

***Daughter of the South* (opera in one act and two scenes)  
by Edward Joseph Collins (libretto and music)**

**Annotation (from Albany Records CD 1210)**

***Daughter of the South* (opera, in one act and two scenes) [1939] (1939)**

The only opera composed by Edward Joseph Collins, *Daughter of the South* is set entirely on a plantation on the Potomac River, near Leesburg, Virginia. The composer also wrote *Daughter's* libretto, the dramatic action commencing on the day the "War Between the States" began in 1861, and ending four years later when peace is declared.

*Daughter of the South* raises a number of questions about its creative genesis. Born in Joliet near Chicago and arguably America's most significant composer of Irish descent, why did Collins choose to set his opera on a plantation in the Confederate South during the War Between the States? Given his early classical studies in Berlin and his intimate experiences with Wagnerian opera at Bayreuth, why did Collins compose a relatively short opera, with few ensembles and limited chorus? Why did Collins decide to compose *Daughter of the South* late in the 1930s, when the economy posed daunting challenges to opera companies worldwide?

**Libretto**

It would be natural to expect that *Daughter of the South* owes a creative debt to George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* or Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, given their chronological proximity and cultural impact. Collins seems however to have been influenced mostly by his own life-long interest in the American Civil War, largely a product of the composer's familial heritage.

Collins's private diary reveals that, as early as 1921, he was pondering what sort of story would be appropriate for an opera written by an American composer such as himself. In a December 24th entry, he mused that "a Southern beauty who loved a Northern boy in 1861 would be nice." This idea would, almost two decades later, be the central dramatic impulse for Collins's libretto for *Daughter of the South*.

During the 1930s, when *Daughter* was being composed, dozens of American operas received first performances, some touching on the general dramatic themes found in Collins's opera. But in his personal diary, Collins makes no mention of these, including George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, the "American folk opera" that had its Chicago premiere in February 1936.

Gershwin did extensive research for his opera in Charleston, South Carolina, visiting nearby James Island, where Gullah communities had preserved African cultural traditions. Gershwin wanted to learn about these traditions, toward bringing authenticity to his opera. Collins perhaps wisely focused on those aspects of the American Civil War with which he had the most personal experience: The profound effects of wartime military service on personal relationships. Perhaps because his aesthetic goals were so different from those of Gershwin, Collins seems to have drawn upon his general experience of African-American culture; he seems not to have deployed any particular dialect for Jonah or Melba.

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**America's Civil War**

Collins had an unusual fascination with the American Civil War, and was drawn to related histories and novels. The latter included the Pulitzer Prize winning *Gone with the Wind*, published in 1936. Collins saw the 1939 Academy Award winning film version with his wife, writing in his diary:

Last night Frieda and I went to see the famous movie "Gone with the Wind" at Hartford [near Cedar Lake, WI]. . . . I enjoyed every minute of G.W.T.W. dealing as it does with the Civil War.

The composer had read the novel only five months earlier, writing on 2 January 1940:

Having waded through the thousand and some pages of "Gone with the Wind" . . . The best seller of the decade gave me a great deal of pleasure. Since I was a little boy I have been interested in everything connected with the Civil War; one of my earlier impressions was the sight of Uncle Peter [Collins] in his blue uniform with the gold buttons. He came down from Eden Valley, Minn. to attend an encampment of the G.A.R. [Grand Army of the Republic] in Chicago and visited us in Joliet. I remember the scar on his forehead where a bullet almost got him at Antietam Bridge. Then too, since writing "Daughter of the South" I have had the greatest sympathy with the Confederates even though their "glorious cause" would now be considered preposterous. Miss Mitchell, who wrote "Gone with the Wind," has made out a very good case for the South, but Northerners and Irish are barbarians and slatterns. The book contains many beautiful and poignant paragraphs, but there is a sameness about it all and a too elaborate explanation of the character's reactions. It is too long and too obvious. After all, the artist makes a few revealing strokes and allows the reader's imagination to fill in the rest. . . .

These diary entries indicate that Collins had already composed his opera *before* he read or saw *Gone with the Wind*. The entries also reveal something of the dramatic aesthetic that Collins brought to his opera's libretto, including an appreciation for minimal character development and stage direction.

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## Research Essay: *Daughter of the South* by Jon Becker

### Nature's Symbolism

Another important influence on Collins's libretto was his love of Nature. From his youth, the composer found walking restorative, as well as vitally important for his creative muse. The lilacs and robins seen on those walks make appearances in *Daughter*, as does the snowball bush, a viburnum hybrid that flowers relatively early in the spring of America's northern latitudes.

In Collin's libretto, these vernal harbingers, and Nature in general, become symbolic of a world that is "right" as opposed to one that is wracked by war. The young lovers sing (Tracks 9 and 10) of their love and Nature, so beautiful as to be dreamlike. Then distant thunder is mistaken for the guns of the recently declared war, and Mary Lou sings:

*It has disturbed my dream; Gone is the moonlight on the bushes; Gone is the odor of the lilacs; I cannot hear the winds; Nor understand the language of the leaves; The streams are dull and glassy; The fields are dead; Heavy clouds have obscured the stars; naught remains but man's folly.*

War cuts off people from Nature and even the rest of the universe. After hostilities break out in *Daughter of the South*, the "natural" order is best found in dreams, dreams that are more real than life with all its human folly.

### Wagner's Dramatic Approach

While a young man studying in Berlin, 1906–1912, Collins heard performances of Richard Wagner's operas, on one occasion writing home to Joliet about having heard *Tannhäuser* conducted by Richard Strauss. Later, Collins also experienced the Wagnerian mythos as an assistant conductor for the Bayreuth Festival. Several diary entries bear on these experiences, including:

**2 October 1939:** When I was a student in Germany I went through the Wagner phase like every other young musician, but I went through it for the first two years ... after I entered the Hochschule, I was taught to despise Wagner . . . Environment is a very potent thing . . . I went over to Brahms and thought Wagner was cheap and gushing.

**25 September 1925:** When I first saw the performance of "Rheingold" at Bayreuth in 1914 I could not restrain a laugh at the sight of Thor with his hammer. They also gave the "Flying Dutchman" that summer and I was amazed at the dullness and ridiculous character of the work. But then came a performance of "Siegfried" that was demonic in its effectiveness.

**24 October 1927:** I have nearly finished [studying] the "Lohengrin" score. ... I have always scoffed at it (like all the other modernists) but now I am loving it. Wagner certainly took a great step forward when he wrote it. I am amazed at the expertness of the chorus and the instrumentation.

In *Daughter*, the influence of Wagnerian dramatic aesthetic is mostly absent, despite Collins's admiration for that great 19th century composer's choral and instrumental craft.

### Music

The music of *Daughter of the South* shares many identifiable qualities with Collins's other compositions for large ensembles, yet also makes more direct use of music styles from the popular culture of the 1920's and 30's, especially jazz and blues. Classical composers often use a more accessible music style for opera, a genre that, with its drama, dance, and visual art elements, inherently draws an audience interested in more than just music.

### African-American Music

In composing the music for *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin again drew on his field study of the African-influenced traditions of Gullah communities. In contrast, for *Daughter of the South* Collins seems not to have undertaken any specific first-hand study of African-American music.

However, by the time of the opera's composition in 1939 Collins had for over two decades been witness, both in Europe and in the USA, to the rising influence of African-American folk, jazz and spiritual music. The composer's ear for this evolving tradition and other popular music of the times must have impressed Collins's fellow Chicagoan, poet Carl Sandburg. For his 1927 book *The American Songbag*, the three-time Pulitzer Prize winner commissioned Collins's arrangement of the ballad *Frankie and Johnnie*.

As jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and "Jellyroll" Morton migrated north to the Windy City in the 1920s and during the Depression, they ignited a distinctive jazz style, augmenting the contributions of native Chicagoans, including Benny Goodman. Collins's son, Edward Jr., recalls his father visiting Chicago's "black and tan" clubs, along with family members and musician friends. The composer Collins later delved deeply and enthusiastically into Negro spirituals, eventually making rather complex piano or orchestral arrangements of several that celebrated the biblical heroes David, Daniel, and Joshua.

## Research Essay: *Daughter of the South* by Jon Becker

*Daughter of the South* opens with a boisterous instrumental outburst, the pentatonic melody paired with the rhythm of the “cakewalk,” an African-American dance. Evocative of the American rural South and plantation life, as popularly (albeit misguidedly) perceived by urban Northerners, the music effectively sets the stage for the opening exchange sung by the slaves Jonah and Melda.

Based on Edna Ferber’s 1926 novel, the history-making *Showboat* opened on Broadway in 1927, and was made into a film in 1936. Collins makes no mention of *Showboat*, but likely he was familiar with its music, composed by Jerome Kern. About twenty-five seconds into “When ha mammy dies” (Track 2), Melda sings of her devotion to Mary Lou. At the words “ole man ribber flowin’ along” there is a deft tip of Collins’s melodic hat to “Ol’ Man River,” *Showboat*’s most popular song, its gentle syncopations and modal melodic material meant to suggest rural black music.

In the Scene I “ballet” (Track 5), the *Allegro barbaro* employs syncopations and repetitive rhythms to create a generalized primal quality, inviting comparison with passages in Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). Later, Collins introduces a quiet contrasting melody evocative of Negro spirituals, redolent with bluesy inflections.

Collins was also aware of how the “jazz” that African-American soldiers had introduced to Europe at the end of World War I was influencing European music. Writing in his diary on 28 October 1927, Collins complained: “I read today of the phenomenal success of ‘Jonny spielt auf.’ This new jazz opera has swept Germany and here I am studying ‘Lohengrin!’”

### Celtic Music

Born to Irish immigrants, Collins’s Celtic heritage can be heard in *Daughter of the South*, intersecting with his interest in the American Civil War, his Romantic sensibilities, and his sense of humor. Noted Civil War music expert and writer Nick Contorno identifies two authentic melodies employed by Collins: *Dixie* and *The Girl I Left Behind* (*Me*). Both tunes have Celtic roots, which is appropriate given the significant involvement of Irish-Americans in the armies on both sides of the War, Confederacy and Union, the latter including Collins’s own relatives.

The earliest hint of Collins’s future opera, a contrapuntal treatment of *Dixie*, is found in one of his music notebooks from around 1920. Despite use as the unofficial “national” anthem by the Confederacy, *Dixie* was a favorite of Abraham Lincoln. With ancient melodic ancestors in English song and Scottish dance music, *Dixie*’s jaunty music likely explains why it remained a very popular song across America, even after the Civil War.

*The Girl I Left Behind* also has distant Celtic roots, its melody heard in England in the 16th century. The lyrics, dating back to an Irish song collection of the 1700s, tell of a soldier leaving tempting foreign beauties to return to his hometown gal. Those lyrics probably resonated with Collins, veteran of a World War I deployment in France. A favorite song of both the Union and the Confederacy armies, use of *The Girl* in *Daughter of the South* is thus packed with emotion, especially considering the Northerner Robert’s forced separation from Mary Lou.

Contorno notes that Collins artfully joins *Dixie* and *The Girl* (Track 12), their tuneful combination marked by “skillful orchestration, with craftsman-like yet playful treatment of motives.” The tuneful mingling may also have been meant to evoke the marshalling of the two armies, Confederate and Union. As the two melodies are warped by dissonances, the composer may have intended to reinforce Jonah’s horror that Robert would be fighting Col. Edmond, or to convey Collins’s personal experience of war’s inevitable absurdities and terrors, no matter how noble the cause.

A little over eight minutes into the “ballet” (Track 5), Collins recycles the jaunty music of *Cowboy’s Breakdown*, a 1938 composition. The jig-like “snap” (short-long) rhythm and melodic features may remind listeners of Celtic cultural influences on the American South. Collins does not provide any stage direction, yet one can imagine the opera’s white characters dancing to the jig, perhaps in competitive response to the dancing of the plantation’s slaves. At the jig’s close, Collins quotes *Shave and a Haircut—Two Bits*, which tune dates back to 1899’s popular song *At a Darktown Cakewalk*, making a more recent operatic appearance in Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*: “Gee, Off-icer Krup-ke, Krup you!”

[In later years, the solo piano version of *Cowboy’s Breakdown* became Collins’s signature encore. The composer’s son, Edward, Jr., recalls his father’s performance of the piece around 1941, during a Chicago Symphony Orchestra Young People’s Concert; the *Breakdown* was so popular that his father had to perform it again. The composer never failed to play it at parties.]

### Other Music

As danced in Europe, the waltz was intended to create a dizzying release from reality, each pair of dancers rotating within a larger rotation of all dancers around the perimeter of the ballroom. Fittingly, Collins deploys the waltz genre twice in the opera’s first scene, when Col. Randolph (Track 3) and Mary Lou (Track 10) sing of their dreams. When Mary Lou describes the ghosts of the war’s dead (Track 16), Collins reinforces the doleful words with a *Marche funebre*, orchestrated as an *equalli* (music for four equal instruments, performed at the funerals of prominent Europeans during the 17th and 18th centuries). Three trombones and a tuba stand in for the traditional trombone quartet.

## Research Essay: *Daughter of the South* by Jon Becker

About five minutes into Mary Lou's lament about war (Track 13), Collins quotes "Taps." Traditionally played at military funerals on the bugle, here the woeful tune is set more darkly for horns. Elsewhere the composer evokes the music to which Civil War armies marched, with drum and fife (using a piccolo or two).

The opera also draws on Collins's Roman Catholic religious heritage. When Mary Lou sings to her fiancé Robert: "But Death is abroad . . ." (Track 10), the composer deploys the melody of *Dies Irae* (*Day of Wrath*). A medieval sequence used in the Catholic Requiem Mass, *Dies Irae* would have been familiar to Collins from his early years, when he was an organist for his parents' church in Joliet.

### Composition

All the Collins music manuscripts and memorabilia will be deposited in Chicago's Newberry Library, allowing scholarly research. Until then, only tentative statements about the composition of *Daughter of the South* are possible.

Born to struggling Irish immigrant parents, Collins was dependent on sponsors for his early piano studies in Chicago and his later education in Europe, thereafter remaining keenly aware of financial matters. He seems to have sought success primarily for better artistic control and quality of cultural life, as well as the potential benefit for his family. Although Collins wrote several works specifically for contests, writing enthusiastically in his diary of the possible rewards, there is no evidence that his opera was submitted to any competition.

*Daughter* did win for the composer the *David Bispham Memorial Medal Award*, bringing Collins into the estimable company of previous awardees, including Charles Wakefield Cadman, Victor Herbert, Howard Hanson, Virgil Thomson, and George Gershwin (subsequent winners included Douglas Moore, Gian-Carlo Menotti, Kurt Weill, and Sir Michael Tippett). However, Collins wrote later of the honor with a mixture of both appreciation and indifference.

There is no historical evidence that any Collins composition was written on commission; several scores bear dedications inspired by performers, but not *Daughter of the South*. Still, despite the deepening of the Depression in the late 1930s, Collins might have hoped that the Chicago City Opera would produce his opera; after all, during three seasons spanning those years, the company produced about 80 operas in almost 130 performances (*150 Years of Opera in Chicago*, Robert C. Marsh and Norman Pellegrini). The start of World War II, causing the financial failure of the *City Opera* and opera companies worldwide, would have dashed any such hope.

During the Depression, Collins was forced to consider lowering his artistic standards and mused anxiously in his diary about composing for new media, such as radio, or even writing in a more popular style. Still, rather than compromise on quality in the opera's public presentation, the composer resisted a campaign by well-meaning admirers to present a semi-staged concert version, which Collins was convinced would result in an artistic disaster, and critical reviews.

### Performance

On 29 November 1938, substantial portions of *Daughter of the South* were performed at the *Arts Club* of Chicago's *Lake Shore Drive Hotel*. Afterwards, 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.

Late in 1940, a second such recital performance took place at the Windy City's Cordon Club. That year Collins also is reported to have played *Daughter of the South* for the Metropolitan Opera's general manager Edward Johnson.

### Restoration

Following the death of the Collins's widow Frieda in 1965, descendants saved most of the composer's music that was in possession of the family, depositing some copies at Chicago's Newberry Library. To keep the music available for performances, most of the scores and parts were placed in the guardianship of William Ferris and John Vorrasi, and stored in Chicago's Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, base for the William Ferris Chorale.

When the present phase of the Collins recording project got underway in 2000, it was thought that the music for *Daughter of the South* had been lost. Fortunately, with some effort, all of Scene I was recovered and much of Scene II, but about forty-two pages of the full score remained missing (see shaded section of libretto in this booklet). All the extant original music having been edited and digitally engraved, there was some consideration of recording just these materials.

## *Research Essay: Daughter of the South* by Jon Becker

On the other hand, it seemed likely that a fully restored opera would have a better chance for performance, and this argument won out. Fortunately, there were good clues as to how to proceed with an artistically sound restoration. First, the duration of the 262-page full score was estimated to be about 65 minutes, from which it could be deduced that the missing 42 pages comprised about ten minutes. Second, a piano-vocal score fragment provided the music for about one-fourth of the missing pages and also revealed portions of the dramatic arc: Robert, for some reason having returned to the plantation, is arrested by a Rebel detachment; the Confederate Sergeant, unconvinced by Mary Lou's assertion that Robert is not a spy, orders him taken away for execution, which he survives, appearing in the opera's *Finale*. Third, the 1938 piano recital program for the opera indicated that the missing pages included an aria for Robert titled "During these four eternal years" as well as a *Finale* Quartette titled "Oh cherished land." For the latter, a piano-vocal score fragment existed, as did an aria sung by Col. Randolph on his return to the plantation following the defeat of the Confederacy.

It was decided that all extant opera materials should be incorporated into its restoration, which also would need to plausibly connect the action between the two largest extant sections of Scene II, from the end of Melda's lullaby to the choir's declaration "the war is over." The composer's son, Edward Collins Jr., took on the responsibility of crafting a dramatic solution. He considered all the clues provided by his father's manuscripts and memorabilia, and then incorporated the actual Civil War experience of his wife Barbara's ancestor, a Union sergeant who had been captured and imprisoned in a Richmond, Virginia, tobacco warehouse, eventually escaping and returning to his unit.

Librettist Charles Kondek then crafted a new libretto. He skillfully wove together all of these many extant, inferred, and invented strands, while also making organic literary connections to the original opera libretto. Motivation for Robert's return to the plantation was provided, in the form of his need to reassure Mary Lou that he was still alive after four years of absence. Delivery of a Union flag to Mary Lou by Robert was included in the action, to provide a rationale for an exchange in the opera's extant *Finale*, where Robert and the Sergeant each sing of their army's flags.

Meanwhile, composer Daron Hagen reviewed Collins's music for the opera, as well as his other compositions. Hagen concluded that, with skillful editing of these sources, he could create a seamless restoration of the opera's music for the new libretto. The music for Robert's aria *During these four eternal years* was borrowed from *Thou changest thy garment*, the "winter" section of Collins's secular cantata *Hymn to the Earth*. Mr. Hagen also orchestrated, in Collins's style, the extant piano vocal-score fragments for the sections of the opera having to do with Robert's arrest and Col. Edmond's return to the plantation.

After Kondek's libretto was delivered to Hagen, he made only minor changes necessary for musical reasons. On 13 June 2008, Hagen wrote to this author: "there is, in fact, very nearly no 'freshly composed' material involved, but rather an integration of already extant musical ideas from the opera (something that [Edward Collins] would have been doing at this point in the opera anyway), with just a little bit of material from the *Hymn* for variety."

With the engraving of the restoration completed early in 2009, sixty years after the composition of *Daughter of the South*, Collins's only opera was ready for recording.

—JON BECKER, ANNOTATOR

*This essay on Daughter of the South has been abridged from a version featuring additional excerpts from the personal writings of the composer, along with broader historical context. The full-length essay is available at [EdwardJCollins.org](http://EdwardJCollins.org).*