

Ballet–Suite: The Masque of the Red Death [1932] (1926–1940) ~ Edward Joseph Collins, composer

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

Some clues to the genesis this work may perhaps be found in the composer's journal entry of 3 April 1922:

We went to the moving pictures at the Chicago theatre tonight. The Americans are getting away from the Occident and borrowing the heavy, sensuous atmosphere of the orient. This theatre might have been a palace in Babylon or a harem in Persia. It needed only a heavy odor of musk and incense. In spite of our reformers and our religious sects, we are pagans; the bizarre and the barbaric are the only things which attract our attention and music, to move us, must be weird and intense. Why not succumb to this color and this intensity? Why not borrow everything our senses are capable of comprehending? Why not throw over their walls and burst those chains and let the imagination descend into Hell, mount to Heaven and absorb all the romance of the earth—the universe? Borrow from history and stories of all the beautiful women who have loved so much—let them inspire me with the violence of their passions and let the whole world breathe romance and the sighs of lovers.

On 26 December 1926, Collins wrote:

... in a few days I shall begin on the "Masque." This is so new to me that I am violently curious about my ability to go through with it. Have I really the imagination and daring to throw off my training and embark on unknown seas? Strapping me down is my early "moral" training at home and my complete immersion in the classic in Germany. Now here is something not sanctioned by the authorities—something shocking! Have I the courage to shock everyone? A month or so will tell.

However, *Masque* is not mentioned again until 7 November 1939, when Collins briefly notes that he is working on the score. It was not completed until almost fifteen months later, and during that period Collins often reflected in his journal on death. The passing of a favorite sister prompted him to question the nature of individual mortality; disturbing developments in Europe, as war clouds gathered, caused him to ruminate on man as both political and creative animal, and what future there might be for a species so self-destructive. With *Masque*, he was prepared to add 'sinister' to his range of temperaments.

On 7 January 1940, the composer wrote in his journal:

Got up around 8 A.M. and finished the instrumentation of the "Propos Subtil" by noon. Took a wonderfully bracing walk just before dinner and a good nap early in the afternoon. ... After my nap I had a great yearning to get on with my Ballet–Suite and began to improvise in the hope of finding an idea for the fourth dance—"Chez le Sultan." If you please, it came tumbling toward me—not only the main theme but a bridge and the second theme, in fact the whole piece crowded into my feverish brain and I trembled with fear of not being able to get it down on paper before forgetting it. Ideas tripped over each other and within an hour I had probably written one hundred measures. With the themes came the instrumentation and I scarcely breathed as I wrote frantically, notes alternating with the abbreviations of the instruments. My dears, I don't believe I have ever had a like experience and it has left me with a feeling of uninspired contentment. At dinner tonight I was very agreeable to everyone and talked small talk with the children.

Collins's *Ballet-Suite* was completed on 29 January 1940. He was not entirely pleased with the composition process, however. In his journal entry that same day, Collins noted:

Finished the 'Masque' at five o'clock. I was terribly sick of it at the end, but I just had to finish it and I fear the Invocation Profane suffered, as it was the final fragment in the order of composition. I brought the last two pages to the copyist right after dinner and spent the evening correcting the remaining one hundred and eight pages of the score.

Submitted as an entry for a competition sponsored by the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, *Masque* also caused its composer some other discomfort. He worried about the reaction of his former teacher and friend Rudolf Ganz. Collins complained in his 30 January journal entry:

... I was compelled to write in many tempo indications all the time worrying that R. Ganz will recognize my hand and vote against my work. For the last few years I have noticed a polite hostility on the part of my old master. We are prone to put such behavior down to jealousy which may or may

not be true, however I am convinced that he would rather see someone else with the prize in St. Louis.

Two days after completion of *Masque*, Collins was more positive, noting in his journal that "I wrote the 'Masque' faster than anything in my life." Despite the composer's caveats, the lurid drama of *Red Death* prompted a vivid score, before which Collins included his synopsis of the story by Edgar Allen Poe:

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal or so hideous

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys-----

The prince had provided all the appliances for pleasure. There were buff[on]s, there were improvisatori, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians, there was beauty, there was wine-----

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade! ----- In the black chamber there stood a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and, when the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound of so peculiar a note that, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily; and thus the waltzers ceased performe their [r]evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company.

But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly --- -----
-after the lapse of sixty minute there came yet another chiming of the clock and then were the same disconcert as before.

-----but now there were twelve stokes to be sounded and there were many individuals who had found leisure to be come aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell on this spectral image his brow reddened with rage. He bore aloft a drawn dagger ----- there was a sharp cry and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterward, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. ----- and now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revel[l]ers-----

And the life of the ebony clock went out. And the flames of the tripods expired. And the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

A tolling ends each section leading to the arrival of midnight. Among many striking moments are trumpet and horn flourishes introducing the *Invocation Profane* and the sinuous oboe theme in *Propos subtil et mysterieux*. The *Valse seduisdante* exhibits forced gaiety, with numerous busy accents. A scurrying flute precedes an intense, emphatic massing of orchestral sound before the mood returns to one of lightness and whispered intimacy. *Chez le Sultan* evokes the Middle East through English horn, tambourine and subtle pulses from the double basses, suggestive of sensual languor.

The final section, *Orgie*, opens at a steady *allegro moderato* in alternating and 2/4 timing. As the music gathers intensity and fullness, shadows intrude through heavy, falling figures. When a lighter mood returns to insinuating rhythmic figurations, themes collide, some falling, others rising in confusion. Energy spent, the orchestra ruminates on what has passed: with the plague's arrival has come death.