

Suite for Violoncello and Piano [1933]

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

Even in a larger oeuvre than that of Collins, the *Suite for Violoncello and Piano* would warrant a leading position. The artists for whom it was intended are unknown, although Collins may have had cellist Alfred Wallenstein in mind with himself as pianist.

In any event, the composer clearly had conceived this work for two musicians capable of intensity, nuance, and considerable dynamic range. It shares with most of Collins's other works a quality of making itself immediately known while reserving depths that become more valued with each successive hearing. On what was likely its New York premiere on 2 November 2002, the *Suite* was received with notable enthusiasm by an audience at the Weill Recital Hall (Carnegie Hall).

The cellist on that occasion, Walter Preucil, makes this observation: "With its fresh harmonic landscapes, expressive tenderness and dramatic passion, the challenging Collins *Suite* is a much welcome and irresistible addition to the cello-piano literature."

Accompanist Jeffrey Sykes describes the *Suite* as "the most modern work on this CD. Clearly indebted to nineteenth century concepts of form, it nonetheless explores new and often craggy harmonic and rhythmic territory in search of a very particular sense of expression. It reminds me of Ives' violin sonatas, in that it recasts European tradition in a manner that strikes me as being uniquely American. It's a work that deserves to be added to the repertoire of serious cello/piano duos."

The *Suite* begins with an emotionally stormy Prelude. The piano voices dense, angular accompanying figures before assuming the principal theme from the cello, as the latter churns in support. As the tempo broadens, an expansive melody in the cello makes a strong impression. Several tempo changes are heard before the movement finishes at a vigorous *allegro*.

If the second movement, *Waltz*, at first suggests music of the salon, the impression is soon dispelled as the perfumes of yearning and recollection scent the music. The cellist is several times instructed to play *sul ponticello* (near the bridge) for a more distant effect. *Love Scene* is the centerpiece of this nearly half hour work. During the soft beginning, phrases turn in on themselves in oblique reflection. When the sweeping, writhing piano part finally moves to forcefully repeated chords, the intensity becomes feverish. The ecstatic principal theme then subsides once more into remembering, before the movement ends *molto dolce e espressivo*.

An eccentric, skipping rhythmic pattern propels the closing Rondo as both cello and piano wander through modulating tonalities before, once more, the music slows for yet more backward glances. Do the chords in the piano part suggest bells tolling as the cello settles into its lower register? Dark thoughts are shaken off by a return to the section's first theme taken *allegro vivace* and then *presto* to the end. The cellist trills through two full measures before a final plucked chord.