

# **Ghost Train Triptych by Eric Whitacre**



## **Unit Study Lesson Guide (Movement One)**

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Greg Kane



## Composer Information and Biography

An accomplished composer, conductor and lecturer, Eric Whitacre has quickly become one of the most popular and performed composers of his generation.

Though he had received no formal training before the age of 18, his first experiences singing in college choir changed his life, and he completed his first concert work, *Go, Lovely, Rose*, at the age of 21. Eric went on to the Juilliard School, earning his Master of Music degree and studying with Pulitzer Prize- and Oscar-winning composer John Corigliano.

Many of Whitacre's works have entered the standard choral and symphonic repertoires and have become the subject of several recent scholarly works and doctoral dissertations. His works *Water Night*, *Cloudburst*, *Sleep*, *Lux Aurumque* and *A Boy and a Girl* are among the most popular choral works of the last decade, and his *Ghost Train*, *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas*, and *October* have achieved equal success in the symphonic wind community.

As a conductor, Mr. Whitacre has appeared with hundreds of professional and educational ensembles throughout the world. In the last ten years he has conducted concerts of his choral and symphonic music in Japan, Australia, China, Singapore and much of Europe, as well as dozens of American universities and colleges where he regularly conducts seminars and lectures with young musicians.

Whitacre has received composition awards from the Barlow International Composition Competition, the American Choral Directors Association and the American Composers Forum. His first recording, *"The Music of Eric Whitacre,"* was hailed by *The American Record Guide* as one of the top ten classical albums of 1997.

Mr. Whitacre lives in Los Angeles with his wife, celebrated soprano Hila Plitmann and their son.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Eric Whitacre's Website: [www.ericwhitacre.com](http://www.ericwhitacre.com)

## **Compositional Impetus**

Ghost Train was a total fluke.

In the fall of 1993, while an undergrad at UNLV, Whitacre happened to hear the wind symphony rehearsing through closed doors. Sneaking into the band room, he sat entranced for 50 minutes; transported by what was, hands down, the single loudest music he had ever heard. 6 percussionists! 8 trumpets! He was in love.

After the rehearsal Whitacre approached Thomas Leslie, the conductor, and asked if he could write a piece for their group. Leslie said (without hesitation), "sure, and if it turns out well we'll play it at the CBDNA convention in the Spring." Up to this point Whitacre had never written for instruments before, only singers, so he gathered up his friends who were instrumentalists and took them through their paces:

- What pieces do you love to play?
- Which register is most comfortable?
- Which instrument sounds best when doubled with your instrument?

Struggling with the work throughout Christmas break, he presented the first movement to Leslie when school resumed. The ensemble played it beautifully at the convention, and then BOOM... the piece took off like a shot. Since its conception, this music has enjoyed over 4,000 performances world wide.

The second and third movements were written a year later, and Leslie premiered the entire Triptych in the Spring of 1995. Whitacre graduated two months later and headed for Juilliard. Ghost Train is dedicated to the man who brought it to life, Mr. Thomas G. Leslie.<sup>2</sup>

## **Additional Program Notes**

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Eric Whitacre's Website: [www.ericwhitacre.com](http://www.ericwhitacre.com)

Ghost Train Triptych is a three movement tone poem that when performed in its entirety runs about twenty minutes. The movements each depict separate scenes that surround the lore.

### I. Ghost Train

Movement one, subtitled The legend of the Ghost Train, depicts a supernatural machine that roars out of the night through forgotten towns and empty canyons, a tale deeply rooted in American folklore. The music's eerie sounds and driving rhythms beautifully captures the supernatural spirit combined with the essence of a steaming locomotive.

### II. At the Station

This movement depicts the train coming to a roaring halt and the passengers departing. Countless images can be *seen* in this movement: friends and family being reunited, the soaring architecture of the station itself, and the genuine sincerity and innocence of the era. After some musical reflection, the locomotive builds up steam and slowly departs again, grand and graceful.













### III. Motive Revolution

This title refers to the period between 1850 - 1870 when steam engines revolutionized transportation, and also describes the cyclical treatment of musical motive throughout the movement. The train blazes across the country side, moonlight glistening off it's dark steel, and ends with a final heroic tribute to these machines and the people who worked them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from composer's score notes.

## Movement 1: Ghost Train – Detailed Overview

Measure	Tempo	Instrumentation	Musical Considerations
1	 = 72	Flute cadenza	Reflective, ambiguous
4	 = 180	Tutti	Cacophony, strong musical impact
6	 = 80	Percussion, sections, piano colors	Train whistles, mystical, introductory dream sequence, 4/4, 5/4, 6/4
17	 = 120	Clarinets	Triplet murmurs foreshadowing locomotive entrance
22	 = 50	Percussion enters	Aleatoric clarinets, muted trumpet s imitate engine whistles
26	 = 		Accelerando begins
30	 = 		Aleatoric flutes, continued accelerando
34	 = 160-180	Tutti	Dark sustained chords, percussion continues to intensify
39		Trombones	First instance of doppler effect
44		Upper woodwinds	Staggered doppler entrances
59			8/8 measures (3+3+2)
61			4/4 resumes, punctuated cascades
65	 = 120	Clarinets	Establishes “the groove”
67		Brushes	3/4
80		Oboe solo	5/8, 4/8, 9/8, 2/4, 4/4
96		Low brass/reeds	3/4 alternating with 7/8 (2+2+3), rhythmic interjections
103		Tutti	Leaves compound rhythms
122	Accelerando	Thick texture dissapears	Cascading entrances
124	 = 180	Clarinets	Nervous “groove” is established, quick train whistles in clarinet voices, sharp percussion interjections, quasi-fugal entrances begin
131			Triplet and duple motives begin to play against each other.
147		Opposing choirs	8/8 vs. 4/4 rhythmic diminution
155		Tutti	Growth to climactic fall on last note.









## Compositional Techniques

- Aleatoric patterns in flutes, clarinets, piano, mallets, chimes.
- Extreme tempo changes.
- Compound meters used throughout.
- Chord clusters, unique voicings, stacked fifths, fourths, spread intervals.
- Doppler sound effects.
- “Groove” sections are frequently displaced by rhythmic interjections
- Train whistle effects: portamento, glissando, mutes, and chord clusters.

## Melodic/Harmonic Highlights

Whitacre acknowledges that he views composing as a buffet; pick and choose whatever styles you please. Much of the music in the first movement is based on chord clusters, which generally speaking leaves the piece without a strong tonal center. Throughout the work however you encounter unexpected moments of tonal clarity. The apparent lack of a tonal center does not however seem to be an underlying compositional element. The work’s strong use of rhythmic motives cleverly disguises tonal ambiguity.

While some of the individual parts have key signatures, Whitacre’s abundant use of accidentals render these “keys” mainly irrelevant.

When considering the examples below, note that the score is in concert pitch.

Measures 10-11: Moments of tonal “clarity” with elements of pandiatonicism illustrated in the parallel chord voicings. This is possibly the best example of traditional melody, during the first movement.

The image displays a musical score for measures 10 and 11. The score is written for seven instruments: Horns 1 and 2 (Hn 1/2), Horns 3 and 4 (Hn. 3/4), Trumpets 1 and 2 (Trb. 1, Trb. 2/3), Euphonium (Euph.), Tuba, and Piano. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is in concert pitch. The music features parallel chord voicings, which are characteristic of pandiatonicism. The Piano part includes a melodic line with a trill and a triplet. The other instruments play sustained chords and single notes.

Measures 44-46: This is an example of the cascading style used throughout the work, in addition to an instance of the Doppler effect.

*FLI*  
**Ghost Train**  
*Add picc. I & II*

The image displays a musical score for measures 44-46 of a piece titled "Ghost Train". The score is written for a woodwind ensemble, including Flutes 1 and 2, Oboe, Bassoons 1 and 2, and Clarinets 1, 2, and 3. The notation is characterized by a "cascading style" where notes are written in a way that suggests a continuous, flowing motion, often using slurs and ties. Handwritten annotations in blue ink are present: "FLI" is written above the Flute 1 staff, "Add picc. I & II" is written above the Flute 2 staff, and "CL3" is written below the Clarinet 3 staff. The score is set in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The woodwinds play a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, while the strings (not shown) provide a steady accompaniment.

Fl. 1  
Fl. 2  
Ob.  
Bsn. 1  
Bsn. 2  
Cl. 1  
Cl. 2  
Cl. 3

Measures 126 - 128: If played exactly together, these clarinet parts create an incredibly neat effect. The accented notes come together to sound exactly like a stuttering train whistle.

Cl. 1

Cl. 2

Cl. 3

Measures 149 - 150: Here is an example of the chord clusters that are featured throughout the work. Also note the rhythmic diminution.

A. Sax

T. Sax

Tpt. 1

Tpt. 2/3

Hns. 1/2

Hns. 3/4

Trb. 1

Trb. 2/3

Euph.

Tuba

## Related Class Activities

- 1) Listen to other pieces about trains, compare and contrast.
  - a. Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra
    - i. Express Crossing, from *They Came to Swing*
  - b. Robert W. Smith
    - i. The Great Locomotive Chase
- 2) Listen to other pieces that feature the use of chord clusters.
  - a. Phillip Glass
    - i. Einstein on the Beach
  - b. John Adams
    - i. The Chairman Dances
- 3) Listen to a recording of Ghost Train
  - a. Lead discussion about the “big picture” vs. individual parts
- 4) Discuss the definition of tone poem
  - a. Tone Poem - def.: music in which some extra-musical program provides a narrative or illustrative element
- 5) Listen to other tone poems, discuss why they are considered tone poems?
  - a. Tchaikowsky – Romeo and Juliet
  - b. Paul Dukas – The Sorcerer’s Apprentice
- 6) Listen to other music by Eric Whitacre
  - a. Godzilla Eats Las Vegas
  - b. October
  - c. Cloudburst

### State Standards

- ☐ Creating, Performing, and Participating in The Arts
- ☐ Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
- ☐ Responding To and Analyzing Works of Art
- ☐ Understanding Cultural Dimensions Contributions of The Arts

### National Standards

- ☐ Singing, alone and with others
- ☐ Performing on instruments, alone and with others
- ☐ Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
- ☐ Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
- ☐ Reading and notating music.
- ☐ Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- ☐ Evaluating music and music performances.
- ☐ Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
- ☐ Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

## Related Student Projects

- Learn more about the history of ghost-train folk lore using the internet and our school library. Report back and we will share your findings with the group!
- Learn more about tone poems by using the internet and our school library. Find two additional tone poem recordings that we didn't listen to in class - we will share your discoveries with the group!
- Listen to the other two movements of Ghost train and compare and contrast them to the first. Consider musical elements such as harmony, melody, texture, and why you think (or don't think) that they are part of an actual tone poem.
- Using our musical vocabulary, discuss how the first movement of Ghost Train is different than another (be specific, i.e.: title) piece that you have played in band. Be sure to include the following terms: harmony, melody, rhythm, texture, dynamics, and form.
- Using a non-musical subject such as a poem or a short story, compose a tone poem for two or more instruments.
- Research the Doppler effect. Find out what it is, how it can be used, and how you can easily demonstrate it.

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## **Important Terms**

Chord Cluster

Tone Poem

Tonal / Atonal / Pandiatonic

Compound Meter

Aleatoric

Portemento / Glissando

Cascade (As it relates to compositional craft)

Diminutive Rhythm