

“They all played RAGTIME”

Rudi Blesh & Harriet Janis, 1950

--EXTRACTS CONCERNING GOTTSCHALK--

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...Negro music, to be sure, has never been without white champions, although these have been isolated figures. Some have been conscious, in every generation since the Negro first came to America, that the race was producing a unique music here. It is interesting to note that, outside of these supporters, white listeners allowed this music to speak more directly to their hearts when the Negro was enslaved than in the years of Negro progress since Emancipation. Yet from Thomas Jefferson to Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Lucy McKim Garrison, Charles Pickard Ware, and William Francis Allen, and from John Mason Brown (a writer of the Civil War period, not the present-day author) to George W. Cable, Lafcadio Hearn, H E. Krehbiel, Rupert Hughes, and right down to the present, some in each generation have rediscovered as a vital new experience the age-old fascination and profound feeling of Negro music.

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p81-84:

Long before ragtime rose like a musical flood over the riparian lands of the great Mississippi system, its rhythms had come to America from another land of vast rivers: equatorial Africa. Inland and upstream on the plantations of our old South the tide of drumbeats became the sound of tools in the fields and the singing and clapping of hands in the "meeting" house; its syncopations lived on in the swing of work song and spiritual. But down on the Delta in New Orleans a phase of African music remained strongly pure in La Place Congo, where until the 1880's the slaves were allowed their Sunday diversion. And it was a youthful New Orleans composer who first wrote in musical notes the beat of the drums, the hollow fanfare of the wooden horns, and the authentic rhythms of what was later to be developed into ragtime.

It was in 1847, a half century before the first ragtime composition was published, that eighteen-year-old Louis Moreau Gottschalk, son of an English cotton broker and a highborn French Creole lady, wrote the long, vastly difficult piano fantasia *La Bamboula Danse des Nègres*. A prodigy at fifteen, Gottschalk had already established himself in concert at the Salle Pleyel in Paris with huge public success and the praise of the great Chopin. *La Bamboula* is the composer's Opus 2; *La Morte* (Gottschalk was playing this "Ode to Death" with a fantastically huge nine-hundred-piece orchestra at Rio de Janeiro when fatally stricken in 1869) is his Opus 60, but the earlier work with its strong Negroid inspiration is considered his masterpiece.

Henry Didimus (Henry Edward Durell) wrote a biography of Louis Gottschalk in 1853 in which the Bamboula dance is described as the composer himself had often seen and heard it in New Orleans. This is the earliest known description of the African dancing in Congo Square:

"In order to appreciate the full merit of this popular composition, one should have seen something of the dance upon which it is founded. Let a stranger to New Orleans visit of an afternoon of one of its holydays, the public squares in the lower portion of the city, and he will find them filled with its African population, tricked out with every variety of a showy costume, joyous, wild, and in the full exercise of a real saturnalia. As he approaches the scene of an infinite mirth, his ear first catches a quick, low, continuous, dead sound, which dominates over the laughter, hallo, and roar of a thousand voices, while the listener marvels at what it can be doing there. This is the music of the Bamboula, of the dance Bamboula; a dance which takes possession of the Negro's whole life, transforms him with all the instincts, the sentiments, the feelings which nature gave to his race, to sleep for awhile, to be partially obliterated by the touch of civilisation, but to remain forever its especial mark.

"Upon entering the square the visitor finds the multitude packed in groups of close, narrow circles, of a central area of only a few feet; and there in the center of each circle, sits the musician, astride a barrel, strong-headed, which he beats with two sticks, to a strange measure incessantly, like mad, for hours together, while the perspiration literally rolls in streams and wets the ground; and there, too, labor the dancers male and female, under an inspiration or possession, which takes from their limbs all sense of weariness, and gives to them a rapidity and a durability of motion that will hardly be found elsewhere outside of mere machinery. The head rests upon the breast, or is thrown back upon the shoulders, the eyes closed, or glaring, while the arms, amid cries, and shouts, and sharp ejaculations, float upon the air, or keep time, with the hands patting upon the thighs, to a music which is seemingly eternal.

"The feet scarce tread wider space than their own length; but rise and fall, turn in and out, touch first the heel and then the toe, rapidly and more rapidly, till they twinkle to the eye, which finds its sight too slow a follower of their movements."

Drumbeats open Gottschalk's *La Bamboula*, and the principal motive that follows later sung by the Creoles as "*Quand palate la cuite na va mangé li*" ("when that 'tater's cooked don't you eat it up") is the Place Congo chant with its hollow background chords of wooden trumpets. Nearly forty years later, in the *Century Magazine* for February 1886, the New Orleans novelist George W. Cable wrote of this fierce dance:

"The bamboula still roars, and rattles, twangs, contorts and tumbles" and then "the music changes. The rhythm stretches out heathenish and *ragged*. The quick contagion is caught by ... the crowd, who take it up with spirited smittings of the bare sole upon the ground, and of open hands upon the thighs." This new dance is the Counjaille, with its "rhythm long and smooth like a river escaped from its rapids, and in new spirit, with more jocund rattle" the same "coonjine rag dance" of the levee men and boatmen all up and down the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Ohio.

In the fifty years that followed Gottschalk's *La Bamboula*, until ragtime burst out into the open, this fierce dance and its milder African cousins, the Calinda, the Chacta, the Babouille, and the Counjaille, as well as that fiercest of all, the Congo, traveled along the big rivers and through the valleys. Blending with the gentle Anglo-American folksongs, the hypnotic almost feral rhythms that had struck Cable as heathenish slowly became the irresistible syncopated momentum of the "shout" song and ragtime.

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Stephen Foster, like Louis Gottschalk, was an early innovator in the use of American Negro melodies and rhythms in white composition. Where Gottschalk based compositions of the European classical sort on this source material, Foster consciously tried to make faithful renderings of Negro river songs and the like.

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CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT RAGTIME DATES

1841. John Stark born in Shelby County Kentucky.

1847. *La Bamboula Danse Nègre* composed by Louis Moreau Gottschalk from African themes heard in Congo Square, New Orleans.ⁱ

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ⁱ Second date in ragtime chronology