

Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

Writing and conducting exquisitely beautiful music for choruses, orchestras and bands around the world, **Eric Whitacre** (b. 1970) has achieved a level of devotion from his fans usually reserved for pop icons and movie stars. His pursuit of music only began in earnest while he was an undergraduate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, when he had the transformative experience of singing in a choir for the first time. On the strengths of his earliest pieces, he earned a coveted slot at the Juilliard School.

Whitacre did not set out to be a choral composer specifically, but in the way that success tends to be self-reinforcing, each early triumph led to bigger and bigger opportunities, until he was a global sensation with a chart-topping, Grammy-winning debut album on Decca Records. In the same period, he was perfecting ways to leverage emerging technology to bring his ardent followers together in virtual choirs, merging the video recordings of thousands of singers from hundreds of countries into gorgeous composite performances that have been viewed millions of times. In recent years, Whitacre has been appearing more and more often on the programs of major symphony orchestras, both as a composer and as a conductor of his own music. His 2023 guest appearance with the Louisville Orchestra, where he conducted Mozart's Requiem for the first time, marked another new chapter in his ever-expanding musicianship.

A commission from the Cincinnati Pops and National Symphony Orchestra led Whitacre to compose the **Prelude in C** in 2022. In this "tribute to Bach," Whitacre explained, he "uses all the chord changes from the famous Prelude in C from The *Well-Tempered Clavier*, only stretched out and slowed down—like smearing ink across a canvas."

When violinist Anne Akiko Meyers called Whitacre to request a new piece featuring her as soloist, he began a process that took an unexpected turn in the face of cataclysmic events. In an interview with program annotator Aaron Grad, Whitacre described the origins of *The Pacific Has No Memory*, which debuted in a Carnegie Hall performance by Meyers and Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.

"I was in Los Angeles," Whitacre explained, "watching the fires unfold, when I met with two friends who had lost everything. I mean, *everything*. They made it out with a couple of plastic bags. And they had this look in their eyes that's impossible to describe. I'd never seen this emotion on a person before. Somehow losing everything to fire is different than almost any other kind of thing you might go through, because it's just gone. I wasn't prepared to experience that, and I was haunted by the look in their eyes.

"That night, I was lying in bed, and this sweet little melody was singing in my head. I can think of only two or three other times where an event happened, and I had the thought to respond with music. It's usually murkier than that, and more distant. I had already done a lot of work on a piece for Anne Akiko Meyers that I was reluctant to put down, but the next day I wrote to her and said, 'I've got this thing in my heart. Can we do a hard pivot?'

“The visual image that kept coming back to me is from the end of *The Shawshank Redemption*. I can remember seeing that film in a theater, and the entire movie is shot in a prison, in grays and browns—dark, hard colors. And then when Morgan Freeman’s character finally makes it to the Pacific, I remember actually feeling it on my eyes, because we hadn’t seen that gentle blue color for two hours. That’s the overriding image in my mind: the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, and how soft and healing it seemed. The title comes from a line in the movie that Tim Robbins’ character says, that the Pacific ‘has no memory.’ There’s something about the Pacific Ocean; it’s really true that it absolves and dissolves.”

Growing up in a secular household, says Whitacre, “Movies were my religion,” and he often thinks of his works cinematically, as if he is “scoring a film that just hasn’t been made.” Before he broke into the elite ranks of film scoring (starting with a collaboration with Hans Zimmer on the score for *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*), he had a first taste of that industry when his friend and mentor Steven Schwartz—the composer of *Wicked* and *Godspell*—recommended Whitacre to a film studio, to be considered to score an animated adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s *The White Seal*. Taking inspiration from the opening poem in which a seal mother sings to her pup, a melody “came gushing out” of Whitacre, which he quickly notated and recorded as a demo for the film studio. That project ended up getting shelved, but Whitacre later adapted the sweet melody into *The Seal Lullaby* for choir and piano. When Anne Akiko Meyers asked for a version she could perform, Whitacre’s old Juilliard classmate Jonathan Newman created this arrangement featuring solo violin.

Besides choirs, another musical subculture that has embraced Whitacre from the start is the world of concert bands. When a high school band director organized a consortium of 30 schools to co-commission Whitacre, he wrote *October* for them in 2000, tailoring the music to be accessible to student performers. “It’s easy to write your way out of a difficult corner with flashy, virtuosic material,” says Whitacre, “but with ‘easier’ music your solutions must be simple, elegant, and functional. Frankly, writing ‘easy’ music is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” He went on to create an orchestral version that he debuted in a performance with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 2019. He took inspiration for the piece from his favorite month; “Something about the crisp autumn air and the subtle change in light always makes me a little sentimental,” he wrote, “and as I started to sketch I felt that same quiet beauty in the writing.”

Whitacre’s *Equus* also began as a concert band commission, and it was premiered in its original form by the University of Miami Wind Ensemble in 2000. The title—the Latin word for “horse”—reflects Whitacre’s desire “to write a *moto perpetuo*, a piece that starts running and never stops.” He describes his use of patterns and cycles in this piece as “dynamic minimalism,” where the repeated material serves to build energy and excitement over time.

As Whitacre was finishing his bachelor’s degree at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the band director there commissioned a piece for concert band that Whitacre worked on while pursuing his master’s degree at Juilliard. When the jury of professors at that elite

institution suggested to Whitacre that he “needed to write some serious music” (as opposed to the concert band music he was mostly writing those days), he came back with what he joked was his “infantile response to authority” in the form of *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas!*

This irreverent sendup of Las Vegas lounge music and Hollywood horror tropes follows a script that Whitacre developed himself. In the first part, Godzilla devours some of the most legendary acts on The Strip, including Frank Sinatra (represented by snippets “New York, New York”), Wayne Newton (“Danke Schoen”), and Liberace (cue the flamboyant strains of Tchaikovsky). In the second part, an army of Elvises battle the giant lizard, with an assist from the iconic Sphinx replica at the Luxor Hotel, ushering in some Arabic-tinged dance music.

One of the composers Whitacre most reveres is Mozart, not least for how “he could live in the stars and live in the gutter at the same time”—in other words, traversing from the most hallowed to the most hilarious music. It’s fitting then that Whitacre designed this program to leap from the cultural gutter of Las Vegas straight to the stars themselves in *Deep Field*, a piece “inspired by the world’s most famous space observatory, the Hubble Space Telescope, and its greatest discovery—the iconic Deep Field image. Turning its gaze to a tiny and seemingly dark area of space (around one 24-millionth of the sky) and left for a 10-day long exposure, the Hubble Space Telescope revealed over 3,000 galaxies that had never previously been seen, each one composed of hundreds of billions of stars.”

This ambitious project, co-commissioned by the Minnesota Orchestra and BBC Radio 3, grew into a multimedia extravaganza. Whitacre teamed up with scientists and video artists to produce an accompanying film that “illuminates the score by combining Hubble’s stunning imagery, including never-seen-before galaxy fly-bys, with bespoke animations to create an immersive, unforgettable journey from planet Earth to the furthest edges of our universe.” Whitacre also augmented the live orchestra and chorus with a virtual choir consisting of more than 8,000 singers from 120 countries, ranging in age from 4 to 87. To complete this all-encompassing sensory experience, even the audience becomes part of the performance, triggering electronic sounds on a smartphone app. (Download the Deep Field app now and wait for Eric’s cue from the conductor’s podium!)

All of these manifestations of Whitacre’s talent flow from his desire to connect people through music, and to cultivate presence. “I remember from the earliest times that I was singing in choir,” he recalled, “I would desperately be trying to hold onto a note. Then you hear other notes around you, especially in close harmony, and it takes every ounce of focus and concentration to stay on that note. And that actually is the fundamental of being present.” As he continues to bring his healing works into this modern world bereft of sacred rituals, it’s no wonder that the people who encounter Whitacre’s music often speak of it as a spiritual or religious experience.