

The First American Pianist

A New Orleans Prodigy—First American to Appear in European Concerts

By
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L. M. GOTTSCHALK

This picture was taken at Gottschalk's prime, when the dreamy virtuoso was making his highly successful American tours.

OUR EARLY AMERICAN FATHERS were not particularly artistic folk and were little inclined to music, save in very rudimentary forms. Only a small proportion of them had any artistic background in Europe, for they generally came not from within but from without the castle walls. And art music was largely the product of wealth and position, though the greatest individual talents did spring from the soil. A Haydn might come from a cook's kitchen; but an orchestra to play his music had to come from an Esterhazy's pocketbook.

America's music, in its first two hundred years, had a horizon of church tunes and folk tunes. Better music was slow in arriving, and soloists were correspondingly laggard, vocalists being first to arrive and they not native but from Europe.

Choral music took root in New England and operatic interest grew in New York and New Orleans. Several cities were experimenting with an orchestra, notably Boston. But the "American artist" did not arrive, save in an experimental form, in oratorio or opera, until the nineteenth century was one third past.

Our Pioneer Pianist

Perhaps due to the interest of New Orleans in opera, its musical atmosphere produced the first American instrumental artist, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who led the long procession of American pianists. He was the first American musical prodigy, the first American artist to brave the European concert platform, and the first American pianist to concertize widely in his own country.

In the days when the central part of America had scarcely emerged from the "state of wilderness", and that term still was musically applicable to all but half a dozen of its larger Atlantic coast cities, it was Gottschalk who hewed a musical path through the country, bringing the piano and its music to sections where art music was unknown and to places where it was almost impossible to secure an instrument for his concert—we would say "recital."

Gottschalk was born May 8, 1829, of English and French lineage. At that time New Orleans was second only to New York in its love for opera, notably French opera, as was natural considering New Orleans' history. The lad was nurtured in this atmosphere.

His first instrument was the violin. Later he studied the piano and played in public as a child. At thirteen he was sent to Paris for study. In the French capital he came under the patronage of his aunt La Comtesse de la Grange and soon became a pet in royal and aristocratic circles. His teachers were Halle, Stamaty, Madelen and the great Berlioz, who said of his pupil, "He is one of the very small number who seems to have all of the various elements which go to make a consummate pianist—all of the things embodied in him to make a very great name and imperial musical power." Even Chopin who first heard him play at the Salle Pleyel, in April, 1844, ninety-six years ago, predicted that he would become a king of pianists. Three years later, Chopin, after hearing the American boy play at the Salle Erard, predicted a great future for him. He was the first American to impress Europe with the fact that musical art might come out of the New World.

Not a Showman's Freak

Gottschalk concertized with Berlioz, and in Spain, France and Switzerland; and he made one or two trips to South America. These were followed by his American tours, beginning in 1853. He was then aged twenty-four. His first concert was in Niblo's Garden, New York City, and was such a success that P. T. Barnum, who had just been reaping a golden harvest from the tour of Jenny Lind, offered Gottschalk twenty thousand dollars and all expenses for a year's engagement. Gottschalk's father refused to consider such an arrangement, because he thought it beneath the dignity of an artist to be hawked about the country by a circus manager. Therefore the trip through the States was undertaken without a professional business manager, and naturally it resulted in a considerable loss to the artist and his father. Later, his tours were managed by Strakosch, Grau, and others, and thus were more successful from a monetary as well as an artistic standpoint. How much Gottschalk might have benefited from Barnum's magic showmanship still remains a question.

It is the prevalent idea that Gottschalk excelled only in the performance of his own compositions. This is a mistake. Competent judges tell us that his playing of Bach, Beethoven, and other classics, was not only satisfactory, but also thrilling and inspiring. One artist said, "Whatever he played he glorified with the most superb quality of tone and brilliancy of execution always at his command."

At that date the country was in its first stages of artistic growth. Chicago was a swamp; St. Louis, a small town. People went to a concert to see the man perform, not particularly to hear his music. The general public was in its musical long clothes. Had Gottschalk fed them with the best music he was capable of playing, that is, with Bach, with Mozart, and with Beethoven, he would have been voted a bore, and would have been left without a hearing. Consequently, outside of the eastern cities, he built his programs largely of his own compositions. Even then his public frequently complained that his numbers were "too heavy and classical."

Beethoven, in his concerts, confined himself to his own creations; Hummel, largely to his own, as did Dussek, Kalkbrenner, Chopin, and Liszt, and notably Moscheles, Thalberg, Jaell, and Herz. Surely, Gottschalk was in good company in playing his own compositions.

The Musical Horizon Widens

In Gottschalk's day there were very few in America who could play his works satisfactorily; and William Mason was among these. During the next thirty-five years their number greatly increased and Gottschalk became a vogue.

When the time needs a man—he comes. America needed Gottschalk. With his own works he broke the ice for the European classics. Von Bülow, Paderewski, Rosenthal, De Pachman, and others, all supplied a demand that was waiting; Gottschalk broke the way for them. In his one thousand American recitals, he created an appetite for the best in piano music. In one season he gave eighty recitals in New York; and probably no other pianist has since approached this record. Yet, so soon is the work of the trail blazer forgotten, even in music, that a book on great artists of today and yesterday refers to him as "Moritz" Gottschalk.

Gottschalk brought to a wondering and delighted though rather ignorant public, a style of performance that was on a level with the best of European artists. He could give all that Bach and Beethoven demanded, and also the Latin delicacy that Chopin required, which his Creole inheritance afforded.

Gottschalk took some excursions outside of the pianistic limitations. For example, he composed two operas, pieces for orchestra, and various songs. His best work was in the bravura style of the salon of his period, for which his talents especially fitted him.

Having gone to Rio de Janeiro in 1869, to conduct a musical festival, he was weakened by an attack of yellow fever. He fell from his chair at the piano, in a Rio concert hall, and was carried to a hospital outside the city, where he died, December 18, 1869.

While Gottschalk's oversentimental pieces by which he is best known, such as *The Last Hope* and *The Dying Poet*, melted the hearts of the ladies in the '50's and '60's of the last century, they are now almost unknown. He did, however, write some very excellently made and very clever works, such as *The Banjo*, *Ojos Criollos*, *Pasquinade*, and *Bamboula*, and other characteristic pieces which deserve to be more frequently heard. His symphony, "Night in the Tropics", has virtually disappeared. Gottschalk's younger sister, Mrs. Clara Gottschalk Peterson, is quoted in *The Etude* for April, 1906, on her recollections of Creole music.