

## The Orchestral Works

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

By the time Collins began composing orchestral works in the early 1920s, Prokofiev's precocious *Symphony No. 1* had been established as a repertory work for a half decade, Stravinsky had already entered his neo-Classical stage with the ballet *Pulcinella*, Richard Strauss was composing his "autobiographical" opera *Intermezzo*, Ravel's *La Valse* had just had its premiere and Arnold Schoenberg's system of serial composition had taken at least one branch of music in a new direction. Among American composers, Charles Ives had long since finished his four symphonies, but was still awaiting wide recognition, and Aaron Copland was studying in Paris with Nadia Boulanger.

Collins had been thoroughly prepared for this moment; his training with Rudolf Ganz in Chicago, his studies in Berlin with Bruch and Humperdinck, travels in Europe to other important cities and his return to the rich cultural life in Chicago all shaped a musical personality different from those of his fellow countrymen. Widely read and a frequent attendee of opera and symphonic concerts, Collins was a cosmopolite. The counterpoint and heavy orchestration to which he had been liberally exposed as a student gradually loosened their hold on him and he turned to Ravel as an idealization of expression in balance with classical restraint.

In his own works, Collins avoided excess. The level of craftsmanship was remarkable even in his first orchestral works such as the *Tragic Overture* and *Mardi Gras* where his stylistic imprint is found fully-fledged. Although his orchestral works are not lacking in visceral impact, there is a sense of passion felt through the filter of recollection, of events contemplated in retrospect. Feelings are not raw. Rather, one senses a mind of rare sensitivity at work.

In form, Collins's orchestral works are fluid, not bound by theme, variation and recapitulation. Themes emerge and, once given voice, pass on, only to be recalled again. The composer's tonal palette is broad and keenly judged: Collins could assemble the combinations of instruments to paint with the right tint and the right brushstroke. Likewise, his notions about tonality were free: while not adhering to the chromaticism of the Late Romantic period, he employed constant key shifts to keep his works airborne, poetic rather than prosaic.

Contributing to this feeling of buoyancy is the manner in which he wrote for the double basses. Rather than confining them to ground level, he often set them loose to follow the contour of the melodic line. Counterpoint played a subservient role and when present, it is both subtle and long-spanned. Among other American composers, no authentic musical colleagues present themselves; only the English composer Frederick Delius seems a suitable counterpart in style and feeling.

Pianist William Wolfram considers that Collins's piano concerti are "technically, not too hard" and "anti-virtuosic in a sense." Despite the absence of rapid-fire octaves, complex passagework, and arm-stretching forays into the extremes of bass and treble registers, Collins kept the soloist in almost constant motion, offering only the occasional pause. Collins's ability to spin affecting melodies kept him focused on substance rather than display.