

*Lil' David Play On Yo' Harp* (1940)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Erik Eriksson, Collins biographer

On Easter Sunday 1939, Collins wrote in his journal, "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)." Eventually, he set four more.

From Collins's journal entry of 28 June 1939, there is this entry, one that reveals a good deal about the pianist/composer's latter-day thoughts on programming as well as concerns about his perceived conflict between performing and composing:

My summer recital took place this afternoon; I played Beethoven Op. 2, No. 3, the Moscheles and Fetis Etudes of Chopin, La Vallee des Cloches by Ravel, Dance by Hindemith, and my own "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" and Nocturne, and Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. It was a nice cool afternoon; it had rained most of the morning and I was discouraged thinking of the people staying away or arriving, soaking wet and steaming up the hall, but about one o'clock the sun broke through and by three everything was fine and dry. The theatre was filled with a very musical and appreciative audience and I was in fine form, having prepared the program perfectly. After the concert Frieda and I went to the Pizzeria and celebrated by having beer and spaghetti. After such a successful appearance I am very unhappy because I like my piano playing for the moment and regret having given it up for my composition. On such an occasion I always realize that it is the piano which has stood between me and my conducting and between me and my creative work through which I could have saved my soul.

Later in the same entry he writes:

I think I am the first person to have played Beethoven and Gershwin on the same program. Some of my more serious colleagues chided me for the desecration, but I think I am justified considering the present popularity of jazz and the season of the year.

The following day, Collins writes with disgust about a review of the concert:

Saw one notice of yesterday's concert. It was written by a young lady pianist and was unfavorable. She criticized me for my flawless technic "which separates me from my listeners." Having heard her once I can say that my technic certainly separates me from her. One of the joys of playing in public is the critic who unsuccessfully tries to be a performer.

Of Collins's three other pieces based on spirituals, *Lil' David Play on Yo' Harp* also soon followed the composer's acquisition of his anthology, while *The Gospel Train*, *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*, and *Joshua Fit de Battle Ob Jericho* were completed in 1947 and 1948, respectively. All are imaginative, energetic, and highly developed treatments of straightforward themes.