

GOTTSCHALK

William Mason
"Memories of a musical life",
1901

I KNEW Gottschalk well, and was fascinated by his playing, which was full of brilliancy and bravura. His strong, rhythmic accent, his vigor and dash, were exciting and always aroused enthusiasm. He was the perfection of his school, and his effects had the sparkle and effervescence of champagne. He was as far as possible from being an interpreter of chamber or classical music, but, notwithstanding this, some of the best musicians of the strict style were frequently to be seen among his audience, among others Carl Bergmann, who told me that he always heard Gottschalk with intense enjoyment. He first made his mark through his arrangement of Creole melodies. They were well defined rhythmically, and he played them with absolute rhythmic accuracy. This clear definition in his interpretation contributed more than anything else to the fascination which he always exerted over his audience. He did not care for the German school, and on one occasion, after hearing me play Schumann at one of the Mason-Thomas matinees, he said : "Mason, I do not understand why you spend so much of your time over music like that ; it is stiff and labored, lacks melody, spontaneity, and naivete. It will eventually vitiate your musical taste and bring you into an abnormal state."

Although an enthusiastic admirer of Beethoven symphonies and other orchestral works, he did not care for the pianoforte sonatas, which he said were not written in accordance with the nature of the instrument. It has been said that he could play all of the sonatas by heart but I am quite sure that Mr. Richard Hoffman, who was his intimate friend, will sustain me in the assertion that such was not the fact.

I have known Mr. Hoffman for more than fifty years, having met him for the first time in the year 1847 or thereabout. His playing is still characterized by precision, accuracy, and clearness in phrasing, with an excellent technic, combined with repose. I have many times enjoyed his artistic interpretations, and I heard him with great pleasure not a long while ago, on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary as a teacher in this country.

Returning to Gottschalk, a funny thing happened one day. At the time of which I write, forty-five years ago, William Hall & Sons' music-store was in Broadway, corner of Park Place, and was a place of rendezvous for musicians. Going there one day, I met Gottschalk, who, holding up the proof-sheet of a title-page which he had just received from the printer, said : "Read that!" What I read was, "The Latest Hops," in big block letters after the fashion of an outside music title-page. "What does this mean?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "it ought to be 'The Last Hope', but the printer, either by way of joke or from stupidity, has expressed it in this way. There is to be a new edition of my 'Last Hope,' and I am revising it for that purpose."

I have in my autograph-book a letter of his, undated, but written in the late fifties:

MY DEAR M.: If you have nothing to do, come and spend the evening with me on Sunday next. No formality. Smoking required, impropriety allowed, and complete liberty, with as little music as possible. I was going to mention that we will have a glass of wine and chicken salad.

Your friend,

GOTTSCHALK