

Huge Choral Rendition of 'Paradise Lost'

By ANNIE WU
Epoch Times Staff

NEW YORK—With a concert featuring an ensemble of over 400 singers and music by one of today's most talented contemporary composers of classical music, it is only fitting that a project of this scale gets its New York premiere at Carnegie Hall.

Eric Whitacre's musical, "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings," was performed as a concert on June 15 at the Isaac Stern Auditorium with Whitacre also conducting the ensemble. Presented by Distinguished Concerts International New York (DCINY), the concert was a rare opportunity to listen to the voices of multiple groups and individual singers together on the same stage.

"Paradise Lost" the musical had a highly successful run in Los Angeles in 2007. Critics praised the show for Whitacre's innovative music, which included "a hybrid of musical theater, opera, electronica, film score and Asian drumming," said Whitacre's website. The show

was also "heavily inspired by and infused with the style of Japanese anime and manga."

For the concert version in New York, chorus and choir groups from Canada, Ireland, and different states in the country formed the Distinguished Concert Singers International, accompanying the lead singers in the role of the Chorus of Angels. This great diversity of performers speaks to "the universal appeal of Eric Whitacre's music," said artistic director of DCINY Jonathan Griffith before the concert.

Several of the actors in the Los Angeles production reprised their roles at the concert, including the heroine, Exstasis, played by Hila Plitmann. The other lead singers were chosen through auditions.

THE PERFORMANCE

Together with Greg Chun's musical direction (who was also the musical director for the L.A. production) and lyrics co-written by David Noroña and Whitacre, the music was both chillingly beautiful and eerie, fitting

perfectly with the musical's story of good and evil that was also created by Whitacre himself.

The most spectacular feature of the evening was the large chorus, though the performances by all the lead singers were equally showstopping. Particularly in numbers like "Close Your Eyes" and "The Rage," Plitmann's haunting voice soared above the chorus, blending beautifully with the voices that at times sounded angelic and majestic, and at others, powerful and foreboding as they called out menacing warrior chants.

Along with cellist Fang Fang Xu's skillful playing, taiko drumming group On Ensemble's brilliant percussion, and the artistic use of electronic beats and effects, the theater echoed with a sound unlike any other, as riveting and heart-stopping as an epic movie soundtrack. Whether it was during the portrayal of fight scenes in "The Principles" or in full cast numbers like "Bliss," all the different sounds came together in unique harmonies that were not only able to convey the scenes from the musical, but were also breathtaking in their beauty.

But the most hair-raising moments of the concert were when the chorus sang alone without any instrumentation. As they sang their very first note in the "Prologue," one was reminded of purity and solemnity, as if listening to the voices of heaven. The Entr'acte before Act II was equally able to bring tears to one's eyes.

The audience, who gave rounds of applause and standing ovations, attesting to Whitacre's popularity, would be overjoyed if "Paradise Lost" is made into a Broadway musical. Artistic director Griffith said Broadway producers were expected in the audience on Tuesday night.

ON THE COMPOSER
Whitacre was awarded the Richard



THE PERFORMANCE: The Distinguished Concert Singers International sing in "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings." COURTESY OF DCINY



THE COMPOSER: Eric Whitacre's musical, "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings," was performed as a concert on June 15 at the Isaac Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall. MARC ROYCE

Rodgers Award for most promising musical theater composer for "Paradise Lost," while the L.A. production earned 10 nominations at the 2007 Los Angeles Stage Alliance Ovation Awards.

Griffith also noted that Whitacre has been working on the score for over 10 years, continually revising and perfecting the music. "It's been kind of a work in progress. He's continually refined it." He mentioned, though, that the composer felt confident that the New York version is really close to a polished, final one that he wishes to present in a concert setting.

Whitacre began singing in college and grew passionate about writing

choral works soon after. His first concert work, "Go, Lovely Rose," was completed when he was 21. He then studied at the Juilliard School, writing for voice and winds.

As his works quickly became many choral groups' favorite pieces, Whitacre thought of a unique social media experiment. Inspired by a YouTube video of someone singing parts from his a cappella choral work, "Sleep," Whitacre invited everyone to sing along to the same recording of the piece and compiled everyone's parts into a Virtual Choir.

Following the success of the first trial, Whitacre decided to record a conducting track in silence and let

singers from around the world sing their parts in "Lux Aurumque." The Virtual Choir was once again in action, and upon listening to the end result, one is immediately drawn in, entranced by the wondrous blend of voices.

Whitacre said on his blog, "When I saw the finished video for the first time, I actually teared up. The intimacy of the faces, the sound of the singing, the obvious poetic symbolism about our shared humanity and our need to connect, all of it completely overwhelmed me." He also said he hopes to write an original piece for the Virtual Choir that will have its world premiere on the Web.

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