

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Gaia x Eric Whitacre: Eternity in an Hour

Saturday 29 August 2026, 7.30pm | Royal Festival Hall

Luke Jerram's extraordinary work combines science and technology with art and design, and over the last two decades I've worked with him many times. I'm delighted to welcome his awe-inspiring artwork *Gaia*, with an accompanying sound work by Dan Jones, to the Royal Festival Hall in the Southbank Centre's landmark 75th year.

Gaia is a stunning sculpture of the Earth that brings us face to face with the beauty and wonder of the planet. By pairing it with classical music concerts that reflect *Gaia*'s themes, we invite you to contemplate life on our increasingly fragile home and to explore new ways for us to experience classical music together.

Mark Ball, Artistic Director, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Eric Whitacre Eternity in an hour for chorus, cello, piano & electronics

60'

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

Excerpt from *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake (1757–1827)

Performers

Eric Whitacre Singers

Eric Whitacre conductor, electronics

Laura van der Heijden cello

William Morrison piano

Stef Van Alsenoy sound engineer

Over 200 years ago, William Blake encouraged us to 'see a world in a grain of sand' in his *Auguries of Innocence*. In 1803, as Blake was completing his 132-line poem, the Industrial Revolution was advancing across Britain, dragging society into a new, uncertain age. Automated machines were viewed by their operators as threats to human creativity, while children were being exploited for cheap labour, their sense of unquestioning wonder shoved into the margins by this urgent new capitalism. The 45-year-old visionary poet and artist was witnessing a death of innocence.

But as excoriating and cautionary as the majority of *Auguries of Innocence* is, it nevertheless opens with four visionary lines that invite us to widen our perception and to see inexhaustible depth and beauty in even the smallest of things. A grain of sand or a wild flower, argues Blake, is not like a world or Heaven but, to those who look deeper, are actual embodiments of them. As a teenager, Eric Whitacre was struck by the powerful simplicity and precision of these ideas – but years later, as Covid cut swathes through our cultural landscape, the American composer admits he finally felt the full impact of the poem's words. 'They seemed to me an essential primer on how one should live one's life: to be always present for the wonder and beauty in the most ordinary things, even a grain of sand,' he says. 'It was the reminder I desperately needed.'

The isolation that resulted from the pandemic granted Whitacre the time and space to respond to a commission from the BBC to mark 100 years of the BBC Singers. *Eternity in an Hour* is an oratorio setting Blake's words, scored for the unlikely union of two of Whitacre's great musical passions: choir and electronics (plus cello and piano). This is the first time that Whitacre has employed synthesizers at such a scale in his music. A self-

Created in partnership with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), Bluedot and the UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres.

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes.
There is no interval.*

confessed 'synth nerd', he 'lived and breathed' them before he could read music, and his obsession with electronic music predates, by some years, his love of choral music.

The central notion at the heart of *Eternity in an Hour* rides on comparing Blake's idea of unlocking and marvelling at the latent infinities within a tiny fragment of rock with the technique of granular synthesis. In granular synthesis, sound is broken down into tiny fragments, or grains, and then reassembled differently to create entirely new sounds. To help him achieve these otherworldly sounds, Whitacre has enlisted the help of a Lyra-8 synthesizer, used in conjunction with a Microcosm effect pedal.

A little about the Lyra-8. This Russian analogue synthesizer from 2017 was designed specifically with experimental music in mind. Rather than incorporating a keyboard, the Lyra-8 is built around eight pairs of interconnected voice oscillators that influence each other in unpredictable, organic ways. So rather than produce precise, controllable sounds, the Lyra-8 behaves almost like a living system, breathing, fluctuating and evolving in ways that the player cannot fully predict or even repeat. The result is an immersive, perhaps even unsettling instrument capable of vast droning, ritualistic textures and sounds that sit somewhere between a church organ, a swarm of insects and something else entirely. 'The Lyra-8's sound is so ancient and raw, mystical,' says Whitacre. 'It can sound silky, and it can growl. It is playful but powerful. It is also very, very stubborn. It seems to have its own ideas, its own soul, so playing it feels less like playing an instrument and more like dancing tango with a strong-willed partner.' At the bottom of the synth is a row of eight 'voices', and to activate a voice the player has to press simultaneously both top and bottom metal discs. The human

body, in effect, completes the electrical circuit, so allowing the voices to 'sing'. Then comes the Microcosm pedal, which takes the Lyra's organic sounds and atomises them, scattering them into clouds of micro-fragments, introducing yet more layers of unpredictability.

Eternity in an Hour is divided into eight movements, each representing one of Lyra-8's voices. In keeping with the work's theme of granularity, Whitacre has divided the poem into slivers of text, each movement setting just a few words at a time. The opening movement begins in familiar Whitacre territory: wide-spaced, shifting choral textures that seem to stretch back, and forward, to eternity. Soon, synthesized sound begins to twitch into life and the journey begins, piano and cello joining the chaos as fragments of sound emerge, disappear and re-emerge like hazy memories. At its heart, the choir overlays an often overwhelming sonic universe with Blake's words, which sound with renewed power and eloquence as our own lives are once again in the midst of deep transformation.

Programme notes © Oliver Condy, 2026

Find out more

- ▶ Luke Jerram
- ▶ Eric Whitacre
- ▶ Eric Whitacre Singers
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

Eric Whitacre Singers

Soprano

Lizzie Drury
Lucy Cronin
Katy Hill
Emily Dickens
Margaret Lingas

Alto

Amy Lyddon
Ruth Kiang
Hannah Cooke
Eleanor Minney

Tenor

Matthew Howard
Nick Madden
Jack Harberd
Julian Gregory

Bass

Simon Gallear
Will Dawes
Edmund Saddington
Tim Murphy
Andy Tipple

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