

Missing: A Wisconsin Composer's Award-Winning Opera

by Jon Becker

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Ever fantasize about having an Indiana Jones adventure and finding a long lost, one-of-a-kind treasure?

Now's your chance and, better yet, there may be no need to brave humid tropical forests, caves teeming with snakes or spiders, or devious competitors and the forces of evil. The "booty" may be lying forgotten in your home or office, at the bottom of a drawer, in a piano bench's storage space, or among yellowing papers in an attic chest.

The treasures in question are the missing pages of the score for *Daughter of the South*, the only opera of American composer Edward Joseph Collins (1886-1951).

Once thought lost, the score for this "opera in one act and two scenes" has now been mostly recovered. Many arias, ensembles, and choruses, as well as some substantial instrumental sections now can be performed.

Unfortunately, dozens of pages from the second scene are still missing, pages that may include most of the dramatic action, based on an extant fragment in which the "hero" seems about to face a military firing squad. (Don't worry... the end of the opera makes it clear that the hero has not been executed; indeed, he is healthy enough to sing in the closing ensemble!).

Although Collins lived and taught in Chicago, he often retreated from urban stresses to summer lodgings on Cedar Lake or near Fish Creek, in Wisconsin, where he also found the isolation he needed to compose.

In the 1800s and even into the first half of the 20th century, once the original manuscript of a composition had been professionally copied, it was not uncommon for composers to give pages of the manuscript as gifts, which were much prized by friends, neighbors, students, or fans, especially if those pages were signed by the composer.

So those missing pages just might yet be found in southeastern Wisconsin.

In 1938, substantial portions of *Daughter of the South* were performed at a luncheon meeting of the *American Opera Society of Chicago (National)*, founded in 1921 as the *American Society for Opera in Our Language* (i.e., English) by the composer Mrs. Archibald Freer. Members of the *Society* heard the new opera in recital (singers with piano) at Chicago's Lake Shore Drive Hotel.

Writing with the prevalent attitudes of the time, a reviewer wrote:

Edward Collins has written an American opera concerned with the period of the civil war, with the locale in the south. It is a big work based on an effective libretto which he has written himself, and a concert version of it presented twice within the last week in Chicago, drew forth huzzahs from Chicago's musical elite. The first performance at the Collins home was followed by a more formal presentation at the Arts Club for the American Opera Society November 29.

The soloists—Lolita Bertling, soprano; Sydney Smith Cooley, contralto; Eugene Dressler, tenor, and Richard Schreier, baritone—were aided by Mr. Collins himself at the piano.

The cast is made up of White and Colored people. The book, commencing with the day the Civil War is declared, carries through the period to the day peace is signed. A love story which involves a Southerner and a Yankee has a strong dramatic element, and Mr. Collins has employed an unexpected sense of theatre to enhance this story. The introduction of a vivid ballet, brilliant choral effects and use of the Colored superstitions, add much to the drama. Musically, the work is extraordinarily well done. There are grateful arias, arresting ensembles and a brilliant use of original thematic material.

The soloists fitted satisfyingly into the roles assigned them and enhanced the music so effectively that both audiences felt a keen desire to see and hear them in a complete performance. —L.W.N.

Collins then began work on orchestration of the opera. In a 3 January 1939 journal entry, Collins wrote:

"Spent all day working on 'daughter of the South. Am at page 240 of the score and shall be through with it in four or five days. It is nice writing for orchestra but what an expenditure of time."

Eleven days later he made another journal entry:

"Finished the orchestration of the 'Daughter of the South' this noon, Page 252."

On 17 October 1939, the *American Opera Society* honored the composer of *Daughter of the South* the prestigious

David Bispham Award. Other notable 20th century American composers who won that prize include George Gershwin, Virgil Thomson, Howard Hanson, Victor Herbert, Kurt Weill, Gian-Carlo Menotti, and Sir Michael Tippett.

It seems that Chicago's *Lake View Memorial Society* staged a performance of *Daughter of the South* late in 1940. By then, preparations for the opera performance had to compete with Collins's work on composition of his third piano concerto, as this November 30th journal entry indicates:

After breakfast I worked on the last movement of my piano concerto but found nothing worth writing down." ... "was roused by a call from Mrs. Singleton who chided me for not getting the music of 'Daughter of the South' to several of the singers. So for the rest of the afternoon I copied words and music - much against my will. This opera adventure is getting me down.

On 4 December 1940, Collins added this to his journal:

In the afternoon I rehearsed 'Daughter' with a soprano and tenor. For the first time in my life I have a tenor who is smarter than a soprano." His second entry for that date reads:

At 4 P.M. went to the Cordon Club where excerpts of the 'daughter were sung. They sounded well. I played part of the ballet - the jazzy part. The dumb soprano turned out fine. Tenor scared to death.

So it seems likely that this was again a partial performance, with piano rather than orchestra, in a venue that fell far short of an opera hall, of what Collins by now was referring to as "my ill-starred 'Daughter of the South'."

Why would an Irish-American composer born in Joliet write an opera about the Civil War?

In his journal entry of New Year's Day 1940, Collins reflected:

Since I was a little boy I have been avidly interested in everything connected with the Civil War; one of my earlier impressions was the sight of Uncle Peter in his blue uniform with the gold buttons. He came down from Eden Valley, Minn. to attend an encampment of the G.A.R. in Chicago and visited us in Joliet. I remember the scar on his forehead where a bullet almost got him at the battle of Antietam Bridge. Then too since writing the "Daughter of the South" I have had the greatest sympathy with the Confederates even though their "glorious cause" would now be considered preposterous.

A recording of the extant portions of the Collins opera is planned, to include the arias, ensembles, choruses, and the composition's rather extensive instrumental sections, including the music for the Scene I "Negro ballet" (a minstrel entertainment), and a funeral march.

However, the discovery of the 60-odd pages missing from the composer's manuscript of the second scene would allow a complete performance that would restore a prize-winning composition to the world's music heritage.

[Anyone having information about the opera should contact Jon Becker, Coordinator of the Edward Joseph Collins Project: JonBecker@aol.com. An abridged version of this article was published in the *Northeast Wisconsin Music Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1; October 2004]