



## Emma Disley met the composer Eric Whitacre in a coffee shop in Cambridge

Eric Whitacre has spent the Michaelmas Term at Cambridge University, based at Sidney Sussex College. In October he gave a Workshop in King's College Chapel, organised by *Concerts at King's*, in association with *abcd* East Region & Music Sales Limited.

*Eric Whitacre has spent under a term in Cambridge, yet it is immediately obvious that he is a familiar face in the coffee shop nearest to Sidney Sussex College. The waitress seems not only to know what sort of coffee he'll order, but also triumphantly brings a chocolate cake he proposes to share with me, with the strawberry on my half, because he has apparently said, on a previous visit, that 'strawberries are for girls!' Don't feel too sorry for him, because he got the bit of solid chocolate decoration on the other half. Changing the subject, I began by asking him about his recent travels:*

**EW** We live in Los Angeles, but it barely feels as if we live there. We've been on the road for the last 8 months of the year. My wife and I have been having deep, difficult conversations about where we want to spend the next part of our life. I've fallen in love with Cambridge. For me, everything about it is perfect – the intellectual life, the students, the number of singers – and walking everywhere – we don't get it in the States at all, except in NY city.

*Do you come from a musical family?*

No, not at all. I grew up with no formal training. I didn't read music at all. I played synthesisers in a pop band. It wasn't until I was 18 years old and in my first week at the University of Las Vegas, that I had my first encounter with choral music. The University's Chorus

Director invited me to audition for the chorus. On the first day of rehearsals we started singing the Kyrie from the Mozart *Requiem* and my life was changed. So I spent two or three years trying to catch up and learn how to read music and then, when I was 21, I wrote my first piece, a little choral work, *Go lovely rose*, as a gift for the conductor, this man who had changed my life. And then it was published and someone else asked me to write another piece for my high school town, so I wrote a piece called *Cloudburst* and so it went on and I woke up and was a composer one day.

*You are obviously a composer who responds strongly to words and who likes setting them:*

Texts are the way in for me. My grandmother was a librarian and she was always giving me books, including books of poetry and I don't think I appreciated it when I was young, but I read them, and it must have gone in somewhere. Now I appreciate the marriage of music and texts at a deep level. Also, voices have a physiological effect have on me. If a sung, dissonant chord is tuned just right, I tremble from it, I giggle and get ecstatic.

*Obviously Mozart was the first influence. Are there any other composers, living or dead, who have had a big effect on you?*

In those first few years, it seemed that every day was a revelation. Someone would say to me 'have you heard of Mahler', 'no, who's Mahler?', I'd answer, and I would go and get a score from the library and listen to the music with a CD and my mind would be blown open. I remember the same happening when I first heard Samuel Barber and Shostakovich and Prokofiev and Debussy – my God, when I first heard Debussy! – and Ravel and the whole impressionist movement. And the American composer John Adams has been a huge influence on me. At the same time, I continued and I still do to listen to a lot of pop or film score music or theatre music; for me the Beatles are as big an influence as Prokofiev, and film composers like John Williams and Thomas Newman are equally influential.

*...They feed into your music?*

It's hard to say. Sometimes I say that Bach is a major influence on me, which surprises people, because they say my music doesn't sound like Bach. But when I say it influences me, it doesn't mean I steal from them! There are some composers I steal liberally from, but there are others, like Bach, that inspire me.

*Do you write by hand, or do you use a computer programme, such as Sibelius?*

I don't use computers at all – it's all handwritten. The manuscripts are ugly and scribbled to death. I still cut and paste with real scissors and tape! I've tried using computers and I use them for a lot of things, but not for writing music. It's ironic. Because of this virtual choir project that I'm doing, I've become known as Mr Technology. But when I try making the music, I need a visceral sense of writing and you just don't get it with a keyboard. Also I get claustrophobic; the computer, no matter how big the display is, can't provide me with the space I need; I like to lay all the sheets of paper out over the floor, to see the broad argument, the long gestures, the things that are echoing each other over many minutes of time. I just can't get that with a computer.

I've only recently stumbled another connection in this respect, but I think it also influences my use of pen and paper: my whole family – as far back as we can remember – have been real working class people; composing doesn't feel like work to me and I can't believe I'm being paid to do it, so I think if I can finish the whole day with lead all over my hands and a couple of paper cuts, it almost counts as real work!

*And you conduct as well.*

Very early on, the conductor who first got me into choral music asked me to lead rehearsals with the college choir and then, inexplicably, invited me to be an assistant conductor at the college light opera company. Here we had ridiculous schedules – nine shows in nine weeks – and I had to learn operetta scores and musicals, and we did G & S four times a year; I really don't know what he was thinking, other than that he saw that I was eager, but I didn't know what I was doing. I did that for three summers, so I would have learned 27/28 shows, but I kept going back as a visiting conductor, so I must have done 40 or 50 shows. It's the greatest training I've ever received, just in terms of learning to give a clear beat, dealing with moving targets and having to study lots and lots of scores – and I really had no time to get worried about it. Then I started to ask if I could conduct, and people would say 'yes'.

Nowadays there's a great respect – a tremendous reverence – given to composers – I really don't know why. If I want to conduct, people always say 'yes'. But great composers have been dreadful conductors: Stravinsky (I have the videos of him conducting and it's a miracle that he didn't take the whole train off the rails!), Copland, Vaughan Williams, even Elgar wasn't so great. But when I

started conducting, I fell in love with it. I love it because it's quite unlike composing, which for me can be pretty agonising. I struggle with composing: I'm a perfectionist and I spend a lot of time trying to get it just right; it takes me a long time to compose very little music; conducting, by contrast, is just pure joy. I never feel a sense of pressure about whether or not I can actually conduct and I never worry if other conductors are judging me, because it's not really my day job, it's a fun job. It's completely liberating for me, so any chance I am offered to do it, I take.

*Have you been composing here as well as conducting?*

A little bit. I've composed a little grace, an *Oculi omnium*, but the truth is I've been so busy that I haven't had a second really to write. There's a lot happening in my career at the moment. Being here in Europe is a chance to do a lot of press and promotional appearances and I've been doing conducting gigs in Cambridge and beyond. I had an album come out in October, and because of that I've been doing endless amounts of press. I'm happy to do it, and I know it's important because there's a small window of time to do it. But I'm looking forward to taking everything I've learned here and going back home to explore what's been 'bubbling in the machine'

*You must need the right conditions, and it can't be easy with a small child.*

It's funny how that changes everything – in the best way. They say your life will change and you'll never see a movie at the theatres again, which is absolutely true, but what they don't tell you is that you won't mind. It's the same thing with composing; I used to live the artist's life – write til 4 or 5 in the morning, sleep til one or two in the afternoon, and mope around the house. That doesn't happen anymore. I'll take my son to nursery school about 8.30 or 9 in the morning and then I'll be free til 3 or 4 in the afternoon, and that's my window for any creative work. I have yet to figure out how to turn it on or off. Ravel famously said 'I'll be at my writing desk from 8 til 4. If inspiration wants me, she knows where to find me!' I have yet to figure out how to create the right conditions to be able to switch it on.

As I said before, I agonise over composing. The hardest part for me is getting a sense of the architecture of a piece; once I can see the skeleton of the building, then the rest of it becomes much easier and clearer; then it just becomes a matter of building a door or a wall or a precipice. But at times, when I'm dealing with the architecture, I feel

as if I'm swimming, and it's so hard to juggle the demands of daily life with abstraction like that.

I can, however, respond to deadlines. David Skinner, the Director of Music at Sidney Sussex College, where I'm based in Cambridge, came to me on a Wednesday and asked if I could produce a grace for the College's Foundation Dinner on the Saturday. He and I had been talking a lot about Byrd and Tallis, and as a result I've fallen back in love with Tudor church music, so that influenced me. But I also found a deadline incredibly liberating. I'm not sure that it's the best thing I've ever written, but it's a thing, and were I to work on that schedule, undoubtedly some of things I would write would be okay by, just by the law of averages! Also there's a muscle which gets in shape if you work to deadlines, which enables one to write quickly and confidently. There's an old film scoring adage that goes 'why go with your fifth bad idea when you can go with your first bad idea!' So there's a lot to be said for taking a moment, quietening yourself, and saying, 'okay, that's the direction I'm going, let's go with it'. I'm wondering if I should incorporate that into my daily life: thinking to myself when I'm writing something that it doesn't have to be the end of the world, just the next piece that I'm writing.

*Is Oculi omnium going to be published?*

Unless there are objections, I'd like not to publish this one and keep it so that it can be performed only at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. I have this fierce loyalty now to Sidney Sussex – to the building and the people, the house, even the coat of arms. Somehow I'd like it if it could only ever be performed in that place.

*I imagine you have been deeply involved with the Cambridge Chapel music scene.*

Evensong is wonderful, isn't it? I'm not a religious person at all. But I have fallen in love with evensong, and on Wednesday nights they do a full Latin Vespers at this College, which I've never experienced before. This semester I've been hugely softened to religion. I'm usually sceptical. But here, sitting in chapel with the music and the candles and the poetry, it strikes me that I am hearing

some of the most beautiful things I know being spoken and sung. And everything is incredibly genuine and pure. And so the small bits of dogma which have previously struck me as superfluous don't bother me now; so I've really been changed through evensong. And I've also sat there and thought that the marriage of music and words is incredibly powerful, for the congregation, for the choir, for everyone in that room. Perhaps there are many for whom their whole life in the church is due to the power of that art form.

There is a difference between here and the US in this respect. Most people here in Cambridge sit lightly to religious dogma; in America, there's a lot of literal blind faith. And yet knowledge about basic theology is greater here. It's another reason we're considering moving over here and raising our son here.

In terms of education, there's simply no question that the British education system is probably the best in the world. It's exactly what we want for our son.

*Might he be interested in a choristership?!*

He's not there yet. He's five. If he could shoot a choir with a ray gun, then I think he'd be interested!

*We have an American organ scholar here in Cambridge at King's College, a young man who has, through his own determination and hard work, succeeded in gaining this position. There's a lot to said for this kind of confidence and self-belief.*

The thing I'm aware of, especially living in California, is that there's an American spirit – a 'can do' spirit – a 'why can't I do this' self-belief. And I've been struck, during my travels, by how rare this world view is. And I want my

son to have that. The more that I travel, the more that I realise what a great thing that is. Now that I'm raising a child, I find myself thinking about that.

*Have you any plans for further projects with **abcd**?*

I did a convention a year or two ago and I'm going to try to make this year's **abcd** Convention at Birmingham. I'm very close to

Mike Brewer from the National Youth Choir and I think he's overseeing it this year and he's asked me to come and be a part of it, so it's just a matter of trying to fit it into my schedule. He and I talk on Skype a good deal.

*What gave you the idea for a virtual choir?*

It's such a simple idea it's barely imaginative! But nobody else had done it and now I'm the 'techno-guy!' I found on YouTube a video of a 17 or 18 year old American girl: she put the Stephen Leighton's Polypony recording of my music, looked at the camera and

said, 'Hello Mr Whitacre, I know you don't know me, but I love your music and I want to do something'. She sang the entire soprano part to the CD and it was very beautiful and very innocent. And it occurred to me that if you put a bunch of people in front of their web cameras, singing to the same recording, starting their videos at the same time, it would sound like a choir - wouldn't it?. So my first impetus was like a five year old boy – if I build this and push this red button, what happens? So I wrote on my blog 'go buy the same recording - the Stephen Leighton version of *Sleep* (the sales of that disc must have spiked for a moment!) Then some people pointed out that we'd be able to hear the recording in the background. So we decided wear headphones.

For the first experiment there was no conductor. Everyone just listened as closely as they could to that recording. Then I gave them

a month to upload their videos. A young man called Scott Haines took all the individual videos and carefully cut them together so that they all started at the same time – and it really sounded like a chorus. It wasn't perfect, there were 's's and 't's all over the place, but it sounded like a piece. So then I wondered whether we could take it a step further and make music with this. This time I chose *Lux Aurumque*. I conducted *Lux* in my studio in complete silence, the way I imagined it sounding in my head. Then I played an accompaniment so that the singers could have a reference – which was an odd experience, playing an accompaniment while watching myself conducting! And then I made the music available for download. And we were a little better this time: we added a 'beep' at the beginning so that we could line up all the beeps on people's videos. And Scott Haines added some reverberation this time, so that we sounded as if we were in King's Chapel, instead of in our kitchens. And that was it. And then the thing fireballed, we posted it and then it exploded. It was craziest thing!

There were 185 singers from twelve different countries. We didn't turn anyone away, everybody's video was good enough to use. It was beautiful – people sitting in their kitchens – it was so nice. This time we're doing *Sleep* and I'm wearing a tuxedo and we've asked everyone to wear black. We're hoping to get 900 people to participate. So I hope the readers of MasterSinger will join in! It's not so difficult to do from the user's end. And it's pretty thrilling when it's finished. We have 220/230 submissions so far. We've tracked it on my website on Google Earth so you can see exactly where everyone is. And the best part for me is that it's a nice media story – because of the fusion of classical music and technology – so it's given a nice spotlight to choral music.

*And so I left Eric Whitacre in a Cambridge coffee shop, very kindly picking up the bill for our chocolate cake!*

