrained people. And for me, I’m always writing, thinking about my mom in the audience. What is my mom gonna like? And my mom has zero training and doesn’t know anything about classical music. And so, I think a couple of us went even further in our new optimism, if you will, even further than John.

*Since you spoke about your mom, what kind of influences did she have on your early years . . . with home . . . musically?*

At home . . . nothing. I mean, my parent’s didn’t even really like to listen to the radio. My Dad would occasionally listen to the Kingston Trio. I sort of remember that. My Grandmother would take us, once a year, to see the *Nutcracker* in Reno, and I remember liking that. But I would say, until I was eighteen, really my only experience with classical music, other than a few piano lessons here and there, was film music.

*Were you interested in popular music?*
Yeah, yeah. That’s kind of all I did. Up until I was twelve I was sort of wanting to please my parents. And then, when I was twelve, I discovered rock. And that’s it. It was all over. And I even remember the song. Bonnie Tyler’s, “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” It changed my life and I figured out how to play it on the piano. And then after that I was a lost cause. I spent all my time buying 45s, and pop and rock albums and stuff. I really got turned on by electro-pop, and synthesizers and Depeche Mode, and Duran Duran and the Pet Shop Boys and Erasure. All of these bands I lived and died for.32

Religious Texts, Extended Works, and the importance of a wide audience appeal

I’ve been asked many times to write mass movements for Requiems. As a rule, I don’t set liturgical texts. I’m not Christian and the words just don’t really speak to me. And it’s essential for me that the words ring true or I just can’t set them. So those kind of big pieces are out. I’d certainly be open to writing some huge . . . now that I’m saying it . . . the problem with it is that I’m not sure it’s relevant any more. To write an hour long chorus/orchestra/soloists masterpiece, because first, it probably wouldn’t get performed very much, which is a big issue for me. It’s not enough to just to have a piece written and existing in the universe. It’s important to me that it actually speaks to people and touches them and moves them. And so I imagine killing myself for a year on this piece that might get performed a couple times, and that sort of breaks my heart. So you know, I might not do a big work that I didn’t think was relevant. What I love about the opera, is that it combines popular kinds of music with more traditional kinds of music and

hopefully will bring a wide, wide audience to something that I think is still artistically sound.\footnote{Eric Whitacre, video interview (2001), 120-121.}

**Creative Inspiration (‘Go, Lovely Rose’ and “When David Heard”)**

And then after that (“Go, Lovely Rose”), I had an idea for this piece where people would snap their fingers and make it sound like rain. And use these handbells, and it was from a bunch of different things that I’d seen. You know the snapping fingers thing obviously is from a campfire game and the handbell thing was from the National Convention in 1991 in Phoenix. I saw it, a performance of the *Chichester Psalms*, with just piano and chorus and the chorus hid these handbells until this part where they brought ‘em out and it was stunning. You know . . . its flash of gold. And I always think that choral concerts are pretty stuffy anyway – everybody just standing up there singing. Kind of snoozeville. And so I was looking to shake things up a little bit, and that seemed to be the vehicle for it.

We should talk about about that (“When David Heard”), because that was a tough time for me, writing that piece. I can tell you much more about this, but I feel like whatever the piece is, I kinda have to go to that place. It’s like Prometheus taking fire from the mountain. And so I actually try to write my pieces so that if now I’m going to feel great for three months and now I’m going to do this for . . . and “When David Heard,” I started writing it for Ron Staheli, who lost his son, and as I started to explore the motives I went deeper and deeper down. So by the end I was really lost. I was kind of just swimming in this sorrow. And still . . . there’s certain chords if I hear them I just .
. . I conducted it for the first time last year and it was so difficult. It’s funny how music has that ability.  

**Dissonance**

*How do you make use of dissonance in your compositions?*

You know, it’s funny. I never think of it as dissonance. It doesn’t seem dissonant at all to me. It just seems beautiful. And then everybody else asks me, they say you know, “Ah, but the chords are so dissonant, but they still sound nice.” To me they’re not dissonant. I don’t know if I’ve completely lost my ability to tell anymore? Like a C major chord with an F in it sounds just like a C major chord to me in a way. I can’t tell anymore.

**Compositional voicing and a cappella writing**

*The majority of your compositions are written for SATB divisi groups. Is there any particular reason you haven’t written any compositions for male ensembles or more compositions for female ensembles?*

I get asked by men’s groups all the time. I mean, ALL the time. I just don’t have anything really to say with men’s group. I love the sound. I just don’t even know what I would do really? You know I made that “Lux” version for men. It works O.K. But, I don’t know why I need the women’s voices or the higher partials. Because you know it’s the same thing with the women’s chorus. I just don’t know what the heck I would say

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34 Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 126.

35 Ibid., 151.
with just women. I don’t know why I need the whole palate there. Maybe the problem is that I generally think choral music as a cappella. That that’s my favorite way to write. I’m not a big fan of a piano at all. You know, if it were up to me, then I would write for string quartet and women’s voices. That’s interesting. Or string orchestra and men’s voices. That’s interesting. The problem is they’d never get performed. Ever.36

**Commonalities in his compositions**

*Do you believe there are similarities between your compositions, or are each one distinctly different? And if they’re similar, how do you feel they are similar. What are their commonalities?*

That’s a good question. I feel, to me, that they’re all very, very different. And I sort of pride myself on trying to make one different from the other. So that I’m never repeating myself. Obviously, I keep doing the same sort of thing over, and over, and over. Not that I mean to, but, I think I sort of stamp them with “me.” I can’t escape “me” in a way. And so somehow they become very recognizable to my style. At least I’ve been told this. That you could hear all these pieces and then one of mine starts and everybody can go, “Uh, yeah, there’s an Eric Whitacre piece.” I don’t know why. I don’t know what that is. But apparently they all seem to have a kind of thing that I do, whatever that thing is.

*So you’re not aware of that thing.*

I guess what I’m aware of is that I have a very particular taste; just about the way I want things to sound. And so, if it sounds right, then it sticks. Then it stays in the

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36 Ibid., 147.
piece. And so, I imagine that there’s kind of a finite number of things that I think sound right and so they end up kind of all going to . . . but other than that I’m not aware of it. I know I’m the “cluster guy.” I keep hearing that all the time. It’s not that I do that on purpose. It’s not that I say, “Oh, you know, I’ll be the cluster guy,” and act my way in. It’s just the way I want it to sound. So, they end up being that way.

So, it’s really not a formula at all, it’s just more organic. It’s what you hear and what you like.

Yeah. I wish it were a formula . . . make it a lot easier.37

Signature trademark

Do you think you have a signature trademark?

Not on purpose. There’s obviously things I tend to do, right? Kind of these things.

Is there a specific chord you use frequently? Is there . . .

Yeah. There’s a bunch of those. They’re kind of all over the place. Where I’m either quoting myself or quoting an idea. Like there’s that opening chord of “Cloudburst.” That chord is sprinkled all over the place. It even shows up in the opera. So yeah, I do that kind of thing where I’m quoting myself all the time. And I guess I have a certain kind of sound. Obviously, the clusters . . . that’s the one everybody points to. Also I tend to do these kind of pyramid cluster things, right, where you start with a single note and then everyone goes up a scale in a way and holds a different note. I guess

37 Ibid., 139-140.
those are my signatures. I don’t think about it when I’m doing it like, “Oh, here comes the big Eric Whitacre moment.”\footnote{Ibid., 151.}

**PROCESS**

**Personal approach**

*Do you struggle with writing a composition or is it more second nature?*

It’s awful. Every single one. It’s just awful. The seed for it is totally natural. You know, I got the ideas and I got all these melodies and things floating around, but sitting down and committing it to paper is so difficult for me. It’s excruciating. Every time.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Compositional Inspiration: Poetry and Commissions**

*What types (texts for choral compositions) attract your attention and how do you choose them?*

They just seem to find me. I kind of know the instant . . . I don’t really even have to read it. I can just sort of see it on the page . . . see the way it looks on the page and know whether or not it’s something I could set. It’s kind of a . . . I don’t know, just a structure thing. It’s hard to describe. But “This Marriage” is the perfect example of the way that I normally find poetry. I knew I wanted to write a piece for my wife on our seventh anniversary. I went to Google. I typed in poems about marriage. That’s the first thing that came up. And so I said, “That’s it. That’s the poem I was looking for.”
don’t feel like Schubert, like I could set a laundry list. It’s got to be very specific. But somehow, when it comes to poetry finding it’s way to me, it seems to be filled with serendipity, and just always falls in my lap right at the time I need it.

*Do you do a lot of reading, or do you have a specific idea of what you want, like you did with “This Marriage,” when you’re looking for poems?*

Both. I do do a lot of reading. But when I sit down to write a piece, then maybe I’ll actively go looking for a poem. And then I’ve got some that I’ve kept in my drawer for years and years and years that I . . . “A Boy and a Girl” was that way. I actually tried setting that . . . god, when I first started writing back in ’91 or something. And then I tried setting it again sometime in ’97 or ’98 and then it wasn’t until 2002 that I kind of figured out how to do it. And so I have a bunch of poems like that, that are just sort of sitting or . . . another one is . . . uh . . . the poem by Yeats . . . What’s it called? . . . I don’t know the name of it but the refrain of it is, “come away oh human child to the water and the wild.” *(The Stolen Child)* I’ve sketched that thing, I don’t know how many times?

*So it’s not necessarily any particular poet. It’s just what attracts you, or they just kind of come to you in reading?*

I guess maybe they sort of suggest just a sort of fundamental music already bubbling right underneath the words . . . to me. And then I think, “Oh, O.K., that’s something I could illuminate. I think I could find the music that is suggested in this poem. I think that’s what it is.”

*Are there any particular poet names that attract you the same as Octavio Paz?*
Oh well . . . e. e. cummings is always . . . I feel that different poetry makes me write different music. Kind of really different. e. e. cummings for some reason makes me . . . it makes my music sound different than any other poetry that I’ve set. Whenever I do set anything written by him. And so, sometimes I love to just sit and read e. e. cummings and think, oh god, you know, maybe I’ll do that one. I will say that e. e. cummings stuff is a lot of frickin’ work. You know, the poetry is dense and the structure is sometimes difficult to find for me. And the words are incredibly pregnant. It’s almost like you can just paint every single word that he writes. And so other poets aren’t quite, James Joyce. They’re all written in sort of song structure. Kind of already suggested. Emily Dickinson, same thing.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{How do you feel about writing commissions? (Other than the idea that it helps you support your life.) Is it a conflict?}

Well, the conflict can come in that, occasionally I’ll receive commissions for pieces that maybe I just didn’t feel like writing at the time. You know, like another choral work. After a while I get pretty burned out with it. But then I find something that I really wanted to say with it. I’m very picky and choosey about commissions and try to make sure that it’s going to be something that I want to do. But some times it’s hard to tell because if I book two to three years in advance . . . I took this thing on two years ago and then I started writing . . . I think, god . . . oh, why did I decide to do this . . . baritone and wind symphony piece. I’m flattered and grateful that I make a living; that people pay me money to write music. And I love business and I love trying to be a businessman and

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\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 142-144.
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try to make as much as I can doing it. That’s when the Ayn Rand philosophy comes in really strong. I do believe in being rewarded. Maybe that’s the wrong way to say it. I’ve never really talked about this before. I think the exchange of money is a good thing. And I believe that it’s a fair exchange. If you write someone a piece that is transcendent and they give you money, that seems to me to be a pretty fair trade. I will say I have yet to make the amount of money that it feels like I’m going through . . . in terms of blood, sweat and tears. Although I can’t imagine what that money is. Because ultimately, the amount of money and the money itself doesn’t matter to the artistic process. I sort of take care of that business part of it and then just . . . I’m glad that I know that’s over with and then I concentrate on the piece. But I never finish the piece so that I can get the commission money. I’ll miss rent before I send off a piece that I don’t think is good. So it’s a balancing act, I think. But I write music for a living, so I’m not complaining.  

**Formula/Personal Style**

*Do you fit into a mold? What is your style?*

No, I don’t think I do. It’s hard for me. I’m often asked by composers, young composers, how do I develop my own style? And that just doesn’t make any sense to me. Just be you and that’s gonna be your style. And so, from the earliest memory, I kind of just did me. And that’s what came out. So, I didn’t feel like I was breaking away from anything traditional. I will say that, “Go, Lovely Rose” was my first piece and “Cloudburst” was my second, so, when I think back objectively, already I was writing eight-part clusters and these pyramiding things and voice leading and all that stuff. 

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seemed to be doing all that stuff right from the beginning. But I will say, it was with “Water Night” when I actually had a moment of what felt like surrender. Where I said, “You know what, I want a fourteen-part chord and I don’t frickin’ care if anybody can sing it. It can’t be that hard. And if I do this right . . . and I just did it . . . I didn’t even think about it.” And that was kind of a real opening moment for me, where I said . . . “This is what I want to hear so I’m putting it down.” Not that I ever felt like I was held back in any way before that, but something about “Water Night” just kind of freed me. And so, I think that was a moment.

*Can you describe your musical style?*

Oh god . . . The problem is that there’s . . . there’s different kinds. There’s “Water Night” and then there’s “Godzilla Eats Las Vegas.” So what I would like to think is that it’s dramatic. Or that it’s engaging. Or best of all it’s not boring. Well, that’s at least what I hope my style would be described as.\(^{42}\)

**Score indications and Interpretation**

*How do you feel about the performances of your compositions? Are you a controlling type of individual that’s very particular about how the music is treated, or are you comfortable with giving free reign to each performance? How does one best interpret your intentions for the performance of your work?*

God . . . uh . . . musically I guess. Um, I’m a total control freak. Nobody ever does it right except for me. And you know, occasionally somebody will do something that’s even better than I thought, but that’s very, very rare. Most of the time it’s just nice

\(^{42}\) Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 142.
to sit and hear a very competent version of the music. But, it’s so intertwined with me. It’s like I can’t give it away. There are pieces now that I’ve heard thousands of times, so part of me has gotten better with sort of hearing them in all kinds of different ways, and detach myself from it. But, for instance, if given the choice, that I can’t imagine a single circumstance where I wouldn’t conduct. It’s just too hard for me to sit out in the audience and say, “Ah, a little more of this and a little less of that.” I know that’s not great for conductors. It probably scares the hell out of them.

_Do you try to be very specific in the score itself to show exactly what you want?_ Or how do we look beyond what’s there to figure it out. Just be musical?

I don’t put a lot of markings in my scores because I feel that it . . . I actually feel that it’s not great for the performance. Conductors will tell you, “No. We need as much information as possible.” But my experience has been that it sort of makes for a robotic reading. And then people get very exact. But then there’s a piano here and a mezzo forte there and a crescendo here and it’s all just like it is on the page, but you can’t really define the stuff. And you know from experience . . . How big is the size of the choir? What’s the room like? How good are they? What’s the audience like? Where is this on the program? Every one of these things totally changes the piece itself. So now what I try to do when I compose, I try to make it inherent in the actual notes. So that if it’s going to be forte, it’s written forte, so that in a way you can’t possibly sing it piano. It has to be performed forte. And if it’s going to slow down or move in a certain way, then the music and the text is designed already so even kind of a monkey can do it. “Sleep” is
like that I think, and, “Lux.” And even “This Marriage.” Most relatively competent conductors can pull these pieces off because in a way, they’re conductor-proof.43

**Road Blocks and Work Ethic**

*Did you ever hit a wall? You referred to one . . . kind of referenced one in the spring of 1995 in some reading that I did.*

Yeah. That was from David Diamond. The wall. And as soon as I stopped studying with him, everything was fine. And then I also, I hit a wall when I was teaching at this private school for a semester. That was just brutal and that really shut down my creative process. And then everything was fine after that. I don’t really have composer blocks the way that you sort of romantically read about them. And my general impression with that kind of thing is that if you hit a block, then you’re just not working hard enough. There comes a thing with the composing where you have to force yourself to just sit there and write and write and write. Even if it sucks and even if you throw it all out (which happens all the time). You have to work through it. My experience is that when composers say that they’ve hit a wall that way, then they just haven’t spent enough time on it.

*How do you think you grew from those walls . . . moving ahead from those experiences?*

Each time it happened, it sort of solidified more and more my own stance as an artist and as a professional musician. So that now it’s a reflex that I just work through

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43 Ibid., 145-146.
something. It’s not that it gets any easier, but I can at least laugh at it and go, “Oh well, here goes this thing again. Alright.”44

The Pragmatist

*What was your first commissioned work?*

My very first commissioned work? Well, there’s really two answers to that question. When I first started writing commissioned works, I would write a choral piece for a group and then we would agree that at the end they would give me a Coke or a candy bar and we’d call that a commission . . . so that I could start developing this catalog of commissioned works. The very first piece that anybody actually paid me money for . . . was . . . it’s actually a piece that I haven’t even released . . . it’s called, “Lake Pyramid.” Somebody called me up and they wanted me to write a piece and I didn’t really want to do it so I thought of the biggest number I could at the time, which was a thousand bucks and said I’ll do it for a thousand bucks (thinking they’d say no) . . . and they said, “O.K. great” . . . and I was like . . . “whoa.” And that was in 1993, probably. And also in 1993, I wrote a work for wind symphony called, “Ghost Train,” and this thing sorta took off like a cannon . . . And so basically between commissions and publications after “Ghost Train,” I’ve supported myself entirely as a working composer.45

Style Change/Growth

*How do you think your compositional style has changed over the past decade?*

44 Ibid., 145.

45 Eric Whtiacre, video interview (2001), 119-120.
My god. So the past decade. We’re talking like 1995 . . . to now. God, I don’t know. I would like to think that I’m getting . . . that it’s all getting sort of more elegant in a way. That I’m able to use fewer notes and fewer gestures to say the same sort of thing. I would like to think that, but I don’t know if it’s true. But that’s certainly what I hope would be true.

Do you feel like it is getting better?

Um . . . yeah . . . it’s all so tricky because if you don’t count “This Marriage,” I haven’t really written an original concert work in like four years. I’ve been just working on “Paradise Lost,” which is a totally different crazy beast. It’s a musical, so you know the old joke about a musical is never written . . . it’s only rewritten. That is so true. I’ve lost all parody. You just keep on writing and writing and writing and hoping the story is gonna work eventually. But, “This Marriage” seems to me a good example of something where, when I sit down first to set that text, I have to say reflectively, I started to do kinda the thing I normally do. You know, these big, lush kind of painting gestures. And then I really looked at the poem and said what is this here? What does it mean? What am I trying to say? And then just this little four-part thing came out.46

What are you able to musically share through this medium (opera/musical) that you can’t share through your previous choral or instrumental compositions?

Well, Paradise Lost for me has just been . . . it’s all ‘learning curve.’ And I think that’s one of the reasons I’m attracted to it. You know I started off thinking that I was going to write some kind of cool, kind of opera weird thing. And then more and more

46 Eric Whitacre, telephone interview (2006), 140-141.
started learning about story and live theater. And music theater. Not necessarily musicals, but music theater. And that just fascinates me. And the idea of writing for that stuff. So it’s been changed so many times you can’t imagine. Complete reworking of the story and the music. I’ve probably thrown out two-hours worth of music. Mostly, I still think it’s just a great idea. At least that’s the way I used to think, is that it’s all about the concept. All this cool music and these angels. But now I think, it’s a great story. About a year ago, David Noroña dropped out of the project as a writer . . . amicably. We’d just sort of came to a creative impasse. He felt like he had nothing left to contribute. We were really stuck. And so I started writing. And I personally rewrote the entire book and about 50 or 70% of the lyrics over the past year. That process has really changed me. I felt like I grew volumes as an artist . . . just learning how to do it. It’s nice to feel like I’m taking baby steps again. You know, like with the choral music now, the things pretty polished and I’ve had some success . . . and so it’s kind of that thing. But writing music theater, the book and everything . . . it’s like I’m a complete novice. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. And it seems to me now the work kind of has a . . . it’s got that same rawness that I had when I first started writing music . . . where I kind of don’t know what I’m doing, but in a way that’s a strength. And that’s exciting to me. And I guess I made this decision a year ago that I’m going to will this thing into existence. That, I’m going to make this happen if it’s the last thing I do. It’s sort of now a personality thing for me. And not only finish it, but this is going to be what I always imagined it’s going to be. It’s going to be on Broadway. People are going to buy the album. It’s gonna shake things up. All of those things. I just won’t take “No” for an answer.47

47 Ibid., 150.
Chapter 4

ANNOTATED CATALOG AND PERFORMANCE GUIDE:

From 1991-2004, Eric Whitacre wrote twenty-one choral compositions, published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., Walton Music Corporation, and Shadow Water Music. This chapter will provide a listing of his published choral works from 1991-2004, including documentation of the following for each composition: title, poet, text source for the piece (i.e. title of poem if different from the title of the composition), language, translator, collection, commission, dedication, publisher, composition date and location, voicing, ranges, instrumentation, meter, tempo, duration, composer insights, performance notes, texts and translations. The compositions are arranged in alphabetical order.

Most of Whitacre’s compositions feature regular use of divisi in all parts. It will be assumed that this technique is employed unless otherwise indicated. Another frequently recurring feature in Whitacre’s compositions is mixed meter. Time signatures will be listed in the order in which they appear in the composition. Duration time listed for each composition is an approximate figure which may vary slightly according to each conductor’s interpretation of the composition.
Title: “A Boy and a Girl”

Poet: Octavio Paz (1914-1998)

Text source: Los novios (Engaged)

Language: English

Translator: Muriel Rukeyser

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the 2002 California All State Choir.

Dedication: Dedicated to my great friend and fellow composer Dr. Ron Kean.

Publisher: Shadow Water Music

Date: January 2002 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (minimal divisi)

Ranges: Soprano  Alto  Tenor  Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 3/4, 2/4

Tempo(s): Rubato, e molto teneramente

Duration: 4’25”

Composer Insights:

A Boy and a Girl is such a tender, delicate, exquisite poem; I simply tried to quiet myself as much as possible and find the music hidden within the words.

I’m often asked which of my compositions is my favorite. I don’t really have one that I love more than the others, but I do feel that the four measures that musically paint the text “never kissing” may be the truest notes I’ve ever written.
A Boy and a Girl was commissioned by the 2002 California All-State Chorus, and is dedicated to my great friend and fellow composer Dr. Ron Kean.

**Author Commentary:**

The ranges and notes in this composition are reasonable, allowing for a quality performance by most choirs. The greatest difficulties lie in two areas; careful navigation of tight harmonic divisi and allowing space for silence and reflection. Breathing/sighing is an essential response to the rests throughout the work. The choir choosing to perform this work will need to be mature in order to discuss the text in depth. All phrases are arched, with no dramatic extremes.

Carefully examine measures 35-37, Eric’s belief in his “truest” writing.

**Text:**

**Engaged**

*Stretched out on the grass*
*an boy and a girl.*
*Sucking their oranges, giving their kisses*
*like waves exchanging foam.*

*Stretched out on the beach,*
*a boy and a girl.*
*Savoring their limes, giving their kisses*
*like clouds exchanging foam.*

*Stretched out underground,*
*a boy and a girl.*
*Saying nothing, never kissing,*
*giving silence for silence.*

---

**Los novios**

*Tendidos en la yerba*
*una muchacha y un muchacho.*
*Comen naranjas, cambian besos*
*como las olas cambian sus espumas.*

*Tendidos en la playa*
*una muchacha y un muchacho.*
*Comen limones, cambien sus espumas*
*como las nubes cambien sus espumas.*

*Tendidos bajo tierra*
*una muchacha y un muchacho.*
*No dicen nada, no se besan,*
*cambian silencio por silencio.*
Title: “Cloudburst”

Poet: Octavio Paz (1914-1998)

Text source: *Agua nocturna (Water night)*
*El cántaro roto (The broken waterjar)*
*Vida Entrevista (Live internal)*

Language: Spanish (adapted by Eric Whitacre)

Translator: Lysander Kemp

Collection: NA

Commission: NA

Dedication: For Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen and the Eldorado High School Concert Choir.

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: 1992 (Las Vegas)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts) and Spanish narration

Ranges: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass

Instrumentation: Piano, Handbells, Percussion (Suspended Cymbal, Windchimes, Bass Drum, Thunder Sheets)

Meter(s): 4/4, 7/4, 5/4, 3/4, free meter, 6/4

Tempo(s): \( \text{♩} = 76 \), Distant, fluid . . . ; \( \text{♩} = \text{ca. 60} \)

Duration: 8’30”

Composer Insights:

After a performance of “Go, Lovely Rose” in 1991, Dr. Jocelyn K. Jensen approached me about writing a piece for her High School Choir. She is an amazing
conductor legendary for doing crazy things on stage (choralography, lighting, costumes, you name it), and I wanted to write something for her that would really knock the audience out. I had recently been given an exquisite book of poems by Octavio Paz, and around the same time I witnessed a breathtaking desert cloudburst, and I guess it just all lined up. The finger snapping thing (all of the singers snap their fingers to simulate rain) is an old campfire game that I modified for the work, and the thundersheets were giant pieces of tin we took from the side of the school.

The piece was originally about ten minutes long, but Dr. Jo-Michael Scheibe sagely convinced me to “tighten it up”. I did, and the piece (now a lean eight and a half minutes) was finally published in 1995. Since then it has been performed all over the world, including a performance by the BYU Singers (Ronald Staheli, conductor) in the Sidney Opera House at the International Choral Symposium.

Cloudburst was written for and is lovingly dedicated to Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen.

INTRODUCTION in original score: “Untitled” poem by Octavio Paz

The hand of day opens
Three clouds
And these few words

Performance Notes from the Composer:

The Cloudburst is a ceremony, a celebration of the unleashed kinetic energy in all things. The mood throughout is reverent, meditative and centered. This does not imply solemn or calm; it simply means the performer must take the spiritual journey with total respect for the power of the water and profundity of the rebirth.

As the Cloudburst begins, the handbells (they should be hidden from the audience until this moment, and placed so that their entrances sound from all sides of the choir)
become the first raindrops. Each handbell player must be unified and deliberate with their ringing motion as the visual action will be as important as the sound.

As the voices enter at m. 65 the choir begins slowly raising clenched fists above their heads, reaching the apex on the fermata at m. 69. On the forte downbeat of m. 70 all fists flash open and clap once (clap of thunder) and immediately begin snapping fingers; the effect will be the beginning of a rainstorm.

The bass drum and thunder sheet must work together to create the thunder. As thunder sheets vary in size and shape it will be important for the director and the players to experiment with the sound. The notation for the thunder is very vague, and is only suggestive of the overall ‘phrases’. The director must decide what works best in the situation; I suggest getting together with the players and listening to recordings of thunder, or the real thing if given the chance!

The transition from m. 70 to m. 71 should be blurred, so that each performer begins chanting “(m)ojos de agua . . .” at different entrances. The diamonds (◊) signify and event; the measure is performed in real time once through and then performed again with the event at random tempi. For example: in m. 72 the tenors will sing “re-lam-pa-gos” tutti once, and then will repeat the phrase at individual tempi until m. 75 beat 4. The first tutti event should not yet be finished when the random performance begins. The fermatas are for the director, and are only resting points before the next event. Their duration is at the discretion of the director. All other voices continue chanting until they have reached their event.

The second ‘hand instruction’, signified by a white ‘2’ in a black circle, is in m. 72. Here, the snapping fingers should crescendo while the baritones randomly begin
tapping their thighs; remember to make them random and without a definite pattern. At the white ‘3’ all the firsts on each part should begin tapping their thighs as well. At the white ‘4’ a select group (8-12) should begin clapping randomly, (random rhythms). All parts should crescendo to a climax in m. 75 as the randomly moving vocal lines gradually rest at the fermata and crescendo to m. 76. At the white ‘5’ the hands should go back to snaps only, and gradually fade to the end. The director should note that each of these hand instructions are to be motivated by a crescendo in both the cymbal and the thunder.

The arpeggios in the piano (m. 71) are to be rolled quickly upwards, over and over. Gently crescendo and decrescendo, and change arpeggios only at the next event. The last four measures are slow and contemplative, and the pianist should roll the chords expressively up while the choir holds each fermata. In the last bar the choir should hold (while the piano/thunder plays out the measure) and then die out, leaving only the rain (soft snaps only) and the thunder as the rain cloud disappears into the distance.

“Cloudburst” received first prize in the 1993 American Choral Directors Association “Composers of the Future” competition, and is dedicated to the woman who brought it to life, Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen.

Author Commentary:

In the original draft of the text, Whitacre actually combined texts from three poems by Octavio Paz; Water night, The broken waterjar, and Live internal. Live internal speaks of “lightening” (see text below), and likely provided the inspiration for the thunder claps at measures 70 and 76. In the end, Whitacre only uses portions of text from Water night and The broken waterjar.
This composition provides opportunities for audience participation. One idea, borrowed from Charles Bruffy, invites the audience to join the choir in creating the “rain” effect through finger snapping. This requires a pre-performance introduction and practice with the audience. The end result is quite effective, fully engaging the audience in the performance of the work.

**Text:**

**Agua nocturna**

*El cántaro roto*

La lluvia...

*Ojos de agua de sombra,*

*ojos de agua de pozo,*

*ojos de agua de sueño.*

*Soles azules, verdes remolinos,*

*picos de luz que abren Astros* *

*como granadas.*

*¿Dime, tierra quemada, no hay agua?*

*¿hay sólo sangre, sólo hay polvo,*

* sólo pisadas de pies desnudos sobre la espina?*

*L lluvia despierta...*

*Hay que dormir con los ojos abiertos,*

*hay que soñar con las manos,*

*soñemos sueños activos de río buscando su cauce,*

*sueños de sol soñando sus mundos,*

*hay que sonar en voz alta,*

*hay que cantar hasta que el canto eche raíces, tronco, ramas, pájaros, astros,*

*hay que desenterrar la palabra perdida,*

*recordar lo que dicen la sangre y la marea,*

*le tierra y el cuerpo,*

*volver al punto de partida...*

*These text lines deleted from the original sketch*

**Vida Entrevista**

*Los huesos son relámpagos*

*en la noche del cuerpo.*

*O mundo, todo es noche*

*y la vida es relámpago.*

**Water night**

*The broken waterjar*

*The rain...*

*Eyes of shadow-water*

*eyes of well-water,*

*eyes of dream-water.*

*Blue suns, green whirlwinds,*

*birdbeaks of light pecking open pomegranate stars.*

*But tell me, burnt earth, is there no water?*

*Only blood, only dust,*

*Only naked footsteps on the thorns?*

*The rain awakens...*

*We must sleep with open eyes,*

*we must dream with our hands,*

*we must dream the dreams of a river seeking its course,*

*of the sun dreaming its worlds,*

*we must dream aloud,*

*we must sing till the song puts forth roots,*

*trunk, branches, birds, stars,*

*we must find the lost word,*

*and remember what the blood,*

*the tides, the earth, and the body say,*

*and return to the point of departure...*

**Live internal**

*Our bones are lightning*

*in the night of the flesh.*

*O world, all is night,*

*life is the lightning.*
Title: “Five Hebrew Love Songs”

Poet: Hila Plitmann (b. 1973)

Text source: Temuná, Kalá kallá, Lárov, Éyze shéleg!, Rakút

Language: Hebrew

Translator: NA

Collection: Five Hebrew Love Songs

Commission: Commissioned by the University of Miami School of Music on its 75th Anniversary.

Dedication: NA

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: Summer 1996 (Swiss Alps) - for soprano solo, violin and piano
Fall 2001 (Los Angeles) - for SATB chorus and string quartet

Voicing: SATB (minimal divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: Piano and Violin or String Quartet

Meter(s): 6/8

Tempo(s): I. \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 96, \) Dolce con rubato;

II. \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 96, \) Teneramente; \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 86-92, \) Leggero; \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 80, \) Adagio, espressivo; Tempo II, Confuoco

III. \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 108, \) con rubato

IV. Senza misura; \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 64; \) Poco più mosso

V. \( \text{\textfrac{3}{4}} = 76, \) Simplice
Duration: 3’33”

Composer Insights:

In the spring of 1996, my great friend and brilliant violinist Friedemann Eichhorn invited me and my girlfriend-at-the-time Hila Plitmann (a soprano) to give a concert with him in his home city of Speyer, Germany. We had all met that year as students at the Julliard School, and were inseparable.

Because we were appearing as a band of traveling musicians, ‘Friedy’ asked me to write a set of troubadour songs for piano, violin and soprano. I asked Hila (who was born and raised in Jerusalem) to write me a few ‘postcards’ in her native tongue, and a few days later she presented me with these exquisite and delicate Hebrew poems. I set them while we vacationed in a small skiing village in the Swiss Alps, and we performed them for the first time a week later in Speyer.

In 2001, the University of Miami commissioned me to adapt the songs for SATB chorus and string quartet, and the Efroni Choir in Israel commissioned me to adapt them for SA, violin and piano, leaving me now with five (!) different versions of the same work: SATB and string quartet; SATB, violin and piano; SA and string quartet; SA, violin and piano; and the original soprano, violin and piano. The choral parts are exactly the same for the different accompaniments, so that if the choir wants to perform the version with string quartet, the chorus can sing from the piano/violin score and the conductor can lead from the quartet version.

Each of the songs captures a moment that Hila and I shared together. “Kalá kallá” (which means ‘light bride’) was a pun I came up with while she was first teaching me
Hebrew. The bells at the beginning of “Éyze Shelleg” are the exact pitches that awakened us each morning in Germany as they rang from a nearby cathedral.

These songs are profoundly personal for me, born entirely out of my new love for the soprano, poet and now my beautiful wife, Hila Plitmann.

Text:

Temuná
Temuná belíbi charutá;
Nodéedet beyn ŏr uveyn ófel;
Min dmamá shekazó et gufêch kâch ôtá,
Usaréch al paná'ích kâch nófel.

Kalá kallá
Kalá kallá
Kulá sheli,
U'vekalút
Tishák hi li!

Laróv
"Laróv," amár gag la'shama'im,
"Hamerchák shebeynéynu hu ad;
Ach lifnéy zman alu lechân shna'im,
Uveynéynu nishár sentiméter echád."

Éyze shéleg!
Éyze shéleg!
Kmo chalamót ktanim
Noflím mehashá'im;

Rakút
Hu hayá malé rakút
Hi haytá kashá
Vechól kâma shenistá lehishaér kâch,
Pashút, uví sibá tová,
Lakâch ôtá el toch atzmó,
Veheniách
Bamakóm hachí, hachí rach.
Title: “Five Hebrew Love Songs”

Poet: Hila Plitmann (b. 1973)

Text source: Temuná, Kalá kallá, Lárov, Êyze shêleg!, Rakút

Language: Hebrew

Translator: NA

Collection: Five Hebrew Love Songs

Commission: Commissioned by the Efroni Choir, Israel.

Dedication: NA

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: Summer 1996 (Swiss Alps) - for soprano solo, violin and piano
August 2001 (Los Angeles) - for SA chorus, violin and piano

Voicing: SA (with minimal divisi)

Ranges: Soprano  Alto

Instrumentation: Piano and Violin or String Quartet

Meter(s): 6/8

Tempo(s): I. $\dot{\bis} = 96$, Dolce con rubato;

II. $\bis = 96$, Teneramente; $\dot{\bis} = 86-92$, Leggero; $\dot{\bis} = 80$, Adagio, espressivo; Tempo II, Confuoco

III. $\bis = 108$, con rubato

IV. Senza misura; $\dot{\bis} = 64$; Poco più mosso

V. $\dot{\bis} = 76$, Simplice

Duration: 3’33”
**Composer Insights:**  See notations for SATB version.

**Text:**  See notations for SATB version.

**Author Commentary:**

This author has either conducted or performed all choral permutations of this work. Singing the SATB/String Quartet premiere performance was exhilarating and provided an introduction to the work. The textures are lush and interesting, providing a rich sonic experience for the choir and audience. However, this author still prefers the piano/violin accompaniment version, allowing the texture to be a bit brighter and more transparent. The SA version has a small amount of divisi, but the sonic simplicity provided by upper voices makes this a go-to choice. In this author’s opinion, the women’s voices, paired with violin and piano is a much closer rendering of the original composition, therefore providing a more tender setting of the text.
Title: “Her Sacred Spirit Soars”

Poet: Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)

Text source: *Her Sacred Spirit Soars*

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the Heartland Festival.

Dedication: Dedicated in gratitude to Dr. Bob Demaree.

Publisher: Shadow Water Music

Date: February 2002 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SSATB/SSATB (double choir)

Ranges: Soprano Mezzo Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4

Tempo(s): \( \text{\( \dot{\text{q}} = 66 \) \); Molto legato e cantabile}

Duration: 5’08”

Composer Insights:

The Heartland Festival, for whom this work was commissioned, had for years been home to a thriving Shakespearean festival. So when they asked Tony Silvestri and me to write an original work for them, we immediately decided that the poem should be a traditional fourteen line sonnet. I told Tony that I would like to send the work with the
phrase “long live fair Oriana,” an homage to the Renaissance works written in tribute to
the ‘Virgin Queen,’ Elizabeth I. Not only did Tony include the line at then end of his
brilliant sonnet, he made the poem an acrostic: the first letter of each line spells out
“HAIL FAIR ORIANA.”

Her Sacred Spirit Soars was commissioned by the Heartland Festival, and is
dedicated in gratitude to Dr. Robert Demaree. It was first performed on June 8th, 2002, in
Platteville, Wisconsin.

Author Commentary:

“Her Sacred Spirit Soars” is rather unique in that it was composed specifically for
double choir. The majority of the work is written for five parts (with minimal divisi), in
canonic form. At measures 49-58, the two choirs come together for a homophonic section
(most of the time, choir two doubling choir one parts) before returning to a one measured
delayed canon to the end of the work. The effect is a stunning wash of sound in praise of
Oriana.

Text:

_Her sacred spirit soars o’er gilded spires,
And breathes into creative fires a force;
In well-tuned chants and chords of countless choirs
Lives ever her immortal shadowed source._

_From age to age the roll of poets grows;
And yet, a lonely few are laurel-crowned,
In whose sweet words her inspiration shows,
Revealing insights deep and thoughts profound._

_O shall Cecelia, or shall Goddess Muse
Reach then to me across eternal skies?
Is heaven’s quick’ning fire but a ruse,
Abiding rather here before mine eyes?
Nearer than I dream’d is She whose fame
All poets sing, whose glory all proclaim:_

_“LONG LIVE FAIR ORIANA!”_
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>“Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poet:</td>
<td>Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text source:</td>
<td><em>Libretto brève with Italian fragments from notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td>English, Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator:</td>
<td>Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection:</td>
<td><em>NA</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission:</td>
<td>Commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association and the Raymond C. Brock Foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication:</td>
<td>Dedicated with love to Gunilla Luboff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher:</td>
<td>Walton Music Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>February 2001 (Los Angeles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voicing:</td>
<td>SSATB (divisi in all parts), soprano, alto and baritone solos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranges:</td>
<td>Soprano 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation:</td>
<td>Percussion (Finger Cymbals, Tambourine, Low Hand Drum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meter(s):</td>
<td>4/4, 2/4, 6/8, 3/4, 2/2, 3/2, 4/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempo(s):</td>
<td>Rubato, e molto espressivo; con moto; moderato, misterioso; molto più mosso; allegro con urgenza; moderato con rubato; poco più mosso (( \dot{\text{d}} = 52 )); Moderato (( \dot{\text{d}} = 72 )); con moto; ( \dot{\text{d}} = 76 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration:</td>
<td>8’50”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Composer Insights:**

“Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine” was commissioned from Eric Whitacre by the American Choral Directors Association, making the composer the
youngest recipient ever awarded the coveted Raymond C. Brock commission. The work was premiered by the Kansas City Chorale, Charles Bruffy, Director, at the 2001 ACDA National Convention in San Antonio, Texas, with Eric Whitacre conducting.

Charles Anthony Silvestri is not only a brilliant poet, teacher and historian, he is a consummate choral singer blessed with a beautiful tenor voice. When Dr. Gene Brooks called and asked me to write the 2001 Raymond C. Brock Commission, I could think of no other author whose words I would rather set. (See commission correspondence documents in Appendix C.)

We started with a simple concept: what would it sound like if Leonardo Da Vinci were dreaming? And more specifically, what kind of music would fill the mind of such a genius? The drama would tell the story of Leonardo being tormented by the calling of the air, tortured to such degree that his only recourse was to solve the riddle and figure out how to fly.

We approached the piece as if we were writing an opera bréve. Silvestri (Tony to his friends) would supply me with draft after draft of revised ‘libretti’, and I in turn would show him the musical fragments I had written. Tony would then begin to mold the texts into beautiful phrases and gestures as if he were a Renaissance poet, and I constantly refined my music to match the ancient, elegant style of his words. I think in the end we achieved a fascinating balance, and exotic hybrid of old and new.

“Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine” is the second in a planned cycle of element works (the first, “Cloudburst”, was complete nine years earlier). It is dedicated with much love and respect to my publisher, the radiant and elegant Ms. Gunilla Luboff.
Author Commentary:

Whitacre has crafted a brilliant, programmatic work that is theatrical in nature. From the outset, he draws the listener into the time period by creating a Monteverdi-esque sound and style, yet retains his own characteristic signature. Silvestri has written a dramatic story line that takes the listener into what would seem to be more of an opera scene, rather than a traditional choral work. (Could this have sparked interest in Whitacre’s work on Paradise Lost, or vise versa?)

As this is the “second” in a planned cycle of element works, it does mimic the layout of “Cloudburst.” The dramatic scene sets up a dream-state. In “Cloudburst,” the rain section and in “Leonardo,” the flight.

This author finds “Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine” to be his favorite work in Whitacre’s catalog. It is thoughtful, creative, challenging, and unique.

Text:

I.
Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine...
Tormented by visions of flight and falling,
More wondrous and terrible each than the last,
Master Leonardo imagines an engine
To carry a man up into the sun...

And as he’s dreaming the heavens call him,
softly whispering their siren-song:

L’uomo colle sua congiegniate e grandi ale,
facciendo forza contro alla resistente aria.
(A man with wings large enough and duly connected
might learn to overcome the resistance of the air.)
II.

_Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine..._

_As the candles burn low he paces and writes,_  
_Releasing purchased pigeons one by one  
Into the golden Tuscan sunrise..._

_and as he dreams, again the calling,_  
_The very air itself gives voice:_  

_Vicina all’elemento del fuoco... _  
_(Close to the sphere of elemental fire...)_

_Scratching quill on crumpled paper, _  
_Rete, canna, filo, carta. _  
_(Net, cane, thread, paper.)_

_Images of wing and frame and fabric fastened tightly._  
_...sulla suprema sottile aria. _  
_(...in the highest and rarest atmosphere.)_

III.

_Master Leonardo Da Vinci Dreams of his Flying Machine..._

_As the midnight watchtower tolls, _  
_Over rooftop, street and dome, _  
_The triumph of a human being ascending _  
_In the dreaming of a mortal man._

_Leonardo steels himself,_  
_takes one last breath,_  
_and leaps..._

Title: “Little Birds”
Poet: Octavio Paz (1914-1998)
Text source: *En Uxmal (2, 3, and 4)*
Language: Spanish
Translator: Muriel Rukeyser
Collection: NA
Commission: S.A.T.B. version commissioned by Bruce Mayhall for the Delaware Junior All-State Choir.
Dedication: Dedicated with love to Kimberly Barclay-Drusedum.
Publisher: Walton Music Corporation
Date: December 2000 (Los Angeles)
Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)
Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass
Instrumentation: Piano
Meter(s): 4/4
Tempo(s): \( \text{♩}= 126; \text{cantabile y molto legato}; \text{Dolce, tranquilo} \)
Duration: 3’00”
Composer Insights:

Ms. Kimberly Barclay-Drusedum and I were students together at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. We sang in all of the choirs together, which basically meant that we spent 99% of all our time together. She is a blast to be around, has a gorgeous soprano voice, plays piano like a maniac, and as soon as she graduated she was snatched up by the
school district and given a brand new high school. It came as no surprise that she built a world-class choral program in just a few short years.

Ms. Broccoli (as I love to call her) commissioned me from her own pocket to write a piece for her women’s chorus, so I found a beautiful Octavio Paz poem and set it in its original Spanish. The work is an homage to Gabriel Fauré, with its running piano part and fluid sensual melodies.

The SATB version was commissioned by Dr. Bruce Mayhall (again from his own pocket) for the Delaware Junior All-State Choir. “Little Birds” is dedicated to my crazy friend and fantastic conductor, Ms. Kimberly Barclay-Drusedum.

**Performance Notes:**

The key phrase to remember here is *little* birds; the effect should be mysterious and magical, and the bird sounds should always be delicate and beautiful. I imagine that the birds are no larger than a finch, and I would encourage the singers to research real birds and whistles.

At the end of the piece as the piano crescendos (beginning at m. 46), the singers make bird sounds that should crescendo *poco a poco*. It is essential that the effect here is joyous and beautiful. On the final downbeat, the conductor claps his/her hands and the choir flutters a piece of white paper (hidden at their sides up to this point) up into the air and then slowly down. This moment should be striking, and the effect should look and sound just like a startled flock of white birds taking flight.

**Author Commentary:**

“Little Birds” carries the distinction of being one of the few ‘accompanied’ Whitacre works, which makes some sense, since it was originally written for women’s
voices. This author has made several requests for an updated release of the SSAA version and hopes it will be added to the Whitacre catalog of offerings for women.

Text:

2. Mediodía
La luz no parpadea,
el tiempo se vacía de minutos,
se ha detenido un pájaro en el aire.

3. Más Tarde
Se despeña la luz,
despiertan las columnas
y, sin moverse, bailan.

4. Pleno Sol
La hora es transparente:
vemos, si es invisible el pájaro,
el color de su canto.

2. Noon
Light unblinking,
time empty of minutes,
a bird stopped short in air.

3. Later
Light flung down,
the pillars awake
and, without moving, dance.

4. Full Sun
The time is transparent:
even if the bird is invisible,
let us see the color of his song.
Title: “little tree”

Poet: e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

Text source: little tree

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony Chorus; Vance George, conductor; Mark Shapiro, pianist.

Dedication: For my sister Kari.

Publisher: Colla Voce Music

Date: 1996 (New York)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: Piano

Meter(s): 3/4, 4/4, 9/8, 12/8, 7/8, 6/8, 6/4, 3/2, 4/2

Tempo(s): $\frac{3}{4} = 72$, Simply; Molto Expressivo, Allargando, Maestoso ($\frac{3}{4} = 56$) Quasi bells

Duration: 5’45”

Composer Insights:

While in my second year at Julliard (1996) I received a phone call from Vance George, the legendary conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus. He wanted to know if I might be interested in a commission for their big Christmas concert, something
that would feature their amazing accompanist Marc Shapiro and the ‘smaller’ choir of 80 singers. The only catch was that it was now the middle of October, and could I please finish the piece by the first of November. Wow.

I took the commission, of course (how could you say no to Vance George!) and my future wife Hila found for me the timeless e.e. cummings poem *little tree*. I started writing as fast as I could and noticed something very strange happening on the page: I was writing with a completely different voice. Part of it was the nature of the poem, but most of it was residue from my first year at Julliard. During that time I had studied composition with David Diamond, a notoriously old-school composer whose style is closest to early works of Barber and Bernstein, and I had become obsessed with intricate counterpoint and that very American sound from the 1940’s. It all ended up in the music somehow; so strange how these things work themselves out . . .

Anyway, I killed myself finishing the piece on time and then all of the musicians went on strike. The work didn’t receive it’s premiere for another year (1997), and Vance surprised me an hour before the performance and asked me if I would like to conduct. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus. In Davies Hall. With 3000 people in the audience. Oh yes . . .

“little tree” is dedicated with joy to my little sister, Kari.

**Author Commentary:**

This composition was unfamiliar until beginning research on this essay. It is a rather unique composition in the Whitacre repertoire for two reasons. First, it is accompanied. Second, it is a secular “seasonal” selection. Although he has written one other work for a seasonal commission (“Lux Aurumque”), this e.e. cummings text
specifically references the Christmas tree and the final statement, referencing a sister, makes this text much more personal for Whitacre. Hence, the dedication to his sister, Kari.

**Text:**

```
little tree
little silent Christmas tree
you are so little
you are more like a flower

who found you in the green forest
and were you very sorry to come away?
see i will comfort you
because you smell so sweetly

i will kiss your cool bark
and hug you safe and right
just as your mother would,
only don’t be afraid

look the spangles
that sleep all the year in a dark box
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,

put up your little arms
and i’ll give them all to you to hold
every finger shall have its ring
and there won’t be a single place dark or unhappy

then when you’re quite dressed
you’ll stand in the window for everyone to see
and how they’ll stare!
oh but you’ll be very proud

and my little sister and I will take hands
and looking up at our beautiful tree
we’ll dance and sing
“Noel Noel”
```
Title: “Lux Aurumque”

Poet: Edward Esch [pseud.]

Text source: Light

Language: Latin

Translator: Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay.

Dedication: For Dr. Jo-Michael Scheibe.

Publisher: Walton Music Corp.

Date: July 2000 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts), soprano solo

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4

Tempo(s): $\frac{\text{d}}{\text{e}} = 60-66$; Adagio, Molto Legato

Duration: 4’00”

Composer Insights:

After deciding upon the poem by Edward Esch (I was immediately struck by its genuine, elegant simplicity), I had it translated into the Latin by the celebrated American poet Charles Anthony Silvestri. A simple approach is essential to the success of the
work, and if the tight harmonies are carefully tuned and balanced they will shimmer and
glow.

“Lux Aurumque” was commissioned by the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, and is
dedicated with love to my great friend Dr. Jo-Michael Scheibe.

**Author Commentary:**

This composition is well loved and often performed during the Christmas season,
due to the reference of angels singing to the Christ-child. The work is difficult to
perform, requiring careful attention to intonation and tight harmonies. It particularly
requires a warm tone production with minimal vibrato. The greatest challenge is finding
the ‘right’ soprano to softly float the high solo lines with grace and beauty. The
composition requires the effect of shimmering clarity of sound.

**Text:**

\[ \text{Lux,} \]
\[ \text{Calida gravisque} \]
\[ \text{pura velut aurum} \]
\[ \text{Et canunt angeli} \]
\[ \text{molliter modo natum.} \]

\[ \text{Light,} \]
\[ \text{warm and heavy} \]
\[ \text{as pure gold} \]
\[ \text{and angels sing softly} \]
\[ \text{to the new-born babe.} \]
Title: “Lux Aurumque”

Poet: Edward Esch [pseud.]

Text source: *Light*

Language: Latin

Translator: Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)

Collection: NA

Commission: NA

Dedication: For Dr. Bruce Mayhall and the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles.

Publisher: Walton Music Corp.

Date: October 2001 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: TTBB (divisi in all parts), soprano solo

Ranges:

Tenor 1

Tenor 2

Bass 1

Bass 2

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4

Tempo(s): \( \frac{\d}{\D} = 60-66; \) Adagio, Molto Legato

Duration: 4’00”

Composer Insights: *See notations for SATB version*

Text: *See notations for SATB version*
**Title:** “She Weeps Over Rahoon”  
**Poet:** James Joyce (1882-1941)  
**Text source:** *She Weeps Over Rahoon (Trieste, 1913)*  
**Language:** English  
**Translator:** *NA*  
**Collection:** *NA*  
**Commission:** Commissioned by Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen for the UNLV Women’s Chorus.  
**Dedication:** Dedicated with much love to Dr. Jensen and the UNLV Women’s Chorus.  
**Publisher:** Walton Music Corporation  
**Date:** 1993 (Las Vegas)  
**Voicing:** SSA (divisi in all parts)  
**Ranges:**  
- Soprano  
- Mezzo  
- Alto  

**Instrumentation:** Piano and English Horn  
**Meter(s):** 4/4  
**Tempo(s):** \( \dot{\text{\textquoteleft}} = 48, \text{lento} \)  
**Duration:** 5’00”  

**Composer Insights:**  
In the fall of 1992, Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen approached me about writing a piece for her new women’s chorus at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a position to which she had just been appointed and has remained since. After a fairly lengthy search for
text, I stumbled across James Joyce’s *Pomes Penyeach*, a beautiful and melancholy collection of poetic microcosms written very early in his prolific career. That year our Northern Nevada winter was particularly desolate, and I found that “She Weeps” was simply a natural extension of the barren surroundings and my subsequent mood. The piece seemed to write itself quickly and with few revisions, and its eventual warmth in the midst of such a bleak text kept me company through a cold and rainy January.

In typical composer fashion, “She Weeps Over Rahoon” wasn’t even close to finished on the day we premiered it. The singers all had their parts (the same parts that now appear in print) and the English Horn player had his part (also the same), and we all had the same number of measures. I had been accompanying the rehearsals, though, and would try different piano parts every time, and the premiere ended up being one big piano improvisation. I even had to go back and listen to the recording of the performance to transcribe some of my playing. Never again. Personally, I had a blast, but I think all of the other musicians were scared to death that I would play something wacky and we would all be over the cliff.

The poetry, by James Joyce, is astonishingly beautiful, and while writing this piece I stumbled upon a choral effect that has become a favorite of mine. Half of the singers sing the written pitches pianissimo, and the other half-whisper the same text and rhythms. The effect is a haunting, breathless choral sound that always makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“She Weeps Over Rahoon” is dedicated with much love to Dr. Jocelyn Kaye Jensen and the UNLV Women’s Chorus, the bravest souls I have ever improvised with.
Author Commentary:

To date, Whitacre has written only three pieces for women’s choir. As he explained, he believes he needs to add other instruments in order to fill out the entire range of voicing. “She Weeps Over Rahoon” illustrates this beautifully with piano and the melancholy punctuation of an English Horn. Measures 9-11 and 19-22 are harmonically difficult passages, requiring particular attention due to extremely difficult intervals with changing accidentals, creating a nightmarish musical challenge for even the best choirs. However, the end result is worth the effort.

Text:

Rain on Rahoon falls softly, softly falling,
Where my dark lover lies.
Sad is his voice that calls me, sadly calling,
At grey moonrise.

Love, hear thou how soft,
How sad his voice is ever calling,
Ever unanswered, and the dark rain falling,
Then as now.

Dark too our hearts, O love, shall lie and cold
As his sad heart has lain
Under the moongrey nettles, the black mould
And muttering rain.
Title: “Sleep”

Poet: Charles Anthony Silvestri (b. 1965)

Text source: Sleep

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned in loving memory of Mr. M.W. Lacy and Mrs. Caroline Morris Lacy, by their daughter, Julia Lacy Armstrong.

Dedication: NA

Publisher: Walton Music Corp.

Date: August 2000 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 2/4, 3/4

Tempo(s): Lento; lontano e molto legato and poco più mosso

Duration: 5’30”

Composer Insights:

In the winter of 1999 Ms. Julia Armstrong, a lawyer and professional mezzo-soprano living in Austin, Texas, contacted me. She wanted to commission a choral work from me to be premiered by the Austin Pro Chorus (Kinley Lange, conductor), a terrific chorus with whom she regularly performed.
The circumstances around the commission were amazing. She wanted to commission the piece in memory of her parents, who had died within weeks of each other after more than fifty years of marriage; and she wanted me to set her favorite poem, Robert Frost’s immortal *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. I was deeply moved by her spirit and her request, and agreed to take on the commission.

I took my time with the piece, crafting it note by note until I felt that it was exactly the way I wanted it. The poem is perfect, truly a gem, and my general approach was to try to get out of the way of the words and let them work their magic. We premiered the work in Austin, October 2000, and it was well received. René Clausen gave “Stopping By Woods” a glorious performance at the ACDA National Convention in the spring of 2001, and soon after I began receiving hundreds of letters, emails, and phone calls from conductors trying to get a hold of the work.

And here was my tragic mistake: I never secured permission to use the poem. Robert Frost’s poetry has been under tight control from his estate since his death, and until a few years ago only Randall Thompson (“Frostiana”) had been given permission to set his poetry. In 1997, out of the blue, the estate released a number of titles, and at least twenty composers set and published “Stopping By Woods” for chorus. When I looked on line and saw all these new and different settings, I naturally (and naively) assumed that it was open to anyone. Little did I know that, just months before, the Robert Frost Estate had taken the decision to deny ANY use of the poem, ostensibly because of this plethora of new settings.
After a LONG battle of legalities back and forth, the Estate of Robert Frost and their publisher, Henry Holt Inc., sternly and formally forbade me to use the poem for publication or performance until the poem would become public domain in 2038.

I was crushed. The piece was dead, and would sit under my bed for the next 37 years as a result of rulings by heirs and lawyers. After many discussions with my wife, I decided that I would ask my friend and brilliant poet Charles Anthony Silvestri (“Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine” and “Lux Aurumque”) to set new words to the music I had already written. This was an enormous task, because I was asking him to not only write a poem that had the exact structure of the Frost poem, but that it would even incorporate key words from “Stopping By Woods” like “sleep.” Tony wrote an absolutely exquisite poem, finding a completely different (but equally beautiful) message in the music I had already written.

And there it is. My setting of Robert Frost’s “Stopping By Woods,” no longer exists. I am supremely proud of this new work, and my only regret in all of this was that I was way too innocent in my assumption that lawyers and heirs would understand something as simple and delicate as the choral art.

Author Commentary:

“Sleep” has become a standard piece of music in the choral canon. It is well crafted with generally accessible ranges, making it a plausible choice for directors wishing to explore a Whitacre composition with their choir. This author was fortunate to hear the premiere performance of “Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening.” The setting of the text was magnificent. It is hard to imagine that this same music could be reset to a new text so perfectly. Tony Silvestri accomplished an incredible feat by
rescuing this composition from certain death. If you have never done so, read the Frost poem with the Whitacre tune. You will discover the genius of Whitacre’s ability to set a text, and then realize the genius of Tony Silvestri’s ability to craft a text.

**Text:**

*The evening hangs beneath the moon,*  
*A silver thread on darkened dune.*  
*With closing eyes and resting head*  
*I know that sleep is coming soon.*

*Upon my pillow, safe in bed,*  
*A thousand pictures fill my head.*  
*I cannot sleep, my mind’s a-flight;*  
*And yet my limbs seem made of lead.*

*If there are noises in the night,*  
*A frightening shadow, flickering light,*  
*Then I surrender unto sleep,*  
*Where clouds of dream give second sight,*

*What dreams may come, both dark and deep,*  
*Of flying wings and soaring leap*  
*As I surrender unto sleep,*  
*As I surrender unto sleep.*
Title: “This Marriage”

Poet: Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273)

Text source: This Marriage – Ode 2667

Language: English

Translator: Kabir Helminski

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by Azusa Pacific University for the APU Chamber Singers; Michelle Jensen, conductor.

Dedication: For Hila on our seventh anniversary.

Publisher: Shadow Water Music

Date: October 2004 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (no divisi)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): No meter

Tempo(s): Senza misura, Freely and Tenderly

Duration: 2’59”

Composer Insights: “This Marriage” is just a small and simple gift to my wife on the occasion of our seventh wedding anniversary.
Author Commentary:

Whitacre has written very few, musically “simple” compositions. Most are composed with wide ranges and a minimum of 6-part divisi. “This Marriage” never breaks into divisi and remains four-part throughout. If a conductor is looking for a Whitacre composition, but faces limitations in group size or range, this is the perfect choice. All vocal ranges are modest. The sopranos never go above an E#4 and the basses never go below an A2.

Text:
May these vows and this marriage be blessed.  
May it be sweet milk,  
this marriage, like wine and halvah.  
May this marriage offer fruit and shade like the date palm.  
May this marriage be full of laughter,  
our every day a day in paradise.  
May this marriage be a sign of compassion,  
a seal of happiness here and hereafter.  
May this marriage have a fair face and a good name,  
an omen as welcomes the moon in a clear blue sky.  
I am out of words to describe  
how spirit mingles in this marriage.

Rumi’s Wedding Vows in Persian/Farsi  
[Kulliyat-i Shams, #2667]
Mubârak bâd bar mâ in ‘arûsi  
Khujasta bâd mârâ in ‘arûsi  
Chu shîr u chun shakar bâdâ hamîsha  
Chu sahbâ vu chu halvâ in ‘arûsi  
Ham az barg u ham az mayva mumatta’  
Misâl-i nakhl-i khurmâ in ‘arûsi  
Chu havrân-i bihishtî bâd khandân  
Abad amrûz fardâ in ‘arûsi  
Nishân-i rahmat u tavqi’-i davlat  
Ham înjâ vu ham âncâ in ‘arûsi  
Nikû nâm u nikû rûy u nikû fâl  
Chu mâh u charkh-i khazrâ in ‘arûsi  
Khamush kardam ki dar guftan na-gunjad  
Ki ba-sirisht ast jân bâ in ‘arûsi
Title: “Water Night”

Poet: Octavio Paz (1914-1998)

Text source: Agua Nocturna

Language: English

Translator: Muriel Rukeyser (adapted by Eric Whitacre)

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the Dale Warland Singers

Dedication: Dedicated in deepest friendship to Dr. Bruce Mayhall

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: January 1995 (Las Vegas)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 6/4

Tempo(s): Adagio, sempre legato

Duration: 5'00"

Composer Insights:

The poetry of Octavio Paz is a composer’s dream. The music seems to set itself (without the usual struggle that invariably accompanies this task) and the process feels more like cleaning the oils from an ancient canvas to reveal the hidden music than composing. “Water Night” was no exception, and the tight harmonies and patient
unfolding seemed to pour from the poetry from the first reading, singing its magic even after the English translation. “Water Night” is simply the natural musical expression of this beautiful poem, and is dedicated with my greatest sincerity to my friend and confidant Dr. Bruce Mayhall.

“Water Night” is just one of those pieces. In January of 1995 I spent the day with Dr. Bruce Mayhall, and in an amazing four hour conversation he basically convinced me to stay in school, finish my degree, and continue my life as a professional artist. Heavy stuff. I wanted so much to show my appreciation to him, to write him a piece worthy of his wisdom and understanding. I got home, opened up my book of Octavio Paz poetry, and started reading.

I can’t really describe what happened. The music sounded in the air as I read the poem, as if it were a part of the poetry. I just started taking dictation as fast as I could, and the thing was basically finished in about 45 minutes. I have never experienced anything like it, before or since, and with my limited vocabulary I can only describe it as a pure and perfect and simple gift. I gave it to Bruce and that was that.

A few months later I entered it in a contest sponsored by the Dale Warland Singers, and I lost. Dale, however, decided to put it in his choral series and now I think we’re close to 40,000 copies sold. It has been performed all over the world, and I’ve heard countless people who sing it or hear it describing the same feeling I had when I wrote it down. I remain eternally grateful for this gift.

“Water Night” is dedicated in deepest friendship to my friend and mentor Dr. Bruce Mayhall.
Author Commentary:

“Water Night” is a composition that is best compared to an impressionistic painting. Close up, each individual musical line appears rather unimportant on its own, but stepping back and understanding the importance of the mingling together of each line is what creates the beautiful, desired effect. As Whitacre pointed out in an interview in 2006 (p. 31), “Water Night” was the work that ‘freed’ him in the compositional process. Consequently, this author believes “Water Night” to be one of Whitacre’s most important foundational works and is the quintessential example of the ‘Whitacre sound.’

Text:

Night with the eyes of a horse that trembles in the night, night with eyes of water in the field asleep is in your eyes, a horse that trembles, is in your eyes of secret water.

Eyes of shadow-water, eyes of well-water, eyes of dream-water.

Silence and solitude, two little animals moon-led, drink in your eyes, drink in those waters.

If you open your eyes, night opens, doors of musk, the secret kingdom of the water opens flowing from the center of night.

And if you close your eyes, a river, a silent and beautiful current, fills you from within, flows forward, darkens you, night brings its wetness to beaches in your soul.

---

La noche de ojos de caballo que tiemblan en la noche, la noche de ojos de agua en el campo dormido está en tus ojos de caballo que tiembla, está en tus ojos de agua secreta.

Ojos de agua de sombra, ojos de agua de pozo, ojos de agua de sueño.

El silencio y la soledad, como dos pequeños animales a quienes guía la luna, beben en esos ojos, beben en esas aguas.

Si abres los ojos, se abre la noche de puertas de musgo, se abre el reino secreto del agua que mana del centro de la noche.

Y si los cierras, un río, una corriente dulce y silenciosa, te inunda por dentro, avanza, te haré oscura, la noche moja riberas en tu alma.
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<th><strong>Title:</strong></th>
<th>“When David Heard”</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Poet:</strong></td>
<td><em>King James Bible</em></td>
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<td><strong>Text source:</strong></td>
<td><em>II Samuel 18:33</em></td>
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<td><strong>Commission:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dedication:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher:</strong></td>
<td>Walton Music Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date:</strong></td>
<td>March 1999 (Los Angeles)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Voicing:</strong></td>
<td>SSAATTBB (divisi in all parts)</td>
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<td>Recitative, 4/4, 2/4</td>
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<td><strong>Tempo(s):</strong></td>
<td>Adagio, recititavo</td>
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<td><strong>Duration:</strong></td>
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Composer Insights:

Dr. Ronald Staheli, more than any other conductor I have ever worked with, understands my music. He is that rare musician who discovers more music in the music than the composer even realized was there, and when I received the Barlow commission to write a work for his amazing choir, I knew it had to be something special.

The previous year Ron had recorded “Cloudburst” and “Water Night”, and both are, in my opinion, the quintessential performances of those pieces. He seemed to find such powerful beauty in the rests, empty moments that became electric in his hands, so as I set out to write “When David Heard”, I decided that my first and most principal musical motive would be silence.

The text (one single, devastating sentence) is from the Bible; II Samuel 18:33.

“When David heard that Absalom was slain he went up into his chamber over the gate and wept, my son, my son, O Absalom my son, would God I had died for thee!”

Setting this text was such a lonely experience, and even now just writing these words I am moved to tears. I wrote maybe 200 pages of sketches, trying to find the perfect balance between sound and silence, always simplifying, and by the time I finished a year later I was profoundly changed. Older, I think, and quieted a little. I still have a hard time listening to the recording.

“When David Heard” was commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for the Arts for the Brigham Young Singers, and is dedicated with love and silence to Dr. Ronald Staheli.

“When David Heard” received its premiere on March 26, 1999.
Note from the Composer:

Breath should be staggered in the following sections, with no apparent break in the line unless specified by a rest:

- The opening recitativo through “wept”
- Measure 5 through 19
- Measure 115 through 139
- Measure 140 through 194
- Measure 195 through the end

Above all, trust the silences.

Author Commentary:

“When David Heard” was this author’s introduction to the choral music of Eric Whitacre through a performance at the University of Miami in the fall of 1999.

Capturing the anguish of the text, working through extreme divisi, and maintaining the required intensity for fifteen minutes presents challenges that few are willing or able to master. However, as difficult as it is to sing, it provides one of the most exhausting, yet rewarding musical experiences of one’s career.

Text:

*When David heard that Absalom was slain he went up into his chamber over the gate and wept, my son, my son, O Absalom my son, would God I had died for thee!*
Title: “Winter”

Poet: Edward Esch [pseud.]

Text source: NA

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: NA

Commission: Commissioned by the Pacific Chorale

Dedication: Dedicated in deepest friendship to Mr. David Noroña, the man who encouraged me to follow my instincts.

Publisher: Unpublished

Date: December 2000 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano  Alto  Tenor  Bass

Instrumentation: String Orchestra, Harp, Sitar, Tanpura

Meter(s): 4/4, 6/4, 3/2, 4/2, 3/2, 4/4, 6/4, 4/4

Tempo(s): begins unmetered; m. 17, ♩= 66

Duration: 11’09”

Composer Insights:

There is a subtle and fragile dance that takes place between the composer and the work itself, and the creation of each new piece feels like an exotic journey, and exploration into uncharted territory. The initial musical material takes on a life of its own and begins to effect the rest of the piece, so that a strange sort of symbiotic relationship is
achieved between the creator and the creation. Few pieces in my catalog illustrate this process as well as “Winter”.

The very first musical idea I had (after memorizing the poetry by Edward Esch) was just three notes, a simple trill, and as I played with this material I realized that it was reminiscent of Indian music I had heard while a student in college. The sparse, static nature of the poem lends itself perfectly to the classical Indian aesthetic, but I hesitated. A Christmas work with Indian sitar? About snow? For Southern California? My great friend and writing partner David Noroña (we are writing an opera together) persuaded me to trust my initial idea, and so without looking back I began composing.

I realized immediately, of course, that I knew nothing about classical Indian music, a musical tradition that easily predates western music and is every bit as complex. I found Paul Livingstone, an amazing sitar player and teacher and started my crash course in Indian music.

In a nutshell, Indian music is based on two major elements: the raga and tala. The raga dictates not only which notes can be played (there is generally one set of notes to be played for ascending melodies, and a different set for descending melodies), but the mood of the piece as well. Each raga carries with it a specific feeling and a number of traditional gestures; after listening to many different ragas I chose raga desh, a rainy season raga that had (to my ears) a beautiful mix of longing and melancholy. I chose tin tala, the most basic, popular tala, basically a circle of four measures of four beats each. All of this happens over a constant drone played by one or two tambours.

I then set out incorporating these elements into my music. Following the rules of raga desh, every time a line ascends it uses a natural seventh, and descending lines use a
flatted seventh. The second degree of the scale is also heavily accented, and so most of my melodies either begin or end on the second degree. When the sopranos sing the line “pure and gentle” it is illustrated using the purest form of the raga, and the words like “melting” and “weary” are illuminated with traditional Indian glissandi (slides). The word “shimmers” is performed once by the choir (accompanied by trilling, ‘shimmering’ strings) but is echoed throughout the piece by the string orchestra. The tala is rhythmically faithful throughout the entire work, and the only time it strays is for one measure when the poem reads “a single snowflake awakens and watches the world”; I like the idea of painting “awakens” with an extra beat, as if the very fabric of the universe were altered by this simple event.

“Winter” was commissioned by the Pacific Chorale, and is dedicated in deepest friendship to Mr. David Noroña, the man who encouraged me to follow my instincts.

**Text:**

I.
*The snow is falling,*
*sleeping,*
*whispering,*
*dreaming of water.*

II.
*Gold, silver, iron, stone;*
*pure and gentle, silently melting,*
*the sun sings softly through the quiet ice.*

III.
*A single snowflake awakens,*
*shimmers,*
*glows,*
*watches the world with weary eyes,*
*darkens,*
*settles,*
*and disappears.*
Title: “I Hide Myself”

Poet: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Text source: With A Flower (I hide myself within my flower)

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: Three Flower Songs

Commission: NA

Dedication: For David B. Weiller and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Chamber Chorale.

Publisher: Santa Barbara Music Publishing

Date: October 1992 (Las Vegas)
Revised, August 2001 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (minimal divisi)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 3/4, 6/4, 5/4

Tempo(s): $\frac{1}{4} = 70$, Dolce; freely throughout

Duration: 2’51”

Composer Insights:

Just a simple little song, really. All of the musical suggestions come from a careful study of the poem, a quiet, passionate soul occasionally speaking a little bolder than the age will allow. She loves almost to the point of distraction, and this mood must
prevail in the performance: Shy and sullen, her passion surging to the surface only to sink back into the silence that is herself.

Composer Insights About the Collection:

When I first arrived at UNLV in the fall of 1988, I was astonished to find that there was no degree program offered for future pop stars. At the time I was interested only in synthesizers and Depeche Mode, and so I auditioned as a music major because it seemed the best thing to do before I hit the big time.

And then I joined the choir.

David Weiller, the choral conductor at UNLV, auditioned me to sing in one of his groups and graciously accepted me into the big University chorus. I distinctly remember how weird I thought the choir people were, with their embarrassing stretches and warm-ups, and undoubtedly the only reason I stayed in class that first week was because there were so many cute girls in the soprano section.

And the first piece we sang was the Mozart Requiem.

It was like seeing color for the first time, and I was regularly moved to tears during rehearsals, crushed by the impossible beauty of the work. I became a choral geek of the highest magnitude, I mean I lived for rehearsals and performances, and through it all there was David Weiller. The man is simply a brilliant educator and a fantastic musician, the one special teacher that ends up changing the entire course of your life.

I was accepted into the advanced choir in my second year. David has this beautiful tradition of programming a different setting of “Go, Lovely Rose,” every year with that choir, and after my first year in that group I decided to write him a setting that would be all his own. We performed it the next year (1991), and in the spring of 1992 we
concluded our program at the Western Regional ACDA convention in Hawaii with my music. My very first concert piece! And just when I thought life couldn’t get any better, Barbara Harlow of Santa Barbara Music found me after the performance and told me that she would like to publish the work.

Barbara thought that it might make a nice set, so I found two more flower poems and set them using small bits of material from “Go, Lovely Rose.” Soon after their publication I started receiving actual commissions for my music, and my life as a professional artist took off. I often thing how lucky I was to have stumbled blindly to the place where David was teaching, and in retrospect I am struck speechless at the thought that our paths might not have crossed. Were it not for Maestro David Weiller I would have had a drastically different life, and it is to him, with infinite love and overwhelming gratitude, that I have dedicated these works.

Author Commentary:

This set of flower songs present three aspects or views of love and courtship. The set is rather unusual, beginning and ending with two beautiful, rather reflective poems and the center piece punctuating a high-energy, rhythmic pulse.

Text:

_I hide myself within my flower_
_that wearing on your breast,_
_You, unsuspecting wear me too_
_and angels know the rest._
_I hide myself within my flower_
_that fading from your vase,_
you, unsuspecting feel for me_
_almost a loneliness..._
Title: “With a Lily in Your Hand”

Poet: Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)

Text source: Curva

Language: English

Translation: Jerome Rothensberg

Collection: Three Flower Songs

Commission: NA

Dedication: For David B. Weiller and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Chamber Chorale.

Publisher: Santa Barbara Music Publishing

Date: October 1991 (Las Vegas)
Revised, August 2001 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 6/8, 2/4, 8/8, 3/4, 6/4

Tempo(s): $\frac{\rightleftharpoons}{\rightleftharpoons}$ = 60 Pesante; $\frac{\rightleftharpoons}{\rightleftharpoons}$ = 168 Presto con vivo, $\frac{\rightleftharpoons}{\rightleftharpoons}$ = 90 Freely; $\frac{\rightleftharpoons}{\rightleftharpoons}$ = 168,
$\frac{\rightleftharpoons}{\rightleftharpoons}$ = 80 Dolce; Presto con fuoco

Duration: 2’42”

Composer Insights:

Water and Fire. If the performance of this piece connects these contrasting elemental ideas, its success is guaranteed.
Water: At m. 30, this ostinato should be fluid and gentle, only interrupted in m. 32 as the butterflies momentarily spring out of the texture; m. 35-38 the water should slowly transform back to fire. M. 44 should be tiny bell-tones motivating the next nine bars, another patient, sensuous transformation back to fire.

Fire: Everything else.

Composer Insights About the Collection:

See composer comments on page 75.

Author Commentary:

Typical of Whitacre, he chooses to vividly set this text with a nod to the poet’s cultural background. The Flamenco style of southern Spain is incorporated into a beautiful melodic soprano line accompanied by a strumming guitar feel in the alto, tenor, and bass. This is further accentuated in the rhythm by an alternating 6/8 and 3/4 meter.

Text:

*With a lily in your hand*
I leave you, o my night love!
Little widow of my single star
I find you.
Tamer of dark butterflies!
I keep along my way.
After a thousand years are gone
you’ll see me,
o my night love!
By the blue footpath,
tamer of dark stars,
I’ll make my way.
Until the universe
can fit inside
my heart.

*Con un lirio en la mano*
te dejo.
¡Amor de mi noche!
Y viudita de mi astro te encuentro.
¡Domador de sombrías mariposas!
Sigo por mi camino.
Al cabo de mil años me verás.
¡Amor de mi noche!
Por la vereda azul, domador de sombrías estrellas
seguiré mi camino.
Hasta que el Universo quepa en mi corazón.
Title: “Go, Lovely Rose”

Poet: Edmund Waller (1606-1687)

Text source: Go, Lovely Rose

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: Three Flower Songs

Commission: NA

Dedication: For David B. Weiller and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Chamber Chorale

Publisher: Santa Barbara Music Publishing

Date: October 1991 (Las Vegas)
Revised, August 2001 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (divisi in all parts), tenor solo

Ranges: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 6/4, 3/2, 4/2, 4/4, 6/4, 4/4

Tempo(s): ♩ = c. 80, Sweetly blossoming; Poco piú moso; Adagio

Duration: 3’33”

Composer Insights:

This piece is structured around the cyclical life of a rose, and is connected throughout by the opening ‘rose motif,’ a seed that begins on the tonic and grows in all directions before it blossoms, dies and grows again. Each season is represented: spring begins the piece, summer appears at m. 13, fall at m. 26, winter at m. 39, and spring...
returns at m. 49. The form is based on the Fibonacci sequence (the pattern found in plant
and animal cell divisions) – its fifty-five measures are a perfect Fibonacci number. The
Golden Mean appears at m. 34 as all parts are reunited to complete the flower before its
final blossom and inevitable cycle of death and rebirth.

Each performance should be approached with the child-like innocence and
naivety that allows us to marvel at the return of the rose each spring. The *sforzandos*
throughout must be light and gentle.

**Composer Insights About the Collection:**

See composer comments on page 75.

**Author Commentary:**

The imagery of a blooming rose is evident throughout the work. Dramatic rise
and fall in dynamics, with a sense of urgency, followed by a sense of relaxation (without
compromising the tempo) is critical in bringing this composition to life. The
transparency of the alto line in measures 47-48 is difficult to navigate. One possible
solution is to consider turning this into a solo line.

**Text:**

*Go, lovely rose*

*Tell her that wastes her time and me,*  
*That now she knows,* 
*When I resemble her to thee,* 
*How sweet and fair she seems to be.*

*Tell her that's young,*  
*And shuns to have her graces spied,* 
*That hadst thou sprung* 
*In deserts where no men abide,*  
*Thou must have uncommended died.*

*Small is the worth*  
*Of beauty from the light retired;*   
*Bid her come forth,*  
*Suffer herself to be desired,*  
*And not blush so to be admired.*

*Then die! That she*  
*The common fate of all things rare*  
*May read in thee;*  
*How small a part of time they share,*  
*That are so wondrous sweet and fair!*
Title: “i will wade out”

Poet: e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

Text source: i will wade out

(line 7 of the original poem reads: “to dash against darkness”)

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: Three Songs of Faith (original title: Three Songs of Praise)

Commission: Commissioned by the Northern Arizona University for the 1999 Centennial Celebration

Dedication: Dedicated with much gratitude to Dr. Edith Copley, who first brought these pieces to life.

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: July 1999 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SSATB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Mezzo Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 3/4, 5/4

Tempo(s): Maestoso, con moto

Duration: 2’48”
Composer Insights:

“i will wade out” is the first in the set of “Three Songs of Faith, and was a joy to set to music. The text is so passionate, so sensual, and I found it to be the perfect opening to a cycle of pieces about my own personal faith.

“i will wade out” is dedicated to the elegant Dr. Copley.

Composer Insights About the Collection:

In 1999 I was commissioned by Northern Arizona University to write a set of choral works commemorating the 100th anniversary of their school of music. I chose three of my favorite E.E. Cummings texts and started writing. “i will wade out,” the first piece in the set, seemed to cry out with lush, neo-romantic harmonies. The third, “i thank You God for most this amazing day,” is such a beautiful and joyous poem that the music was at times almost effortless. It was the middle installment, “hope, faith, life, love,” that was causing me to lose sleep.

Writing a commissioned work can be tough, especially if it is for a big glorious occasion, and my first reaction is almost always leaning towards grandeur. I mean, for God’s sake, the school has been around for a hundred years, the least I can do is write something that will really bring the house down. This is exactly the mentality I was trying to force upon this set, and exactly the kind of thing that tends to get me all tangled up.

“i will wade out” is the first in the set of Three Songs of Faith, and was a joy to set to music. The text is so passionate, so sensual; I found it to be the perfect opening to a cycle of pieces about my own personal faith.

In “hope, faith, life, love” the original poem is actually quite long, with sounds of clashing and flying and singing, and calls for music that is vibrant and virtuosic, a real
show piece. The more I thought about faith, however, the more introspective I became, and I modified the poem entirely to fit that feeling. I took only the first four words (hope, faith, life, love) and the last four (dream, joy, truth, soul) and set each of them as a repeating meditation. Each of the words, in turn, quotes a different choral work from my catalog, and its corresponding musical material comments on the word I set (i.e. the word “life” quotes the musical material from “Cloudburst,” where the text is “roots, trunk, branches, birds, stars”). Because I wrote it last, the middle movement even quotes the first and the last piece in this set on the word “soul.”

The 2009 revised edition of “i thank You God for most this amazing day,” replaces the original edition, published in 2000, which is no longer available. Page 12 has been exchanged at my request – the rest of the work remains as it was first published. The decision to rewrite a section of a work after publication has its own interesting story.

When I originally premiered “i thank You God,” with Northern Arizona University back in 1999, I made a lot of changes during the few days I had with the choir before they first performed it. One section I didn’t change, and that I loved, was the text “now the ears of my ears awake, now the eyes of my eyes are opened.” For that first performance in 1999 it was just a simple chant-like round, and I felt that it elegantly set up the next section, a cluster-y meditation on the word “opened.” Then, literally the night before I sent back the final proofs for publication, I freaked. “i thank you God” was the third in a set of three pieces (the Three Songs of Faith), and it suddenly occurred to me that I could tie the whole set together by quoting the beginning of the first piece, “i will wade out,” at the end of “i thank You God.” So I quickly rewrote the “now the ears of
my ears” section, echoing the first leaps in “i will wade out,” and sent it off to the publisher. I can remember feeling actual pride – a very ‘scholarly’ pride – for so brilliantly and effortlessly manipulating motivic material.

The piece was published, and a year later I hear the new version actually performed. I was horrified. Page 12 was ridiculously difficult, and I could see the otherwise excellent choir sweating just to make it sound natural. Much worse, though, was this: it completely masked the meaning of the words. The text just became lost in the ‘clever’ writing, and the most important sentence in the poem just vanished in a fog of academic writing and… pride.

I conducted that version for years, trying every way I could think of to make it work. It never did, not even once. So when it was going to be recorded by the British ensemble Polyphony, I sent them the original version of “i thank You God.” That’s the one they recorded, and that’s the one I’ll do from now until the end of time. It’s so much more simple, and humble, and to my ears, the meaning of the text now explodes off the page. It was a great lesson for me, and I think of those measures every time I start to ‘overthink’ while I’m writing.

So – if you are conducting or singing “i thank You God for most this amazing day,” please know that I am most happy to have found my way back to the original and true version in today’s 2009 publication.

Author Commentary:

“i will wade out” requires strong soprano and alto sections with superb intonation and agile voices. The contrast of warmth at measure 15, with the addition of the tenor and bass voices, is critical for adding depth and richness to the work. Remember, these
three pieces are not what one would typically think of as “Songs of Faith.” However, they do reflect the spiritual sensibility of the composer. Please refer to the earlier commentary in Chapter 3 regarding Whitacre’s life philosophy and religious views.

**Text:**

*i will wade out
 till my thighs are steeped in burning flowers

*i will take the sun in my mouth
  and leap into the ripe air
  alive
  with closed eyes
  to dash against darkness

*in the sleeping curves of my body
 shall enter fingers of smooth mastery
 with chasteness of sea-girls
 will i complete the mystery
 of my flesh

*i will rise
 after a thousand years
 lipping
 flowers
 and set my teeth in the silver of the moon*
Title: “hope, faith, life, love . . .”

Poet: e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

Text source: hope, faith, life, love (abridged)

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: Three Songs of Faith (original title: Three Songs of Praise)

Commission: Commissioned by the Northern Arizona University for the 1999 Centennial Celebration

Dedication: For Hila on her twenty-sixth Birthday

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: August 9, 1999 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SSAATTBB (divisi in all parts)

Ranges: Soprano Soprano 2 Alto 1 Alto 2

Tenor 1 Tenor 2 Bass 1 Bass 2

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 6/4, 7/4, 8/4

Tempo(s): $\dot{=} 72$, Molto legato

Duration: 3’36”
Composer Insights:

The *Three Songs of Praise* were commissioned by Northern Arizona University, Dr. Edith Copley, conductor, for their 1999 Centennial Celebration.

I chose three of my favorite e.e. cummings texts and started writing. “i will wade out”, the first piece in the set, seemed to cry out with lush, neo-romantic harmonies. The third, “i thank You God . . .”, is such a beautiful and joyous poem that the music was at times almost effortless. It was the middle installment, “hope, faith, life, love”, that was causing me to lose sleep.

Writing a commissioned work can be tough, especially if it is for a big glorious occasion, and my first reaction is almost always leaning towards grandeur. I mean, for God’s sake, the school has been around for a hundred years, the least I can do is write something that will really bring the house down. This is exactly the mentality I was trying to force upon this set, and exactly the kind of thing that tends to get me all tangled up.

The original poem is actually quite long, with sounds of clashing and flying and singing, and calls for music that is vibrant and virtuosic, a real show piece. The more I thought about faith, however, the more introspective I became, and I modified the poem entirely to fit that feeling. I took only the first four words (hope, faith, life, love) and the last four (dream, joy, truth, soul) and set each of them as a repeating meditation. Each of the words, in turn, quotes a different choral work from my catalog, and its corresponding musical material comments on the word I set (i.e. the word “life” quotes the musical material from “Cloudburst”, where the text is “roots, trunk, branches, birds, stars”). Because I wrote it last, the middle movement even quotes the first and the last piece in
this set on the word “soul,” simply because I believe the soul is the beginning and the end. It ends with quotes from “Water Night” and “When David Heard.”

“hope, faith, life, love” is dedicated to my wife Hila on her twenty-sixth birthday.

**Author Commentary:**

This work has similar musical challenges to “When David Heard:” slow tempo, extreme divisi, and long lyric lines with a limited text. This is a musical tour de force.

**Text:** hope, faith, life, love

*hope, faith, life, love,*
*dream, joy, truth, soul*

**Original poem:** !hope, #69 in 73 Poems, published by Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962

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<td>faith!</td>
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Title: “i thank You God for most this amazing day”

Poet: e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

Text source: i thank You God for most this amazing day

Language: English

Translator: NA

Collection: Three Songs of Faith (original title: Three Songs of Praise)

Commission: Commissioned by the Northern Arizona University School of Performing Arts for the 1999 Centennial Celebration

Dedication: Dedicated with love to Anthony, Julia, and Thomas Silvestri

Publisher: Walton Music Corporation

Date: March 1999 (Los Angeles)

Voicing: SATB (extensive divisi in all parts throughout) and soprano solo

Ranges: Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

Instrumentation: A Cappella

Meter(s): 4/4, 3/4, 6/4, 3/2, 2/4

Tempo(s): ∆ = 72-76, Legato, moderato

Duration: 6’51”

Composer Insights:

“i thank You God for most this amazing day” is one of Three Songs of Praise, which also includes the e.e. cummings poems “i will wade out” and “hope, faith, life, love”. The poetry strikes me as shiny and brilliant and many of the chords (especially settings of the words painting the indescribable, i.e. ‘infinite’, ‘You’, ‘opened’, are
meticulously balanced and tuned. The performance should be dynamic and flexible, taking great care to paint each word of this magnificent poem.

“i thank You God for most this amazing day” received its premiere on October 3, 1999, and is dedicated with love to the poet Charles Anthony Silvestri and his beautiful wife and son, Julia and Thomas.

Composer Insights About the Collection:

See composer comments on page 82.

Author Commentary:

This is a highly favored text by many composers, each providing their personal interpretation of the poetry. Whitacre has chosen to set this text in a reflective manner to open and close the work, highlighted by a few moments of exuberant joy and adoration.

Text:

\[
i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes (i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth day of life and love and wings: and of the gay great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any-lifted from the no of all nothing-human merely being doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
\]
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Eric Whitacre’s entrepreneurial spirit and musical talent have joined forces to create the international superstar we see and hear today. His early decision to self-publish his wind band compositions, beginning with “Godzilla Eats Las Vegas,” afforded him the opportunity to support himself full-time as a composer. In 2003, he broke ties with all publishing companies to exclusively self-publish through his own Shadow Water Music, distributed by Hal Leonard Music. This allows him to retain the rights to his music, as well as a majority of the profit margin from sales. This is not a decision for the faint of heart. It takes a great deal of business savvy to maintain the Whitacre “machine.” Fortunately, he possesses a skilled business mind and is a social media and technology genius. His website, www.ericwhitacre.com, is easy to navigate, is visually stimulating, and remains up to date. He is also active on Facebook and Twitter, sending out personal tweets and personal responses to posts, as he is able. This personalized approach is one of the significant reasons he is adored by his throngs of followers.

Because he is willing to embrace new trends and think creatively, Whitacre experimented with the idea of forming a “virtual choir” via the internet. The first attempt, using his best selling “Lux Aurumque,” drew the participation of 185 singers from 12 countries. The finished product, released on YouTube in 2010, was a technological phenomenon. It sparked global interest, creating a demand for future choirs with larger participation. To date, there have been a total of four Virtual Choirs (VC). VC2 features “Sleep,” with 1750 participants from 58 countries. “Water Night,”
the focus of VC3, used 3,746 videos from 73 countries. VC4 elicited 8,409 video
participants from 101 countries, and featured “Fly to Paradise,” from his musical,
*Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings*. This latest incarnation took on the look and feel of a
pop music video, with Japanese Anime style graphics. The following year, the first-ever
Virtual Youth Choir was formed in association with UNICEF and the Glasgow 2014
Commonwealth Games. A total of 2,292 singers from 80 countries joined forces to
present another song from *Paradise Lost*, “What If.”

These participation numbers on a global scale, as well as millions of YouTube
views become newsworthy; Whitacre has been featured in interviews for the evening
news on NBC and ABC television, as well as the British Broadcasting Corporation. His
Virtual Choirs also spawned a 2013 partnership with Disney to produce a virtual choir
presentation for their *World of Color – Winter Dreams* holiday show, featuring a new,
original song entitled, “Glow.”

Due to these successes and heightened public exposure, this dashing, articulate,
business mogul attracted the attention of the famous TED Talks. Whitacre was invited to
speak for the first time in 2011. His fourteen-minute presentation opened with a
romanticized autobiographical view of his musical beginnings, discussed how he formed
the first Virtual Choir, and previewed two minutes of his second video, VC2 “Sleep.”
(This TED Talk garnered over three million views.) Two years later, Whitacre was
invited back. This time, pushing the boundaries of technology, he presented a one-time
performance of “Cloudburst.” Partnering with Skype, he merged a 100-voice live choir
on the TED stage with 32 singers from around the globe to form a live, virtual choir. Due
to the potential delay in sound (caused by the limitations of technology), Whitacre
brilliantly added the Skype participants during the rainstorm section of “Cloudburst,” allowing them to embrace and sing into the delay, rather than being obsessed with beat accuracy.

Whitacre’s creativity is boundless. He seeks opportunities to explore new creative outlets which stretch beyond the musical realm, by embracing new technological challenges, presentational opportunities, and even poetic possibilities. But this last area of creativity has been mysteriously veiled. Having spent a great deal of time reviewing Whitacre’s interviews and compositions, this author came across an anomaly that could not be shaken. Who is Edward Esch? The first difficulty came with the attempt to find dates for this poet. Nothing could be attributed to this poet, other than a reference to writing the English text for “Lux Aurumque,” translated into Latin by Charles Anthony Silvestri. No other references could be found. Internet searches brought up speculative chatter about this being Esch’s only surviving poem. Later, this author discovered that “Winter,” Whitacre’s choral/orchestral work written for the Pacific Chorale, contained lyrics by Edward Esch. The most profound discovery came while reviewing interview notes from October 2006. Whitacre’s son is named Esch Edward Whitacre. This appeared to be too much of a coincidence. The final confirmation came while searching Whitacre’s website. Paradise Lost, his musical, clearly states that the libretto is written by Edward Esch. In this author’s 2006 interview with Whitacre, he states that he “personally rewrote the entire book . . .” With all these pieces of evidence combined, the only conclusion this author can reach is that Edward Esch is the pen name for Eric Whitacre.
Whitacre has a thoughtful and thorough approach to creating his works, which results in commonalities among them, a compositional signature of sorts. First, the choral compositions are all text driven. The texts are carefully chosen so they resonate with the composer first, believing the words must ring true to him. This allows for creativity, honesty and sincerity in each work. Secondly, they resonate with a special consideration for audience appeal, without compromising the level of sophistication or musicality. This is a unique balance that is difficult to consistently achieve for most composers. He employs dramatic and emotional connection in an attempt to engage the singer and audience member alike. The works are relatable and pleasing to hear. Third, Whitacre prefers writing for the voice and its unique, flexible characteristics. Consequently, most compositions are a cappella, highlighting the full range and expressivity of the vocal instrument. Lastly, two signature trademarks are infused in most of his works: chord clusters/pyramid clusters and quoting himself. The pyramid cluster begins on a single pitch and then builds up the scale, each voice part sustaining a different note in the chord cluster. He also frequently quotes himself or an idea, from works such as “Cloudburst” and “Water Night.” For example, the opening chord of “Cloudburst” “is, according to Whitacre, “sprinkled all over the place,””48 and most recently at the end of his new arrangement of “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Finally, Whitacre’s music has the quality and characteristics that will have a lasting impact on the choral canon. Believing this to be true, this author posed two questions to four influential individuals in Whitacre’s career, Barbara Harlow (President, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc.), Gunilla Luboff (Publisher, Walton Music), Tony

Silvestri (friend, librettist, collaborator), and David Noroña (friend, librettist, collaborator), seeking to eloquently clarify and confirm this assumption: *What type of contribution do you believe Eric has made to the musical world? and Do you believe that Eric's music will stand the test of time?* Whitacre’s music seems to have a universal appeal, crossing boundaries of gender, age, and ethnicity. To these questions, Barbara Harlow responds, “Eric's talent was obvious. He has great drama in his music. It moves people and leaves an impression on them, much as he does with his charismatic personality.” Gunilla Luboff emphasizes Whitacre’s contribution to the musical world, “I think that from the very start he was able to capture the needs and the moods of his time and he continues to do so.” Charles Anthony Silvestri says, “Absolutely yes. You can't sell hundreds of thousands of copies of sheet music and not stand the test. I think he has made a lasting contribution to the repertoire, that's sure. But he is also changing the way opera sounds, the ways music is published and distributed, and the ways technology can be harnessed to help a composer in creative and business ways.” And finally, David Noroña concludes, “Without a doubt Eric's music will continue to live like some kind of sublime virus. It's just simply good music: inspired and expertly constructed all at once.”

To date, Eric Whitacre has more than doubled his choral catalog from his first decade of composition 1991-2004 as discussed in this document. There are currently

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49 Whitacre Question Responses (Harlow), 159.

50 Whitacre Question Responses (Luboff), 163.

51 Whitacre Question Responses (Silvestri), 166.

52 Whitacre Question Responses (Noroña), 169.
fifty-two cited SATB compositions, three SSA compositions (two original works), and two TTBB compositions (one originally for SATB and the other originally for SSA). At mid-career, there is every reason to believe that Whitacre’s prolific output will continue to expand and evolve. Charting his musical growth during the next twenty years of his career will be exciting, and his new compositions will continue to provide further opportunities for exploration into the genius of this young composer and entrepreneur.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interviews


Scores


**Books**


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First Interview with Eric Whitacre (Video Recorded)
University of Miami
Miami, FL
October 1, 2001
File Duration: 00:44:36
Transcriptionist: Phillip Swan

SPEAKERS
Phillip Swan: PS
Eric Whitacre: EW
Hila Plitmann: HL

PS: Where were you born?


PS: Family?

EW: Both parents still alive. Two sisters, both younger. No musicians in the family.

PS: What are your parent’s names?

EW: Ross and Roxanne.

PS: R’s . . .

EW: Yeah . . . Thank God they didn’t name me Ralph or something. I knew this family, they were like . . . two K’s and they had like seven kids all with K.

PS: And who are your sisters?

EW: Kari (spelled out) and Julie.

PS: What do your parent’s do?

EW: My father works for the state of Nevada, he has for thirty years. He’s in Employment Security. Actually, he’s Chief of Benefits now for the state. So he oversees people who need jobs and people who need unemployment checks. My mom is a graphic artist.

PS: Does she do that professionally – full-time?
EW: Yeah, she does it professionally – full-time, kinda . . .

PS: Independent contractor?

EW: It depends, ya know, whichever she’s working on, she’s done a lot of different things. But usually it’s in the graphics field – either with newspapers, or magazines, or print, or independent stuff, yah, anything. Now she’s just retaught herself all of the big programs – Photoshop, Quark . . .

PS: School. Did you grow up in Reno?

EW: I grew up in a bunch of little town’s all over Nevada ‘cause my Dad worked for the state.

PS: So you moved all over?

EW: Exactly, we moved all over. The school that I most identify with is the one that it’s in a little town called Gardnerville. It’s just right down the hill from Lake Tahoe. And I started attending there when I was in sixth grade and graduated from high school there. That’s what I think of when I think of home.

PS: College. You graduated from high school there . . . Gardnerville.

EW: Douglas High School, it’s called.

PS: And right to college?

EW: Right to UNLV.

PS: And was your major Music, originally.

EW: My original major was Music Ed. for six months, because I didn’t read music and I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so they put me in Music Ed. Appropriate isn’t it? And then after six months I decided to change it to composition.

PS: Did you do anything in high school with music?

EW: When I was in middle school and for a couple years in high school, I played trumpet in the marching band and I got kicked out my junior year for insubordination. I basically told the conductor that he was terrible and he was an idiot.

PS: It was probably accurate.
EW: It was . . . but maybe not the best way to approach the problem, in retrospect.

PS: Do you still play?

EW: No. I haven’t played in . . . god . . . I played one time for a musical. The last time, maybe ten years ago, somebody asked me to play second trumpet. I picked it up, kinda dusted it off, got to a place where I only half-sucked and then . . .

PS: Did you have some kind of ensemble requirement in college, or not in composition?

EW: It was Choir. I sort of fell into choir. The choir director asked me to sing just because he was recruiting. By a fluke I joined. And then boom . . . my life was changed. The first thing we sang was the Requiem by Mozart and then that was it. I was an overnight convert.

PS: So did you sing in choir for four years?

EW: For seven years. It took me seven years to get my Bachelors Degree. I sang in every choir they had. I would have sung in Women’s Glee if they would have let me.

PS: What did you do when you got done?

EW: When I finished, I did my Master’s Degree at Julliard, which was ’95-’97. That’s where I met Hila.

PS: You went straight there?

EW: Straight there.

PS: Why did you choose Julliard? Other than the obvious reputation.

EW: No. My grades were quite bad. And I was told that I wouldn’t be accepted into a graduate school because my grades were so bad. So I looked in the big book of schools for any school that would accept an application without a GPA, only a portfolio. And that was Julliard. They were the only one. So that was the only place that I applied. And the only reason I even heard about Julliard is because I met this composer, Aaron J. Kernis, and he heard a piece of mine and he said I should apply to Curtis. So I called Curtis to ask for an application and they asked how old I was and I said 25. And they laughed at me because at Curtis . . . I guess at Curtis you have to be 12 to go. Anyway, when he had said something about Curtis, I looked it up and I saw that all these people who went to Curtis . . . Bernstein, and Ned Rorem,
Lucas Foss, Barber . . . that they had also all had affiliations with Julliard. So if he thinks I can get into Curtis then I’ll try Julliard.

PS: Was it a good choice?

EW: Ah . . . well . . . I met my wife, which already makes the best decision I’ve ever made. It was a . . . In terms of the schooling, I met some amazing people there and I got to study my last year with John Corigliano and that was the best experience I had with a teacher of composition. But you know, like any school it’s hit and miss. Julliard was surprisingly stuffy. I expected it to be a cathedral of creativity. It’s really like a corporate office; all the walls and the rugs, and everything is very quiet and professional. You know, I was expecting Fame. Yeah . . . it’s what you’d think . . . all those creative people. And really what Julliard is . . . it’s a Finishing School. I feel like they just collect the very best of the best and then get them through so they can put the magic J on the resumes. That’s crass, but they . . . (pause) . . . I should say, just because now that I’m thinking about disparaging Julliard . . . I also studied ear training with a woman named Mary Anthony Cox, who was the best, the single best teacher I’ve ever had in my life. And that made the entire educational experience at Julliard worth it . . . my two years in ear-training terror/hell. I learned more in those two years . . .

PS: What was different about what she taught? How did she approach it differently?

EW: Her way of approaching it was that . . . first she approached it with this amazing old-school formality, which I’d really never had in an educational experience before . . . where things were just the way they were and that’s what it was. And also as a teacher, she simply wouldn’t accept “No” for an answer. If you couldn’t do something, it just didn’t matter. And every week you’d have this whole litany of tests where you’d have to stand in front of the class and do these different tests. And if you couldn’t get it right, you stood up there until you got it right. As bad as it was, or how ever much you didn’t prepare or however far behind you were . . . it didn’t matter. You were going to stay up there until you got it right. And everybody was equal in her eyes. And there were people with perfect pitch and people without and people who were amazing and people who weren’t, and everybody was equally terrified. A born teacher. She studied with Nadia Boulanger, so she’s directly from that school.

PS: So you finished in ’97 at Julliard and moved to California?

EW: Graduated in ’97 and moved to Los Angeles. Two things. One, I taught for a semester at a private school, conducting, fourth through twelfth grade.

PS: What school?
EW: It’s called the Buckley School in Los Angeles. Real hoity-toity . . . the rich and famous . . . they send their kids there. Did that for a semester. Hardest job I’ve ever had in my life. Wouldn’t do it again. Loved it. Still miss the kids. And then the plan was that I was going to attend . . . there’s a program at USC for film scoring . . . it’s a one-year film scoring program. I got accepted and I was going to start in the fall. And I went to the first day of school and I dropped it.

PS: Because . . .

EW: Well, I think it was a combination of a lot of things. First, it was almost $30,000 with no financial aid, which is a lot of money to spend on one year of school. Second, it would have been my tenth year of collegiate life and that’s too much for anybody to handle. Finally, I just didn’t think it was worth it. I feel like I’m basically self-taught anyway. And I’d become increasingly disenchanted with academia throughout my career until by the time I graduated, I could only stand it . . . in fact, I think the deciding moment was when they handed out Scantron . . . start to fill in, you know, and you start to fill in your social security . . .

PS: It’s so personal.

EW: Yeah, and not even that . . . you just see that it’s a “System”. It’s like the BORG . . . you must submit. And so I talked it over with Hila and decided it just wasn’t for me. So I dropped out. So, do you want me to keep going with what happened after that?

PS: Sure.

EW: I kept writing commissioned works for Chorus and Wind Symphony.

PS: What was your first?

EW: My very first commissioned work? Well, there’s really two answers to that question. When I first started writing commissioned works, I would write a choral piece for a group and then we would agree that at the end they would give me a Coke or a candy bar and we’d call that a commission . . . so that I could start developing this catalog of commissioned works. The very first piece that anybody actually paid me money for . . . was . . . it’s actually a piece that I haven’t even released . . . it’s called, “Lake Pyramid.” Somebody called me up and they wanted me to write a piece and I didn’t really want to do it so I thought of the biggest number I could at the time, which was a thousand bucks and said I’ll do it for a thousand bucks (thinking they’d say no) . . . and they said, “O.K. great” . . . and I was like . . . “whoa.” And that was in 1993, probably. And also in 1993, I wrote a work for wind symphony called, “Ghost Train,” and this thing sorta took off like a cannon . . . and so
basically between commissions and publications after “Ghost Train,” I’ve supported myself entirely as a working composer.

So in L.A. . . . after I dropped out of USC . . . I was writing some of these commissioned works and I was also trying to break into film, meeting people and doing the whole film thing and checking out the scene and I even wrote a score to a feature film . . . actually, David Noroña (the guy who wrote the libretto), wrote this film also and starred in it. We wrote six songs together, it’s all kind of like rock-funk stuff . . . it was such a horrible experience.

With David it was great . . . but the director was . . . we didn’t see eye to eye on a lot of things and it ended very badly. And I realized then and more so now that, in terms of collaboration, I’m not sure if film scoring is the thing for me. Because in film scoring traditionally, it’s not really a collaboration between the director and the composer . . . the composer is very much the servant of a lot of different opinions. Many of them having no knowledge about music . . . they want more orange and less blue . . . and who knows what that means? So I became kind of disenchanted with that idea and then at the same time embraced this whole career that I was starting to have with writing professionally for chorus and wind symphony and then orchestra. Then last year I became composer in residence for the Pacific Chorale. And now I’m writing this opera.

PS: Is this the first “major” work that you’ve done?

EW: Yeah . . . Major, major.

PS: What else would you consider “major”?

EW: Well, Ghost Train . . . the entire thing is 21 minutes long. I did a setting for wind symphony, chorus and soloists, “Kubla Khan,” which was almost 30 minutes long. But, it’s not very good and no one will ever hear it. There’s some material that I’ll probably salvage. It wasn’t my finest hour. What other big pieces? I guess that’s it. But those aren’t even really “major, major” works as we see them now. Yeah, I guess, so the opera ultimately will be about 2 hours long. And for me that’s pretty major.

PS: Have you considered doing any other settings of like, Requiems . . . that kind of thing . . . extended works for chorus?

EW: I’ve been asked many times to write mass movements for Requiems. As a rule, I don’t set liturgical texts. I’m not Christian and the words just don’t really speak to me.

PS: Don’t relate?
EW: Yeah, not at all. And it’s essential for me that the words ring true or I just can’t set them. So those kind of big pieces are out. I’d certainly be open to writing some huge . . . now that I’m saying it . . . the problem with it is that I’m not sure it’s relevant any more. To write an hour-long chorus/orchestra/soloists masterpiece, because first, it probably wouldn’t get performed very much, which is a big issue for me. It’s not enough to just to have a piece written and existing in the universe. It’s important to me that it actually speaks to people, and touches them, and moves them. And so, I imagine killing myself for a year on this piece that might get performed a couple times, and that sort of breaks my heart. So you know, I might not do a big work that I didn’t think was . . . That’s what I love about the opera, is that it combines popular kinds of music with more traditional kinds of music and hopefully will bring a wide, wide audience to something that I think is still artistically sound. (quizzically looking at the camera)

PS: To Hila . . . I wanted to ask you a question before you have to run, because I probably won’t get another chance to do it. What do you see as his (Eric’s) musical qualities?

HP: I’m not sure how to answer the question.

PS: What do you see in him as a musician?

HP: It’s a very interesting question. First, I’d just like to say I admire him as a musician. It has nothing to do with him as my husband. It is interconnected in my life. I probably wouldn’t be married to him if I didn’t . . . I see him as always evolving and always learning something new . . . not in the sense that newness is always the thing to strive for but that he’s always trying to learn something from his process, from the world around him and what it does to his music. Sometimes I don’t understand it in detail because I’m not a composer, because I’m not in his head, but as an outsider I see and sometimes it’s hard to see, but there’s little glimpses every now and then that I realize that this is a guy that spends time thinking about what he does and about what he wants to do. Regardless of what other people think of his music, if they enjoy it or not, some people I see do enormously and some people less. As somebody who is so close to him, at least for me and with my musician skills, I find that in every piece there’s an evolution. And again not to say that it’s better as it goes along, it’s just the best for the time that it’s being done at . . . I really do believe this. And I see him trying things in order to teach himself and I think that that’s amazing. On top of that I find that all his aesthetic beliefs that show themselves in the way he lives his life and in the way that he writes music are admirable and incredibly valuable. That he writes for beauty’s sake and that he makes beautiful things.

EW: You’re so sweet.
HP:  *I hope that answers your questions.  And if there’s anything more . . . please . . .*

EW:   You’re like a breath of fresh air.  (Eric affectionately touches Hila.)

(Hila gets up to leave.  They kiss goodbye.)

PS:    Thanks.

HP:    *Thank you.*

EW:    Alright sweetheart.  I’ll see you in a little bit, O.K.?

HP:    *Alright.  I'll see you later guys.*

(Air kiss out the door.)

PS:    It’s easy to see why you guys got married.

EW:    She’s the best!  I was a little worried about what she was going to say.  “Well as a musician, he’s out of his mind.  He doesn’t know what the hell he’s doin’.”  (Laughs.)

PS:    I have a bunch of questions I wanted to ask.  She said something really interesting, which, I don’t know how much you want to get into this, but it makes me . . . will maybe help me to understand better as far as writing (what to include) . . . she said she admires the way you live your life, your ideals, etc.  Do you have anything you can share about that, that would help to give some insights?  I’m sure it’s a lot.

EW:    You mean, my ideal of how to live.

PS:    Your philosophy of life . . . in a nutshell.

*(pregnant pause)*

Sorry.

EW:    No, no.  I’m not sure what to say.  I guess I would say that my actions, I would hope, speak about my philosophy of life.  That I work hard and I’m grateful for the opportunities I have and I really try to use what I’ve been given to the best of my abilities.  And to bring . . . my artistic sensibilities are much like my life ideals in that there are certain subjects that I think . . . they’re *verboten*, that I just shouldn’t be broached with art.  And I think that the subjects that should be are beauty and truth and freedom and love. *(chuckle)* I sound like *Moulin Rouge*.  I mean really, all the Bohemian ideals.  I believe that art should transcend, and transcend to a place of evolution.  So
I don’t want to work on pieces or have my life be involved in things that are destructive or are depressing, or . . . no, I shouldn’t say depressing . . . destructive or speaking to the more degraded part of the human sensibilities. It’s not to say that (that’s why I qualified with depressing), that you can’t write music that’s profoundly sad or explore that kind of thing, but at the same time there’s a way of approaching it with a sense of awe and a sense of wonder, which is what I really try to do with my life and with my music. And then I think, just in life I try to be true to myself, I just try to be really honest.

(telephone interruption)

PS: Do you identify religiously with a particular philosophy?

EW: I have two opposing and equally powerful known philosophical systems that I tend to adhere to. One is objectivism, which is Ayn Rand. This sort of powerful confident celebration of the self and of the ego. And the other one is the complete polar opposite which is Zen Buddhism. And I was heavily into both in my early twenties and I feel like I now have this strange mix of the two of them. Maybe they’re the same thing. Religiously . . . religious then says there’s some practice involved. I would say for me at least, religion is the practice of a faith. For me the faith is completely in the art and in my life. And so, I try to pour my understanding and my wonder of the universe into my art and try to make pieces that help other people feel the way I do about the world and about the universe. Which is interesting, because then I can look at pieces that I wrote ten years ago and think, wow, I actually felt a little differently about the world. I can hear that in the music. And, I wonder if other people can hear that too? I’m not sure that’s a whole ‘nother topic. You know, after you write a piece, its got a life of its own. So I guess that’s it. Mostly, I’m quite wary of organized religion. Generally, I would say that it’s difficult to have good come out of a massive organized religion. History sort of says otherwise. But at the same time, religion has been for some people, the way in.

PS: Not wanting to write something with a profoundly sad text or dealing with something . . .

EW: I should say, not sad, but degrading.

PS: Yeah . . . “When David Heard” is pretty profoundly sad.

EW: Yeah . . . This is the thing. I do believe that pain is an important and vital part of the human experience and it’s something we all must go through on some level or another. Some people seem to experience and live through pain that is truly beyond my comprehension. So I believe that it’s worthy of exploration, artistically . . . and of exaltation, because that’s what you’re
doing when you create a piece . . . is that you’re really exalting that ideal. “When David Heard” is a perfect example of that because I think that if it hasn’t happened to somebody, it’s a fear that happens and it’s so primal and so . . . it reminds me of being a young child when I think of it. Probably, I don’t know, maybe everybody’s like this, you know maybe, your earliest fear is that you’ll lose someone close to you or you’re abandoned. So I think that’s worthy of exaltation. Now, that has to be done with kid gloves because you can easily start hammering. You can use the topic to have an artificial emotional effect on the audience.

PS: Right. Exploiting.

EW: Exploiting. Exactly. Which I think is the worst possible thing you can do. A lot of Hollywood movies these days are doing that. And I just think it’s disgusting. It’s really terrible. It’s one thing to explore the thing for what it really is, but it’s another thing to artificially create it. When I think about degrading art, I think about pieces that . . . that speak to the evils of mankind and exalt that. And I just can’t agree with that. I’m not saying that people sit in the audience and think, “Wow, it’s great to be evil.” But why waste your time and energy and everybody else’s time and energy on exploring the dark side of human nature? And you know when I say dark, I’m not talking about pain.

PS: Right.

EW: I’m talking about something else. And it’s not worthy, it’s not worthy of . . . It’ll be interesting to see if I feel the same way in ten years.

PS: Time and effort.

EW: Yeah . . . everybody’s time and effort. And it’s not worthy of laying upon the altar of this thing we call art, because that’s the most sacred alter I can think of.

PS: I think you sort of answered my next question, but . . . why do you compose?

EW: (chuckle) That’s just what I do. That’s just what I do. I learned pretty early on . . . that, uh, I don’t know what it was . . . I guess when I was in high school I’d listen to music and think that could be . . . oh, it would have been so great if it would have done this . . . or . . . what would have happened if they would had done this. And with that sort of deconstruction, then I started slowly writing my own stuff. Now I just can’t stop. And, some days I don’t want to do it anymore. But, generally, I have so many commissions lined up that I have to do it anyway, and then I’m glad I did.
PS: How do you feel about writing commissions? (Other than the idea that it helps you support your life.)

EW: Yeah, I’m . . .

PS: Is it a conflict?

EW: Well . . . the conflict can come in that . . . occasionally I’ll receive commissions for pieces that maybe I just didn’t feel like writing at the time. You know, like another choral work. After a while I get pretty burned out with it. But then I find something that I really wanted to say with it. I’m very picky and choosey about commissions and try to make sure that it’s going to be something that I want to do. But some times it’s hard to tell because if I book two to three years in advance . . . I took this thing on two years ago and then I started writing. . . I think, god . . . oh, why did I decide to do this . . . baritone and wind symphony piece. I’m flattered and grateful that I make a living . . . that people pay me money to write music. And I love business and I love trying to be a businessman and try to make as much as I can, doing it. That’s when the Ayn Rand philosophy comes in really strong. I do believe in being rewarded. Maybe that’s the wrong way to say it. I’ve never really talked about this before. I think the exchange of money is a good thing. And I believe that it’s a fair exchange. If you write someone a piece that is transcendent and they give you money, that seems to me to be a pretty fair trade. I will say I have yet to make the amount of money that it feels like I’m going through . . . in terms of blood, sweat and tears . . .

PS: That would be fair?

EW: Yeah. Although I can’t imagine what that money is. Because ultimately, the amount of money and the money itself doesn’t matter to the artistic process. I sort of take care of that business part of it and then just . . . I’m glad that I know that’s over with and then I concentrate on the piece. But I never finish the piece so that I can get the commission money. I’ll miss rent before I send off a piece that I don’t think is good. So it’s a balancing act, I think. But I write music for a living, so I’m not complaining.

PS: So what caused you to switch to composition in college?

EW: In college, I, like I said, got tricked into singing in this choir. So the first year I was just in the big, all-campus choir, and I fell completely in love with it. And the next year I auditioned for the little, elite chamber choir, and got accepted. And each year the conductor, David Weiller, would do a different setting of the poem, “Go, Lovely Rose.” You know there’s many settings of it – to kind of end the year and it was our piece. So my third year in Chamber Choir, I decided to write him a setting to show my appreciation for this beautiful gift that he’d given me. So we did it and performed it and then,
this is all on my website too, we got accepted to sing at the regional convention in Hawaii. And we sang the thing and Barbara Harlow of Santa Barbara Music Publishing came up right afterwards and said, “I’d like to publish your piece,” and that was it . . . boom . . . I was a published composer.

PS: So that was your first published . . .?

EW: Yeah. My first piece. And then after that, the very next thing, I had an idea for this piece where people would snap their fingers and make it sound like rain. And use these handbells, and it was from a bunch of different things that I’d seen. You know the snapping fingers thing obviously is from a campfire game and the handbell thing was from the National Convention in 1991 in Phoenix. I saw it, a performance of the Chichester Psalms, with just piano and chorus and the chorus hid these handbells until this part where they brought ‘em out, and it was stunning. You know . . . its flash of gold. And I always think that choral concerts are pretty stuffy anyway – everybody just standing up there singing. Kind of snoozeville. And so I was looking to shake things up a little bit, and that seemed to be the vehicle for it.

(Secretary interruption)

Interview basically stops. Personal chat. Discussion about recital in February.

EW: “She Weeps” . . . that’s cool. I really have fond feelings for that piece.

We should talk about about that (“When David Heard”), because that was a tough time for me, writing that piece. I can tell you much more about this, but I feel like whatever the piece is, I kinda have to go to that place. It’s like Prometheus taking fire from the mountain. And so I actually try to write my pieces so that if now I’m going to feel great for three months and now I’m going to do this for . . . and “When David Heard”, I started writing it for Ron Staheli, who lost his son, and as I started to explore the motives I went deeper and deeper down. So by the end I was really lost. I was kind of just swimming in this sorrow. And still . . . there’s certain chords if I hear them I just . . . I conducted it for the first time last year and it was so difficult. It’s funny how music has that ability. Thank you.

PS: I really appreciate it.

EW: Of course my friend. All right buddy . . . so I’ll see you tomorrow, 9:00 o’clock then.

PS: Be great!

EW: All right.
PS:   Thanks.

EW:   See ya.
Telephone Interview with Eric Whitacre (Audio Recorded)  
Appleton, WI and Los Angeles, CA  
March 21, 2006  
File Duration: 01:05:11  
Transcriptionist: Phillip Swan  

SPEAKERS  
Phillip Swan: PS  
Eric Whitacre: EW  

EW: Hello.  

PS: Eric, this is Phillip Swan.  

EW: Hey Phillip, how you doin’ buddy?  

PS: Doing well. Thanks so much for agreeing to do this.  

EW: Absolutely.  

PS: I hope you don’t mind if I record this.  

EW: Not at all. I should warn you. I looked at the questions. I’m not sure how many answers I have.  

PS: O.K.  

EW: (laughter) You know, a lot of it is . . . and I understand it completely because of your paper, but it’s sort of an analytical approach to an incredibly intuitive experience. And so . . . I’ll do my best.  

PS: That would be great. That’s all I’m asking.  

EW: All right.  

PS: Well, should we just jump in and go with the questions there? I may have a few other things that will sidetrack me, but maybe that’s the best place to start.  

EW: Yeah, I don’t have them in front of me, so why don’t you just go ahead and . . .
PS: O.K. Question 1. You have shared a bit about your start in choral music at UNLV, but how did you end up on the path in composition? And, why didn’t you pursue choral conducting?

EW: Why did I choose composing over . . .

PS: Yes.

EW: Well, I don’t know. I guess it’s the same reason that all musicians chose music. It chose us, right? Composing . . . since I can remember, I don’t think I’ve always thought of myself as a composer, but I can’t remember a time when I didn’t hear a song and wish that it went a different way. You know what I mean? Like I always . . . even said as a little kid, “O god, I just wish it would have done that” or, “It would have been so cool if it had been like that.” So yeah, I think it’s sort of . . . it’s there. I do remember having this experience with . . . we were singing in choir with David Weiller and he was working on a Kirke Mechem piece, and at that time, I think probably in my mind I thought, yeah, I’ll be a choir director. This is what I want to do. I’d been singing in choir for a couple of years and I was just enamored of the whole thing, David had a question about the score, and he said, “I don’t know, I’ll call Kirk . . . And suddenly, to see that in the hierarchy of things, there was someone who the conductor had to ask. (laughter) . . . And I remember that distinctly, it was very appealing to me in thinking, wow, all right, so there’s . . . on the food chain . . . there appears to be someone to who everybody defers to.

PS: I want to be at the end of the line.

EW: Yeah. So I remember having that kind of singular experience with him. I don’t know how much of it . . . you know . . . I was writing pop songs a lot before that, so . . . And then, I guess the reason that I didn’t choose choral conducting as a job is that it’s just so much better the way I do it now – for me.

PS: Sure.

EW: I can conduct as much as I want and I get to be the guest conductor, which is infinitely easier. You don’t have to organize a choir. You don’t have to recruit singers. In fact, you generally only conduct for three or four days at a time, so there isn’t even time for people in the choir to start hating you or get tired of your tricks. (Laughter)

You just kind of come and say, “sing with long vowels”, and everybody’s like . . . “he’s a genius,” and then you leave.
(Laughter)

PS: O.K. All right. Now, I should start thinking about composition.

(Laughter)

EW: Exactly. Yeah . . . and it’s where all the money is . . . – woo-hoo.

PS: Yeah. Right. O.K. How did you make your decision to go to Julliard?

EW: That was a pretty easy one. I wanted to go to a graduate school and was told by the Dean and by my advisor that my grades were so bad that I probably wouldn’t get in to any of them. So I just went to the big book of graduate schools in the library and looked for any school that would accept my application without a GPA, just a portfolio. And, the only one I could find was Julliard. And I didn’t really know much about it. I’d heard of it and I’d just finished reading this Bernstein biography so I knew that he went there. And well, so I thought, what the heck. So I applied. That’s the only place I applied.

PS: Wow, that’s cool.

EW: Yeah.

PS: How did you choose your teachers there, or were you just assigned?

EW: Yeah, I was assigned to David Diamond for my first year and then about three-quarters of the way through my first year, he had a heart attack and stopped teaching for a couple of months. And that kind of gave me a window to go to the Dean and ask to be transferred to a different teacher. And then I went to John Corigliano.

PS: Well, I think you answered question three, which was, “Why did you decide to change studios?”

EW: Well . . .

PS: Is there more there than just the heart attack . . .

EW: Yeah. David Diamond . . . that was one of the most awful musical experiences I’ve ever had in my life. I don’t know. For whatever reason we didn’t get along. He was kind of very old-school . . . and . . . I don’t know if it was his method to kind of tear you down and then build you back up, but, I didn’t get along with him at all. He really kind of paralyzed me. And, he actually gave me my favorite quote of all times. He said to me, “Well, it’s effective, but I certainly wouldn’t call it music.” (He said about one of my
pieces.) I couldn’t run away from him fast enough. It’s just that we had completely different ways of thinking about it. And John, was for my entire first year, oversaw the graduate composing seminar. So, every week, all the graduate composers would go over to his place and we’d listen to each other’s music and talk and have these little forums and I just thought he was the coolest guy ever. And thought that he’d be sort of simpatico to what it was I was doing. So I asked him, and he said yes.

**PS:** Wow . . . that’s great!

**EW:** Yeah. It was really cool.

**PS:** I’ll have to share a story with you sometime.

**EW:** About who?

**PS:** Just about some of my experiences. They’re very similar.

**EW:** Teachers will mess you up, huh?

**PS:** Yeah. Well, on those same lines, ‘cause I’ve . . . this kind of will carry through the Julliard thing, but . . . I’ve been told you were a part of a quasi club or a fraternity of some sort at Julliard that you guys created.

**EW:** Yeah . . . barely. There was a guy there, I can’t even remember his name now . . . Ken. Oh crap, what was his . . . Ken Lampl . . . L-A-M-P-L, who was also a composer, I think a year or two ahead of me. And, he had started this little group called the New Optimists. And basically the idea was, you know, this revolutionary idea, “let’s write music that people actually want to hear.” There were sort of two streams at Julliard. There were these atavist group of us in New Optimists. I mean it’s not like we had a formal meeting or anything. We just kind of aligned ourselves as people who shared the same ideology. And then there were all of the kind of academic serialists and the guys who were doing the opposite of what we were doing. So that’s how that worked.

**PS:** Were there many people in this group?

**EW:** I don’t know? Maybe four or five? Actually, most of them ended up being at BCM. Steve Bryant and Jonathan Newman. But like I said. It’s not like we had lunches together or had a year-end dance. It was just like a bunch of guys who all felt the same way about music and would sometimes hang out and have lunch together.

**PS:** Cool. Was John Corigliano kind-of on that same kind of line too? In his thinking?
EW: Yeah. I think we all looked up to John as someone who was like that. Although I would have to say, you know, where we were at, or at least where I was at, was sort of even more populist in a way. Like, you know, I was writing for concert band and everybody, including John was telling me that . . . what are you doing writing for concert band . . . ya know. Why don’t you write for a serious ensemble like the orchestra? And for me, I got such a kick out of band and even choir because it just reaches so many people.

PS: It does.

EW: And a certain kind of people. You know, it’s not just a mass appeal, it’s like . . . relatively untrained people. And for me, I’m always writing with my, ya know. thinking about my mom in the audience. What is my mom gonna like? And my mom has zero training and doesn’t know anything about classical music. And so, I think a couple of us went even further in our new optimism, if you will, even further than John.

PS: Cool. Well, I was going to ask this later, but I’ll just ask it now. Since you spoke about your mom, what kind of influences did you have on your early years . . . with home . . . musically?

EW: At home . . . nothing.

PS: O.K.

EW: I mean, my parent’s didn’t even really like to listen to the radio. And so, like my Dad would occasionally listen to the Kingston Trio. I sort of remember that. My Grandmother would take us, once a year, to see the Nutcracker in Reno . . . and I remember liking that. But I would say, until I was eighteen, really my only experience with classical music, other than a few piano lessons here and there, was film music.

PS: Were you interested in popular music?

EW: Yeah, yeah. That’s kind of all I did. I was into this sort of, I don’t know, I guess, I don’t know what kind of music I was into until I was twelve, when I was, you know, up until I was twelve I was sort of wanting to please my parents. And then, when I was twelve, I discovered rock. (chuckle) And that’s it. It was all over. (chuckle) And I even remember the song. Bonnie Tyler’s, “Total Eclipse of the Heart.” It just like changed my life and I figured out how to play it on the piano. And then after that I was a lost cause. I spent all my time buying 45s, and pop and rock albums and stuff. I really got turned on by electro-pop (I don’t know why), and synthesizers and Depeche Mode, and Duran Duran and the Pet Shop Boys and Erasure. All of these bands I just sort of . . . I lived and died for.
PS: Cool. Did you take lessons at all on any instruments? Or did you just kind of learn them on your own?

EW: Occasionally I would try piano lessons. I don’t think they ever stuck for more than a couple of weeks. But you know, apparently my parents thought I had some facility for it. There was always a piano in the house for some reason and I would sit and figure out songs that I’d heard. And I had a pretty good ear. And then I was in marching band. I played trumpet, in like 6th grade for a year and then . . . well actually, a little bit of 6th, all of 7th and then some of my 8th grade and then I got kicked out in high school. But I certainly wouldn’t say I’d studied. And I’d never learned to read music. I would just listen to whatever the person next to me was doing and then play that.

PS: Wow. Obviously you had a good ear to get there. That’s cool.

EW: Yeah.

PS: So, no other formal ensembles in high school other than band for that little while.

EW: Yeah. That’s right. Well, yeah . . . I was in a pop band, but I guess that doesn’t count.

PS: No. That’s fine. That’s what I was going to ask though. So you kind of formed a band?

EW: Yeah. And it was me and three other guys. Well, a guy and two girls. And the two girls sang and the two guys did synthesizers and drum machines. And we just kind of did that for the . . . I guess for three years in high school.

PS: Did you play for like . . . school dances?

EW: Yeah. Actually, and we played quite a bit. We wrote a song for Students Against Drunk Driving.

PS: Good.

EW: We got picked up and got some national play, you know, among all the SADD chapters.

PS: Wow.

EW: And so we ended up going around. We played a lot of concerts actually at high schools and that kind of thing, all over the state and in California and stuff.
PS: Cool. Got an early start.

EW: Yeah. I can’t say that we were very good . . .

PS: But you were effective.

EW: (chuckle) Yeah. (chuckle) That’s right. (chuckle)

PS: O.K. Moving on here so I don’t keep you on the phone. I’ll try to keep this moving. There are some people that I found when I was researching different things, and things that you had written that had some influence on you . . . for good or bad. And I’ll just list them off and what I’m looking for is . . . just share how these people influenced you personally or possibly your compositional style.

EW: All right.

PS: And if there’s anybody else when I get done with this list, that is missing from the list, go for it and add them to it.

EW: O.K.

PS: David Weiller

EW: Yeah. I mean . . . David is kind of impossible to describe the influence he had on me. He was my choir director for seven years. All seven years that I did at UNLV. He was a total mensch and a mentor. He’s the reason that I wrote, “Go, Lovely Rose.” I wrote it for him. It was my first piece. He is also the reason that I started conducting. For some reason, I don’t know why he had let me do a couple of bass sectionals. And then he said to me, well in the spring, listen . . . I think you’d be perfect for this summer stock thing. College Lite Opera Company out in Cape Cod. You could be an assistant conductor. And I went out and tried to do (chuckle) nine shows in nine weeks, fully staged. Total insanity. And my first year was West Side Story. And so all of that just sort of changed my life.

PS: Wow.

EW: So, yeah, yeah, I sort of owe everything to David.

PS: That’s cool. We have a lot of students actually, from Lawrence, that go there for their summer program.

EW: Oh really.

PS: Do College Lite, yep. So, that’s really interesting.
EW: Yeah . . . it’s amazing.

PS: Don Hannah.

EW: Hum. Technically, Don was my first composition teacher. Although we hardly ever talked about composition. He was a really well known Las Vegas orchestrator and had done orchestrations for all the big Vegas shows. I was kind of a goof during my composition lessons, and so occasionally I’d show up with something and mostly, we’d just talk about coffee. *(chuckle)* The one great thing he did for me was he sort of casually mentioned that, talking about poetry, you may want to look at the poetry of Octavio Paz, who I’d never heard of. And that kind of changed everything for me.


EW: Yeah.

PS: David Diamond. You shared a little already, so . . .

EW: Yeah, that’s probably all that we can say about David without . . . *(uncomfortable laughter)*

PS: That I dare put in writing.

EW: Yeah. He’s gone now so probably best not to speak disparagingly of the deceased.


EW: John’s really the only guy that I would consider was an actual teacher of composition for me. And he never once looked at my pieces as we were working on them. He didn’t want to know what I was working on. We would talk only about process in a very abstract way. Which I think is the only way you can teach composition. Now, I understand what he was doing. So there was never anything personal and you know, me never defending what it was I’d written or feeling bad about something I’d done. It was this crazy, detached way of looking at “process” as a thing outside of me. And that was great. Also John, although I was kind of already there, John is the . . . one of the only composers I know who also has a real head for career and business. And so it was liberating for me to suddenly hear someone successful talk about that kind of stuff openly . . . at Julliard . . . nobody else talked about it. And he remains a good friend. My wife does a lot of premiers for him, and so, we see each other all the time now.

PS: Still stay in contact.
EW: Yep.

PS: That’s great. Speaking of that, do you have an email contact for him? He’s somebody I’ve been trying to reach and I have no way to contact him.


PS: Uh huh.


PS: Cool.

EW: I think that’s right.

PS: Well if I have a problem with it I’ll email you and see if I can get it straightened out.

EW: All right.

PS: Great. Thanks. Let me ask one more question about him and then we’ll move on. You said, “the process.” What did he talk about in “the process” or how did that influence you as you were working on things?

EW: Well, it’s difficult to describe. There’s the one thing that we did . . . he’d have me make these detailed pictures of what I wanted the piece to look like, sort of starting from the beginning to the end. This was before I’d written a note of music.

(telephone ringing – interruption)

Almost sort of an emotional, structural kind of thing. And so I would make these sort of elaborate paintings, in a way, and uh . . .

PS: Sorry.

EW: Did you need to get that?

PS: Nah . . . I don’t need to get it. I meant to turn it off and just forgot. It’s the other phone in my office. Sorry.

EW: No problem. (chuckle) Anyway . . . so you spend a lot of time on that stuff and you start to see in a very abstract way . . . motives and architecture. Then, when you go to write the notes, you don’t feel quite so helpless against the tide of this thing that you’re making. This sort of . . . there’s a sense of direction, you know, as opposed to sitting down and trying to write
something from scratch. And I don't always use that technique, but it always sort-of informs the way I think now. It kind of opened my mind to the idea of musical architecture in a big way.

PS: Cool. That helps a lot. O.K. Bruce Mayhall.

EW: Ahhh . . . Bruce! Ah, Bruce is just a dear friend. He was kind of my first champion in a way. He would perform anything that I wrote – when I was just a kid there at UNLV. And we became very good friends. I wrote “Water Night” for him. And he kept me from dropping out of school. I had actually dropped out of school. In my sixth year they failed me for not memorizing an art song for my voice jury. And so Bruce convinced me to stay in school . . . and that was a big thing. And he lives in Los Angeles now.

PS: Cool. Do you still stay in contact?

EW: Yeah. Absolutely. In fact, I’ve done a number . . . he’s now the conductor of the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles.

PS: I just saw that on the research I was doing.

EW: Yeah . . . and so I’ve done a number of things with them.

PS: Great. Tony Silvestri.

EW: Ahhh . . . Tony! Tony I met in choir in David Weiller’s choir. I think I was 19 and Tony was 24. He was taking a year off . . . writing his dissertation (chuckle) . . . while he was doing a doctorate at USC. And he was from Vegas, so he came back and just wanted to join choir so he’d have something to do. And we hit it off – instantly. And became sort of best friends. And in fact when I decided to move to Los Angeles in 1998, he was here and he set it up so that I got a teaching job, teaching for a semester at the private school that he teaches at . . . the Buckley School. And then obviously, then there’s the connection with the poetry. He’s written all these pieces for me. He also introduced me to Arvo Pärt, which also sort of rocked my world. And Tony’s been a dear friend. He lives . . . god . . . less than two miles from me. Yeah. We see each other all the time.

PS: Well, I just got some responses back from him. Some questions I had emailed him about and . . . yeah . . . great responses.

EW: Yeah. He’s something else. He’s the only true Renaissance Man I’ve ever met. I mean the guy can do anything. You know, he speaks all these languages, and in his spare time he illuminates manuscripts . . . the actual gold and velum. I mean the guy’s just crazy. (laughter)
PS:  Wow.

EW:  Yeah.

PS:  So why did you pick him as your collaborator on “Leonardo” and well, obviously other pieces now.

EW:  I don’t remember why I started. I knew he was a very gifted writer. And “Leonardo” . . . that was kind of a no-brainer, because his doctorate is in Medieval History and he speaks fluent Italian. So . . . who else to go to, to write this kind of thing? Uh, “Sleep” was just kind of a whim. In fact, it was my wife who suggested I contact him. And I said, all right, here’s the game. (chuckle) Yeah . . . (chuckle) . . . you have to write a poem that exactly matches the metrical structure of Robert Frost. And he sort-of hit that out of the park. And then, “Her Sacred Spirit Soars,” same thing, you know, who better to write an Elizabethan sonnet. And now, we’re just getting ready to start on something else. I’m having him write and original poem in Latin for me.

PS:  Oh! David Naraño.


PS:  Thanks.

EW:  With a tilde over the second “n.” Yeah, David is, right now, he’s been my best friend for eight years. We met at a fluke, chance encounter when I first moved here . . . to Los Angeles. And he’s an actor by trade. And we hit it off so fast and we ended up living in the same apartment building. He and his wife and me and my wife. And sort of spent eight hours a day for six years together. At first working on this horrible, horrible film that he was involved with (laugh), that we wrote songs for.

PS:  What was that?

EW:  It’s called Alligator Alley. Please, god, do not go and get it. I tried to get my name taken off the film . . . and . . . it’s terrible. And then with Paradise Lost, when we kind of started talking about the idea of doing this thing. Then we started dreaming together and I’ve been doing it ever since, I guess.

PS:  I’ll probably come back and ask a question about that, but I’ll move on for now. Ron Staheli.

EW:  Ron. Ron as you know is the conductor of Brigham Young.

PS:  Right.
EW: On the west coast, Brigham Young University Singers are kind of like rock stars in the choral community. Every time they performed at convention, it’s just this astonishing, staggering performance. And so, even when I started going back to choral conventions in 1990, we’d literally camp out so that we could get front row seats to see BYU. And then in 1993, I found out that he was doing “Cloudburst,” and he took it to the International Choral Symposium or something down in Australia. And I’d never heard him do it. And he’d just gotten the manuscript from somebody there in Vegas. I think Scheibe maybe? And, you know, I couldn’t believe that BYU was doing my piece. So in 1995, when I’d just started school at Julliard, I went out, I flew out to Utah to have him record it . . . have the choir record it. And we did it in a night session, and that’s the recording on the disc. And then at the very end of the session, one of the kids said, “Hey, you know what we should do? We should sing ‘Water Night’ for Eric too.” And I said, “You know ‘Water Night’?” It had just come out. And they said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” So we hit record just in case, and they sang it through once and that’s the recording that’s on the disc.

PS: Wow.

EW: And you know, I was sort of shaking from the experience. And then we became great friends after that. And when he lost his son, I wrote him “When David Heard.” And then we had three pieces recorded, and I think I called him in like 2000 and said, listen why don’t we just do all the rest of them and make a CD out of it. And he went for it.

PS: That’s great. O.K. What non-musical influences affect your compositional style?

EW: God . . . I remember seeing this one.

PS: Yeah . . . sorry.

EW: (sigh) I don’t know man? That’s one of those crazy questions, right? Like . . . I guess food does and sunsets and pain and my car and books I read and . . . it’s so weird . . . it’s like, like imagine somebody was to ask you about your conducting style. What non-musical . . . I don’t know . . . you’d say . . . well, ocean waves and people I’m in love with and my hair and you know, it’s like, everything. (laugh) It’s kind of just you. So I’m not sure I have a real answer for it.

PS: That’s fine. I wasn’t sure I was expecting one, but . . . It was out there. Do you believe there are similarities between your compositions, or are each one distinctly different? And if they’re similar, how do you feel they are similar . . . what are their commonalities?
EW: Uh . . . that’s a good question. I feel, to me, that they’re all very, very different. And I sort of pride myself on trying to make one different than the other. So that I’m never repeating myself. Obviously, I keep doing the same sort of thing over, and over, and over. Not that I mean to, but . . . I think I sort of stamp them with “me.” I can’t escape “me” in a way. And so somehow they become very recognizable to my style . . . if that makes sense.

PS: Sure.

EW: At least I’ve been told this. That you know, you could hear all these pieces and then one of mine starts and then everybody can go, “Uh, yeah, there’s an Eric Whitacre piece.” I don’t know why? I don’t know what that is? But apparently they all seem to have a kind of thing that I do, whatever that thing is?

PS: So you’re not aware of that thing.

EW: I . . . I mean . . . I guess what I’m aware of is that I have a very particular taste; just about the way I want things to sound. And so, if it sounds right, then it sticks. Then it stays in the piece. And so, I imagine that I have a . . . you know . . . that there’s only . . . there’s kind of a finite number of things that I think sound right and so (chuckle) so they end up kind of all going to . . . but other than that I’m not aware of. I know I’m the “cluster guy.” I keep hearing that all the time.

(chuckle)

It’s not that I do that on purpose. It’s not that I say, “Oh, you know, I’ll be the cluster guy,” and act my way in. It’s just the way I want it to sound. So, they end up being that way.

PS: So, it’s really not a formula at all, it’s just more organic? It’s what you hear and what you like?

EW: Yeah. I wish it were a formula . . . make it a lot easier.

PS: Yeah. How do you think your compositional style has changed over the past decade?

EW: My god. So the past decade. We’re talking like 1995 to . . .

PS: Yeah.

EW: . . . to now. Um . . . heh. (long pause) God, I don’t know? I would like to think that I’m getting . . . that it’s all getting sort of more elegant in a way. That I’m able to use fewer notes and fewer gestures to say the same sort of
thing. I would like to think that, but I don’t know if it’s true. But that’s certainly what I hope would be true.

PS: Well . . . uh . . . since it’s opinion . . . how do you feel about it? Do you feel like it is getting better?

EW: Um . . . yeah . . . it’s all so tricky because if you don’t count “This Marriage,” I haven’t really written an original concert work in like four years. I’ve been just working on Paradise Lost, which is a totally different crazy beast. It’s a musical, so you know the old joke about a musical is never written . . . it’s only rewritten. That is so true. (chuckle) I’ve lost all parody. I don’t even . . . you just keep on writing and writing and writing and hoping it’s . . . the story is gonna work eventually. But, so like, “This Marriage,” seems to me a good example of something where, when I sit down first to set that text, I have to say reflectively, I started to do kinda the thing I normally do. You know, these big, lush kind of painting gestures. And then I really looked at the poem and said what is this here? What does it mean? What am I trying to say? And then just this little four-part thing came out.

PS: Wow . . . cool. O.K. Um . . . You sort of answered this, but I’ll just read it again and if there’s anything you can add to it, go ahead or we’ll move on. What compositional devices and techniques did you learn from your composition teachers?

EW: Hum. Specifically from the teachers?

PS: Well . . . not necessarily. I guess that’s what I was asking, but if there’s other things, yeah, go for it.

EW: Well I would have to say specifically, from the teachers . . . not much. Yeah, I can’t really think of anything in fact. Some orchestrational ideas. But everybody has a different idea about that . . . the way to voice things . . . the way to orchestrate. So maybe I just picked up little tricks here and there. I would say I think most of the learning I’ve done has been one of two things. Either listening and occasionally looking at scores of other composers and stealing from them. Or, um, trial and error . . . that I just put something down and then get to a rehearsal and give a downbeat and you just say “wow, that’s great,” or, “that completely sucked.” “Don’t ever do that again.” (laugh) Those seem to be the two best teaching methods for me.

PS: Great. Next one I can skip . . . you’ve answered it. O.K. This is a kind of out-there question too, which you’ll probably laugh at. When did you break free from the form and develop your own style?

EW: Now when you say the form, what do you mean?
PS: Well . . . just traditional expectations of . . . this is how you should do it. Did you ever fit any mold of . . .

EW: No, I don’t think I did. It’s hard for me . . . I’m often asked by composers, young composers, how do I develop my own style? And that just doesn’t make any sense to me. It’s like, just be you and that’s gonna be your style. And so, from the earliest memory, I mean, I can remember that it’s some . . . I kind of just did me. And that’s what came out. So, I didn’t feel like I was breaking away from anything traditional. I will say that you know, “Go, Lovely Rose” was my first piece and “Cloudburst” was my second, so, when I think back objectively, already I was writing eight-part clusters and these pyramiding things and voice leading and all that stuff. I seemed to be doing all that stuff right from the beginning. But I will say, it was with “Water Night” when I actually had a moment of what felt like surrender. Where I said, you know what, I want a fourteen-part chord and I don’t frickin’ care if anybody can sing it. It can’t be that hard. And if I do this right . . . and I just did it . . . I didn’t even think about it. And that was kind of a real opening moment for me, where I said . . . this is what I want to hear so I’m putting it down. Not that I ever felt like I was, ya know like, held back in any way before that, but something about “Water Night” just kind of freed me. And so, I think that was a moment.

PS: Well, it shows in the piece. It’s cool. Can you describe your musical style? I mean, do you have a . . .

EW: Oh god . . . (chuckle/sigh) . . . uh . . . no . . . The problem is that there’s . . . there’s different kinds. There’s “Water Night” and then there’s “Godzilla Eats Las Vegas.” So what I would like to think is that it’s dramatic.

PS: Cool.

EW: Um . . . that . . . or that it’s engaging . . . or best of all it’s not boring. Well, that’s at least what I hope my style would be described as.

PS: I think that’s pretty accurate. Texts for choral compositions. What types attract your attention and how do you choose them?

EW: Um . . . they just seem to find me. I kind of know the instant . . . I don’t really even have to read it . . . I can just sort of see it on the page . . . see the way it looks on the page and know whether or not it’s something I could set. It’s kind of a . . . I don’t know, just a structure thing. It’s hard to describe. But “This Marriage” is the perfect example of the way that I normally find poetry. I knew I wanted to write a piece for my wife on our seventh anniversary. I went to Google. I typed in poems about marriage. That’s the first thing that came up. And so I said, “That’s it! That’s the poem I was looking for.”
PS: Wow.

EW: Yeah. I don’t feel like Schubert, like I could set a laundry list. It’s got to be very specific, you know. But somehow, when it comes to poetry finding it’s way to me, it seems to be filled with serendipity, and just always falls in my lap right at the time I need it.

PS: So do you do a lot of reading, or do you have a specific idea of what you want like you did with “This Marriage,” when you’re looking for poems?

EW: Both. I do do a lot of reading. But when I sit down to write a piece, then maybe I’ll actively go looking for a poem. And then I’ve got some that I’ve kept in my drawer for years and years and years that I . . . “A Boy and a Girl” was that way. I actually tried setting that . . . god, when I first started writing back in ’91 or something. And then I tried setting it again sometime in ’97 or ’98 and then it wasn’t until 2002 that I kind of figured out how to do it. And so I have a bunch of poems like that, that are just sort of sitting or . . . another one is . . . uh . . . the poem by Yeats . . . uh . . . uh . . . duh, duh, duh, duh . . . uh . . . What’s it called? . . . I don’t know the name of it but the refrain of it is, “come away oh human child to the water and the wild.” You know this poem?

PS: Yeah.

EW: And I’ve sketched that thing, I don’t know how many times . . . What’s it called? . . . the . . . Uh, what the hell’s the name of poem? Anyway, I’ll remember it while we’re talking.

PS: O.K. So it’s not necessarily any particular poet. I mean, you like Paz obviously.

EW: Yeah.

PS: But others . . . it’s just what attracts you, or I mean . . . they just kind of come to you in reading?

EW: Yeah, I guess. And I guess maybe they sort of suggest just a sort of fundamental music already bubbling right underneath the words . . . to me. And then I think, oh, O.K. that’s something I could illuminate. I think I could find the music that is suggested in this poem. I think that’s what it is.

PS: Are there any particular poet names that strike you, that hit you the same as Octavio Paz?

EW: Say that again. Any . . .?
PS: Any other particular poets that strike you in that way . . . that attract you in their poetry?

EW: Oh well . . . e. e. cummings is always . . . e. e. cummings too . . . what I like, I feel that different poetry makes me write different music. Kind of really different. e. e. cummings for some reason makes me . . . to me, it makes my music sound different than any other poetry that I’ve set. Whenever I do set anything written by him. And so, sometimes I love to just sit and read e. e. cummings and think, oh god, you know, maybe I’ll do that one. I will say that e. e. cummings stuff is a lot of frickin’ work. You know, the poetry is dense and the structure is sometimes difficult to find for me. And the words are incredibly pregnant. Like, you know, e. e. cummings . . . it’s almost like you can just paint every single word that he writes. And so other poets aren’t quite, you know, James Joyce . . . they’re all written in sort of song structure. Kind of already suggested. Emily Dickinson same thing.

PS: O.K. What were some major turning points in your musical journey? I know a little bit about your choir experience at UNLV. Are there others?

EW: I premiered this piece for band called “Ghost Train.” I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I’d never written for instruments. They premiered it at a CBDNA convention and instantly I started getting calls from all over the country. People wanting to buy it. That was a big turning point for me. A decision not to publish those pieces with a publisher, but to retain my publishing was a huge moment for me. That single decision allowed me to sort of make my living as a professional composer. Going to Julliard was huge. Deciding not to be a film composer was huge. I suppose in retrospect now, deciding to write this fricking musical/opera/crazy thing is huge. (laugh) I didn’t realize at the time. Yeah, but it’s probably the big one. Meeting my wife was huge. Huge . . . I mean, besides just getting married, but she’s also the best musician I’ve ever met. And so that’s kind of . . . just by knowing her and being around her and watching her sing and make music, that’s kind of changed a lot for me.

PS: What about your son?

EW: Ah, yeah, my son. I mean . . . huh (chuckle) . . . Do you have any kids?

PS: I don’t.

EW: Yeah. Well if you ever have them you’ll know what I’m talk . . . it’s kind of indescribable. And I don’t know yet how it affects the music, but as a person, it’s um . . . (lip buzz) . . . there really aren’t words for it. The best you can do is just take out your wallet and start showing pictures and start embarrassing everybody around you . . .
PS: That’s awesome.

EW: *(chuckle)* It’s the craziest thing.

PS: What’s his name?


PS: Hum. Cool. O.K. I’ll move on. Did you ever hit a wall? You referred to one . . . kind of referenced one in the spring of 1995 in some reading that I did.

EW: Yeah. That was from David Diamond. The wall. And as soon as I stopped studying with him, everything was fine. And then I also, I hit a wall when I was teaching at this private school for a semester. That was just brutal and that really shut down my creative process. And then everything was fine after that. I don’t really have composer blocks the way that you sort of romantically read about them. And my general impression with that kind of thing is that if you hit a block, then you’re just not working hard enough. There comes a thing with the composing where you have to force yourself to just sit there and write and write and write. Even if it sucks and even if you throw it all out (which happens all the time). You have to work through it. My experience is that when composers say that they’ve hit a wall that way, that they just haven’t spent enough time on it.

PS: How do you think you grew from those walls . . . moving ahead from those experiences?

EW: Hum. Ah well, each time it happened, it sort-of solidified more and more my own stance as an artist and as a professional musician. So that now it’s a reflex that I just work through something. You know what I mean?

PS: Yeah.

EW: I can just kind of . . . It’s not that it gets any easier, but I can at least laugh at it and go, “Oh well, here goes this thing again. Alright.”

PS: All right. Next question is kind of something that was my original dissertation topic that I talked about with you in the first place. But I’ll apply it to you specifically. How do you feel about the performances of your compositions? Are you a controlling type of individual that’s very particular about how the music is treated, or are you comfortable with giving free reign to each performance?

EW: Yeah . . . I mean . . .

PS: In other words, maybe this will ask it better. But, how does one best interpret your intentions for the performance of your work.
EW:  (*lip buzz/sigh*) God . . . uh . . . musically I guess.

(laughter)

Um . . . yeah . . . I’m a total control freak. Nobody ever does it right except for me. And you know, occasionally somebody will do something that’s even better than I thought, but that’s very, very rare. Uh, most of the time it’s just nice to sit and hear a very competent version of the music. But, um, it’s so intertwined with me . . . it’s like I can’t give it away. There are pieces now that I’ve heard, I don’t know, thousands of times, so part of me has gotten better with sort of hearing them in all kinds of different ways . . . and detach myself from it. But, for instance, if given the choice, that I can’t imagine a single circumstance where I wouldn’t conduct. It’s just too hard for me to sit out in the audience and say, “Ah, a little more of this and a little less of that.” I know that’s not great for conductors. It probably scares the hell out of them, but um . . .

(laughter)

PS:  Yeah.

EW:  It’s just the way it is. You know . . .

PS:  So . . . “musically” is your answer. Do you try to be very specific in the score itself to show exactly what you want? Or how do we look beyond what’s there to figure it out. Just have to be musical?

EW:  I don’t put a lot of markings in my scores because I feel that it . . . I actually feel that it’s not great for the performance. Conductors will tell you, “No. We need as much information as possible.” But my experience has been that it sort-of makes for a robotic reading. And then people get very exact. But then there’s a piano here and a *mezzo forte* there and a *crescendo* here and it’s all just like it is on the page, but you can’t really define the stuff. And you know from experience, it’s like, how big is the size of the choir? What’s the room like? How good are they? What’s the audience like? Where is this on the program? Every one of these things totally changes the piece itself. So now what I try to do is, when I compose, I try to make it inherent in the actual notes. So that if it’s going to be *forte*, it’s written *forte*, so that in a way you can’t possibly sing it *piano*. It has to be performed *forte*. And if it’s going to slow down or move in a certain way, then the music and the text is designed already so even kind of a monkey can do it. “Sleep” is like that I think, and, “Lux.” And even “This Marriage.” These are pieces that are like . . . most relatively competent conductors can pull these pieces off. Because in a way they’re conductor-proof.
PS: Cool. O.K. A great majority of your compositions are written for SATB divisi groups. Most.

EW: Yep.

PS: Like, almost all. Is there any particular reason you haven’t written any compositions for male ensembles or more compositions for female ensembles?

EW: I get asked by men’s groups all the time. I mean, ALL the time. I just don’t have anything really to say with men’s groups. I love the sound. I just don’t even know what I would do really. You know I made that “Lux” version for men. It works O.K. But, and I don’t know what that is . . . I don’t know why I need the women’s voices or the higher partials. Because you know it’s the same thing with the women’s chorus. I just don’t know what the heck I would say with just women. I don’t know why I need the whole palate there. Maybe the problem is that I generally think choral music as a cappella.

PS: Sure.

EW: That that’s my favorite way to write. I’m not a big fan of a piano at all. You know, if it were up to me, then I would write for string quartet and women’s voices. That’s interesting. Or string orchestra and men’s voices. That’s interesting. The problem is they’d never get performed. Ever.

PS: I don’t know. I think the string and women’s thing would work.

EW: Yeah, but I mean. So what would we get? Maybe twenty or thirty performances a year? Maybe.

PS: I think you’d get more. Actually “Five Hebrew Love Songs” is really great.

EW: Thank you. It’s a perfect example. So, I just got my statement from Walton. The pieces that are published with Walton, last year I sold 105,000 copies. 11 pieces. Thirty-one of those were the string quartet version of the “Hebrew Love Songs.”

PS: Really.

EW: Yeah. That’s the SATB version. Four of those were with women.

PS: Wow.

EW: That’s what I’m talkin’ about. So it’s like . . . it’s not that I’m only writing to make sure that it gets performed a bazillion times, but if I’m going to work so hard on something, I want it to be relevant, you know?
PS: I find that interesting. Because when we did that for the regional, for the state convention three years ago here, four years ago, and that was the talk of the convention.

EW: Yeah. Well it’s different. It’s one thing for it to be a big splashy thing and it’s another thing for people to actually do it.

PS: Well they said they were going to do it. That’s what’s interesting. I’m surprised.

EW: Yeah. But it’s hard to get a string quartet. You know?

PS: Well we did it with just the violin and piano.

EW: Well, now that version gets performed all the time. And that’s why I did it that way. But a string quartet . . . getting four good players together . . . that’s very hard. Also, it’s’ out of the wheelhouse of almost all choral conductors. They’re frightened to death of those strings and they don’t know how to talk to them or what to do with them.

PS: I actually really wanted to do the quartet version, but I thought I would do this because it would do exactly what you said, it would be a more open opportunity for other people to do it.

EW: Yeah. Which is why everyone does it. So it’s a big issue. It’s a kind of pragmatic issue. So I guess those are the kinds of things . . . The thing with an SATB chorus, and there’s a bazillion of them, and people will do it so the piece can be alive.

PS: Well, I want to encourage you to work for those SSAA . . . AA . . . SS . . .

(laughter)

. . . extended whatever. If it ever comes to you, let me know.

EW: I will.

PS: Because it’s a huge success. My women have loved . . . we did “She Weeps Over Rahoon” and we did “Five Hebrew Love Songs” and loved it. I also was going to ask you about “Little Birds” ’cause I know you did an SSA version of that originally.

EW: I did. And then I . . . the SATB version is kind of . . . it’s not different, but it’s really reworked. And so the SSA version I want to do some day but I have to go back in and rework it. It’s not just as easy as publishing the version that I originally wrote.
PS: So it’s not what you would want to put out there at this point?

EW: Yeah. That’s right. And it would take some work and my head’s just not really there right now.

PS: Sure. Well, keep me posted on that one.

EW: (chuckle) I will.

PS: And I’ll ask one more question, ‘cause if I don’t ask this I’ll get in serious trouble about, you know, the composition thing. But is there a solo version of “Five Hebrew Love Songs” published?

EW: Not published.

PS: O.K.

EW: Everybody asks. And generally what I’ll do . . . I have a copy here that’s all highlighted that people can, whenever they write to me, then I just send them a copy of the highlighted version of the SATB version, you know, showing them what to do. And then they just sing that. I should publish it.

PS: Yeah. When we did the SA version with the Women’s Choir, I had five of them immediately say, “How can I get that, ‘cause I want to do that for my senior recital?”

EW: I know. I know. It’s another one of those things. I’m kind of interested in writing for solo voice. I should do that. The problem again with writing for solo voice is that you always have to write for that damn piano. And I mean, it’s O.K. It’s just such a pain in the ass to write for piano and it always kind of sounds . . . I don’t know . . . it just sounds like piano. I so much more prefer the sound of strings, for instance. But again, like we said, if you do a piece for soprano and quartet, you’re gonna get three performances. (chuckle)

PS: Yeah. Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but . . . O.K. When I was at Miami, we premiered the “Five Hebrew Love Songs” with the string quartet version and we started working on your introductory phase of Paradise Lost. My question is, why has this opera been such an important project to you?

(Huge laughter)

Besides the fact that you’re invested that big in time now . . .

EW: The project that will never die.
PS: And what are you able to musically share through this medium that you can’t share through your previous choral or instrumental compositions?

EW: Hum. Well, _Paradise Lost_ for me has just been . . . it’s all ‘learning curve.’ And I think that’s one of the reasons I’m attracted to it. You know I started off thinking that I was going to write some kind of cool, kind of opera weird thing. And then more and more started learning about story and live theater. And music theater. Not necessarily musicals, but music theater. And that just fascinates me. And the idea of writing for that stuff. So it’s been changed so many times you can’t imagine. Complete reworking of the story and the music. I’ve probably thrown out two-hours worth of music. Mostly, I still think it’s just a great idea. At least that’s the way I used to think, is that it’s all about the concept. All this cool music and these angels. But now I think, it’s a great story. What’s that?

PS: It’s a very cool story.

EW: Yeah. About a year ago, David Noroña dropped out of the project as a writer . . . amicably. We’d just sort of come to a creative impasse. He felt like he had nothing left to contribute. We were really stuck. And so I started writing. And I personally rewrote the entire book and about 50 or 70% of the lyrics over the past year. This is just what we presented at Northwestern a month ago. Oh, the thing you saw.

PS: Right.

EW: That process has really changed me as a . . . I felt like I grew volumes as an artist . . . just learning how to do it. It’s nice to, to feel like I’m taking baby steps again. You know, like with the choral music now, the things pretty polished and I’ve had some success . . . and so it’s kind of that thing. But writing music theater, the book and everything . . . it’s like I’m a complete novice. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. And it seems to me now the work kind of has a . . . it’s got that same rawness that I had when I first started writing music . . . where I kind of don’t know what I’m doing, but in a way that’s a strength. And that’s exciting to me. And I guess I made this decision a year ago that I’m going to will this thing into existence. That, I’m going to make this happen if it’s the last thing I do. It’s sort of now a personality thing for me.

PS: “I’m going to finish this.”

EW: Yeah, you know what I mean? And not only finish it, but this is going to be what I always imagined it’s going to be. It’s going to be on Broadway. People are going to buy the album. It’s gonna shake things up. All of those things. I just won’t take “No” for an answer.
PS: Cool. I think you already sort of answered this. Do you struggle with writing a composition or is it more second nature?

EW: No. It’s awful. Every single one. It’s just awful. (chuckle) The seed for it is totally natural. You know, I got the ideas and I got all these melodies and things floating around, but sitting down and committing it to paper is so difficult for me. It's excruciating. Every time.

PS: Do you have . . . this is something I sort of asked earlier . . . Do you think you have a signature trademark? We sort of talked about it. But do you feel like there’s anything there? Like if you . . .

EW: Not on purpose. I mean there’s obviously things I tend to do, right? Kind of these things.

PS: Like is there a specific chord you use frequently? Is there . . .

EW: Yeah. There’s a bunch of those. They’re kind of all over the place. Where I’m either quoting myself or quoting an idea. You know, like there’s that opening chord of “Cloudburst.” That chord is sprinkled all over the place. It even shows up in the opera.

PS: Yeah. I noticed several spots.

EW: Yeah, yeah. And so, yeah I do that kind of thing where I’m quoting myself all the time. And I guess I have a certain kind of sound. Obviously, the clusters . . . that’s the one everybody points to. Also I tend to do these kind of pyramid cluster things, right, where you start with a single note and then everyone goes up a scale in a way and holds a different note. I guess those are my signatures. I don’t think about it when I’m doing it like, “Oh, here comes the big Eric Whitacre moment.”

PS: Yeah, I don’t expect that I guess. Well you sort of answered this too, but how do you make use of dissonance in your compositions?

EW: You know, it’s funny. I never think of it as dissonance. It doesn’t seem dissonant at all to me. It just seems beautiful. And then everybody else asks me, they say you know, “Ah, but the chords are so dissonant, but they still sound nice.” To me there not dissonant, they’re just . . . yeah . . . I don’t know if I’ve completely lost my ability to tell anymore. Like a C major chord with an F in it sounds just like a C major chord to me in a way. (laughter) I can’t tell anymore.

PS: That’s kind of scary. I think that’s why I really appreciate your music too because that’s how I think. I’ve always thought that way. I don’t think in a real
theoretical approach to what I’m doing. It’s . . . this is the sound I’m listening to . . . this is what I hear . . . this is what I like.

EW: Yeah. And you like it, right.

PS: Yeah.

EW: Yeah. That’s right.

PS: We talked about texts, so I think that’s done.

EW: Phillip, you’ll have to forgive me, I’ve got like three more minutes. If that’s possible.

PS: Yep. That’s what I was just going to say. I think we covered actually those three pages of questions.

EW: Wow. Great.

PS: Yeah. I’ve been trying to push it ahead and make sure we get there. I have a couple of other things that I needed to ask, but I think what I’ll do is email them to you.

EW: O.K.

PS: Because they’re very specific, simple things like . . . I’m just double-checking some information, ‘cause what I’m doing as part of the dissertation is writing a little bit about each of your works, ‘cause I’m doing a total collection of all of your works to date . . . for choral music. So I’ve got the title and the poet, the poem, the language (that’s all on there). If it’s from a collection, the publisher, the date that it was written. Most of them I have because I’ve gotten them from your website, but there are a couple that I just had questions about.

EW: O.K.

PS: Voicing (most of that I have . . . find two), Ranges I’ve dealt with, Instrumentation, Meter, Tempo, keys, and then this is what I’ve needed to ask you about but, I’ve also included a lot of your insights and quoting things from your website that you’ve stated about the works or in covers of the works.

EW: Right.

PS: So basically that’s what’s there. And there are just a few things like the date it was composed and some insights possibly from some things. There’s three pieces I don’t have that are brand new. I do have one of the pieces, but I don’t have much information about . . . like “A Boy and a Girl.” I don’t have . . . do you
know what, and this is what I’ll email you, but just about the poem, when it was composed and then just any insights on that.

EW: Sure, sure.

PS: And then I don’t have “Her Sacred Spirit Soars” and “This Marriage.” Are they published already?

EW: “This Marriage” is. But if you just send an email to Craig, and he’ll send you everything you need.

PS: Great.

EW: You’ve got all that stuff.

PS: That would be great, ‘cause that’s that only things I don’t have yet and I really would like to be as complete as possible . . .

EW: Yeah. Absolutely.

PS: I would like this to really be a good service to you as well, so . . .

EW: Thanks Phillip.

PS: So, yeah, I really appreciate your taking your time . . .

EW: Yeah. Absolutely. And thank you for working so long and hard on this.

PS: Well, I’m wanting to bring this to a close. It’s kind of like your opera, I’m thinking. You know, I just need to finish this.

EW: I know the feeling. All right well, I’ll look forward to your email then.

PS: Great and I hope we can stay in touch. I really, really appreciate it and I’ll give you any of this stuff when it’s kind of completed and let you take a look at it too. So, thanks very, very much.

EW: All right. Take care buddy.


EW: Bye, bye.
Gene —

The title of the piece will be:

"Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine".

The piece will be sung in English and Italian (the Italian is Leonardo's own writings).

I already have some great sketches. Hope you like it...

Have a safe trip!

Eric
Alone in his workshop once again,
Surrounded by parchments and sketches,
Master Leonardo da Vinci dreams of a flying machine...

L'uomo colle sua congegniata e grandi ali,
faccendo forza contro alla resistente aria,
vincendo potere
soggirare a levarsi sopra di lei.

As the candles burn low he paces and writes,
Releasing purchased pigeons one by one
Into the golden Tuscan sunrise...

Vedi l'ale percorsa contro all'aria
fanno sostenere la pesante aquila
sulla superba sottile aria
vicina all'elemento del fuoco.

Tortured by visions of flight and falling,
More wondrous and terrible each than the last,
Master Leonardo perfects his design for a machine
Which will carry a man to the sky...

I believe that if this instrument
is well-manufactured,
that is, if it is made of linen cloth,
the pores of which have been closed with starch,
and if the device is promptly reversed,
the screw will engage its gear when in the air
and it will rise up on high.

Images of wings and frame and screw, confused and disjointed,
Spring from the Master's pen.

Molla di corso, o di ferro
ligata sul legno di salice incassato della canna.
Prima prima le foglie della cancellaria.
Un pancone d'abete ligato in sotto.
Fustagno. Taffeta. Filo. Carta...
Se stia sul tetto al lato della torre,
que' dal turbino non vedano.

At last, his notebooks filled with ingenious design,
Master Leonardo discovers the secret artifices
Whereby a man can be carried into glory...

Le pennne avranno li omini
siccome gli uccelli intrezzo il cielo;

Feathers will raise men
as they do birds, towards heaven.
April 2, 2000

Gene,

Can’t begin to tell you how excited I am to be working on this project!

I’ve enclosed a contract in duplicate. Please sign one copy and return it to me. The dedication (as listed in the contract) can read something different if you like... I wasn’t sure if it was the Raymond W. Brock Foundation, or Commissioning Fund, or something else. Easy to change. I’ll begin work on the piece as soon as I receive the first installment.

I’ve also included a CD of four works. **Cloudburst** (which you know); **Water Night** (commissioned by The Dale Warland Singers); **little tree** (commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony Chorus); and **When David Heard** (commissioned by the Barlow Foundation). **little tree** is performed by the S.F. Symphony Chorus, and the other three are performed by the BYU singers.

Again, I am thrilled to receive such a prestigious commission, and am honored and overwhelmed by your generosity.

Warmest regards,

Eric Whitacre
Gene,

Wanted to see if you received the package I sent and are happy with the terms of the commission. I can’t tell you how excited I am for this project, and already have a few ideas cooking.

It looks like I am going to become the composer-in-residence for the Pacific Chorale. Great group, great people... I can’t wait.

Hope this e-mail finds you happy and healthy.

Eric
APPENDIX D.1: WHITACRE QUESTION RESPONSES:

BARBARA HARLOW

From: Barbara Harlow <bharlow@sbmp.com>
Date: March 20, 2006 4:30:29 PM CST
To: "Phillip A. Swan" <phillip.a.swan@lawrence.edu>
Subject: Re: Eric Whitacre dissertation

Hi Barbara,

My name is Phillip Swan. This is now my fourth year of teaching at Lawrence
University's Conservatory of Music in Appleton, WI, where I direct the Women's Choir,
teach courses in conducting and music education, and supervise choral student teachers.
I have been working on my doctoral essay through the University of Miami for the past
several years and am now making a valiant attempt to complete this final portion of my
degree. My topic is "The Choral Music of Eric Whitacre".

As the premise for my study, I believe that it is important to archive information about
significant living composers. Documentation on many composers is often limited,
leaving us with the need to make "educated guesses" about interpretation of their
compositions. It is my desire to catalog information about Eric Whitacre, which will be
the beginning of a permanent record of his work. I believe that a better understanding of
the musical score and particularly of the composer will be a valuable aid to conductors as
they grapple with the interpretation of Whitacre's music.

Through my research and discussions with Eric, you appear to have been an important
influence in his life. In order to better document Eric's life, education, compositional
style and process, and external influences, I believe it is important to hear your
perspective on his life and music. Would you please take a few moments to answer the
following questions? Your prompt reply will be greatly appreciated. If it would be better
for you to answer these questions through a telephone conversation, I will be happy to
call you when this is convenient. Please tell me how and when to contact you at your
earliest convenience. Thanks in advance for your assistance. I eagerly await your
response.

Phillip Swan

Eric is a natural business man and a very creative person-a rare combination of talents
and skills. I heard the UNLV choir sing GO LOVELY ROSE at a convention in Hawaii -
- he then was a singer in the choir. I did what any publisher with ears would have done: I
offered him my card and said I'd like to publish this piece. Subsequently, I suggested he
compose two more flower songs to create a set.
Eric's talent was obvious—he has great drama in his music. It moves people and leaves an impression on them, much as he does with his charismatic personality.

The business man Eric soon took hold. We were then a fledging publishing company. He and his wife came to visit me bringing flowers. In reality, I think he wanted to see our operation. No big building, we were an office with 2 computers. Soon he moved on to venerable Walton Music. As his fame grew, I offered to re-release the Three Flower Songs, he did some editing on them, we designed new covers, and re-issued them indicating in the scores that some revisions had been made. He was very receptive to this idea and very cooperative. At this time, he said he would be sending me some new pieces—he never did.

Recently, I received an email from Eric. He now has his own publishing company and he desperately wanted to buy back all rights to the Three Flower Songs. I could not offer him this opportunity—it would be precedent setting—if we did this on demand to any or all of our composers it could spell the death of our company. I have been told by the owner of Walton, he made the same request of her—she too denied him.

And so we pay royalties to Eric Whitacre Inc. and do whatever is needed to fulfill our duties as the publisher of his first three pieces. It will be interesting to see how Eric fairs now that he is responsible for the marketing of all of his new choral publications. Many young composers look up to him. Some are beginning to question their idol, probably because they have none of the business skills he possesses, little of the far-flung ambition, and certainly not the fast-forward drive that Eric possesses in abundance.

I wish Eric well in all he does and feel privileged to have his first three pieces in our catalog. Only time can judge how he fares in the annals of great composers.

Barbara Harlow

PS - I have on file here Andrew Lloyd Larson's dissertation on Eric - U of Illinois, 2004. I assume you have already consulted this.

How did you meet Eric Whitacre?

What is your relationship with Eric?

What do you believe are Eric's strengths as a composer?

What are his weaknesses?

As the publisher Eric's first choral work, you have an invaluable perspective on his early compositional years. Would you be willing to share any insights on your collaboration with Eric?

From a publisher's perspective, is he easy or difficult to work with?
Is he "punctual" and "on time" in meeting deadlines for publication?

What are your personal feelings about his music? Does his music influence you in any way?

Why did you choose to publish "Go Lovely Rose?" Why were you drawn to this composition?

What is your favorite Whitacre composition? (Please identify and explain why?)

Are there any of his compositions you do not like? (Please identify and explain why?)

What type of contribution do you believe Eric has made to the musical world?

Do you believe that Eric's music will "stand the test of time?" Why or why not?

Please share a personal story(s) that may shed light on Eric's personality or character.

--

Barbara Harlow, President
Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc.
Dedicated to nurturing the choral art

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WEBSITE: http://www.sbmp.com
APPENDIX D.2: WHITACRE QUESTION RESPONSES:

GUNILLA LUBOFF

The Choral Music Of Eric Whitacre
Responses to questionnaire from Gunilla Luboff, Walton Music, to:

Phillip A. Swan
Associate Director of Choral Studies
Conservatory of Music
Lawrence University
Appleton, WI 54912
office: (920) 993-6282
fax: (920) 993-6284

How did you meet Eric Whitacre?
Eric Whitacre's first two publications with Walton were brought to us in the mid-nineties, by two influential educators: Dr. Jo-Michael Scheibe (“Cloudburst”) and Dr. Dale Warland ("Water Night") and published in their respective choral series. Both works were contracted by Walton Music without me having had the opportunity of meeting the composer in person. When Eric's new work "When David Heard" was being premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York with Dr. Ronald Staheli conducting the Brigham Young University Concert Choir, I traveled to New York to finally meet Eric and hear the choir sing Eric’s music. It became a landmark experience, both for Walton Music and its publisher, as we finally met and sat down in a deli on Broadway to map out future collaboration.

What is your relationship with Eric?
I am the proud publisher of 12 landmark Whitacre choral works 1996-2003. In the late fall of 2003, our professional relationship changed as Eric responded to a growing urge to become his own publisher. He made the decision that future works from that point were to be offered in the composer’s own catalog. However, faced with such a ‘divorce’, I believe strongly in the parties maintaining a friendship for the benefit of the ‘children’ – in this case the Whitacre works entrusted to Walton. I enjoy supporting them and seeing them grow and concur the world, and I think Eric knows that I love them just as he does.

What do you believe are Eric’s strengths as a composer?
I believe others can speak to this subject with more authority than I. But for me - the way he understands the relation between poetry and music is astonishing! The words of Octavio Paz have opened the minds of so many singers through Eric’s rich and wonderful settings of the Paz’ poems. And the intimacy of the Five Hebrew Love Songs is surely supported by the impressionist poems of Hila, Eric’s wife, making this set of miniatures precious and playful.

What are his weaknesses?
Again – I will leave for others to address this question. Personally, I don’t believe in
exploring weaknesses in other people. A composer, like all artists, needs all the support that can be offered in the creative process to bring out the strength of the artist, so dwelling on weakness does little good in my opinion.

As the publisher for the majority of Eric's works, you have had a great deal of interaction with him. Would you be willing to share any insights on your collaboration with Eric?

Our years of collaboration were truly unique for me, as we were both in some ways searching and in the process of developing our respective professions. Eric’s language and voice as a composer appealed immediately to the young choral community, who responded by including the artistically challenging “Water Night” in its high school repertoire, over time making it his most successful choral work. We shared many inspiring conversations discussing dreams and hopes for future publishing projects, eventually arriving at a full dozen works. His Walton publications continue to give me great pride and pleasure and I think fondly of Eric as the inspired (and inspiring!) young composer, filled by music still unsung. I will be following his future career with great curiosity!

From a publisher's perspective, is he easy or difficult to work with?
If indeed Eric was difficult to work with in the past, he most surely would have been in his right to be so. If, indeed Eric was not ‘punctual’ in the publishing process, I would have mostly forgotten about it or determined that a good thing would be worth waiting for!

Is he "punctual" and "on time" in meeting deadlines for publication?
See above!

Were you involved in the snafu regarding "Stopping By Woods" / "Sleep"? If so, please share your perspective on this situation.
It was a most unfortunate situation, passionately described in detail by Eric himself in the program notes on the inside cover of ‘Sleep’. In brief, the problem originated with Eric’s belief that the copyright for the poem was in the public domain, since there had been a great number of choral settings published in recent time. Eric had taken on a commission to set the text and delivered a wonderful blend of poem and music to me for publication. As a result of a routine research, we found that the Estate of Robert Frost had stipulated that permission for publication had to be obtained. After numerous letters to the firm representing the rights, supported by endorsements from prominent conductors and scholars, as well as publisher colleagues, I realize that publication would not be possible. Eric was, understandably, even more upset than I by this fact and the email and phone remained silent for a period of time, until one day he shared with me the good news that he had circumvented the problem by contacting his good friend and poet, Charles Anthony Silvestri and asked him to write a new poem to the already existing music – one of the most challenging tasks a poet can undertake. The result speaks for itself – ‘Sleep’ became rapidly one of the most successful of Eric’s works, joining ‘Cloudburst’ and ‘Water Night’ as a clear favorite with choirs around the world.
What are your personal feelings about his music? Does his music influence you in any way?
Spiritual, inspiring, moving, setting a bench mark for the ears. For me Eric’s lush writing is etched into the musical memory together with a small number of select composers with distinctly personal voice. It will continue to offer a wonderful reference point for a long time yet.

Why did you choose to publish his works? What was the first publication?
See response to first question.

What is your favorite Whitacre composition? (Please identify and explain why?)
Without a doubt ‘Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine’. Within the extended work format it gives the composer and his librettist Charles Anthony Silvestri time to develop several themes and musical styles, from Monteverdi to playful almost-bossa-nova. The libretto is ingenious, like a stage drama, setting the scene of the tribulations of Leonardo da Vinci and interpreting the mood of the Maestro while he pursues his dream of flying… it is amazing how Eric and his librettist brings us into the mind of Leonardo da Vinci. It is equally exciting every time I hear the work performed. For me, ‘Leonardo…’ is also deeply personal, as it represents a seal on our friendship, with Eric graciously adding a few lovely words of dedication to his publisher in the program notes.

Are there any of his compositions you do not like? (Please identify and explain why?)
No - impossible! They all have their different strengths and tone of voice, all well crafted. You just have to open your ears and let the music in.

What type of contribution do you believe Eric has made to the musical world?
I think that from the very start he was able to capture the needs and the moods of his time and he continues to do so. He has further documented his style in so many ways: in choral works, symphonic band pieces, instrumental writing, and in his opera-in-progress project, ‘Paradise Lost’. In 2003 in New York I saw him conduct it in a concert version, with his wife Hila in the leading role – and with a computer on the music stand, no less. A man on the cutting edge, for sure!

Do you believe that Eric’s music will “stand the test of time?” Why or why not?
Yes, I believe it will – provided that he gives room in his life for the purity and the depth of writing what is in his heart. It is a fragile situation, which seems to require room in time and space. Keeping your eyes on the ball is not always easy. But I trust Eric will be able to maintain a balance among his many callings and let the passion continue to lead him to beautiful, timeless and indispensable music!
Please share a personal story(s) that may shed light on Eric’s personality or character.
I have said enough – his music will speak for him. I am just deeply grateful to have been in the right place at the right time to offer the nurturing of a publisher to a talent that has already touched so many hearts and minds.

*Gunilla Luboff, publisher*
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writeus@waltonmusic.com (editorial office)
bynumite@aol.com (personal email)
Phillip,
My answers are interspersed with yours in all caps. I hope that's OK. I would be happy to chat with you about any of these answers if you need more...
Tony

On Mar 19, 2006, at 10:39 PM, Phillip A. Swan wrote:

Hi Tony,

My name is Phillip Swan. This is now my fourth year of teaching at Lawrence University’s Conservatory of Music in Appleton, WI, where I direct the Women’s Choir, teach courses in conducting and music education, and supervise choral student teachers. I have been working on my doctoral essay through the University of Miami for the past several years and am now making a valiant attempt to complete this final portion of my degree. My topic is “The Choral Music of Eric Whitacre”.

As the premise for my study, I believe that it is important to archive information about significant living composers. Documentation on many composers is often limited, leaving us with the need to make “educated guesses” about interpretation of their compositions. It is my desire to catalog information about Eric Whitacre, which will be the beginning of a permanent record of his work. I believe that a better understanding of the musical score and particularly of the composer will be a valuable aid to conductors as they grapple with the interpretation of Whitacre’s music.

Through my research and discussions with Eric, you appear to have been an important influence in his life. In order to better document Eric’s life, education, compositional style and process, and external influences, I believe it is important to hear your perspective on his life and music. Would you please take a few moments to answer the following questions? Your prompt reply will be greatly appreciated. If it would be better for you to answer these questions through a telephone conversation, I will be happy to call you when this is convenient. Please tell me how and when to contact you at your earliest convenience. Thanks in advance for your assistance. I eagerly await your response.

Phillip Swan
How did you meet Eric Whitacre?
We met in Las Vegas. I was taking a year off from my doctoral work—had just taken my quals and wanted to avoid starting my dissertation for a bit. So I went to live at home for a year, and I joined the choir at UNLV. We interested each other and started hanging out. I seemed so much older than everyone else in the group, but Eric was different. We clicked right away.

What is your relationship with Eric?
Simply put, he's my best friend and soul brother.

What do you believe are Eric’s strengths as a composer?
Eric won't admit it, but he is a channel for god. His music is so beautiful, and he understands people so well. He knows what sounds will be most effective. He is charismatic and attractive as a person, and his music is filled with that charisma.

What are his weaknesses?
Some say that his music all sounds alike, or "there's that Whitacre chord"—but he's no Lauridsen or Arvo Pärt when it comes to writing music that all sounds alike. Don't get me wrong—I love Lauridsen's music, and part—I could listen to the Lux cd or the Passio all day. But Eric's music isn't like that, although it does have a recognizable sound to it.

What type of contribution do you believe Eric has made to the musical world?
I think he has made a lasting contribution to the repertoire, that's sure. But he is also changing the way opera sounds, the ways music is published and distributed, and the ways technology can be harnessed to help a composer in creative and business ways.

Do you believe that Eric’s music will “stand the test of time?” Why or why not?
Absolutely yes. You can't sell hundreds of thousands of copies of sheet music and not stand the test. There are a core of pieces that will remain in the repertoire—Water Night, Sleep, Lux, for sure. An example of one that will not be as often performed is Leonardo. It's hard and esoteric. When David Heard, I think might also slip away.

As the lyricist for a few of Eric's compositions, please share your personal insights about your collaboration with Eric?
I love the challenge of creating text for him to set. He makes such exquisite music, that I know what I craft will have a life past when I send it off. I can't be guaranteed that with any other composer. Eric is open and forgiving in collaboration, but aggressive when his musical idea is strong. Our most organic collaboration was with Leonardo. I can say that the music changed from its original form as much as the text did. We really worked together to create that piece, while respecting each other's domains.

How difficult was it to "retrofit" the lyrics for "Sleep" into the existing music for "Stopping By Woods?"
To be honest, I didn't think about it much. I jumped into that project with both feet, and that is the poem that came out after just a short time. I was careful to preserve what I needed to preserve, and mimic the sounds, vowel qualities and singability. It was
surprisingly easy, but I don’t think I could do as good a job if I tried it again! I just look forward to our next challenge.

Please share a personal story(s) that may shed light on Eric’s personality or character.
I'll think about this one and get back to you.

AGAIN, IF you want anything more than what I have typed here, just ask. I can elaborate on whatever.

Tony
APPENDIX D.4: WHITACRE QUESTION RESPONSES:

DAVID NOROÑA

From: david norona <dnorona@sbcglobal.net>
Date: March 22, 2006 1:08:34 PM CST
To: Phillip A. Swan <phillip.a.swan@lawrence.edu>
Subject: Re: Eric Whitacre dissertation

Phillip,

Hope this finds you well, and thanks for the kind words about Sterling. I've got a newborn and a two-year-old and I'm in the middle of pilot season, so I won't be available for a phone conversation. Hope these answers below do the trick.

How did you meet Eric Whitacre?
Eric and I met about eight years ago through Hershel Felder, a pianist, performer and expert networker here in Los Angeles. We were both invited over to Hershey's house for coffee and we hit it off immediately. We've been best of friends, brothers really, and creative partners ever since.

What is your relationship with Eric?
Best friends, and creative blood brothers, really. I think I'm really the only person Eric has ever allowed to enter his creative process: that's usually such a personal place for him. Our relationship is honest, direct, respectful, though not without moments of tension, as you would expect in any kind of collaborative marriage.

What do you believe are Eric’s strengths as a composer?
His strength is his simplicity. Though harmonically some might argue that the music is quite complex, I would say that the underlying intention, the motifs, variations, repetition, make his music simple in the best of ways: simple, but layered; accessible yet warranting many, many a listening.

What are his weaknesses?
There aren't any. His music is unlike any I've ever heard, though inspired, I understand, by a few who've preceded him. But he's singular and he's unrelenting in his integrity, and it shows in every note. It's definitely not a weakness, but whatever this well is that he goes to fish out these ethereal, light-filled melodies and harmonies is definitely also a sad place. I think Eric is in constant tension with this underlying pain; he's trying to rise above it.

What are your personal feelings about his music? Does his music influence you in any way?
Both the music and the man have inspired me, do inspire me every day -- in all seriousness. I've never met anyone like Eric. He has a Midas touch -- a cocktail one part Herculean will and ten parts immense talent. I often think, when I'm making decisions
about my own creative endeavors and my career: what would Eric do in this situation. And I'm always flattered when he gives me a call and he runs something by me. Not only do we respect each other creatively, we also fancy ourselves pretty good business men: something not usually attributed to artist folk.

**What type of contribution do you believe Eric has made to the musical world?**
A voice: one at once contemporary and hauntingly mature, one which any listener falls in love with as quickly as a great pop tune and at the same time one you can listen to a hundred times and still be struck by to the very core of your heart. To this day I can't really listen to "When David Heard". I cried as if I'd lost my own son before I even had a child, and now that I have two I can't imagine listening to David's grief.

**Do you believe that Eric’s music will “stand the test of time?” Why or why not?**
Without a doubt Eric's music will continue to live like some kind of sublime virus. It's just simply good music: inspired and expertly constructed all at once.

**As a co-creator and collaborator for the original "Paradise Lost,” please share your basic process for writing the libretto. Was it collaborative? Was it difficult? How has the libretto changed since it's inception in 2001?**
Eric and I spent many years trying to answer that very question: how best to go about writing this groundbreaking piece? Do we do it like the classics: librettist hands in the libretto, composer cuts, pastes, edits as needed? Or do we do it like the tunesmiths of Broadway? Or do we do it like pop producers? In the end, we did all three, and all three worked and all three failed -- at some point. Our biggest setback was not having the story plotted out beforehand: a novice's mistake. The libretto has changed as much as the music: vastly. In the end, I handed my last draft over to Eric last year, we discussed the direction to take and Eric made the last pass. It's strikingly similar, yet much streamlined and improved. There are infinite amounts of both of us in every cell.

**Please share a personal story(s) that may shed light on Eric’s personality or character.**
Phillip, forgive me, but I'm out of time. Hope what I've written helps and much luck to you.

David