

Eric Whitacre - Water Night (2012)

Written by bluesever (Bogdan Marszałkowski)
Friday, 10 July 2020 15:58 -

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1 *Alleluia* 9:25 2 *Equus* 9:02 3 *Oculi Omnium* 3:17 4 *The River Cam* 11:54 5 *Her Sacred Spirit Soars* 6:58 6 *Water Night* 6:06 7 *Goodnight Moon* 5:09 8 *When David Heard* 17:38 9 *Sleep, My Child* 6:22 Julian Lloyd Webber (cello) Hila Plitmann (soprano) Eric Whitacre Singers London Symphony Orchestra Eric Whitacre - conductor

I first encountered the music of Eric Whitacre back in 2006 when I reviewed a Hyperion disc of his vocal music. I was impressed both by the excellent performances by Polyphony and Stephen Layton and by the music. If you had invested in shares in Eric Whitacre plc at that point you would have seen a strong return on your money because since then his stock has soared – though I hasten to add that I'm sure my review played no part in that! Subsequently, I've encountered several individual pieces by him and, not long ago, I reviewed another disc devoted to his choral music. Whitacre has now become a Hot Property and, as such, has been snapped up by Decca, for whom this is his second disc: the first was reviewed last year by my colleague, William Hedley.

Most of the pieces on this disc are receiving their first recordings – the only ones previously recorded are *Her Sacred Spirit Soars* and *When David Heard*. I've heard the latter piece on two earlier discs. My first encounter with it was the Merton College Choir CD, *In The Beginning*. Anyone who has read that review will know that I was critical of the piece, which I believed was overlong for its material and, in its central section, seemed to rely too much on choral effects rather than genuine development. So why am I more enthusiastic about the piece in a performance that lasts 17:38 against 14:12 on the Merton College disc and an even shorter performance from the Elora Singers? There are two reasons. Firstly Whitacre himself takes the extensive central section a bit more broadly than his rivals. Crucially, however, he is much more daring in his treatment of the many silences or pauses that permeate this section, seeming to elongate many of them for a few seconds. He indicates in his booklet note that the silences are a key element in the score. In passing, I wonder if these are annotated in terms of beats or, as I suspect, left to the conductor's discretion. So even though Whitacre adds more than three

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minutes to the piece compared with the rival interpretations the result is, to my ears, much more convincing. Whitacre's direction of his own piece suggests – I may be wide of the mark here – that his music is an attempt to illustrate musically a grief that is so intense that it is difficult to articulate and therefore is expressed haltingly. I still think that perhaps this section is a bit too long but I now think I'm starting to 'get' the piece. The opening and closing passages are slow and full of grave emotion and the climax that follows the central section is intense yet has an air of nobility to it. Good though the other two performances are, this one is the best of the lot in terms of control of dynamics, sustaining the tension and sheer concentration. I'm converted.

In the autumn of 2011 Whitacre spent what was clearly a fruitful term at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University – he has now accepted an invitation to be composer-in-residence there for the next five years. Among the fruits of that association are two vocal works on this disc. *Oculi omnium* is a Latin grace, used at the College. Whitacre's short effective setting is for unaccompanied SATB choir although the male voices only get a look in towards the end, for the fivefold Amen. The opening piece in the programme may remind listeners of Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*. Just like Thompson, Whitacre sets just the one word for unaccompanied SATB choir. It's a good piece, featuring some very long vocal lines and it's beautifully written for voices. A nagging thought at the back of my mind is that it's a bit too long – perhaps a couple minutes less of music would not have been a serious loss – but I can see this becoming a 'hit' with choirs.

I've heard *Her Sacred Spirit Soars* several times before. It was written in association with an American Shakespeare festival and Whitacre's librettist, Charles Anthony Silvestri, has written a fine sonnet for him to set. Whitacre's music serves well the literary imagination of the words; there are some very rich choral textures here and the piece builds to an ecstatic setting of the final line. I don't think I've heard the piece done better than this present performance.

Up to now I've only encountered Whitacre's unaccompanied choral music. This disc offers a chance to sample some of his writing for orchestra. I'm afraid I don't hear much to set my pulse racing. *Equus* is a piece in which, in the composer's own words, "there are a LOT of notes". Indeed there are, but do all these notes achieve much? Whitacre says that he set out to write a *moto perpetuo* – in his 2011 revision he added strings to the scoring – and he calls the end result "dynamic minimalism". The piece is strongly rhythmic and, to be sure, there's a good deal of energy and surface excitement but, frankly, this sort of thing has been done many times over before by composers such as Michael Torke or, in some early works, John Adams. *Equus* is, arguably, twenty years too late and, to my ears, it's old hat.

The *River Cam* is, as its name suggests, another Cambridge piece, inspired by the composer's

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daily walks along the river banks. Commissioned by Julian Lloyd Webber, Whitacre says that this piece became, as he was writing it, “a ‘pastoral piece’, undeniably British, with serious echoes of Elgar and Vaughan Williams.” Those who know the music of those two composers might be forgiven for thinking that the result is, in fact, something of a pastiche. The songful nature of the cello is exploited but the string orchestra accompaniment is pretty uneventful and more of a pleasing backdrop than anything else. The piece has an undeniable surface beauty but I found it made no lasting impression on me.

Water Night is an arrangement for string orchestra of an unaccompanied choral setting of words by Octavio Paz. Whitacre recorded the choral version on his earlier Decca disc. I haven't heard that CD but I have come across the vocal version on the Elora Festival Singers' Naxos disc. I think I prefer the original version where the words give a bit of definition to the music, which is lacking in the instrumental version. Goodnight Moon is a setting for soprano – here, the composer's wife, Hila Plitmann – strings and harp of a children's poem that Whitacre used to read nightly to their young son. I'm afraid I find the setting completely twee so I won't make any further comment on it.

There is a lot of undeniably beautiful music on this disc, especially in the choral pieces. However, I couldn't help but notice the comment made by William Hedley in reviewing Whitacre's previous disc, *Light and Gold*: “All this music demonstrates the composer's remarkable ear for choral texture, and there are many moments of near-sublime beauty. The unrelieved richness tires me out, however, and I long for more in the way of melodic line and real counterpoint.” I can only agree, though it's fair to say that the disc in question went on to achieve great popularity and to win several awards. William went on to qualify his remarks by acknowledging that his reaction “may be no more than a simple matter of taste” and in seconding that I should also remind myself that this disc brought me to an appreciation of *When David Heard* that had previously eluded me. So for me the jury continues to be out as far as Eric Whitacre's music is concerned. I suspect it may not be a good idea to hear too many of his pieces at one sitting, as the reviewer is bound to do.

I'm sure that Whitacre's many admirers will want to acquire this disc, especially as it contains so much material that is previously unrecorded. Those who buy the disc will find that the performances are all that could be desired in terms of quality of singing and playing. ---John Quinn, musicweb-international.com

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