

Mardi Gras [1922] (rev. 1924~1931)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

A 13 October 1921 entry in Collins's journal records the beginning of his work on this composition:

Started my "Festival Overture" [Ed.: later re-titled *Mardi Gras*] today—got a pretty good idea for the beginning. At last I have started writing something for orchestra. No more fooling now. Night and day I must work to make up for a ten year delay. My apprentice[ship] has been too long—from now on learning must come from writing only.

After completing the overture on 7 January 1922, Collins submitted it to Chicago's North Shore Competition, in which it failed to qualify for the final round. Before the year's end, however, an individual described only as "a prominent musician" gave Collins some advice about the work and the composer immediately started making revisions.

On two successive evenings in late March 1924, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed *Mardi Gras* and "the audience liked it," the composer noted in his journal. Nonetheless, he felt it was "very old-fashioned" and was "a bit ashamed of it." Collins felt somewhat more sanguine about the work when he conducted it during 1931 commencement ceremonies at Chicago Musical College, leading an orchestra composed of students along with members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. *Mardi Gras* had, he noted in a journal entry of 25 June 1931, "a fine success." By this occasion he could have also recalled that the work had been one of five final-round compositions in the 1926 North Shore Competition in which Collins was awarded first prize for his *Tragic Overture*. Although *Mardi Gras* suggests the freer form of subsequent compositions, Collins here maintains a connection to traditional theme and development notions he had learned from his teacher Rudolf Ganz and others with whom he studied in Berlin.

In program notes prepared for the 1924 Chicago Symphony performances, Collins observed that "the piece is boisterous and bizarre by turns, with now and then a romantic or even serious moment—this latter the constant companion of wild frivolity." He further remarks that *Mardi Gras* presents a main theme voiced by cellos and horns accompanied by violins, trumpets and higher woodwinds, then by the full orchestra, and that after the orchestral statement, the theme breaks into "subsidiary fragments."

A return to the principal theme is followed by a transition to the second theme, now played "tenderly" by a solo clarinet. The composer acknowledges the episodic quality of the work in detailing the succession of climaxes that rise and subside, making way for new themes evocative of the festival's great masks and clowns on stilts. Collins concludes:

The Development has to do mainly with a working out of the opening subject and the first subsidiary theme. The Recapitulation begins in the violas and violoncellos (soli) over an organ-point in the kettledrums and horns. The final coda is the whole work 'boiled down.' Fragments of the entire thematic material are tossed back and forth until the wild scene reaches a culmination in a fanfare of trumpets sounding above the full orchestra. At this moment the carnival royalty arrives, thousands of colored streamers are thrown from upper windows, the air becomes thick with confetti, and lurid lights play upon the fantastic floats and the grotesque costumes of the revelers.