

## Thalberg & Gottschalk

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### Gottschalk

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George T. Ferris ,  
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During Thalberg's first visit to America he had an active and dangerous rival in the young and brilliant pianist, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who was as fresh to New York audiences as Thalberg himself, though the latter had the advantage over his young competitor in a fame which was almost world-wide. Of American pianists Louis Gottschalk stands confessedly at the head by virtue of remarkable native gifts, which, had they been assisted by greater industry and ambition, might easily have won him a very eminent rank in Europe as well as in his own country. An easy, pleasure-loving, tropical nature, flexible, facile, and disposed to sacrifice the future to the present, was the only obstacle to the attainment to a place level with the foremost artists of his age.

Edward Gottschalk, who came to America in his young manhood and settled in New Orleans, and his wife, a French Creole lady, had five children, of whom the future pianist was the eldest, born in 1829. His feeling for music manifested itself when he was three years old by his ability to play a melody on the piano which he had heard. Instantly he was strong enough, he was placed under the instruction of a good teacher, and no pains were spared to develop his precocious talent. At the age of six he had made such progress on the piano that he was also instructed on the violin, and soon was able to play pieces of more than ordinary difficulty with taste and expression. We are told that the lad gave a benefit concert at the age of eight to assist an unfortunate violin-player, with considerable success, and was soon in great request at evening parties as a child phenomenon. The propriety of sending the little Louis to Paris had long been discussed, and it was finally accomplished in 1842.

On reaching Paris he was first put under the teaching of Charles Halle, but, as the latter master was a little careless, he was replaced by M. Camille Stamaty, who had the reputation of being the ablest professor in the city. The following year he began the study of harmony and counterpoint with M. Malidan<sup>1</sup>, and the rapid progress he evinced in his studies was of a kind to justify his parents in their wish to devote him to the career of a pianist.

Young Louis Gottschalk was much petted in the aristocratic salons of Paris, to which he had admission through his aunts, the Comtesse de Lagrange and the Comtesse de Bourjally. His remarkable musical gifts, and more especially his talent for improvisation, excited curiosity and admiration, even in a city where the love of musical novelty had been sated by a continual supply of art prodigies. Young as he was, he wrote at this time not a few charming compositions, which were in after-years occasional features of his concerts. His delicate constitution succumbed under hard work, and for a while a severe attack of typhoid fever interrupted his studies. On his recovery, our young artist spent a few months in the Ardennes.

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<sup>1</sup> Maleden

On returning to Paris, he became the pupil of Hector Berlioz<sup>2</sup>, who felt a deep interest in the young American, as an art prodigy from a land of savages in harmony, and devoted himself so assiduously to the study that he declined an invitation from the Spanish queen to become a guest of the court at Madrid.

An amusing incident occurred in a pedestrian trip which he made to the Vosges in 1846. He had forgotten his passport, and, on arriving at a small town, was arrested by a gendarme and taken before the maire. The latter official was reading a newspaper containing a notice of his last concert, and through this means he assured the worthy functionary of his identity, and was cordially welcomed to the hospitality of the official residence.

His friend Berlioz, who was ever on the alert to help the American pupil who promised to do him so much credit, arranged a series of concerts for him at the Italian Opéra in the winter of 1846-'47, and these proved brilliantly successful, not merely in filling the young artist's purse, but in augmenting his fast-growing reputation. Steady labor in study and concert-giving, many of his public performances being for charity, made two years pass swiftly by. A musical tour through France in 1849 was highly successful, and the young American returned to Paris, loaded down with gifts, and rich in the sense of having justly earned the congratulations which showered on him from all his friends. A second invitation now came from Spain, and Louis Gottschalk on arriving at Madrid was made a guest at the royal palace. From the king he received two orders, the diamond cross of Isabella la Catholique and that of Leon d'Holstein, and from the Duke de Montpensier he received a sword of honor. We are told that at one of the private court concerts Gottschalk played a duet with Don Carlos, the father of the recent pretender to the Spanish throne.

Among the romantic incidents narrated of this visit of Gottschalk to Madrid, one is too characteristic to be overlooked, as showing the tender, generous nature of the artist. An imaginative Spanish girl, whose fancy had been excited by the public enthusiasm about Gottschalk, but was too ill to attend his concerts, had a passionate desire to hear him play, and pined away in the fret-fulness of ungratified desire. Her family were not able to pay Gottschalk for the trouble of giving such an exclusive concert, but, to satisfy the sick girl, made the circumstances known to the artist. Gottschalk did not hesitate a moment, but ordered his piano to be conveyed to the humble abode of the patient. Here by her bedside he played for hours to the enraptured girl, and the strain of emotion was so great that her life ebbed away before he had finished the final chords. Gottschalk remained in Spain for two years, and it was not till the autumn of 1852 that he returned to Paris, to give a series of farewell concerts before returning again to America, where his father and brothers were anxiously awaiting him.

Before Gottschalk's departure from Paris, Hector Berlioz thus wrote of his *protégé*, for whom we may fancy he had a strong bias of liking; and no judge is so generous in estimation as one artist of another, unless the critic has personal cause of dislike, and then no judge is so sweepingly unjust: "Gottschalk is one of the very small number who possess all the different elements of a consummate pianist, all the faculties which surround him with an irresistible prestige, and give him a sovereign power. He is an accomplished musician; he knows just how far fancy may be indulged in expression. He knows the limits beyond which any freedom taken with the rhythm produces only confusion and disorder, and upon these limits he never encroaches. There is an exquisite grace in his manner of phrasing sweet melodies and

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<sup>2</sup> No evidence exists. Gottschalk was a friend of Berlioz and assisted him in some concerts.

throwing off light touches from the higher keys. The boldness, brilliancy, and originality of his play at once dazzle and astonish, and the infantile *naivete* of his smiling caprices, the charming simplicity with which he renders simple things, seem to belong to another individuality, distinct from that which marks his thundering energy. Thus the success of M. Gottschalk before an audience of musical cultivation is immense."

But even this enthusiastic praise was pale in comparison with the eulogiums of some of the New York journals, after the first concert of Gottschalk at Niblo's Garden Theatre. One newspaper, which arrogated special strength and good judgment in its critical departments, intimated that after such a revelation it was useless any longer to speak of Beethoven! Whether Beethoven as a player or Beethoven as a composer was meant was left unknown. Gottschalk at his earlier concerts played many of his own compositions, made to order for the display of his virtuosoism, and their brilliant, showy style was very well calculated to arouse the enthusiasm of the general public. Perhaps the most sound and thoughtful opinion of Gottschalk expressed during the first enthusiasm created by his playing was that of a well-known musical journal published in Boston:

"Well, at the concert, which, by the way, did not half fill the Boston Music Hall, owing partly, we believe, to the one-dollar price, and partly, we *hope*, to distrust of an artist who plays wholly his own compositions, our expectation was confirmed. There was, indeed, most brilliant execution; we have heard none more brilliant, but are not yet prepared to say that Jaell's was less so. Gottschalk's touch is the most clear and crisp and beautiful that we have ever known. His play is free and bold and sure, and graceful in the extreme; his runs pure and liquid; his figures always clean and perfectly denned; his command of rapid octave passages prodigious; and so we might go through with all the technical points of masterly execution. It *was* great execution. But what is execution, without some thought and meaning in the combinations to be executed?... Skillful, graceful, brilliant, wonderful, we own his playing was. But players less wonderful have given us far deeper satisfaction. We have seen a criticism upon that concert, in which it was regretted that his music was too fine for common apprehension, 'too much addressed to the *reasoning* faculties,' etc. To us the want was, that it did *not* address the reason; that it seemed empty of ideas, of inspiration; that it spoke little to the mind or heart, excited neither meditation nor emotion, but simply dazzled by the display of difficult feats gracefully and easily achieved. But of what use were all these difficulties? ('Difficult! I wish it was *impossible*,' said Dr. Johnson.) Why all that rapid tossing of handfuls of chords from the middle to the highest octaves, lifting the hand with such conscious appeal to our eyes? To what end all those rapid octave passages? since in the intervals of easy execution, in the seemingly quiet impromptu passages, the music grew so monotonous and commonplace: the same little figure repeated and repeated, after listless pauses, in a way which conveyed no meaning, no sense of musical progress, but only the appearance of fastidiously critical scale-practicing.<sup>3</sup>"

In the series of concerts given by Gottschalk throughout the United States, the public generally showed great enthusiasm and admiration, and the young pianist sustained himself very successfully against the memories of Jaell, Henri Herz, and Leopold de Meyer, as well as the immediate rivalry of Thalberg, who appealed more potently to a select few. The hold the American pianist had secured on his public did not lessen during the five years of concert-giving which succeeded. No player ever displayed his skill before American audiences who had in so large degree that peculiar quality of geniality in his style which so endears him to

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<sup>3</sup> Extracted from « Dwight's Journal of music ». Dwight's opinion was not shared by everyone.

the public. This characteristic is something apart from genius or technical skill, and is peculiarly an emanation from the personality of the man.

In the spring of 1857 Gottschalk found himself in Havana, whither he had gone to make the beginning of a musical tour through the West Indies. His first concert was given at the Tacon Theatre, which Mr. Maretzek, who was giving operatic representations then in Havana, yielded to him for the occasion. The Cubans gave the pianist a tropical warmth of welcome, and Gottschalk's letters from the old Spanish city are full of admiration for the climate, the life, and the people, with whom there was something strongly sympathetic in his own nature. The artist had not designed to protract his musical wanderings in the beautiful island of the Antilles for any considerable period, but his success was great, and the new experiences admirably suited his dreaming, sensuous, pleasure-loving temperament. Everywhere the advent of Gottschalk at a town was made the occasion of a festival, and life seemed to be one continued gala-day with him.

In the early months of 1860 the young pianist, Arthur Napoleon, joined Gottschalk at Havana, and the two gave concerts throughout the West Indies, which were highly successful. The early summer had been designed for a tour through Central America and Venezuela, but a severe attack of illness prostrated Gottschalk, and he was not able to sail before August for his new field of musical conquest. Our artist did not return to New York till 1862, after an absence of five years, though his original plan had only contemplated a tour of two years. It must not be supposed that Gottschalk devoted his time continually to concert performances and composition, though he by no means neglected the requirements of musical labor. As he himself confesses, the balmy climate, the glorious landscapes, the languid *dolce far niente*, which tended to enervate all that came under their magic spell, wrought on his susceptible temperament with peculiar effect. A quotation from an article written by Gottschalk, and published in the "Atlantic Monthly," entitled "Notes of a Pianist," will furnish the reader a graphic idea of the influence of tropical life on such an imaginative and voluptuous character, passionately fond of nature and outdoor life :

"Thus, in succession, I have visited all the Antilles—Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Swedish, and Danish; the Guianas, and the coasts of Para. At times, having become the idol of some obscure *pueblo*, whose untutored ears I had charmed with its own simple ballads, I would pitch my tent for five, six, eight months, deferring my departure from day to day, until finally I began seriously to entertain the idea of remaining there for evermore. Abandoning myself to such influences, I lived without care, as the bird sings, as the flower expands, as the brook flows, oblivious of the past, reckless of the future, and sowed both my heart and my purse with the ardor of a husbandman who hopes to reap a hundred ears for every grain he confides to the earth. But, alas! the fields where is garnered the harvest of expended doubloons, and where vernal loves bloom anew, are yet to be discovered; and the result of my prodigality was that, one fine morning, I found myself a bankrupt in heart, with my purse at ebb-tide. Suddenly disgusted with the world and myself, weary, discouraged, mistrusting men (ay, and women too), I fled to a desert on the extinct volcano of M——, where, for several months, I lived the life of a cenobite, with no companion but a poor lunatic whom I had met on a small island, and who had attached himself to me. He followed me everywhere, and loved me with that absurd and touching constancy of which dogs and madmen alone are capable. My friend, whose insanity was of a mild and harmless character, fancied himself the greatest genius in the world. He was, moreover, under the impression that he suffered from a gigantic, monstrous tooth. Of the two idiosyncrasies, the latter alone made his lunacy discernible, too many individuals being affected with the other symptom to render it an

anomalous feature of the human mind. My friend was in the habit of protesting that this enormous tooth increased periodically, and threatened to encroach upon his entire jaw. Tormented, at the same time, with the desire of regenerating humanity, he divided his leisure between the study of dentistry, to which he applied himself in order to impede the progress of his hypothetical tyrant, and a voluminous correspondence which he kept up with the Pope, his brother, and the Emperor of the French, his cousin. In the latter occupation he pleaded the interests of humanity, styled himself 'the Prince of Thought,' and exalted me to the dignity of his illustrious friend and benefactor. In the midst of the wreck of his intellect, one thing still survived—his love of music. He played the violin; and, strange as it may appear, although insane, he could not understand the so-called *music of the future*."

"My hut, perched on the verge of the crater, at the very summit of the mountain, commanded a view of all the surrounding country. The rock upon which it was built projected over a precipice whose abysses were concealed by creeping plants, cactus, and bamboos. The species of table-rock thus formed had been encircled with a railing, and transformed into a terrace on a level with the sleeping-room, by my predecessor in this hermitage. His last wish had been to be buried there; and from my bed I could see his white tombstone gleaming in the moonlight a few steps from my window. Every evening I rolled my piano out upon the terrace; and there, facing the most incomparably beautiful landscape, all bathed in the soft and limpid atmosphere of the tropics, I poured forth on the instrument, and for myself alone, the thoughts with which the scene inspired me. And what a scene! Picture to yourself a gigantic amphitheatre hewn out of the mountains by an army of Titans; right and left, immense virgin forests full of those subdued and distant harmonies which are, as it were, the voices of Silence; before me, a prospect of twenty leagues marvelously enhanced by the extreme transparency of the air; above, the azure of the sky; beneath, the creviced sides of the mountain sweeping down to the plain; afar, the waving savannas; beyond them, a grayish speck (the distant city); and, encompassing them all, the immensity of the ocean closing the horizon with its deep-blue line. Behind me was a rock on which a torrent of melted snow dashed its white foam, and there, diverted from its course, rushed with a mad leap and plunged headlong into the gulf that yawned beneath my window."

"Amid such scenes I composed 'Réponds-moi la Marche des Gibaros,' 'Polonia,' 'Columbia,' 'Pastorella e Cavalière,' 'Jeunesse,' and many other unpublished works. I allowed my fingers to run over the keys, wrapped up in the contemplation of these wonders; while my poor friend, whom I heeded but little, revealed to me with a childish loquacity the lofty destiny he held in reserve for humanity. Can you conceive the contrast produced by this shattered intellect expressing at random its disjointed thoughts, as a disordered clock strikes by chance any hour, and the majestic serenity of the scene around me? I felt it instinctively. My misanthropy gave way. I became indulgent toward myself and mankind, and the wounds of my heart closed once more. My despair was soothed; and soon the sun of the tropics, which tinges all things with gold—dreams as well as fruits—restored me with new confidence and vigor to my wanderings.

"I relapsed into the manners and life of these primitive countries: if not strictly virtuous, they are at all events terribly attractive. Existence in a tropical wilderness, in the midst of a voluptuous and half-civilized race, bears no resemblance to that of a London cockney, a Parisian loungeur, or an American Quaker. Times there were, indeed, when a voice was heard within me that spoke of nobler aims. It reminded me of what I once was, of what I yet might be; and commanded imperatively a return to a healthier and more active life. But I had allowed myself to be enervated by this baneful languor, this insidious *far niente*; and my

moral torpor was such that the mere thought of reappearing before a polished audience struck me as superlatively absurd. 'Where was the object?' I would ask myself. Moreover, it was too late; and I went on dreaming with open eyes, careering on horseback through the savannas, listening at break of day to the prattle of the parrots in the guava-trees, at nightfall to the chirp of the *grillos* in the cane-fields, or else smoking my cigar, taking my coffee, rocking myself in a hammock—in short, enjoying all the delights that are the very heart-blood of a *guajiro*, and out of the sphere of which he can see but death, or, what is worse to him, the feverish agitation of our Northern society. Go and talk of the funds, of the landed interest, of stock-jobbing, to this Sybarite lord of the wilderness, who can live all the year round on luscious bananas and delicious cocoa-nuts which he is not even at the trouble of planting; who has the best tobacco in the world to smoke; who replaces today the horse he had yesterday by a better one, chosen from the first *calallada* he meets; who requires no further protection from the cold than a pair of linen trousers, in that favored clime where the seasons roll on in one perennial summer; who, more than all this, finds at eve, under the rustling palm-trees, pensive beauties, eager to reward with their smiles the one who murmurs in their ears those three words, ever new, ever beautiful, 'Yo te quiero.'"

Mr. Gottschalk's return to America in February, 1862, was celebrated by a concert in Irving Hall, on the anniversary of his *début* in New York. This was the beginning of another brilliant musical series, in pursuance of which he appeared in every prominent city of the country. While many found fault with Gottschalk for descending to pure "claptrap" and bravura playing, for using his great powers to merely superficial and unworthy ends, he seemed to retain as great a hold as ever over the masses of concert-goers. Gottschalk himself, with his epicurean, easy-going nature, laughed at the lectures read him by the critics and connoisseurs, who would have him follow out ideals for which he had no taste. It was like asking the butterfly to live the life of the bee. Great as were the gifts of the artist, it was not to be expected that these would be pursued in lines not consistent with the limitations of his temperament. Gottschalk appears to have had no desire except to amuse and delight the world, and to have been foreign to any loftier musical aspiration, if we may judge by his own recorded words. He passed through life as would a splendid wild singing-bird, making music because it was the law of his being, but never directing that talent with conscious energy to some purpose beyond itself.

In 1863 family misfortunes and severe illness of himself cooperated to make the year vacant of musical doings, but instantly he recovered he was engaged by M. Strakosch to give another series of concerts in the leading Eastern cities. Without attempting to linger over his career for the next two years, let us pass to his second expedition to the tropics in 1865. Four years were spent in South America, each country that he visited vieing with the other in doing him honor. Magnificent gifts were heaped on him by his enthusiastic Spanish-American admirers, and life was one continual ovation. In Peru he gave sixty concerts, and was presented with a costly decoration of gold, diamond, and pearl. In Chili the Government voted him a grand gold medal, which the board of public schools, the board of visitors of the hospitals, and the municipal government of Valparaiso supplemented by gold medals, in recognition of Gottschalk's munificence in the benefit concerts he gave for various public and humane institutions. The American pianist, through the whole of his career, had shown the traditional benevolence of his class in offering his services to the advancement of worthy objects. A similar reception awaited Gottschalk in Montevideo, where the artist became doubly the object of admiration by the substantial additions he made to the popular educational fund. While in this city he organized and conducted a great musical festival in which three hundred musicians engaged, exclusive of the Italian Opera company then at Montevideo.

The spring of 1869 brought Gottschalk to the last scene of his musical triumphs, for the span of his career was about to close over him. Rio Janeiro, the capital of Brazil, gave Gottschalk an ardent reception, which made this city properly the culmination of his toils and triumphs. Gottschalk wrote that his performances created such a *furore* that boxes commanded a premium of seventy-five dollars, and single seats fetched twenty-five. He was frequently entertained by Dom Pedro at the palace; in every way the Brazilians testified their lavish admiration of his artistic talents. In the midst of his success Gottschalk was seized with yellow fever, and brought very low. Indeed, the report came back to New York that he was dead, a report, however, which his own letters, written from the bed of convalescence, soon contradicted.

In October of 1869 Gottschalk was appointed by the emperor to take the leadership of a great festival, in which eight hundred performers in orchestra and chorus would take part. Indefatigable labor, in rehearsing his musicians and organizing the almost innumerable details of such an affair, acted on a frame which had not yet recovered its strength from a severe attack of illness. With difficulty he dragged himself through the tedious preparation, and when he stood up to conduct the first concert of the festival, on the evening of November 26, he was so weak that he could scarcely stand. The next day he was too ill to rise, and, though he forced himself to go to the opera-house in the evening, he was so weak as to be unable to conduct the music, and he had to be driven back to his hotel. The best medical skill watched over him, but his hour had come, and after three weeks of severe suffering he died, December 18, 1869. The funeral solemnities at the Cathedral of Rio were of the most imposing character, and all the indications of really heart-felt sorrow were shown among the vast crowd of spectators, for Gottschalk had quickly endeared himself to the public both as man and artist. At the time of Gottschalk's death, it was his purpose to set sail for Europe at the earliest practicable moment, to secure the publication of some of his more important works, and the production of his operas, of which he had the finished scores of not less than six<sup>4</sup>.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was an artist and composer whose gifts were never more than half developed; for his native genius as a musician was of the highest order. Shortly before he died, at the age of forty, he seemed to have ripened into more earnest views and purposes, and, had he lived to fulfill his prime, it is reasonable to hazard the conjecture that he would have richly earned a far loftier niche in the pantheon of music than can now be given him. A rich, pleasure-loving, Oriental temperament, which tended to pour itself forth in dreams instead of action; vivid emotional sensibilities, which enabled him to exhaust all the resources of pleasure where imagination stimulates sense; and a thorough optimism in his theories, which saw everything at its best, tended to blunt the keen ambition which would otherwise inevitably have stirred the possessor of such artistic gifts. Gottschalk fell far short of his possibilities, though he was the greatest piano executant ever produced by our own country. He might have dazzled the world even as he dazzled his own partial countrymen.

His style as a pianist was sparkling, dashing, showy, but, in the judgment of the most judicious, he did not appear to good advantage in comparison with Thalberg, in whom a perfect technique was dominated by a conscious intellectualism, and a high ideal, passionless but severely beautiful.

Gottschalk's idiosyncrasy as a composer ran in parallel lines with that of the player. Most of the works of this musician are brilliant, charming, tender, melodious, full of captivating

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<sup>4</sup> If it was true, we should have found one of the manuscripts !!

excellence, but bright with the flash of fancy, rather than strong with the power of imagination. We do not find in his piano-forte pieces any of that subtle soul-searching force which penetrates to the deepest roots of thought and feeling. Sundry musical cynics were wont to crush Gottschalk's individuality into the coffin of a single epigram. "A musical bonbon to tickle the palates of sentimental women." But this falls as far short of justice as the enthusiasm of many of his admirers overreaches it. The easy and genial temperament of the man, his ability to seize the things of life on their bright side, and a naive indolence which indisposed the artist to grapple with the severest obligations of an art life, prevented Gottschalk from attaining the greatness possible to him, but they contributed to make him singularly lovable, and to justify the passionate attachment which he inspired in most of those who knew him well. But, with all of Gottschalk's limitations, he must be considered the most noticeable and able of pianists and composers for the piano yet produced by the United States.