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Celebrating a rock star of choral music

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Brady Allred, conductor, Salt Lake Choral Artists, and the U's University Singers and A Capella.

Composer Eric Whitacre is in great demand around the world, especially since topping the classical charts and earning a Grammy nomination for his 2008 all-Whitacre CD "Cloudburst" on the Hyperion label.

Salt Lake Choral Artists conductor Brady Allred has known the 41-year-old Whitacre since 1997, when the charismatic composer was leading a humbler life.

"I've see him go from a young composer with a lot of dreams to a rock-star composer who is known all over the world," Allred said.

The four choirs of SLCA and combined choirs from five area high schools will join forces to perform "Cloudburst" at the close of SLCA's "Eric Whitacre Extravaganza" on Feb. 19, circling their Libby Gardner Concert Hall audience for what Allred describes as "an antiphonal, surround-sound experience of the storm."

Preceding that aural deluge, SLCA's Concert, Chamber and Women's Choirs and the Young Choral Artists will explore Whitacre's oeuvre. The repertoire includes a setting of e.e. cummings poetry titled "Three Songs of Faith" and "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine," a setting of poetry by Charles Anthony Sivistri that is a favorite at choral music festivals.

Allred describes Whitacre's music as being filled with enchanting clusters of sound.

"When you are hearing it, you think it must be very difficult to sing," Allred said. "His music is not easy, but the voice leading he uses is so easy to sing that when you put it all together, you get these incredible tonal clusters."

Whitacre's music employs contemporary techniques such as bitonal chords, shifting meters and aleatoric sections in which singers improvise chants and melodies. The rich sonorities he writes can require dividing choirs into as many as 18 vocal lines.

Despite those complexities, Whitacre's music appeals to a wide-ranging audience, Allred said.

"High-school students that love pop music love his choral music, and people that love classical music really enjoy hearing it too, along with all the New Age fans," Allred said. "He has managed to bridge many different tastes with his music, and I think that is why it is so attractive."

Whitacre's world

P The choirs of Salt Lake Choral Artists present works of one of today's hottest choral music composers in an "Eric Whitacre Extravaganza." Choirs of Alta, Bingham, East, Syracuse and Hillcrest high schools also will participate. Conductors are SLCA artistic director Brady Allred and SLCA Women's Choir conductor Jane Fjelsted.

Where • Libby Gardner Concert Hall, University of Utah, Salt Lake City

When • Saturday, Feb. 19, 2 and 7:30 p.m.

Tickets • \$15; \$10 for students, at the door or by visiting www.saltlakechoralartists.org, where you also can see video of SLCA rehearsing Whitacre's works.

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