

Eric Whitacre's Paradise

By Tom Provenzano



IF YOU MENTION his name in music circles, gleeful shouts of “cutting edge” and “groundbreaking” fill the air. But composer Eric Whitacre, best known for classical choral music, is bemused. “I get those words a lot. I am just making music I would like to listen to—sounds that move me deeply and come directly from me. Choral music is generally considered classical but I grew up listening to rock and pop in the ‘70s and ‘80s. I am still heavily influenced by my pop roots.”

He also spent eight summers conducting for the College Light Opera on Cape Cod, so he has had an extensive relationship with musical theatre which also heavily influences his compositions. Dreading being pigeon-holed in any form, he would be happy if audiences enjoyed and understood the eclectic nature of his music. “I love combining the best of all these genres that I love. I

would be thrilled if people said they heard a little Sondheim and a little Rodgers and Hammerstein. Then at the same time said, ‘I could definitely hear Puccini in there but also some parts reminded me of *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*.”

All of these styles fuse together in Whitacre's intensely ambitious musical theatre project *Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings*, which enjoys its world premiere at The Theatre @ Boston Court this summer. Six years in development has changed the concept from a contemporary retelling of the great Milton epic to a completely original story. Whitacre explains, “We loved the poem for its grandeur and its epic storytelling. We also liked the idea of updating a classic. But, definitively, this new version has nothing to do with Milton. The concept is heavily influenced by the anime and manga worlds—this is just another chapter in the ‘*Paradise Lost* saga.’ The basic story begins 17 years after the eve of a great battle in Paradise between the armies of darkness and forces of light. The angels, fearing for their children's lives, took them to the most remote

corner of the universe. Took their wings from them and said, ‘Wait. We will return for you.’ They have yet to return. That's when our story begins. There will be 19 singers on stage plus two live taiko drummers, a live string quartet and a DJ running the electronics and playing live keyboard. Technically it is an operetta. Like a musical it has spoken scenes and songs. Some of the songs sort of live in that musical theatre world a little: It's all in English and they all rhyme. But it's not like the new pop musical theatre, much more like old Broadway. Then there are these moments in the show when it just explodes. All of the singers have legit voices, save one who has more of a rock tenor voice. There are no belters. The three female leads are all classically trained.”

One of those women is his wife Hela Plitmann. “She is a professional coloratura soprano. We're doing some modifications in the way she sings so we make sure all the lyrics are understood, meaningful and intelligent—which one doesn't always worry about in opera. Hela's voice was completely in my mind when I wrote the music. With different concert versions along the way, I have picked up actors. Each time I find someone I love, I write for that voice. It is always better if I have the singer in my ear.”

Through every permutation of the musical over the years, Whitacre has been intimately involved as musical director and performer. This time he nervously turned the reins over. “This will be the first time ever that I just sit in the audience and bite my nails. I really let it go. We have a music director named Greg Chun who is extraordinary; he is best known here for *The Ten Commandments*.

In addition to this project, Whitacre continues his lucrative career as a choral composer. I have a number of classical commissions.” He is not quite satisfied with the term “classical” because it implies old music. “The problem is no one has a good name for it anymore. It's even worse when they call it ‘serious music.’ I hate that name, not only because it isn't always true but it sounds so stuffy.”

He explains the process of working on commission, with a current example of a contract with the London Symphony Orchestra. “They contacted me saying, ‘We're celebrating the 40th anniversary of the London Symphony Orchestra Chorus. We'd like a piece between 16 and 20 minutes long for the chorus and orchestra. You can choose the text.’ I often collaborate with living poets. I send them the piece just in time for rehearsal.” Unlike composing for Hollywood, the orchestra has no power to give notes or ask for changes. “The best part about being a classical composer is that the composer is at the top of the food chain.”

Paradise Lost at Boston Court is actually a try-out for a move to Broadway. It has been an exhausting but invigorating six years. After it is up, Whitacre can move on to his next big ambition. “I am going to take a three-week margarita break.” ■

Paradise Lost

Opens July 28;
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm; through Sept. 2
Tickets: \$34
Previews July 19-27 (\$20)
The Theatre @ Boston Court
70 N. Mentor, Pasadena
626.683.6883 or