

Romantic Music of Edward Joseph Collins

Folk Songs & Dances for Piano - **EARL WILD**

Allegro piacevole - **THE MANHATTAN STRING QUARTET**

Notes by Phillip Ramey [updated by Jon Becker, 2016]

A renowned American musician of the late nineteenth century, Mrs. H.H.A. Beach, once noted that she had “literally lived the life of two people” while pursuing a double career as composer and pianist. The case of the now-little-known Edward Joseph Collins. (1886-1951) was rather more complicated, for he led not two but four lives: composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher.

Born in Joliet, Illinois on November 10, ~~1889~~ 1886, Collins came from a large and musical Irish-American family. Both of his parents were musicians, and four sisters and one brother took up music professionally. At age fourteen, after preliminary piano instruction in his hometown, Collins began studies at the Chicago Musical College with the distinguished Swiss pianist, composer and conductor Rudolph Ganz (1887-1972), to whom Maurice Ravel dedicated his virtuoso piano piece *Scarbo*. In Chicago, Collins additionally studied composition with Felix Borowski and Adolf Weidig.

Subsequently, he spent several years in Berlin, where at the Königlische Hochschule he continued his work with Ganz and had composition lessons from Max Bruch and Engelbert Humperdink. Collins made his pianistic debut in 1912 in Berlin, performing the Schumann *Fantasy* and the Brahms *Handel Variations*, and one critic wrote, “he played in such a spirit of natural romanticism and with such youthful exuberance that it was a joy to follow him.”

After returning to the United States that same year, he toured as piano soloist on a double-bill with the world famous soprano Ernestine Schumann-Heink. During 1912-13, Collins was assistant conductor of New York City's Century Opera Company, and later (1913-14) an assistant conductor at Germany's Bayreuth Festival.

Collins served in France in World War I-initially as an infantry private, then as a lieutenant in the Army Intelligence Department- and was cited for bravery. An operetta he composed to entertain the troops was performed for the Allied Expeditionary Forces and the Army of Occupation, with President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing in the first-night audience. After the 1918 Armistice, Collins was appointed an Army bandleader by John Philip Sousa.

On his return to Chicago, he began a long pedagogical career, first (in 1919) as one of the principal piano instructors at the Chicago Musical College and then (from 1933) as a member of the piano faculty of Chicago's American Conservatory of Music. In 1920, he married Frieda Mayer, a voice student.

During Collins' final three decades, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra programmed several of his works and he was soloist in his piano concertos, under the baton of Frederick Stock [and Hans Lange]. In 1939 he was awarded the David Bispham Memorial Medal for his Civil War opera *Daughter of the South*, and in 1942 he himself conducted the Chicago Symphony in [a revised version of] his prize winning Tragic Overture, a work inspired by his World War I service. After suffering from heart disease for more than a decade, Collins died of congestive heart failure at age sixty-two, on December 1, 1951, in Chicago.

Among Collins' works are the *Symphony in B Minor*, “*Mardi Gras*” - *Carnival Piece for Orchestra* (introduced by Stock and the Chicago Symphony in 1924), *Suite Mignonne for Orchestra* (1925) [lost], *A Tragic Overture* (1926; revived during the 1980-81 season by the Long Island Symphony), *Irish Rhapsody for Orchestra*, “*Young Americana*” - *Suite for Orchestra* [lost], *Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-Flat Major* (1924; the finale, marked *All' America*, has, wrote the composer, “the snappy rhythms of our own music”), *Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Minor* (1931; original title: *Concert Piece*), *Piano Concerto No. 3* (1941), the opera *Daughter of the South* (libretto by Collins), the operetta *Who Can Tell?* (dating from the time of Collins' war service), the ballet *Masque of the Red Death*, the oratorio *Hymn to the Earth*, a string quartet movement (1935), *Sonata in A Major for Violin*, and *Piano Trio in G Minor* for violin, cello and piano, and *Arabesque* for violin and piano, and numerous short pieces for violin [lost], a considerable amount of piano music (including the *Sonata in F Minor* [lost]), and a large number of songs.

**For some works no dates are available; in the case of others, when no exact year of composition is known, the date given is that of copyright.*

Similar to Mrs. Beach and the even better known American composer-pianist Edward MacDowell, Collins wrote conservative, Europe-derived music, although, like his contemporary Charles Tomlinson Griffes (and, for that matter, his teacher Ganz), his work has French Impressionist overtones. Patrician in intent, Collins' large-scale pieces utilize traditional forms. Although his rhetoric might be termed conventionally romantic, it is emotionally cool, avoiding vulgarity with a near Mendelssohnian restraint (the *Variations on an Irish Tune* for piano and the *Second Piano Concerto* provide clear examples of the aesthetic). Long-lined melody tends to be at a premium, for Collins was essentially a short breasted composer to whom variation form had a natural appeal.

A thorough professional, Collins absorbed all of the turn-of -the-century chromatic language (Scriabin, Debussy, Reger) but he himself made no re-examination of tonality. His orchestrating (in, for instance, the *Tragic Overture*, and *Second Piano Concerto*) is solid and sonorous, if not especially coloristic. He did however have an occasional, rather striking, predilection for eccentric rhythm: for example, the unusual additive meter 3 1/2 1/4 in the *Allegro piacevole* for string quartet and the finale of the *Second Concerto*, and 4 1/2 1/4 in the opening section of the *Tragic Overture*; also worth noting are the alternating bars of 3/4 and 5/8 time in the *Allegro piacevole* and 7/8 and 5/8 in the second movement of the *Third Piano Concerto*.

Even though Collins' pervasive eclecticism assured that his music could be of no influence historically, those of his large-scale scores that it was possible to examine prove so well executed as to fit agreeably into the latter-day romantic tradition of such figures

as Sergei Rachmaninoff, Jean Sibelius and Samuel Barber - no small achievement, surely. Collins, who seems to have written less and less as he grew older, and very little in his last decade, intrigues as an ambitious composer of works in all genres who was not able fully to realize is considerable potential.

Probably written in 1930, *Variations on an Irish Tune* consists of a theme, sixteen variations and a finale. The overall scheme is a traditional one: a series of minor-key variations surrounding several in the tonic major that form a contrasting sub-section. The key is G minor for variations 1 to 8 and 13 to 16; and G major for Variations 9 to 12.

The simple, modal character of the theme (the Irish folk song "O! the 'taters they are small over here!") does not lend itself to development, making inevitable the set of small-scaled episodes that comprise Collins' variations. This highly eclectic work offers an odd stylistic amalgam, with a good deal of contrast between simple diatonicism and pentatonicism (the last, *à la* Debussy and Ravel, arising from the folk song's Aeolian mode with its flatted seventh) and luxuriant chromaticism. Because the emphasis is on the melodic rather than harmonic structure of the theme, the composer felt free to superimpose practically and harmony. Collins' piano writing is conservative even for its day, but well conceived; though not virtuosic, it is mildly coloristic in some of its ornamentation and its occasional cross rhythms.

The work opens *Andante* with rolled chords (marked *quasi arpa* and meant to suggest the Celtic harp) accompanying the statement of the theme. Variation 1 (*Con movimento*) is expressive and redolent of middle-period Scriabin; Variation 2 (same tempo) is clear but ornate, with a brief, resonant canon. Variation 3 (*Allegro*) is etude-like, and Variation 4 (same tempo) features a pattern of three-against-four. The lyric Variation 5 (*Molto tranquillo*) and the rhythmic, dramatically Rachmaninovian Variation 8 (*Nontropo*). With Variation 9, the key changes from G minor to G major; the meter of this variation is 6/8 and there are sonorous pedal tones and canonic writing that suggest a lyrical Irish jig.

The first half of Variation 10 (*Poco allegro*) bears a charming resemblance to Debussy's famous little piece *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*, while Variation 11 (*Andante molto tranquillo*) is sweetly melodic and ornamental, with a three (left hand)-against-four (right hand) pattern throughout. The pentatonic lyricism of Variation 12 (*Allegro*) signals the end of the second, major-key, section. Variation 13 (same tempo, G minor) is improvisational in character, oddly juxtaposing chromatic writing with the pentatonicism of the preceding variation.

Although ostensibly cast in 4/4 meter, the syncopated, high-spirited, folksy Variation 14 (*Commodo*) moves in five each beat divided into pentuplets. The pensive Variation 16 (*Più allegro*) continues the canonic motion with busier writing and bigger textures while building to a climax. The Finale (*Allegro quasi presto*) begins in a toccata-like manner and climaxes in a thunderous, declamatory restatement of the folk song with ultra-chromatic harmonization, after which the work ends in triumphant and unambiguous G major, close upon a flourish of dissonant whole-tone harmony.

As with other of Collins' small piano pieces based on actual American folk tunes or on folk-like material, *Cowboy's Breakdown* (1938) suggests similar efforts by the New Orleans pianist-composer Louis-Moreau Gottschalk (1829-69), with the qualification that Collins is far more harmonically sophisticated. Constructed in elementary A-B-A form, the genial *Cowboy's Breakdown* has a perky sounding opening section (C major, marked "Pretty lively"), a slower middle section (A major, "songlike") featuring a new, syncopated tune, and then a return of the opening music, with a jokey ending on the familiar "Shave-and-a-haircut: two bits" rhythm.

Collins' dispassionate *Tango (In Form of a Rondo)* (1935) is a droll commentary on the slow Argentine dance, a genre that traditionally suggests sultry emotion. Cast in second rondo form (A-B-A-C-A), this ingratiating and effective piece (marked *Un poco languido*) is so chromatic as to stylistically suggest the impossible; a tango by Scriabin. Note the Flamenco ornamentation in the C-section, just before the transition back to the main theme.

The brief *Passacaglia* (which probably dates from the mid-1930s) comprises a narrative, repetitive theme in the Mixolydian mode followed by eight tiny variations. The writing, with the exception of the final variation (unexpectedly chromatic and wittily dissonant in its penultimate diminished chord), is straight-forward and conventional, of a somewhat academic disposition nor dissimilar to Aaron Copland's early piano work of the same title.

Four Collins pieces based on American Negro spirituals are presented on this recording. Although their esoteric harmonization is presently out of favor with musicologists and arrangers, who prefer original simple modal accompaniments of these ingenuous tunes, nonetheless Collins' method has a certain ear-catching originality. Despite this aspect, as pianist Earl Wild has noted: "Collins' transcriptions are artfully written and maintain their ethnic flavor throughout".

All God's Chillun' Got Wings (1948), in A-flat major, consists of an anticipatory introduction, the spiritual itself and three harmonically spicy variations. *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?* (1940), in G major, A-B-A form, has the bars of arpeggios suggesting an Impressionist harp cadenza that herald the well-known, bouncy spiritual, presented in a straightforward manner; a contrastingly peaceful middle section (B minor) follows, and then a return to the tune and a harp-music ending. *The Gospel Train* (1947), in B-flat major, begins with an intentionally bizarre, improvisatory introduction replete with Neapolitan Sixth arpeggios; a simple statement of the lighthearted tune "Git on Board, Lil' Chillun'" is followed by humorous treatment of that material.

Earl Wild is one of the last in a long line of great virtuoso pianist/composers. Often called a “supervirtuoso” and “one of the 20th century’s greatest pianists,” Wild has been performing for over six decades. He was born on November 26, 1915 in Pennsylvania, and began piano studies at the age of three. When he was fourteen years old, Otto Klemperer engaged him as pianist for the Pittsburgh Symphony. The recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the Liszt Medal, he makes regular concert tours throughout North America in recital and as soloist with symphony orchestras. Wild was a member of the Juilliard School piano faculty for ten years, and is currently the Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Ohio State University. He holds the distinction of being one of the most recorded of pianists, with more than 31 concertos, 14 chamber works and over 350 different solo pieces in his discography.

The Manhattan String Quartet, formed in 1970, is part of a much older tradition which dates back to the 1930s. The original quartet was led by violinist Rachmael Weinstock and disbanded prior to World War II. Three decades later Eric Lewis became Mr. Weinstock’s student at the Manhattan School of Music and re- envisioned the quartet for a new era. Today’s quartet is described by the Boston Globe as a “national treasure,” and has performed across the United States, Mexico and Europe. They have been in residence at Music Mountain Chamber Music Festival, Western Connecticut State University, the Manhattan School of Music, Corfu Festival in Greece and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico. Their concerts are frequently aired on national radio and television and they have maintained a large, eclectic discography.

PIANO WORKS

Producer: Michael Rolland Davis.
 Engineer: Ed Thompson.
 Piano Technician: Greg Comly,
 Baldwin Piano
 Recorded in Fernleaf Abbey, November 1988

ALLEGRO PIACEVOLE

Produced and recorded by Greg Squires at Rye Presbyterian Church, Rye, New York on March 15, 1986.
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All music manuscript (BMI).

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| 1. <i>Variations on an Irish Tune</i> | (1930) | 15:17 |
| 2. <i>Cowboy's Breakdown</i> | (1938) | 2:19 |
| 3. <i>Tango (in form of a Rondo)</i> | (1935) | 4:04 |
| 4. <i>Passacaglia</i> | (mid 1930's) | 2:30 |
| 5. <i>All God's Chillun' Got Wings</i> | (1948) | 2:13 |
| 6. <i>Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?</i> | (1940) | 2:13 |
| 7. <i>Lil' David Play on Yo' Harp</i> | (1940) | 3:36 |
| 8. <i>The Gospel Train</i> | (1947) | 1:57 |
| 9. <i>Valse Pensive, Opus 18, No. 5</i> | (early 1920's) | 3:43 |
| 10. <i>Valse Eccentrique</i> | (1949) | 3:36 |
| 11. <i>Valse Romantique, Opus 18, No. 3</i> | (1924) | 3:10 |
| 12. <i>Valse Limpide, Opus 18, No. 4</i> | (1922) | 2:33 |
| 13. <i>Valse Heroique, Opus 18, No. 1</i> | (1922) | 3:07 |

Earl Wild, piano

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| 14. <i>Allegro Piacevole in D Minor (for string quartet)</i> | (1935, rev. 1949) | 7:28 |
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The Manhattan String Quartet
 Eric Lewis and Ray Lewis, violins
 John Dexter, viola
 Judith Glyde, violoncello