

The Songs [1917-1944]

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

As a former opera house assistant conductor at New York's Century Opera and at the Bayreuth Festival, Collins understood voices and had a thorough appreciation for the best of them. Having coached many singers, he knew what to expect in regard to range, color, tessitura and expression. In Chicago, he attended the opera regularly, and on occasion he collaborated with such well-established singers as contraltos Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Cyrena van Gordon.

He did not, therefore, approach song-writing as if composing for instrumentalists. A man who was an avid reader of the classics, he brought a literate acuity to his choice of texts and even wrote some fine ones himself; the best songs merit the attention of any sensitive singer.

Soprano Patrice Michaels remarks:

The songs of Edward Joseph Collins seem to divide themselves into two distinct groups—true miniatures (for which he chooses subtle vocal lines and spare accompaniment) and ballads such as *Annabel Lee* (full of sweeping melodies and pianistic figuration). Both types of song display his characteristically lyric chromaticism—a bit melancholy even in cheerful moments. Nature whose bloom is destined to decay, love that grows even while it is doomed to fade—his attraction to these poetic themes is totally harmonious with his rich musical vocabulary.

Pianist Elizabeth Buccheri finds that, from a pianist's point of view, the songs are "very gratifying to play," also noting:

It is clear that the songs were written by a composer who knew the instrument well. From the expanded tonality of *To a Little Child* to the quasi-serial technique of *Magdalene*, there is a wealth of interesting writing.

Magdalene, Collins's longest song, is a narrative retelling of the story of the harlot brought before Jesus. In his journal entry for 14 March 1928, the composer wrote:

Finished my 'Magdalene' today. It has a great many beautiful things in it but who knows if it will be considered a fine song? I have had so little encouragement in my work for the last year that I don't even know if I have any talent.

Four days later, Collins wrote the following in his journal,:

I have taken down the Bible and am going to read it diligently and impartially. I have always jeered at it, but lately wrote a song based on the Mary Magdalene episode and could not resist repeating over and over again the beautiful text and marveling at the wisdom of Jesus. Having been fed up with the divinity of Christ in my youth and therefore having had no contact with him, it is time that I study this wonderful character and see him as a guide and as ideal... .

For *The Wooded Lake*, Collins provided his own text; words and music are beautifully wedded and the accompaniment is never banal. In the same vein are *The Pines* (set to an evocative crawling, sighing accompaniment), *The Fog* (to Carl Sandburg's poem) and *To a Little Child*. The latter has a simplicity of purpose and a richness of musical ideas that prove endearing.