

Louis Moreau Gottschalk

Clara Louise Kellog (Mme Strakosch)
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My general impressions of this period of my life include those of the two great pianists, Thalberg and Gottschalk. They were both wonderful, although I always admired Gottschalk more than the former. Thalberg had the greater technique; Gottschalk the greater charm. Sympathetically, the latter musician was better equipped than the former. The very simplest thing that Gottschalk played became full of fascination. Thalberg was marvellously perfect as to his method; but it was Gottschalk who could "play the birds off the trees and the heart out of your breast," as the Irish say. Thalberg's work was, if I may put it so, mental; Gottschalk's was temperamental. Gottschalk was one of the first big pianists to come to New York touring. He was from New Orleans, having been born there in the French Quarter, and spoke only French, like so many persons from that city up to thirty years ago. But he had been educated abroad and always ranked as a foreign artist. He must have been a Jew, from his name. Certainly, he looked like one. He had peculiarly drooping eyelids and was considered to be very attractive. He wrote enchanting Spanish-sounding songs; and gave the banjo quite a little dignity by writing a piece imitating it, much to my delight, because of my fondness for that instrument. He was in no way a classical pianist.

Thalberg was. Indeed, they were altogether different types. Thalberg was nothing like so interesting either as a personality or as a musician, although he was much more scholarly than his predecessor. I say predecessor, because Thalberg followed Gottschalk in the touring proposition. Gottschalk began his work before I began mine, and I first sang with him in my second season. He and I figured in the same concerts not only in those early days but also much later.

Gottschalk was a gay deceiver and women were crazy about him. Needless to say, my mother never let me have anything to do with him except professionally. He was pursued by adoring females wherever he went and inundated with letters from girls who had lost their hearts to his exquisite music and magnetic personality. I shall always remember Gottschalk and Brignoli comparing their latest love letters from matinee girls. Some poor, silly maiden had written to Gottschalk asking for a meeting at any place he would appoint.

Said Gottschalk:

"It would be rather fun to make a date with her at some absurd, impossible place, say a ferry-boat, for instance."

"Nonsense," said Brignoli, "a ferry-boat is not romantic enough. She wouldn't think of coming to a ferry-boat to meet her ideal!"

"She would come anywhere," declared Gottschalk, not at all vaingloriously, but as one stating a simple truth. "I 'll make her come; and you shall come too and see her do it!"

"Will you bet?" asked Brignoli.

"I certainly will," replied Gottschalk.

They promptly put up quite a large sum of money and Gottschalk won. That dear, miserable goose of a girl did go to the ferry-boat to meet the illustrious pianist of her adoration, and Brignoli was there to see.

If only girls knew as much as I do about the way in which their stage heroes take their innocent adulation, and the wicked light-heartedness with which they make fun of it ! But they do not ; and the only way to teach them, I suppose, is to let them learn by themselves, poor little idiots.



Gottschalk
Photograph by Case & Getchell