

Louis Moreau Gottschalk

... First American Concert-Pianist

by Jeanne Behrend



AFTER SEVERAL DECADES of neglect, the music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk is again attracting attention. During the last few years, there have been signs of a revival—an occasional magazine article, an LP potpourri "Cakewalk" conducted by Eugene Ormandy, and lecture-recitals by the writer. Now, Eugene List's recording of his piano music has just been issued by Vanguard, a similar record soon will be released by M-G-M, already heralded by Presser's edition of Gottschalk's music, both by the writer.

What is needed now is an edition of his journal, *Notes of a Pianist*, out of print and scarce. This entertaining chronicle has been a source of information to researchers in Americana coming under the peculiar spell of Gottschalk's personality—many-faceted, mercurial, sometimes baffling. If republished, it would gain many readers. Historians would see mid-19th century America through the eyes of a concert pianist educated abroad, observing his own country with a detachment not always possible in a native American.

It was his privilege to travel almost the length and breadth of the United States during a particularly crucial period of its history: from 1853 to 1856, from 1862 to 1865. His impressions have been commented upon by various critics and musicologists—in fact, many different Gottschalks emerge from their accounts. There is the 16-year-old lad hailed by Chopin as "king of pianists," exciting France, Switzerland and Spain with his Creole compositions, already both a pioneer in American popular music and a cultural ambassador. There is the matinee idol. To this writer he is an important figure between two flowerings of American music, who, in an entertainment field dominated by opera, minstrel shows and lectures, helped to create a new audience for piano recitals. Another writer sees him

principally as a Latin American, stressing his maternal ancestors of St. Domingo, his childhood in a town assailed by Caribbean rhythms, his visits to the West Indies, and his last four years skirting most of the outer rim of South America. To still another, he is a tragic example of a talent frittered away. All these legends are more or less available and largely true. But they do not tell the whole story.

Once the journal is republished, the next task is a biography telling not only what he observed and what he did or did not accomplish, but what he was. It is not enough to see his world through his eyes. Seeing into them, we might see him.

The veiled eyes, however, so devastating to his female admirers, do not invite the direct gaze. The journal tells just so much and no more. Possibly it underwent revision through the translation of his brother-in-law and the editing of his sister. Yet there remain some slightly purple passages in a language then not hospitable to them. We could conclude that Gottschalk was reticent about the women who really mattered to him. We surmise, too, that often they were the pursuers rather than the pursued. By the time Gottschalk was writing his journal, he had arrived at a singular deadness of heart.

Gottschalk was essentially a lonely man. This is not to imply he was anti-social; on the contrary, he was a delightful companion. But it must have been a self-imposed loneliness that made of him a restless wanderer. Economic necessity, of course, brought long and arduous concert tours, but not so urgently as time went on. He could have settled somewhere to teach, or he might have retreated to the quieter tempo of Europe, once his success here was assured. But he was not a teacher, he was a showman. And he was not a European, he was incurably an American, this aristocratic, half-Jewish Creole who preferred to speak and write in French, who took pride in the United States while ridiculing its mores, who defended American democracy while finding it just a little too democratic. It might be true that an insatiable curiosity about America drove him on, but one senses also a hidden unrest. He railed against his nomadic existence in accents truly pathetic. But he did nothing to change it.

A more familiar charge of *laissez (aire* concerns his apparent failure to change the public taste. He did not play in public the works of Bach and Beethoven or those of his contemporaries Chopin and Schumann. But then—who else did, at that time, anywhere? Only a few embattled souls like Clara Schumann. The primary task facing Gottschalk in the United

States was to get people to come to hear him at all. Away from large cities, they resented paying a whole dollar just to see a man cross a bare stage to play on a piano—a strangely chilling scene sometimes even today. After the fiasco of his first New England tour, he knew it was sink or swim. He was the sole financial support of his mother and several younger brothers and sisters. At the suggestion of his faithful publisher William Hall, he started a vogue for his own compositions. They formed the major part of his programs, much to the disgust of certain critics. Gottschalk defended this practice: "If Thackeray was lecturing to you would you complain that he gave you Thackeray, and would it not be absurd if he recounted to you the passages of Hamlet or Othello which any actor could recite to you?"

Perhaps they could recite it better than Thackeray; would you conclude from that, that Thackeray had less talent? . . . Berlioz told me that the originality, the subtle refinement of a special talent, could only be appreciated in very old societies. If we are yet to proclaim an art and to form our taste, then I understand that you would like better a tame interpretation of consecrated *chefs-d'oeuvre*, than an original, which is not yet consecrated and whose place in art you dare not yet designate."

The "originals," varying widely in both calibre and style, hint at the exigencies governing his life."Soon after his highly successful debut in Paris, 1845, he wrote nostalgic evocations of his still-recent New Orleans childhood — *Bamboula*, *Le Bananier*, *La Savane*, inspired possibly by the example in nationalistic music set by Chopin and Glinka. This happy vein is climaxed by *The Banjo*. A change seems to come over Gottschalk after his return to the United States in 1853. Actually *The Last Hope* dates from a visit to Cuba that same year. He sold it for \$50 to a certain publisher, who, having little success with it, sold it for the same sum to Hall, who then made a fortune on it. Of a sickly sentimentality, it nevertheless soars into a noble arc of melody that later enhanced many a silent movie and today is sung as a hymn. Gottschalk became quite complacent over the enormous influence exerted by this work and others, writing in 1865: "I am daily astonished at the rapidity with which the taste for music ... is developing in the United States. At the time of my first return from Europe I was constantly deploring the want of public interest for pieces purely sentimental; the public listened with indifference; to interest it, it became necessary to strike it with astonishment; grand movements, *tours de force*, and noise had alone the privilege in piano music, not of pleasing, but of making it patient with it . . . From whatever cause the American taste is becoming purer, and with that remarkable rapidity which we cite through our whole progress.

For ten years a whole generation of young girls has played my pieces. 'Last Hope,' 'Marche de Nuit,' 'Murmures Eoliens,' 'Pastorelle et Cavalier,' 'Cradle Song,' have become so popular that it is difficult for me to find an audience disposed to listen to me since the majority has played or studied the pieces which compose the program."

Not everybody will agree that this was entirely a healthy influence. But even the sorry procession of trivia that followed *The Last Hope* is a shade better than most of the salon music then popular. And there are occasional flashes of the old fire—*Souvenir de Porto Rico*, a march of ruthless step beginning in dark mystery; *Pasquinada*, a deliciously impudent lampoon; *The Union*, a grandiose montage of the Civil War shrewdly aimed at an inflamed public and revealing as well where his sympathies lay in the tragic conflict.

Of all his compositions, our favorite is his *Berceuse* (Cradle Song), based on a French lullaby, *Fais dodo, mon bebe*. He played it extensively after his return from a six-year Indian sojourn, and made of it a song, *Slumber On, Baby Dear*

On January 1, 1863, Gottschalk, recovering from an illness, gave way to seasonal melancholy: "It is seven o'clock, New Year's Day! Magical epoch, which, when we are children, excites in us a glow of indescribable felicity, and which, as we become old,* brings with it only the remembrance of lost happiness." Something had just arrived, however, to make his hotel room look a little less bleak. It was a fan-letter from an Indianapolis mother to the Home Journal concerning his *Berceuse*. Immensely cheered by it, he recalled how he came to write the *Berceuse* as an expression of gratitude for the recovery of a younger sister. The lady from Indianapolis concludes her effusion—"A good man must he be—the composer of the *Berceuse*." We would hesitate to inform the lady that uplifting music is not necessarily written by paragons of virtue. Just the same, a simple creature of the Victorian era had sensed a side of Gottschalk's nature seldom mentioned by more learned people since her time. The tendency is to expose his showmanship and cynicism.

But the Gottschalk of the *Berceuse* is he who interrupted his concert in Toronto to go to the immediate aid of a friend in New York, who could not say no to a being in distress, and whose greatest gift at such a time was that of his actual presence. The Lisztian tradition of donating fees to charity was observed whenever possible, and many are the instances of the

*He was then only thirty-three.

impulsive largesse. This generosity extended as well to his attitude toward fellow-artists—professional jealousy was foreign to his nature.

The mood of that New Year's Day—a vaguely oppressive feeling of a life misspent—returned some years later while he was visiting an "obscure hole on the coast of the Pacific," Acapulco, now a popular resort. His pleasure on encountering there an aged compatriot from New Orleans was tempered when the old man asked somewhat testily, "Whatever became of that little prodigy Gottschalk who promised marvelous things, and whose father sent him to Europe in hopes of making a great musician of him? Nobody has heard anything more said about him. What has become of him?" Gottschalk's answer: "I confess that I found myself a little embarrassed in answering this question. My self-esteem was considerably hurt. I told him the little prodigy was still a pianist, and that without having precisely realized the expectations of his countrymen, he had notwithstanding continued to work at music."

We are taking a kinder view. Gottschalk was a civilized, sentient human being, an artist buffeted by circumstance, of a world tripartite: North America, Europe and Latin America. To each he brought all three, to all he gave himself. His was a meteoric career, a life lived fully in momentous times.

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