

something clever. It is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde in a poorer moment, though it is not *l'art pour l'art*; merely *l'humeur pour l'humeur*.

Alfredo Casella's gargantuan *Symphony No. 3* is perhaps one of the more sterile examples of the genre. It has scarcely a moment, except perhaps in the *Scherzo*, where the material justifies the use of so large a canvas. It is in fact so poor in invention that it is even doubtful whether a much smaller canvas would have served effectively. There is very little interest, still less individuality; and although it is replete with a kind of technical resourcefulness, it presents nothing more than the spectacle of a strained development.

Leo Sowerby's *Third Symphony*, on the other hand, revealed a certain eloquence and impersonal charm. Its derivative elements were not too evident; if they had been more successfully treated, the musical expressiveness of their substance would undoubtedly have gained as well. But there is too great a chasm between Sowerby's romanticism and his attempts at formalism. Each movement, especially the slow middle one, is spread out to a point where boredom becomes no longer mere negative acquiescence. The best is perhaps the last movement which, owing to its unpredictable rhythms, achieves a certain formal completeness, as well as an agreeable primitivism of expression. But even here the principal theme, though attractive rhythmically, is somewhat ineffectual; overburdened with an impotent chromaticism, it is confined to repetitious meanderings of slight melodic force.

Remi Gassmann

MUSEUM PIECES

MUSIC in a museum is, like any exhibit, on show and calls for display. Showmanship would improve an evening at Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan, too, but there it matters less since the radio saves most of us the trouble of attendance. For the small musical retreat, however, dedicated to the new, the exotic, the esoteric, a producer is imperative if only to prevent the generally grim walls, bleak light and poor acoustics from crushing one's spirit and wiping out the very anticipation of pleasure.

This spring the Museum of Modern Art is giving New York a series of brilliant, intimate, musical evenings called Coffee Concerts. The museum has certain obvious facilities. Its building is handsome and the

auditorium, designed for sound films, has a good shape, a stage that is properly elevated, and about five hundred very comfortable red velvet seats. But even the Mexicans and Brazilians who took over last year couldn't bring it to life. Except for one inspired moment on a League program when Elsie Houston went into her Voodoo act by candle light, it has remained just a large, air-conditioned sub-cellar. Now Miss Louise Crane, a new and apparently very astute entrepreneur, has set her concerts in this place with a great deal of taste, a strict attention to all the details that start and keep a show going right, and some exceptionally smart stage management. "Salon Swing" which opened the series was a model of restrained theatrical effect. The house was filled, which in a small hall is a point of utmost importance; it not only reassures the audience, but provides that luxuriant warmth in which performers best expand. When every seat was taken the lights were promptly dimmed, the title of the concert and names of artists flashed upon a screen, and then spotlights, strung on two austere exposed, vertical scaffolds, threw a very agreeable glow over the whole stage and the performers – all of them Negro and all of them decorative. Between numbers, the musicians unobtrusively shifted the big double bass, the piano and the stands, sparing us those long, deadly waits while stage hands slowly come and go. The show had pace, it moved along at a clip and the audience, itself quite vivid with brilliantly dressed Negro women scattered like cockatoos and tropical flowers through the hall, kept its air of happy excitement to the last note.

I wish I could feel as pleased about the music. The salon atmosphere, was spread with considerable emphasis but what happened to the swing? John Kirby's band, always on the smooth and dainty side, ran through some tame Debussy arrangements and went to town only in two noisy numbers when the little trumpeter cut some fancy capers and the drummer quite tore himself apart – but with an air of concession to the baser instincts of the audience. The chop-stick arabesques of pianist Herman Chittison broke a Chopin waltz and the *Blue Danube* into listless little fragments. The Sophistichords, a super-energetic vocal quintet, acted a parody on *Old Man River* and then burlesqued a burlesque of *Pagliacci*, with a kind of super-condenscension. Coyness is undoubtedly the worst crime in the calendar; its effect is painful when singers have, as two of these did, the elongated bodies and gaunt heads of figures by El Greco. Which leads me to register a mild protest against the pretentious "tony" note that finds its way into occasional Negro entertainments. Arrangements of *Parlez-moi*

and *Tea for Two* and *Bolero* would not, ordinarily, be expected to hold the interest of a sophisticated audience. The point here seems to be that since the performers are Negroes the result is endearing. It is hard to imagine a more mutually patronizing set-up between the people out front and on the stage.

What audiences at large expect from Negro musicians is nothing less than the very best — technical virtuosity, miraculous rhythm, a confident display of power and a direct appeal to emotion. (If we must have "refinement" there's always Roland Hayes.) And what everybody really likes most is to get all of this straight.

Straight is exactly the way Virgil Thomson led the Negro chorus and soloists in his oratorio version of *Four Saints* at the second Coffee Concert. The devotional rapture of these unsmiling men and women perfectly transmits the humor, irony and poetry of that opera. Thomson's ritual treatment, the poise and control of his artists gave the evening grace and distinction. Musically, this clinched the series.

Minna Lederman