

# A Real Pioneer

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Like the reigning romantic heroes of mid-19th century musical Europe, Chopin and Liszt, New Orleans-born Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-69) had sex appeal aplenty. As a Wunderkind pianist-composer in the Paris salons, as a lion on tour in the U.S., the West Indies and Latin America, he dazzled the ladies with his pink-lemonade piano pieces and thrilled them with his frail, aristocratic good looks and his saturnine, bedroommy eyelids. One panting female, so the story goes, even swooped down upon him at the end of a recital, picked him up in her arms and made off with him for the night.

If sex was his joy, it was also his undoing: in his last years as a recitalist he took to playing up to the ladies in the audience, leaving them tearful with languid, fatalistic little tunes like *The Dying Poet* and *The Last Hope*. When he died,\* that is the way the world remembered and then forgot him—as an adorable miniaturist.

Now, a century later, Gottschalk is beginning to be appreciated for what he was—America's first important nationalistic composer. New LPs of his piano music by Amiram Rigai and his two-movement symphony, *A Night in the Tropics*, show how much he loved the Negro, Creole and Latin American melodies and rhythms. More important, they show that he handled those native folk ingredients with astonishing sophistication, charm and originality. Listening to his music is often like hearing Stephen Foster delivered with the elegance of Chopin and the romantic flair of Berlioz.

Before long, more of his music ought to be finding its way into the concert halls and onto recordings. Several of Gottschalk's long-lost major works, notably the *Montevideo Symphony* and the one-act opera *Escenas Campestres*, have been found in a private collection in Rio de Janeiro and have been purchased for the New York Public Library by Concert Pianist Eugene List. "He was a real pioneer," says List. "His writing is sometimes Chopinesque, sometimes Lisztian, but always definitely American in flavor. It's scintillating, tuneful, fresh. It could have been written today."

**\* Although accounts of his death vary, the most persistent version is that he succumbed to yellow fever and toppled from his stool during a recital in Rio de Janeiro while performing a composition of his called *Morte*!!**