

*Variations on a Negro Theme* (ca. 1930)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Jon Becker, editor for the Collins project

A beautiful and sophisticated composition, *Variations on a Negro Theme* oddly receives no mention in Collins's writings, nor anywhere else for that matter.

Given the music's mature style, the *Variations* were likely composed in the final decade of Collins's life, and sometime after this 9 April 1939 entry in the composer's diary: "

In the morning finished 'Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel.' (The other day I bought an amazing collection of Negro spirituals and am going to make piano pieces of them).

Collins also arranged several other Negro spirituals for piano solo: *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho* [1947]; *The Gospel Train* [1947]; *All God's Chillun' Got Wings* [1948]; and, *Lil' David Play on Yo' Harp*, also orchestrating the latter.

The composer clearly was drawn to spirituals on account of their musical riches. Collins also was an admirer of jazz, and his son, Edward Jr., recalls chauffeuring him to Chicago's "black and tan" clubs.

However Collins also was keenly aware of Ireland's "struggles" and of the plight of Irish-American immigrants, including his parents. Near his home in Joliet, Irish immigrants built canals under terrible physical conditions; they suffered discrimination, and on occasion were lynched.

About 10'30" into the first recording of *Variations on a Negro Theme* track, one hears an unmistakably Celtic variant, perhaps expressing Collins's personal empathy with the human tragedy that shaped the Negro spiritual.

With regard to source manuscripts, *Variations on a Negro Theme* was the most problematic of all the Collins composition. Two versions were extant, each in separate music notebooks, both undated. One version had thirteen variations, some having alternatives. The other version had mostly the same variations, albeit in a different order, in half-time, or in a different key, plus a *Finale*. In both versions, the composer crossed out some sections. The manuscripts recall those of Collins's *Nocturne*, which he is known to have performed, then re-worked.

This edition of *Variations on a Negro Theme* aims to integrate the best of each source score.