

industrious mind, full of wit and not without charm and sensibility. Whatever can be accomplished without inspiration, he accomplishes.

George Henry Lovett Smith

## NEGRO AND NON-NEGRO MUSIC

OF the two evenings in which Negroes figured at ASCAP's Festival of American Music, no one could say with fairness that either offered more than a few bright flashes in a series of horrors. In both, the musical element wandered and lost itself in a sea of sentimentality, pretentiousness, banality and just plain bad taste. It is important to note, however, that wherever there was good music, its value went just as far as the degree to which the truly Negro elements therein had been left alone and not subjected to whitening.

The program "devoted to compositions by our Negro Composer-Members" was excellent evidence of the effect chauvinism can have upon musical culture. The music was considered a thing apart because Negroes had written it, which would have been valid if the material had shown any connection with Negro music. In reality what one heard was not too good Radio-City-Music-Hall. For these particular composers it would certainly have been better if Ferdie Grofe had never been born. The symphonic pieces were unsavory dishes served with utter disregard for the listener's receptive faculties. Thus William Grant Still conducted a long slow number, followed by the equally long and slow second movement of the *Afro-American Symphony*, by which time even the academic cuteness of the third movement was welcome.

The fact that a Negro writes or plays music is no guarantee that the result will be "Negro music." However, when Negro music is to be produced, it is a Negro who in most cases will give the best result. Juanita Hall led her group in a choral number whose form and content sprang directly from a Negro religious service. The piece was *Go Down, Death*, with text by the late James Weldon Johnson. I can think of no finer Negro choral number. Its vocal line is a carefully considered succession of solo and group speech, shouting, Negro-preacher *recitativo* and melody couched in true Negro prosody. There is also a quality of improvisation present which gives the music tremendous spontaneity and strength. Parts of the ensemble speaking will call to mind effects in Milhaud's *Choéphores*, not because of any inherent resemblance, but simply because the field of comparison for this truly unexploited medium is so small. Its racial

characteristics have been consciously retained and highlighted, instead of pared away to conform to "white" standards of harmony and sonority. The performance was dramatic and satisfying.

Louis Armstrong and his band also helped remind the audience that the real thing existed. Virtuosity on the drums seems more certain to stop the show these days than anything else, and Big Sidney Catlett did just that with some very beautiful sounds from his cymbals during a cadenza for traps. For the last hour and a half the stage was full to capacity with several dozen composers who sang and played the popular tunes they had written during the past forty years or so. The very idea of such a program, in which serious composers, choral groups, swing bands and Tin-Pan-Alley men are herded together into one evening of a series of eight concerts, simply because they belong to the same race, is pretty appalling.

The second time Negroes took part in the festival they stole the show completely. Appearing with Benny Goodman were Fletcher Henderson, Lionel Hampton and an inspired young guitarist who, with Goodman and the rest of the band, produced the only music heard that evening. Paul Whiteman offered a saxophonist playing *Nola*, florid banjo antics, impersonations and a clowning male quartet, everything being performed in what was aptly called a decade ago "late Paramount Style." Fred Waring travelled the whole distance to vacuity, soothing the ear with chimes and celesta, inciting tenors to sing pure soprano and leading his smirking chorus and beatific brasses into ever more offensive harmonies, each of whose crescendos set the audience cheering out of pure nervousness. It was like the altar music for the temple of some monstrous Californian cult. Goodman was best when he kept his ornamentations as close to the Negro idiom as possible. The *One O'Clock Jump* had a powerful cumulative effect, although it lacked the purity of the original Basie arrangement. The exquisite pieces for quintet of electric guitar, vibraphone, piano, drums and bass had a watchwork-like quality which was a joy to hear. But in certain rhapsodic numbers for the entire band, everything fell to pieces because there was no logical harmonic progression to take for granted beneath the fantastic improvisation and virtuoso-playing.

During the swing numbers, the audience attempted to keep time to the music by clapping hands on what it imagined to be the off-beat. It was astonishing that never once was there a unanimity of opinion about the rhythm. The hall seemed filled with continuous desultory applause. Said one Negro: "This could never happen at the Apollo!"

Paul Bowles