

A Forgotten Pioneer

By G. JEAN-AUBRY.

IT MUST be admitted, generally, that few people are less fond of novelties than musicians. Most performers are content to play and the majority of the public to listen always to the same works. If, likewise, they were compelled always to look at the same pictures and the same statues or to read over again the same books, they might prove less patient. Is it because most of those who hear music do not really listen to it? I cannot say, but the fact remains that music lovers experience a strange pleasure in again meeting what they are familiar with, whilst it is very difficult to convince most readers that they should read over and over again works of real fecundity and depth.

There is no doubt that one who would deem it a dishonor not to be acquainted with the latest novel or the most modern play, fails altogether (even if musical) to show the same zeal and enthusiasm in listening to the latest sonata or symphony, and that most people much prefer the sonata or symphony they are going to hear to be the production of a master consecrated by custom, time, and the professionals.

Rediscoveries

Such an absence of curiosity, however, does not manifest itself only in regard to the most recent productions, but, it applies equally to works belonging to the past. I have often thought that there was probably no realm where more acts of injustice seemed to be committed than in the realm of music. One need not have made himself familiar with literature or plastic art to feel the interest one finds in rediscovering from time to time writers or painters who have enjoyed a certain favor, but, have afterward lost their popularity and even sometimes been relegated to complete oblivion.

There are certain artists whose works are established for ever. If we are musical, we cannot remain ignorant of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin and a few others; but, are we sure that amongst forgotten musicians there are not only bold mentalities which might explain to us the rise of certain geniuses, but even tempers which have been able to attune themselves better to the average public of their age and whose characteristics may again be modern for some of our contemporaries?

The history of literature and of painting presents eclipses which can be explained not always on fundamental grounds but sometimes simply by reasons of temporary fashions, and the indifference with which such or such a painter is regarded is sometimes quite inexplicable. Who can tell, for instance, why, at the present day, there is hardly anyone acquainted with Zurbarab's works and who appreciates their high merit? Yet this artist is one of the leading figures in Spanish painting. I could quote other examples.

Gottschalk and Field

Without meaning to refer to an artist of such power, I could not help thinking of the indifference and injustice of music lovers generally, when lately I listened to a work by a charming musician who is hardly mentioned now, and whose music is seldom heard, although he certainly does not deserve complete oblivion, and who was to a certain extent, a forerunner in that path, often abandoned and often resumed, of descriptive music. A friend who was fond of delving in the cellars of music dealers made me listen lately to a charming work called "The Last Hope," the production of a musician who has experienced dazzling triumphs, but, whose name today is hardly known! I mean Gottschalk. Undoubtedly the piece I heard was clearly characterized by the style prevalent in his time, and there was no need to have heard, some long time ago, the name of Gottschalk to know that he was a

composer born about 1830. Yet in this piece there was a blending of Weber, Field and Chopin, which had its charm.

I often have complained of the indifference amongst musicians in regard to Field. Merely because Chopin wrote a few Nocturnes, those by Field, which deserve better treatment are despised. Who can tell me that there are not among Gottschalk's works charming pages which ought to be brought to light again?

We live at a time when, in the domain of furniture and knick-knacks, we find many an amateur who is a collector of Victorian or "Louisphilippard" art. This is how, whilst some rather ugly pieces of furniture and hideous curios have been unearthed, some charming pieces of an exquisite style have also been brought to light. I recollect reading accounts of Gottschalk's brilliant career. The son of a doctor of science of Cambridge and of a Frenchwoman of New Orleans, who spent his early years on the shores of the Pontchartrain Lake, he is an ancestor of American music. Chopin showed affection for this virtuoso's compositions, when he was still on the threshold of youth.

Concert Triumphs

The Creole environment in which Gottschalk lived, the disposition he had inherited from his mother, and the tales of the Indians and the songs of the Negroes had impressed his early life. "La Bamboula," "Le Bananier," "La Savane," the titles of several pieces for the piano written when he was not more than 10 or 17 years of age, were not spurious compositions; he knew what he was talking about; his object was not to flatter tastes of a more or less authentic exotism inspired by Chateaubriand or Victor Hugo. To him it was evoking his early childhood and youth.

His concert tours were triumphs in France as well as in Spain, England and America. In New York, Cuba, Porto Rico he was overwhelmed with laurels; at Martinique, St. Thomas and Trinidad he performed his works, and was everywhere triumphantly received. Yet, of all this, there is hardly left more than a hazy recollection. Who will again let us hear some of his works, of which we know little more than the names: "Manchega," "Les Yeux Creoles," "La Gitanille," "Minuit à Séville," "Les Souvenirs d'Andalousie," "Le Banjo," or a symphony with the beautiful title of "Les Nuits des Tropiques?" Who will give us the opportunity to hear once more the works of a "topical" composer in these times of Negro folklore and musical exotism?