

GOTTSCHALK
(1829-1869)

(Anna de Brémont, “*The World of Music ; The Great Virtuosi*”)

FRAGRANT as the magnolia-blooms of his native land is the memory of Louis Moreau Gottschak to all who knew him as a man, while his name as virtuoso and composer is one of the brightest in the coronal of gifted sons adorning the young brow of America. Reared in one of the most beautiful States of the South, the sunny land of Louisiana, his soul drank early of the cup of beauty so lavishly bestowed by Nature in her happiest mood ; the long golden days of sapphire skies, luxuriant bloom, and reveille of the song-bird, the night with its silver radiance, its breezy symphonies, and nocturnes of the nightingale, fed the springs of sensuous emotion in the childish heart; while all that was tender, sweet, and pure in human love walked beside him, guiding those infant steps, cherishing the young mind, with that one priceless care, the care of a good and devoted mother, at once playmate, friend, and monitor. Truly an ideal childhood! To such happy influences Gottschalk owed the subsequent perfection of his art. In such surroundings every faculty of his genius bloomed to its fullest extent; the soul of the poet kept pace with the soul of the artiste, the generous impulses of the heart with the noble development of the mind. To all these the great virtuoso undoubtedly owed the wonderful power of sympathy which made him the most magnetic performer of the piano of his day: people *felt* his music, they knew instinctively the heart that throbbed within it and the soul that sang through it, just as one feels the love in a mother's touch or the tenderness in a lover's hand.

Where a sister and a friend have written so eloquently, the few words now written across the record of his fame might appear cold and inadequate were it not that every leaf, however small, may add to the greenness of his memory. One of the most striking characteristics of Gottschalk's performance was its wonderful originality, due no doubt to a fervid and poetical imagination combined with great dramatic expression—faculties almost abnormally developed by his early training, of which he tells us in his own peculiar and fascinating style in *Notes of a Pianist*, a diary relating the daily experiences, observations, and thoughts of an exceptionally brilliant and busy career. To the loving labour of his sister Clara Gottschalk the musical world owes this little volume, collected from a mass of dilapidated papers some years after her brother's death— a book not only of interest to the musical dilettante, but likewise to the reader of political events, from the many incidents of the late American Civil War recorded therein. In this work

an old negress, 'Sally' figures as the beloved nurse, friend, and *protégée* of his childhood. In fact, the faithful slave owed all the happiness of her existence to her young master. When the boy was barely five years old he was one day paying a visit with his parents to a lady of distinguished position living on a great plantation some distance from his home; there he saw for the first time the 'carcan' inflicted on a slave. This was a barbarous implement of torture, consisting of a round wooden instrument fastened by a padlock and placed round the neck of the negroes as a punishment, whereby the poor creatures were prevented from lying down, and sometimes worn for months. The sight of this cruel punishment filled the child's young heart with such pity that he ran straightway to her mistress and with tears demanded the release of the negress, and besought his father to buy the woman. Greatly embarrassed, Mr. Gottschalk sought to quiet the boy, but all to no avail. Finally the lady proposed to sell the slave, who, she averred, was only good to look after the chickens; the bargain was completed, and the indulgent father bestowed the slave on the young humanitarian, and 'Sally' became his devoted and cherished servant. To her he owed an intimate acquaintance with the wild and beautiful folk-lore of the negro race, and the tales told with all the quaint dramatic power and charm of expression of the old negress around the fire when the hour of bed-time was near and the children gathered at her knee. 'We listened to Sally so well,' he writes, 'that we knew the whole of her stories off by heart, with an interest that continues till to-day, and still makes me find an inexpressible charm in all these naïve legends of our negroes. I should like to relate in their picturesque and exquisite originality some of those old Creole ballads whose simple and touching melody goes right to the heart and makes you dream of unknown worlds.' The inspiration imbibed at these feasts of negro folk-song bloomed into noble fruit in after years. Like Chopin, who reaped undying fame through the setting of his national airs to the music of dance and nocturne, Gottschalk wove the old Creole airs of his native State into compositions of exceeding beauty—so original, so typical of the negro race in their plaintive tenderness, their joyous revels, and their passionate despair under the iron yoke of slavery, that he has created for himself the enviable position of the only truly American pianist and composer. He is the Chopin of his country ; other gifted and clever pianists have arisen since, but they belong to either the school of Thalberg, Liszt, Chopin, or Rubinstein. Gottschalk was of no school or master ; he was supremely Gottschalk, and to this day no other American pianist has arisen to take his place. To the once oppressed and (alas !) still despised negro race, whose simple chants and weird melodies are the only purely American musical tradition of to-day, the world owes the perfection of that genius who caught and enshrined in immortal beauty those gems of American folk-song. Listen to the strains of the *Bamboula*. It is composed on only four bars of a negro melody well known in Louisiana ; but

what a wealth of melody, sparkling cadences of variations, and glittering chains of modulation it contains! Does it not conjure up visions of those mad, merry moonlight dances under the banana trees wherein the negroes forgot their bondage, cast aside their sorrows, and abandoned themselves to the wild delight of the dance ? It is related that the great virtuoso composed this marvellous *chef-d'œuvre* while on the eve of convalescence, though still in the throes of delirium, from fever; no doubt the fantasies of that strangely disordered condition were reflected in the brilliant changes and plaintive reiterations of the simple melody borne in upon his dreaming senses from the lips of his old nurse. *Bamboula* established his fame in Paris ; it brought the critics to his feet; they were never weary of lauding the young Creole composer to the skies. One critic exclaims: 'The piano is no longer the dry and monotonous instrument with which we have been acquainted. It is not the hand of a man that touches the keys ; it is the wing of a sylph that caresses them, causing them to resound with the purest harmony.'

'Young man, I predict for you a future such as few men have yet seen!' exclaimed Thalberg when he grasped the young composer by the hand on hearing him play the *Bamboula* for the first time.

Still another typical work is *The Banjo*, wonderfully characteristic of that fascinating negro instrument, beloved by the masses of the American people, but, until Gottschalk immortalised it, despised in artistic circles. How marvellously he has incorporated the musical trum-trum and mellow clang of the strings on the 'possum skin, and the sonorous echoes of the mulberry-wood body of the instrument! In *The Last Hope*, a tone-poem of exquisite purity of style and conception, Gottschalk displayed his wonderful mastery of the tremolo, a technique so perfect that every chord sobbed forth its sweet minor until the notes blended into a *vox humana* heartrending in its mournfulness. For tenderness and simplicity combined with an indescribable natural rhythm, *La Berceuse*, or the Cradle-song, has never been surpassed ; its melody stirs the heart of every mother ; with its plaintive refrain, half-sad, half-joyous, it seems to breathe a blessing on the past and a prayer for the future.

'The Cradle-song—is it not a mother's heart set to music?' wrote one who had heard the composer play it at a concert. And we read in that wonderful diary wherein he poured out all his sorrows, triumphs, thoughts, and experiences this touching record: 'No praise in my life has so much touched me as that of this mother recognising in my poor little composition, humble as it is, a reflection of her affection for her infant, when, hanging over its cradle, she recalled to herself *La Berceuse*! I was led to compose the *Berceuse* by memories of a younger sister of mine, dearly loved and brought up by me, whom I cradled in my arms during her infancy through a painful illness which threatened to take her away from us. I imagined her lying in her cradle as

of old ; and at the thought of losing her all my youthful emotions, all my affections, ripened by age and strengthened by absence, sprang up afresh to be condensed into this little *morceau*, which, despite its trifling artistic value, I dearly love, because it recalls to me a great sorrow once spared my heart.' How eloquently the lofty, sympathetic nature of the man speaks in those simple words, proclaiming him to have been not only a genius but a man of heart—in a word, a *good* man ! It was such noble qualities as these which filled his life with deeds of charity to the poor and oppressed, which moved him to perform acts of quixotic kindness akin to that when, on one occasion during his tour in Spain, he gave orders to have his piano conveyed to the home of a young girl dying of consumption, who had expressed a desire to hear the great virtuoso ere she passed away, for his fame had penetrated even the darkened shadows of the death-chamber. Unfortunately, the parents of the dying girl were too poor to accede to her wish. For days she pleaded, until the unhappy parents were in despair, since they knew not where to look for the money to pay so distinguished an artist for the privilege of gratifying their child's request. At length the matter came to the ears of Gottschalk, and the last moments of the poor girl were gladdened by such melody as had never before awoke beneath the touch of those inspired fingers. When the music ceased, the gentle spirit had flown, borne into the very gates of eternity on the wings of those sweet strains.

Undoubtedly the most interesting and valuable record of the career of the great pianist is that covering his tour of the United States during the late Civil War. His visits to France, Switzerland, and Spain are full of remarkable incidents of romantic triumph : from the episode of his first public concert at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, when Chopin, who was present, sought the artist's room, and, placing his hand on the boy's head, exclaimed, 'Give me your hand, my child ; I predict that you will become the king of pianists!' to that of the toreador of Madrid, who presented him in a burst of admiring enthusiasm with the magnificent sword with which he, the greatest bull-fighter of Spain, had upheld the glory of the Spanish Toréo won by Montes, his famous predecessor, from whom the sword had descended. The *Notes of a Pianist* read like a condensed history of the American War. Travelling constantly from place to place, sometimes in the company of artists since greatly distinguished — notably Adelina Patti and her family—again with no companions but the great Chickering Grands, made expressly for him, and which on many occasions caused the firm great concern through fear of injury to their precious bodies from bombardment or other risks of warfare. In his own words, he writes: 'I acknowledge my heart beat at the idea of leaving these two brave companions of my life exposed to the chances of a bombardment or of assault! Poor pianos! you will probably serve to feed the fine bivouac fire of some obscure Confederate soldier, who will see with indifferent eyes your harmonious bowels

consumed, without regard for the three hundred concerts which you have survived, and the fidelity with which you have followed me in my Western campaigns.' This was written in the cars *en route* to Harrisburg, which he found in a state of siege, with the enemy expected every moment. Stirring descriptions of marching soldiers, flying batteries of artillery, besieged towns, snow-bound trains, burned bridges, mistaken identity arrests, comical complications, concerts for the officers, concerts for the President, and concerts for the soldiers, interspersed with profound reflections on life, art, and human economy, fill the pages written in the whirl of railway travel or to beguile the tedium of the long coach- and carriage-drives, with a fascination truly irresistible—to the cost of the researcher's time, be it confessed,—for who could hope to skim so charming a work ! Of the great and lamented Abraham Lincoln he writes: 'Lincoln is remarkably ugly, but has an intelligent air, and his eyes have a remarkable expression of mildness and goodness—sat in the first row— wears no gloves.' This was on the occasion of a concert at Washington. Again, he writes of his countrywomen : 'The desire for cultivating the mind and purifying the taste is an imperative necessity among American women, which I have never found in so high a degree in any other race.' Then he naïvely records his pleasure in the innocent admiration of some young boarding-school ladies, who had heard him play at a concert in the pretty little town of Nashua, in the following: 'Met in the street three little boarding-school girls in a buggy, who threw me kisses.' Again this amusing item: 'I have to write my autograph hundreds of times.' Of the numerous war-songs written in that exciting period he gives the palm to the *Battle-Cry of Freedom*. 'It ought to become our national air,' he writes ; 'it has animation, its harmonies are distinguished, it has tune, rhythm; and I discover in it a kind of epic colouring, something sadly heroic, which a battle-song should have.'

With a family history highly romantic on his mother's side—(the maternal grandfather was the Comte de Bruslé, the Governor of St. Domingo, forced to fly for his life when the revolution broke out in that island: Louisiana was then a dependency of the French crown, and the Anglicism of New Orleans had not yet been invented for the staunch French colony of la Nouvelle Orléans)—we can readily understand the romantic and chivalrous nature of Gottschalk. His portraits all portray the exceeding refinement, almost spiritual character, of his mind in the delicate lineaments, the high and noble brow, and introspective, dreamy glance of the beautiful eyes. Fate was exceptionally cruel in cutting short so glorious a career; the good he might have done for American music when age had mellowed his judgment, and time had set the seal of Master on his fame, is incontestable. And it is indeed to be deplored that no star has risen since his set beneath the glowing skies of Brazil, to shed the same glorious light on American

art. Flowers were ever his delight and consolation. 'They soothe me into better thoughts, and make me more worthy to be your friend' he wrote to his friend and biographer Octavia Hensel; and in the words of that devoted chronicler of his genius and virtues : 'Flowers themselves shall be placed upon his grave. In the spirit of their symbolism I offer to his memory these words and thoughts, caught from the sunlight of his genius, nourished by the remembrance of his kindly words and kindlier deeds.'