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What Defines a Runestad Work? The Evolution of Choral Music in the Twenty-First Century

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Annotated Bibliography

Choral music has undergone a number of changes through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, thanks in part to technological advances that offered composers a wealth of music traditions from which to draw inspiration. This led to what some have called the “neo-impressionist” style of choral composition: a new approach that combines historical traditions such as impressionism and early polyphony with forward-thinking sonorities and harmonic progressions, as well as a strict focus on text. In defining this style, musicologists often turned to the works of Eric Whitacre, who is well-known for his text-driven pieces laden with clustered harmonies. In the nearly two decades since this type of scholarship began, a new generation of composers has entered the fray, and Jake Runestad is one of the best. Little academic analysis exists of his works, though he has exhibited similar tendencies to Whitacre in his compositional process. In this paper, I will use analysis of Whitacre’s works as a model to create a working definition of the Runestad style in relation to historical choral traditions.

1. Day, Timothy. “Cultural History and a Singing Style: ‘The English Cathedral Tradition.’” In *The Oxford Handbook of Singing*, edited by Graham F. Welch, David M. Howard, and John Nix, 805-22. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199660773.013.021>.

Timothy Day is a cultural historian who studied organ at St John’s College of Oxford University. He has written a number of texts on music history, mostly on the English musical tradition. In this chapter, he describes the “peculiarities” of the English cathedral tradition. This style is known for clarity, simplicity, and ease of sound and tone. Examples of choirs that follow this tradition are the King’s Singers, Voces8, and the Tallis Scholars. Eric Whitacre’s eponymous ensemble is also composed of mostly English singers who would have been trained in this style. As he stated in his interview with Tom Wine, Whitacre has a preference for that sort of sound, and he pushes for the choirs he works with to emulate it, even if he is not fully cognizant that that is what he is asking for. While Runestad has worked with mostly American choirs, the same clear, simple sound is still ideal for his works.

2. Denney, Alan. “Ours to See: Emerging Trends in Today’s Choral Compositions.” *The Choral Journal* 60, no. 3 (October 2019): 8-20. Music Periodicals Database.

Alan Denney is a high school choir director in Estes Park, Colorado. In this article he examines the state of choral music today through the eyes of living composers. While Denney’s academic credentials are unclear from further research, his experience as a music educator and choir director make him uniquely suited to address contemporary choral music. He also defers to the words of established choral composers, as the majority of the article is actually a paraphrased group interview with composers such as Jake Runestad, Z. Randall Stroope, and Andrea Ramsey, among others. The composers share their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of twenty-first century choral music, major recent changes in the field, and what they think makes a piece of music last through history. Collectively, the composers seem to agree that technology has had the most impact on the field. Having access to such a wide variety of music leads to new sources of inspiration, and modern recording technology allows for immediate preservation of musical ideas, rather than fumbling for a pen when inspiration strikes. Runestad

also touches on the social responsibility required of today's composers, and how he draws inspiration from current social issues. Like Whitacre, he considers the text to be paramount when composing, and he expresses the same desire to focus on the capabilities of the voice in addition to the final sound of a piece.

3. Larson, Andrew Lloyd. "Textural and harmonic density in selected choral works (1992-2003) by Eric Whitacre." D.M.A. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

This is a foundational piece of writing in Whitacre scholarship. It is cited in a number of other dissertations and articles, and the study was re-published as an article in *The Choral Journal* two years after initial publication. Since receiving his doctorate, Larson joined the faculty of Stetson University in Florida as a choral conductor and later as an associate dean. He describes this dissertation as being an objective study of Whitacre's works in response to Whitacre's own subjective remarks on the topic. He states that "the unique appeal of [Whitacre's] music cries out for an explanation" despite the use of music traditions dating back centuries. Larson's study reveals a number of commonalities across Whitacre's compositions, in particular a "single harmonic process." In order to effectively analyze this process, Larson developed a graphing system for what he calls "textural density variation," taking into account polyphonic areas, melismas, silences, and even the differences between true unisons and octave unisons. This system has caused some controversy in the musicology world, with some claiming it is overcomplicated because many of Whitacre's characteristic sonorities can be reduced to much simpler harmonies, very often to a prolongation of the subdominant. Kenneth Lee Owen recognizes both the benefits and detriments of Larson's system, and applies it loosely to the works of Morten Lauridsen and René Clausen to demonstrate the similarities in their works. Larson's paper offers important insights into what makes a Whitacre piece unique, as well as how his writing can be tied to historical traditions. It is also a strong model on which to base a similar analysis on Runestad.

4. Lynch, Shane M. "Music Historiography and Useful Style Histories: The Case for the Evolving Era of Neo-Impressionism and Its Influence on American Choral Music of the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries." DMA diss., University of Washington, 2008. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Lynch's dissertation was published around the same time as Owen's, and covers a very similar topic. While Owen relates the music of Whitacre, Lauridsen, and Clausen mostly to early music traditions with the inclusion of new techniques, Lynch examines their works through the lens of twentieth-century impressionism. More broadly, he discusses the general usefulness of this type of music classification. He also discusses the difficulties in strict categorization of something so inherently subjective as music. In this paper, he attempts to lay a foundation for further study of this type of choral music, and he suggests a name for it: neo-impressionism. He turns first to the music of Claude Debussy to define impressionism, relating pitches and sonorities to colors in a painter's palette. Whitacre said something similar with regards to his own compositional process in his interview with Tom Wine, and Lynch draws this connection as well. Having defined impressionism, Lynch goes on to the issue of the *neo-* prefix and the additional ambiguity it creates. His final definition boils down to a new and evolving composition style that draws on the techniques of the impressionist movement. The name has not been widely accepted, but it is certainly evocative of what twenty-first century choral music has

become. Lynch examines many of the same works as Owen and Larson did before him, while more specifically relating the sonorities and textures to impressionist music. Unlike Owen, he includes every pitch in his Roman numeral analysis, finding function beyond just color in the added seconds (or ninths, as they are more commonly analyzed).

In his chapter on Whitacre, Lynch describes Whitacre's music as a balance between minimalism and impressionism with a heavy focus on the text. The largest difference he identifies between Whitacre and Debussy is Whitacre's use of a much broader dynamic palette, a trait which he ascribes to his self-defined neo-impressionism. He calls neo-impressionism the dominant force in American choral composition, and opens the door for further study into the style. Today this begs the question: has American choral music evolved further in the last fifteen years, or does Jake Runestad fit the bill of neo-impressionism?

5. Owen, Kenneth Lee. "Stylistic Traits in the Choral Works of Lauridsen, Whitacre, and Clausen (1995-2005)." DMA diss., Arizona State University, 2008. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

In his 2008 dissertation, Kenneth Owen proposes "the potential development of a sub-style of contemporary choral music," stemming from the works of Morten Lauridsen, Eric Whitacre, and René Clausen. At the time he wrote this, it was the only scholarly publication to relate these three composers in this way, though Lynch's dissertation on a very similar topic was published the same year. Owen strives to define this new style of choral composition by drawing commonalities from the three composers' works. While he does reference Larson's textural density variation system, he chooses instead to utilise Roman numeral analysis to aid in defining the common harmonic language. He justifies the three composers' use of added seconds as an effort to change the "color" of a chord, rather than as strictly changes to harmonic function. Owen likens this new style to plainchant, with regards to its speechlike rhythms, and to the Renaissance, with regards to its long legato lines. Both these characteristics direct the listener's attention first and foremost to the text, and allow the complex harmonies to shine through. By defining the exact components of this new style, it becomes easier to relate it to earlier traditions and identify new and emerging trends.

6. Runestad, Jake. *The Hope of Loving*. Recorded with Conspirare, January 20-22, 2019. Delos Productions DE 3578, 2019. CD.

While many choirs have recorded his works, this Grammy-nominated album is the first to consist of solely Jake Runestad's music. Conspirare is an American choral organization that has been recording since the early 2000s, under the direction of conductor and composer Craig Hella Johnson. Their repertoire spans from plainchant to present day, with a mix of sacred and secular works. Despite the large size of the choir, their sound has a certain clarity that lends itself well to the stark dissonances and precise rhythms of Runestad's music. Runestad himself was a part of the recording process for this album, which means the performance is as accurate a representation of the composer's intentions as possible. The album's selections span a variety of texts as well, with some specially written for Runestad and some pulled from various points in history. Runestad has said he is very picky about the texts he chooses to set, and this album provides some insight into how he approaches those texts, as well as how his scores translate to performance.

7. Sharon, Deke. *The Heart of Vocal Harmony: Emotional Expression in Group Singing*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Deke Sharon is known as the most prolific arranger of contemporary a cappella music. He was the arranger and music director for all three *Pitch Perfect* movies, as well as a producer of NBC's *The Sing Off*. He has also written six books on a cappella music and group singing. The majority of this book discusses the importance of and methods for emotional expression in choral settings, from a piece's conception, through the rehearsal process, and into performance. Though his specialties are jazz and pop music, he chose to interview Eric Whitacre in his section on composers. Sharon addresses Whitacre's use of nonconventional harmonies and rhythms in his works, relating it to vocal jazz in the way it compels an audience to listen. Whitacre discusses his focus on authenticity and truthfulness in his composition process, both in the music and his chosen poetry. He also states that his vocal lines and phrases are all dependent on the breath, and that natural phrasing is the most important thing to make a piece feel and sound effortless. This demonstrates a focus on the capabilities and technique of both the singer and the voice, rather than pushing for a certain sound in the final product. These are critical aspects of the Whitacre style, and Runestad expresses similar sentiments when discussing his process. If Sharon were to expand on this book, Runestad would fit right in with the other composers chosen, especially as he has cited jazz as one of his major influences.

8. Strimple, Nick. "Choral Music in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries." In *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music*, edited by André de Quadros, 43-60.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521111737.005>.

Nick Strimple is a faculty member at the University of Southern California, from where he also received his master's degree in sacred music and doctoral degree in choral music. His main area of interest is music in relation to the Holocaust, and he has given many lectures on that topic. This focus is evident in this particular book chapter, which summarizes the main influences on the choral music of the twentieth century, particularly the influence of "previously marginalized repertoire," or in other words, folk music from around the world. The twentieth century began with "an explosion of new ideas," building on the existing foundation of nineteenth-century choral music. Polytonality, tone clusters, and parallel harmonic motion became staples of the genre, from the impressionist works of Debussy to Stravinsky's eclecticism. Another major factor in the evolution of choral music in this time was a move toward nationalism during and following the World Wars, resulting in compositions deeply rooted in traditional music across the world, toeing the line between patriotism and propaganda.

The chapter only briefly touches on the twenty-first century, in a final section titled "Looking Ahead." This book was published in 2012, so while it makes sense to lump the twenty-first century in with the twentieth, it is odd to relegate a full decade to such a small section. Earlier writings, such as those of Lynch and Owen, describe a concrete musical style that has evolved across the 1990s and into the 2000s, rather than a new and distinct style of the twenty-first century, in analyzing the works of composers such as Morten Lauridsen and Eric Whitacre. Why Strimple chooses to instead barely reference the wealth of choral music composed in the first decade of this century remains unclear, unless this chapter was written much earlier than the actual publication of the text. He does identify a few key techniques used in contemporary choral composition; however, his words imply a sort of disdain for the style that is not mirrored in his writing on twentieth-century styles.

9. Swan, Phillip Allen. "In His Own Words: The Choral Music of Eric Whitacre from 1991-2004." DMA diss., University of Miami, 2016. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Though much of this work consists of score and text analysis, the most relevant part of Swan's dissertation is 30 pages of Whitacre's own thoughts transcribed or paraphrased, hence the main title of the dissertation. The lengthy interview Swan conducted with Whitacre offers deep insight into his career path and the influences in his life. He speaks at length about New Optimism, a sort of movement amongst his classmates at Juilliard that focuses on writing music people want to hear, and highlighting the good and important things in life. He also relates composition to the story of Prometheus, which was also quoted by Beethoven in the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, and subsequently by Jake Runestad in his related work "A Silence Haunts Me." When asked about commonalities in his pieces, Whitacre claims each of his works is profoundly different to him. He has no idea what the formula for the "Whitacre" sound is, though he can identify a few chords and techniques that others have told him are distinctly "his," or that he is aware he tends to reuse. Runestad mirrors this sentiment in his interview with Jonathan Talberg.

10. Talberg, Jonathan. "Jake Runestad: An Introduction to the Composer, Interview, and Preview of the 2019 Raymond W. Brock Commission, *A Silence Haunts Me*." *The Choral Journal* 59, no. 7 (February 2019): 8-17. Music Periodicals Database.

Jonathan Talberg is Director of Choral, Vocal, and Opera Studies at California State University, and happens to be great friends with Jake Runestad. He begins this article with some biographical information, identifying potential key influences on his musical philosophy. The remainder of the article consists largely of an interview, followed by context for one of Runestad's recent works. Runestad touches on his musical background, revealing he began as an instrumentalist with a penchant for rule-breaking and a dislike of structure. He ventured into jazz while studying music education in college, and stumbled into choir almost by accident. While in choir, he had the opportunity to meet and talk with Libby Larsen, who took him on as a composition student and convinced him he could pursue composition as a career. As for music that inspires him, Runestad names everything from Disney to James Taylor to Samuel Barber. Like Whitacre, he expresses a deep desire to allow the text to speak through the music, rather than boxing words into a song. Also like Whitacre, he finds it difficult to define his own musical style. There is a lot of work to do in breaking down his style as others have done for Whitacre.

11. Whitacre, Eric. *Cloudburst and Other Choral Works*. Conducted by Stephen Layton.

Recorded with Polyphony, January 3-5, 2005. Hyperion Records A67543, 2006. CD.

Polyphony is an English cathedral choir that was established in 1986, directed by Stephen Layton. Their repertoire, like *Conspirare*, includes anything from the Renaissance to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, though they have been described as "award-winning exponents of twentieth-century choral music." As the twenty-first century had only just begun when this album was recorded, that description makes perfect sense. Many of the singers credited on this album went on to become members of The Eric Whitacre Singers, Whitacre's hand-picked ensemble that he has directed for multiple Grammy-winning recordings and concerts of his works. Their specialties lean more toward the early music side of things, indicating Whitacre's preference for that type of singing in his compositions. Polyphony is a much smaller ensemble than *Conspirare*, and as such, their dynamics span an even larger range,

from the barely-heard pianissimo to the gorgeous full fortissimo. They seem to favor a slightly darker tone than what is heard from the Eric Whitacre Singers, but it is still well suited to the music.

12. Wine, Tom. "Searching for an Icon: Eric Whitacre on Composing & Conducting." *The Choral Journal* 58, no. 2 (September 2017): 44-54. Music Periodicals Database.

Tom Wine is the choral director at Wichita State University, and was the editor of GIA Publications' 2007 book, *Composers on Composing for Choir*, which featured most of the composers mentioned in this bibliography and more. This article is a transcription of a 2016 phone interview with Whitacre, who was not available to contribute to the 2007 book. In the interview, Whitacre discusses his composition process and philosophy at length. His approach to composition stems directly from the texts he chooses, which he describes as "alpha and omega." He says his music is a direct extension of himself, both his personality and his philosophy, and everything he writes is shaped by his world view. When asked about his creative process, he expresses an interest in deconstructing existing works to figure out how to go together, citing Bach as a favorite influence. His primary focuses as highlighted in this interview are communication of the text and naturalistic vocal phrasing. As this is a more recent interview, well into his established career, Whitacre sounds self-assured and aware of what exactly it is he strives for in composition.