

# A PIONEER AMERICAN PIANIST.

GOTTSCHALK—HIS WORK, ARTISTIC STANDING, AND  
FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES. A STATEMENT  
AS TO HIS POVERTY CORRECTED.

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(The Etude, Aug. 1898)

LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK must be given a place in the history of American music as one of the principal molding influences during the first fifty years in which this country really had any musical history, *i.e.*, from 1825 to 1875. During the century ending in 1850, that century which saw the greatest of instrumental works produced, that time which almost might be called the “golden age of music” in Europe, the music of this country was in a very elementary condition. Early in the half-century just mentioned, from 1825 to 1875, there came the awakenings of an artistic musical spirit, then the formation of orchestras, the importation of soloists, and the foundation of that national enjoyment in music that is now so prevalent.

In the middle of this century the engrossing topics for the thought and energy of the people were those pertaining to the material development of the country's yet unappreciated and largely unexplored resources. But little time or attention was given to the non-material,—to the artistic. True, a very few artists had come from Europe and had received a hearty and golden welcome. But it was left for New Orleans to give us the first American artist of note, L. M. Gottschalk, who was born there in 1829.

It was not until 1853 that he began his first American tour. This had been preceded by brilliant successes in France, Spain, and Switzerland. Accounts of these successes coming to the ears of P. T. Barnum, who had just been reaping a golden harvest from the tour of Jenny Lind, he offered Gottschalk terms which would have proved quite lucrative for that young artist. But Gottschalk's father refused to consider such an arrangement, as he thought it beneath the dignity of an artist to be hawked about the country by a circus manager. So the trip through the States was undertaken without a professional business manager, and naturally resulted in a considerable loss to the artist and his father. Later his tours were managed by Strakosch, Grau, and others, and were more successful from a monetary as well as an artistic standpoint.

It is the prevalent idea that Gottschalk excelled only in the performance of his own compositions. This is a mistaken idea. Competent judges who heard him tell us that his playing of the Bach, Beethoven, and other classics was not only satisfactory, but was

thrilling and inspiring. One artist says : “Whatever he played, he glorified with the most superb quality of tone and brilliancy of execution always at his command.”

As I have said, 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. Now, had Gottschalk fed them with the best he was capable of with Bach, with Mozart, with Beethoven, he would have been voted a bore, and would have been left without a hearing. So, outside of the Eastern cities, he built his programs largely of his own compositions; and even then it was frequently complained that they were “too heavy and classical.”

Naturally Gottschalk played his own compositions best. And this was what the public wanted,—to hear Gottschalk play Gottschalk. They had never heard or seen Mr. Bach or Mr. Beethoven, but they had seen Mr. Gottschalk, and his were the tunes they wanted. And they got them. Got them with a finish, a polish, an elegance that they would not have heard excelled had they waited till the present day.

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

Gottschalk’s works require for their proper performance a well-nigh perfect technic, a delicate touch, and a poetic soul behind it, all. Delicacy and power must be happily blended. The “Last Hope” as pounded out in the usual student style and the “Last Hope” as played by an artist are two different things; but to have heard his works at their best we can easily believe that they must have come from the composer's own playing.

Gottschalk came at just the right time in the musical development of the country. In fact, who can say that he did not do more for us than Paderewski, Rosenthal, and Pachmann? He, with his entrancing playing of his poetic fancies, did what no Paderewski, loaded down with Bach and Beethoven, could do. The ground must be prepared first, and none could do that better than Gottschalk. Bülow, Paderewski, *et al.*, reaped in their American tours what Gottschalk sowed.

So let us give him full praise for being the man for the place, and filling the place.

It is only necessary for a man to be prominent in some line for a host of stories and anecdotes to be told and written concerning him, frequently irrespective of fact or probability. We know this is true of the great composers, and especially of the later artists, like Liszt and von Bülow. Nor is it to be expected that Gottschalk should escape the penny-a-liner. The columns must be filled, even though the statements be false.

One thing that has caused pain to the friends and relatives of Gottschalk is the statement that he was threadbare, in extreme poverty, and accepted the assistance of friends and strangers.

A clipping before me states that “just after his return from his first trip to South America Gottschalk found himself penniless in New York.” He tried to sell some compositions, and finally, after several attempts, raised \$90. The dealer to whom he sold them (so this article goes on to state) told Jonas Chickering of Gottschalk’s talent and poverty, and Chickering, whom Gottschalk had never seen, sent him a check for \$150, which the artist accepted. Later, we are told, when Steinway offered him a goodly aim to play his pianos, Gottschalk refused, saying, “No money consideration you could offer would induce me to play your piano in my concerts so long as Mr. Chickering makes a piano that meets my demands. When my toes and elbows were out, Mr. Chickering, a gentleman whom I had never met, came to my assistance, and I shall not forget it so long as I live.”

All this makes a very pretty story, but it lacks the one element of truth.

Gottschalk did not go to South America until shortly before his death. He died at Rio Janeiro in 1869, the same year in which he landed there. Before me lies a letter from his sister, now Mrs. Clara G. Peterson, from which I can not do better than quote, as it is a final resort in the matter in question.

She says, “There never was a time when our brother, L. M. Gottschalk, was in such a state of want as to have shabby clothes and to depend on anybody’s kindness. While my father lived he amply provided for his son, and it was only after his death that my brother began to depend on his profession for himself and his brothers and sisters.”

I have only given an outline of the story I quote. As a whole, it makes very interesting reading. But as I said, and as Mrs. Peterson’s letter shows, it lacks the vital element of truth. Gottschalk enjoyed a large income from his concert tours, after the first unfortunate venture, and it is thus doubly unpleasant to his family, who revere the memory of a kind and loving brother, as well as of the brilliant artist and composer, to see such statements given wide publicity.

It is due him and them that this correction from an authentic source be given equal circulation among the musical public. And in this pleasant duty THE ETUDE is glad to be first and foremost.