

EDWARD JOSEPH COLLINS

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Here is a composer you should get to know and I must acknowledge here my dependence on Erik Eriksson's articles which, I understand, are in the public domain. I am grateful to Peter Cook for introducing this composer to me.

Edward Joseph Collins was born in Joliet, Illinois on 19 November 1886, the youngest of nine children born to an Irish-American couple Peter and Bridget (nee McIntyre). All the children had some musical talent. Edward spent most of his early life in Chicago and, by the age of nine, he was giving concerts locally. When fourteen, he had music lessons with Rudolf Ganz and, in 1906, travelled with him to Berlin where he had lessons and/or introductions to Max Bruch, Robert Kahn, Di Motta, Gernsheim and Humperdinck. He certainly had lessons with Bruch and Humperdinck.

Collins' performing debut in Germany was playing Schumann's Fantasy in C and Brahms Handel Variations, two fine works, which won him critical praise.

He returned to the USA in 1912, and toured the Eastern cities giving recitals. He appeared in a double bill concert with the contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink and, after a tour of Europe and America, he was appointed assistant conductor of the Century Opera Company in New York (1912-13). He went to Europe in 1914 as an assistant conductor at the Bayreuth Festival where he played the timpani. The outbreak of war meant that he returned home to the USA where he was very busy giving concerts.

When America joined the war, Collins was a private in the infantry rising to the rank of Lieutenant serving in the 88th Division of the Intelligence Unit in France and later cited for bravery. He spoke German which enabled him to act as an interpreter. He found time to write his operetta *Who Can Tell?* and was given many successful performances in Paris and, at one performance, President Wilson and his party were in attendance.

After the Armistice, Sousa appointed Collins as a local bandleader.

Back in Chicago, Collins resumed his career and became one of the principal piano teachers at the Chicago Music College in 1919.

He married a voice student, Frieda Mayer, whose father, Oscar, owned a meatpacking company and was well to do. E J and his wife had four children namely Dorothy Louise, Marianna Louise, Louise Joan and Edward Joseph junior. Having married into a family of wealth, they lived in the Mayer residence on Sheridan Road in Chicago.

In 1923, there was a competition for new works for orchestra arranged by the Chicago North Shore Festival. Two were entered by Collins namely *1914*, later retitled *Tragic Overture*, and *Mardi Gras* said to be boisterous and bizarre. The Chicago Symphony orchestra was conducted by Frederick Stock and Collins won the \$1,000 first prize for the *Tragic Overture*.

Collins Piano Concerto no 1 in E flat was premiered by the composer and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Stock on 27 March 1925. It was said to be well crafted but short on ideas. In 1928, Collins began work on a large work for soloists, chorus and orchestra called *Hymn to the Earth*. In this, he distanced himself from German styles and Romanticism and the work was more impressionistic. He seemed to be moving towards Ravel. Collins' Piano Concerto no 2 is really his Concert Piece in A minor for piano and orchestra given its first performance on 3 December 1931 which fared better than its predecessor.

In March 1933, someone wrote that creative work demands clean living and much rest. Some might disagree with this but it is interesting to consider that some composers who did not embrace clean living wrote some really awful works, as did composers with mental problems. There is a lot of sense in this statement.

Then the Collins fell in love with a picturesque village called Fish Creek on the west coast of Wisconsin and, in 1938, purchased a house between Fish Creek and Egg Harbour. In 1939, he received the David Bispham Award for his opera *Daughter of the South* but that year some hints of depression set in and there was little interest in his work whereas, earlier, he had had some acclaim, and everyone seemed short of money. He was also beginning to suffer from congestive heart disease. His first heart attack was in the late spring of 1940 and he finally had the fatal one on 7 December 1951. He was 65.

A few comments about some of his orchestral works may be helpful:

Tragic Overture 1914 revised 1926 and 1942 inspired by World War One and effectively evokes this in part, but the work is somewhat episodic making it formless to some extent.

Piano Concerto no 1 of 1925 is competent and well written for the piano but not well received at its premiere.

Symphony in B minor 1925 *Nos habet humus* (All return to Dust). This, as the title suggests, is another tragic work but has much to commend it. It tends to be a little rhapsodic but I heard it after a performance of Amy Beach's symphony and the Collins is far superior.

Hibernia, variations on an old Irish song 1929. One of his works that acknowledges his Irish roots.

Concert Piece in A Minor for piano and orchestra (Concerto no 2) 1931. Apparently, this had to be completed in a hurry but is a good work and the understanding of the piano is evident.

Mardi Gras 1932. Does not sound like a carnival and is often dreary. It is long winded.

Valse elegante 1933 is a typical predictable waltz

Lil' David play on your harp 1940 is a good working of a famous spiritual

Lament and Jig 1941 shows effective use of Irish inspiration

Piano Concerto no 3 1942 is possibly his most successful concerto.

I would be failing if I did not mention his fine orchestration particularly in his excellent *Festive Overture*, the last pages of which generate a real thrill.

There are many solo piano works performed by two fine pianists, Earl Wild and Gunnar Johansen, some of which are spirituals and others are cowboy pieces or Americana. They include

All God's chillum got wings

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel

Lil' David play on your harp

The Gospel train

Cowboy breakdown

and the inevitable waltzes and a tango.

Most of these works are trite but pleasant.

I expect the composer considered all these pieces as Americana

At the time of writing, there are 10 CDs of his music available from Albany Records.

Collins was not forwarding looking in his music as were Irving Fine and Roger Sessions. Walter Piston was probably the best composer of conventional music but, although comparisons are odious, Collins is preferred to Copland. When I make a statement like this, I am pursued to explain it by giving an example, so here is one. Some rather daft person wrote that York Bowen's music was like Tchaikovsky!

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