

## Hymn to the Earth [1929] (1929)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

### Notes by Erik Eriksson (1940-2008), the composer's biographer

The motivation to compose a choral work on a grand scale seems to have arisen from a commission from New York's Society of the Friends of Music; there is however no record of a performance by the Society.

A microfilm copy of the score was found in the late 1980s by composer choral and conductor William Ferris; he conducted what may have been the first performance on 2 June 1989 in Chicago; the concert was recorded live and had a limited release on CD.

The Society's commission likely prompted action by Collins on an idea that may have been percolating for some time, something that could encompass his feelings about nature and life. His journals are replete with observations on the beauty of Nature. Collins, like Mahler, worked in a big city during the concert season and had difficulty composing there. Inspiration was found in the Wisconsin countryside each summer, at the cottage of his wife's family on Cedar Lake, or on the Door County Peninsula.

The composer's son Edward, Jr. recalls:

In the 20's and 30's Door County was quite remote and undeveloped, requiring a two-day drive from Chicago. But my parents gladly made the trek every summer, at first to various resorts and later to the home they bought there, surrounded by Lake Michigan waters, dense forests, and brisk seasonal weather. It is easy to sense the strong impressions that nature made on my father, in the lyrics as well as the music for *Hymn to the Earth*.

The composer confided a little about the genesis of the work to his journals—as well as something of the diligence with which he applied himself:

**13 January 1922:** The coldest day this winter so my spirits are low. I hate the battle with the elements—this expending energy not only to succeed in life but simply exist and not succumb to a hostile force. Cold means death to me; not the death of the body but the death of worlds. On a night like tonight the heavens seem filled with gorgeous planets which ages ago were conquered by the cold and now are stark in a limitless void where only the cold is present. Our earth is a little ball of warmth assailed on every side by a horrible chill, the agent of death and eternal lifelessness.

**17 October 1926:** Creative effort has a magical effect upon the imagination even outside the sphere to which that effort is confined. When I am writing I catch sounds in the air—say, fragments of dance music from upper windows, the songs of birds, melodious sounds of train whistles in the distance and the whole symphony which rises out of the ground on a summer night.

**1 February 1927:** How beautiful the young tree is in Spring! Its roots are buried deep in the rich soil of Mother Earth from whom it draws sustenance when its pale green leaves are pierced by rays of the life-giving sun. When earth and sun combine the result must needs be a masterpiece.

**24 September 1928:** I am beginning the last week of my vacation. Of course, I have been in town [Chicago] for a month, but things are very slow at the [Chicago Musical] college and most of my family is at Cedar Lake so I have been able to give many precious hours to my "Hymn to the Earth." It is fast nearing completion and I am elated to think that at last I have entered on a really serious and creative phase of my life.

**28 September 1928:** Played my "Hymn to the Earth" for one of my colleagues tonight and he didn't like it. Ho! Hum! A few years ago this would have discouraged me but now I am callous. Some will like it and for the others I shall write other works.

**30 October 1929:** It seems incredible that a week has winged by since I wrote in this book. Well, the last several days have been a total loss anyway ... [Collins recollects some nights of partying and drinking] ... Tuesday (last night) at the Boston orchestra's concert and at Pospishil's after where I wrote the last page of "Hymn to the Earth" and he copied it. In bed around 2 a.m. So tonight I am going to bed betimes (9:30) and try to get back some of the squandered energy. The "Hymn to the Earth" was on its way to New York today to the Society of the Friends of Music. There are many fetching things in the work but it is old-fashioned and naïve in spots.

By the time Collins addressed himself to his *Hymn*, choral works were no longer quite as fashionable as they had been

in the nineteenth century. Works such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *St. Paulus*, Vaughan Williams's *Sea Symphony* and Delius's *Mass of Life* and *Requiem* were all in the past. A few contemporary composers were still working with large choral forces, however: Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalm* would be completed more than a year later and several British composers (Herbert Howells, for example) were still producing compelling works for massed voices.

The score achieves a distinct grandeur, while Collins's own text reflects his familiarity with great writing: it is, if somewhat elevated and archaic in tone, literate and eloquent. The choral writing and orchestral scoring are assured, even in long passages of strenuous singing. Collins's particular style of chromaticism provides movement and a free-floating quality, mitigating any suspicion of a traditional four-square gait.

The opening and closing choruses are the longest and most imposing of the six sections. The first section opens with an extended passage for strings and flute before the full orchestra gathers and the chorus enters vigorously, accelerating to *Allegro*. Even in these early pages, marked contrasts are heard in dynamics and tempi.

After a martial choral flourish, the solo bass embarks upon an invocation of Winter. The melodic line moves both low and high, rising from a low G to a softly-sung high F. The third section, for tenor soloist and chorus, finds the latter initially echoing the soloist in long, flowing phrases before they leave him on his own to celebrate Springtime. Summer finds its advocate in the soprano soloist vocalizing a lilting waltz that might recall the salon were its character not so fresh and guileless. Section five is given to the chorus, led first by tenors and basses, before trebles join to proclaim "White butterflies flit here and there."

The final section begins with the alto soloist honoring Autumn arrayed "in thy brightest and thy somberest hues." The chorus joins to proclaim "the season now is late." Nature's beauty is bittersweet and, moreover, humanity's place within her embrace by no means certain. When for all humans "life and death have ceased to be" the chorus ponders what is to be found "amid the vast silence of eternity patiently waiting" but can only answer "Who knows?"

The meaning of words now exhausted, the chorus, led by the sopranos, briefly intones "ah," then goes silent as violins ascend as though outward into the cold void.