

Cleveland Orchestra Chorus: Whitacre's *The Sacred Veil* (Oct. 20)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Sacred Veil, as one might expect from an hour-long work about death and grief, is not an easy listen. Eric Whitacre's music, evocative and emotional, makes potent company with Charles Anthony Silvestri's words, a chain of poems on the loss of his wife Julia Lawrence Silvestri (Julie), who died of ovarian cancer in 2005 at the age of 36. The inclusion of Julie's own poetry, along with Whitacre's, increases the impact.

On Friday, October 20 during a performance by The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, the Severance Music Center audience, perhaps expecting lighter fare, listened closely, though gloomily. Told through particularities — one couple's experience of early love and childbirth, the young woman's diagnosis, prognosis, and ultimately her death — *Sacred Veil's* power lies in its wider applicability. The words, projected in supertitles above the stage, penetrated the

heart; the music sealed the deal.

The Orchestra's Director of Choruses, Lisa Wong, led an in-concert discussion with the composer and poet about the work's origin and conception. Silvestri and Whitacre are close and longtime friends, but the idea of collaborating on such a work did not develop until nearly twelve years after Julie's death. A single poem by Silvestri (Tony), just thirteen lines in length, was the stimulus. It elicited an on-the-spot, nearly fully formed musical response from Whitacre (what became the first movement) and started a conversation about creating a much longer work.

The exclusion of the first work, Reena Esmail's *When the Violin*, from the discussion had the unintended effect of giving it undercard status. According to Esmail, the piece was written as a companion to Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria's *O vos omnes* and expresses itself in the same 14th-century language — and in equal measure, Hindustani *raag* (raga). It is a lovely dialogue between the two musical styles, shifting from choral Renaissance formality one minute to improvisatory rapture the next. The latter was aided by lithe and ethereal cello playing by Mingyao Zhao with unidentified soloists in the choir chiming in. As we have come to expect, Lisa Wong conducted The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus with authority.

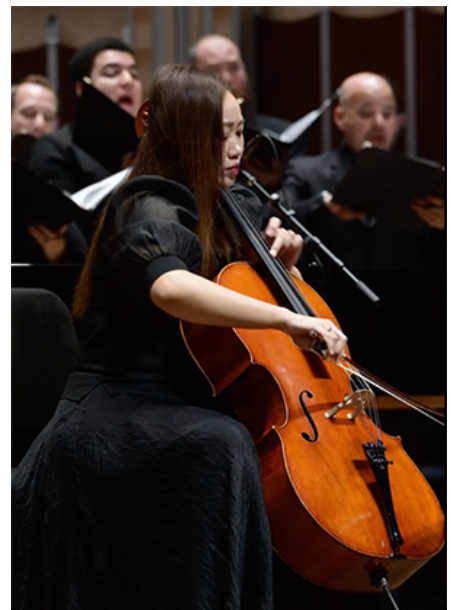


Whitacre entered and proceeded to impress as a beguiling composer and charismatic conductor. He was splendidly assisted by the Chorus, prepared by Wong, and by the graceful playing of pianist Daniel Overly and Zhao again on cello.

High voices receive special treatment in Whitacre's score. The Chorus's women — many coincidentally about Julie Silvestri's age — seemed to serve as her proxy. Sung in perfect rhythmic unison and at a conversational dynamic, words of the deceased were eerily close and tangible, as though speaking to us from "the other side of life's veil."

As Whitacre's notes tell us, the opening piano note also defines life's boundaries: a middle C. This moves above to E-flat and below to A, thus painting in tones the close proximity of the living and the dead.

Especially effective were Zhao's cello lines ("the most vocal of instruments," opined Whitacre) variously representing the soul and fate, with an ineffable voice, expressing what words cannot. In the fifth movement ("Wherever There is Birth") the cello plays alone, recalling earlier themes of domestic fulfillment. In the seventh movement ("I am Here") its rising lines mimic, without the benefit of words, the patient's rising despair.



A particularly memorable movement is the sixth, "I'm Afraid," describing the moment after Julie's diagnosis. After the first line, "I'm afraid we found something," much of the

text is medical jargon (“mucinous cystic adenocarcinoma with focal carcinosarcoma,” etc.), misapplied or medically inaccurate, to give a sense of distance, unintelligibility, and dread.



The final movement, “Child of Wonder,” with words by Whitacre himself and quoted material of Silvestri, serves as a kind of benediction. The music is lovely and sad, but conveyed in language that is fuller than the previous movements, perhaps availing it as a standalone work.

This sacred veil became a veil of tears for many — even open sobbing — and one woman seemed to collapse on her way out. But though the work extracted an emotional price, many found truth in its beauty.

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