

Variations on an Irish Tune (1930-31)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Erik Eriksson, Collins biographer

While a student, Collins was exposed to late German Romanticism. Attempts to write music after his arrival in Berlin in 1906 proved a struggle, but he persisted. Despite his Euro-centric training, he moved steadily toward orchestral composition that drew more on his Celtic roots and writing for piano that embraced Americana.

Aside from composition, Collins trained to be a concert pianist and won approving notices for a debut solo recital in Berlin. He also played organ and timpani in concerts. As an organist, he received praise from Ernest Bloch for his participation in the premier of a major work by that composer. Collins appreciated the skills needed to be a "jazz" player and once confided to his journal that, had he the chance to begin again, he might choose to become a popular artist like Eddie Duchin.

The longest, most fully developed of Collins's solo piano works is one derived from the Irish folksong, "O! The 'Taters over here are small." Its restless, often reflective character differs from his high-spirited settings of American spirituals, his *Cowboy's Breakdown* and the varied moods depicted in his five distinctively named waltzes.

The text of "O! The 'Tater's" goes:

oh, the praties they grow small over here, over here,
oh, the praties they grow small over here.
oh, the praties they grow small and we dig them in the fall,
and we eat them coats and all, over here, over here.

oh, i wish that we were geese, night and morn, night and morn,
oh, i wish that we were geese night and morn, night and morn.
oh, I wish that we were geese for they fly and take their ease
And they live and die in peace eating corn, eating corn.

oh, we're trampled in the dust over here, over here,
oh, we're trampled in the dust over here, over here.
oh, we're trampled in the dust but the Lord in whom we trust
he will give us crumb from crust over here, over here.

[The fourth stanza repeats the text of the first. The Gaelic "praties"='taters = potatoes].

Brian Hart, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin Center for Celtic Studies in Milwaukee, comments:

There are some odd words used in these lyrics that indicate that it was translated from Irish Gaelic into English in America. The use of the word 'fall' is an Americanism you wouldn't find in Ireland. Also, the use of the term 'corn' in reference to grain—grain was used to pay rent in Ireland in famine times and was not eaten—gives greater significance to these lines.

Hart states that Collins's use of this air in his compositions may reflect "pastoral nostalgia, or a romanticism of Ireland and especially the famine, as most Irish-Americans trace their ancestry back to the great diaspora caused by that famine—a sentiment still held onto today."

Collins's first use of this tune appears to be the orchestral work *Irish Rhapsody*, which—according to the composer's journal—was written in 1927 for a performance by the orchestra of the Chicago Musical College (where Collins was an instructor) at the school's June 20 graduation ceremony. *Hibernia (Irish Rhapsody)* may be the "Irish Variations" mentioned by Collins in his journal in early 1929. The composer was working diligently to finish the work for a contest sponsored by the Hollywood Bowl. *Hibernia*, then, is likely the composer's revisit of his *Irish Rhapsody*.

On 29 November 1929, Collins wrote in his journal, "Am a fair way to finishing a little piano piece—a transcription of an Irish tune. The achievement is not great but when a man is dying of thirst, a glass of water will save him." Two months later, Collins played the set of piano variations for a colleague who liked some, but criticized others. In his journal, the composer wrote:

I cannot expect unqualified admiration from a colleague, especially one who objects to "hardness" in the leading of voices. Unless he can analyze every chord he is dissatisfied, and besides he cannot stand "empty" intervals. Oh well, I shall go over them again and when I polish them to the point where I am satisfied, then the professor can go to the devil.

In January 1932, Collins noted in his journal that he was still attempting to find time to complete the orchestration of *Variations on an Irish Tune*. This appears to be the orchestral work eventually titled *Variations on an Irish Folksong*.

Although Collins made extensive use of "Oh! the 'Taters" and composed his orchestral works with a pervasive Celtic melancholy, he did not sentimentalize the Irish or even regard them as altogether admirable people. On St. Patrick's Day, 1939, the composer wrote, "I have had several very disagreeable encounters with Irishmen. The Irishman is by nature "tough;" he is not warm-hearted as people think but of course he is loyal to the church in all its phases..." Collins concludes his entry by noting his inability to "appreciate love of country or love of God. I believe that the world will not be a beautiful place until men and women save their love for each other."

The sixteen variations in this piece are well-contrasted, diatonic and pentatonic passages countered elsewhere by elaborate chromaticism, simplicity balanced by richer textures.