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## Composer Eric Whitacre on why British choirs are best

Tuning, sight-reading, tone and knowledge - the secrets of a glorious tradition Fri 10th December 2010

*Gramophone's January issue asked an international jury to name the world's leading choirs, and then invited American composer Eric Whitacre to reflect on why the list is dominated by British ensembles.*

At the age of 18, when I first began singing in choirs, I devoured every choral recording I could find. I collected a huge and varied number of choral discs but over time realised that I was partial to those albums performed by British choirs. Three recordings stand out in my memory: Vaughan Williams's *An Oxford Elegy*, Stephen Darlington conducting Christ Church Cathedral Choir; Arvo Pärt's *Passio* from the Hilliard Ensemble; and "The Treasures of English Church Music", John Rutter conducting the Cambridge Singers. I loved these recordings and marvelled at such perfect singing.

Then suddenly, five years ago, I received an e-mail from Stephen Layton, letting me know that he had discovered a few pieces of mine in a music store in Amsterdam and would I be kind enough to send him everything I'd ever written. I did – and one year later he sent me the finished disc "Cloudburst", performed by his incredible choir Polyphony. Never had I dreamt that my music would one day be so beautifully and masterfully recorded by such a quintessentially British choir.

Since that time I have had the great privilege to work with a number of choirs in the UK, with each experience being a thrill: writing a piece for the The King's Singers and the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain; recording my album "Light & Gold" with the Eric Whitacre Singers (all Brits) and Laudibus; and, most recently, concerts with the London Symphony Chorus and the Welsh choir Cordydd. After much thought I'm finally beginning to understand what makes these British choirs so incredible.

**Tuning:** perhaps the most powerful weapon in the technical arsenal of a choir, choristers in the UK are taught from a very early age not only to sing in tune but to listen to those around them. A perfect example is Alamire, David Skinner's phenomenal early music group to which I have recently been introduced, a choir that sings so in tune that the music seems to shimmer and float in front of the speakers.

**Sight-reading:** the Brits are possibly the world's greatest sight-readers. In my travels I've certainly never seen anything like it. Every time I rehearse a choir here I am astonished at how quickly they parse the music and absorb it. When we recorded "Light & Gold", the Eric Whitacre Singers and Laudibus had just six hours to read through and rehearse 80 minutes of my music. Good singers here are simply expected to read.

**Tone:** bright and clear, with a healthy spin and not too much vibrato. I love the warm, long, open vowels, the purity of the vowel colour being perfect for the close harmonies in my music. I love the way the women can sing in their upper registers, rich and crystalline. And when a British choir truly dedicate themselves to the consonants – like in the line "giving their kisses like clouds exchanging foam", a line from my *a cappella* work *A Boy and a Girl* – there is little that's more sweet or more affecting.

**Knowledge:** British choirs simply get it. I'm sure it comes from the centuries-old tradition of singing but there is a seasoned polish and an attitude about the music-making that is at once soulful and unsentimental, expressive without being maudlin. They have the beating hearts of singers and the brains of trained musicians and this places them among the most potent and versatile artists on the planet.



[/sites/gramophone.co.uk/files/imagecache/gallery\\_main\\_image/eric\\_whitacre.jpg](/sites/gramophone.co.uk/files/imagecache/gallery_main_image/eric_whitacre.jpg)

Eric Whitacre recording his recent Decca disc in London (photo: Alex MacNaughton)

I certainly do not underestimate the influence of such extraordinary choral conductors as John Eliot Gardiner, Stephen Layton and Harry Christophers. What can I say? I am genuinely in awe of the British choral tradition and look forward to each opportunity that I have to listen to and work with the many and varied exceptional choirs.

*And the the choirs in ascending order of votes (20-1) are:*

#### **20 I Fagiolini**

Specialising in Renaissance and contemporary music, I Fagiolini are a British solo-voice ensemble directed by Robert Hollingworth. The group are renowned for their themed performances – “The Full Monteverdi” and “Tallis in Wonderland”, for example – and are also active in commissioning new works.

#### **19 Arnold Schoenberg Choir**

Founded in 1972, the Arnold Schoenberg Choir have enjoyed a close association with director Nikolas Harnoncourt for the past 25 years and remain one of the most versatile and sought-after vocal ensembles in Austria.

#### **18 Stile Antico**

Including three sisters among their ranks, Stile Antico rehearse and perform without a conductor and have experienced exponential success since they won the audience prize at the Early Music Network Young Artists’ Competition in 2005. The group have released five discs with Harmonia Mundi since 2007, including one *Gramophone* Award winner.

#### **17 The Balthasar-Neumann Choir**

Unusually founded *before* the orchestra of the same name, the Balthasar-Neumann Choir, so-called after the Baroque architect, perform as a free association of singers under creator and director Thomas Hengelbrock.

#### **16 Westminster Abbey Choir**

The blend of tradition and versatility of the Westminster Abbey Choir, combined with a unique polish and personality, has resulted in numerous recordings with Hyperion. The choir have continued to flourish under James O’Donnell’s direction during the past decade.

#### **15 Les Arts Florissants**

The 30-year-old Les Arts Florissants have, under William Christie’s direction, consistently won critical plaudits, drawing praise for their vivid performances and for giving up-and-coming singers opportunities to flourish and develop.

#### **14 Choir of New College, Oxford**

The sound of the trebles is what many people prize in this very impressive choir – bright, incisive and intense. A daily helping of liturgical music keeps the choir grounded in sacred music, but there’s also a flexibility and elegance there too that brings a wide range of music within the choir’s unique embrace.

#### **13 The Tallis Scholars**

Founded by Peter Phillips in 1973, The Tallis Scholars’ sound has become, for many, synonymous with early polyphonic repertoire (music of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries). The Tallis Scholars’ sound is flexible, full but always full of power – and with their own recording label, Gimell, it’s a sound that has reached the four corners of the planet.

#### **12 Choir of King’s College, Cambridge**

One of the most famous choirs in the world, with an immediately recognisable sound – thanks in large part to the remarkable acoustic of King’s College Chapel – it remains quintessentially English in timbre. Each new music director has not only put his stamp on the King’s music-making, but has also broadened the Choir’s repertoire.

#### **11 The Dunedin Consort**

One of the youngest choral contenders, the Scottish Dunedin Consort was founded in 1996 and have, since 2000, been conducted in the larger choral repertoire by John Butt – an association

that has produced a string of impressive recordings for Linn Records (including the *Gramophone* Award-winning set of Handel's *Messiah*).

#### **10 Swedish Radio Choir**

One of mainland Europe's great vocal ensembles, the Swedish Radio Choir is the one that Claudio Abbado would regularly call on when he performed choral music: and their EMI recording of the Verdi Requiem, made in 2001, is a tribute to their power and personality, one that always stays intensely human.

#### **9 RIAS Kammerchor**

Well known internationally through their very fine recordings for Harmonia Mundi (mainly under Marcus Creed and his successor Daniel Reuss), the RIAS Kammerchor have a remarkably homogenous sound and terrific power. They sing a wide repertoire and bring a great sense of bite and concentration of sound that makes a deep impression in music as different as Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Frank Martin's *Golgotha*.

#### **8 Accentus**

Founded in 1991 by the conductor Laurence Equilbey, Accentus are a virtuoso chamber choir with a huge following thanks to their superb series of recordings of transcriptions for Naïve. Accentus's repertoire stretches from the romantic masters of the 19th century to music of the 20th century.

#### **7 Collegium Vocale Ghent**

Founded 40 years ago by Philippe Herreweghe as a 16-voice chamber choir, Collegium Vocale have various different "guises" for different repertoires, though a composer central to the choir's work remains JS Bach.

#### **6 Wells Cathedral Choir**

One of the oldest choirs in the UK, Wells Cathedral Choir are made up of lay clerks who live in the famous 14th-century Vicars Close and sing in a choral tradition that has remained unbroken for around 800 years (though now they have girls singing alongside the trebles).

#### **5 Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge**

It's only a few years since Stephen Layton – who appears further up the list with Polyphony – took over as director of music at Trinity College. In that time, numerous recordings, not least that of music by David Briggs, have revealed what an accomplished, committed choir they are.

#### **4 The Sixteen**

Under the expert command of founder Harry Christophers, The Sixteen have combined musical excellence with bold, well-thought-out programmes, to become one of today's greatest of all choral ambassadors.

#### **3 The Cardinal's Musick**

This year's *Gramophone* Recording of the Year winners – for the final disc in their exploration of the music of William Byrd – thrive on a musical approach making the most of the virtuosity of their individual voices.

#### **2 Polyphony**

Stephen Layton's choir have become renowned for both their sound and versatility – whether in early music, or contemporary works such as those of Eric Whitacre, they embody the remarkable tradition of British choral excellence at its finest.

#### **1 The Monteverdi Choir**

For 40 years, Sir John Eliot Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir have been the voices behind some of the most powerful and perceptive Baroque recordings in the catalogue, not least the hugely ambitious Bach Cantata Pilgrimage of the year 2000, but the choir's range is also a strength (this past year has found them singing Bizet's *Carmen*, Brahms's *A German Requiem* and the Monteverdi Vespers among much else, and Weber's *Der Freischütz* looms large on the horizon).

Read about the choirs and why they were selected in the January 2011 edition of *Gramophone*, now on sale in the UK, and in shops abroad in the coming weeks. Or [subscribe](http://www.themagazineshop.com/all-titles/gramophone) (<http://www.themagazineshop.com/all-titles/gramophone>) to *Gramophone*.