

## *Symphony in B Minor ("Nos habebit humus")* [1929]

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

About his only symphony, Collins had a little to confide to his private journal. As early as January 1922, plans to start a symphony are mentioned. In early October of 1928, the composer ruminated on the artist's need for solitude, then noted, abruptly, "Tomorrow I am going to start my symphony." His muse proved a fickle "jade," however.

After leading him to a "noble and expansive theme" for the first movement, she fled, leaving him to struggle on. Despite the difficulties composing the symphony presented, the work was completed during the following year and was given the citation, *Nos habebit humus* ("all return to dust," a phrase from that most venerable of student songs, *Gaudeamus Igitur*\*).

While its stylistic building blocks will bring to mind works of other composers, taken as a whole, they add up to something quite different. There is in Collins's letters and journals no mention of composers of the British Isles, but in tone and emotion there is a similarity. Delius comes to mind; his music was performed rather widely in pre-WW I Germany. Whether Collins heard his works and experienced a subconscious connection or he drew on his own Irish ancestry, one cannot know. The essential nature of Collins's symphony bears, in any event, only the most tenuous similarity to the works of his American contemporaries or even those of such a predecessor as Edward McDowell.

The work is scored for very large orchestra. In addition to a full complement of strings, Collins calls for 4 flutes, 4 oboes, English horn, 3 bassoons, a contrabassoon, 4 trumpets, 6 horns, 3 trombones, tuba and 2 harps. The sheer size of the ensemble is evident in the opening measures where the tonal richness makes an immediate impression. Collins uses a floating bass line, keeping the underpinnings moving and occasionally, as in the fourth movement, obliging the double basses to play sixteenth notes. The atmosphere is bucolic, the mood volatile in ceaseless rise and fall in both scale and temperament. Collins's writing for horns is expressive: he sometimes pushes them into sharply accented figures, such as the *ma marcato* measures in the first movement. While rising cadences ascend vigorously, the slow, regretful fall of descending phrases makes the more memorable impression.

The second movement offers an elliptical, sunny melody unclouded by doubt. Buoyant figures are passed from section to section before the orchestra shifts into a *Presto (alla tarantella)*.

The third movement is an elegy, though not a lugubrious one. Grave and affecting, it holds imaginative couplings of instruments. Though not an uncommon alliance of sounds, the trumpet, trombone, tuba and bassoon ensemble here assumes a haunting, serene yet disquieting role. The orchestra grows in volume and unrushed intensity as the movement nears the close, but subsides to *p* for the final two pages.

The final movement, marked *allegro*, begins with a churning, impatient figure that will recur often during the finale. This dominating theme is interrupted several times by a jabbing figure that slows the vigorous pace. Forceful, accented phrases alternate with ones of unruffled legato. Tempi are fluid; the music hastens, then relaxes, sometimes slowing to a near stop. Instruments playing sustained phrases in their upper register fire the timbre, pushing the soundscape into one of considerable urgency. In the final two pages of the orchestral score, Collins requests that the players move steadily from *p* to *pp* as the strings and winds dissolve into silence, *sempre più dolce*. The effect lingers in the memory, ineffably moving.

### Jon Becker, editor for the Collins project

Late in the Collins project, after Erik Eriksson had passed away, it was discovered that Collins had orchestrated the third movement of his *Piano Trio* (Geronimo), in *G minor*, *Op. 1*, for use as the third movement for his 1929 *Symphony*. The *Trio* had been composed early in his career, and revised in 1921.

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\* "Gaudeamus igitur" nach C.W. Kindleben 1781

Gaudeamus igitur,  
Juvenes dum sumus;  
Post jucundam juventutem,  
Post molestam senectutem  
Nos habebit humus!

While we're young, let us rejoice,  
Singing out in gleeful tones;  
After youth's delightful frolic,  
And old age (so melancholic!),  
Earth will cover our bones.