

*Tragic Overture* [1925, originally titled 1914] (revised 1926, 1942)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

Collins's *Tragic Overture* was the work with which the composer finally took first prize in Chicago's North Shore Festival competition in 1926. Begun four years earlier (when it was called "1914"), it is first mentioned in Collins's journal entry of 30 November 1922.

On 11 December 1922, Collins was recovering from negative criticism of his recital played the previous day, though the evening papers were kinder in their assessments. After working on the overture, he wrote in his journal that day: "It is a silly old piece but has some interesting moments and I am learning a great deal writing it."

After having lost the competition twice, the work, now titled *Tragic Overture*, won the competition on its third appearance in 1926. He admitted in his journal on 3 June 1926 that his delight in winning was "not as great as my chagrin the other times." Two years earlier, he was rueful about losing because he regarded his work as the best on the program. In August 1926, the *Tragic Overture* was performed in New York under Frederick Stock's direction; a month later, the composer led the overture with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. In December 1926, Collins completed a new revision of the work.

In notes Collins contributed for CSO performances in March 1927 (which he conducted), he cautions:

No definite program should be attached to the thematic material; however, in one or two cases, it will be impossible to avoid this as the meaning is perfectly obvious. For instance, the battle scene with the pastoral interruption which constitutes the development section, and the coda, which is a funeral march with a fragment of 'taps' in the distance, are two places where only one impression can be conveyed.

Those who listen carefully may be startled to hear what seems a near-direct quote of the Nibelungen theme from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Was this intentional? Did the composer, briefly an assistant conductor at Bayreuth on the eve of the Great War, consider this a symbol of war's enslaving savagery?

The *Tragic Overture* is scored for large orchestra, calling for three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, piano, and an extensive battery of percussion.