

GOTTSCHALK'S TOUR IN THE UNITED STATES.

(extracted from *The Nation*, 5 Jan 1882)

Notes of a Pianist. By Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Preceded by a biographical sketch with contemporaneous criticisms. Edited by his sister Clara Gottschalk. Philadelphia: Lippincott. 1881.

HEINE called himself the first poet of the nineteenth century, as having been the first born in it. For a similar reason, Gottschalk assumed the name of the first American pianist. Before him, he says, piano concerts were heard only when a famous artist came from Europe and attracted an audience by the celebrity of his name and the curiosity to see the lion. At the time when he himself first returned from Europe (1853) "the public listened with indifference; to interest it, it became necessary to strike it with astonishment; grand movements, *tours de force*, and noise had alone the privilege in piano music, not of pleasing, but of making it patient with it." But Gottschalk was not the man to be daunted by this state of affairs. He accommodated himself, to a certain extent, to the demands of the public, and if in so doing he partly sacrificed his artistic principles, he deserves credit, on the other hand, for the work of a pioneer who was frequently obliged to toil under circumstances as discouraging as those which beset the early settler, who has to convert a virgin forest into a wheat-field. In playing to an audience of Western roughs he was wise enough to ignore the classics and limit his programme to popular tunes or his own show-pieces, such as his 'Siege de Saragosse,' in which "there is a passage where Gottschalk in a most ingenious manner imitates a military parade, accompanied by the beating of the drum." But that Gottschalk was also capable of rendering compositions of a higher order in an artistic manner will be remembered by many who heard him play in our larger cities, and is also attested by the judgment passed on him by noted critics during his sojourn in France and other foreign countries. Berlioz, in the *Journal des Débats*, called him an accomplished musician, in possession of "all the different elements of the sovereign power of the pianist." "He has a perfect grace in his manner of expressing sweet melodies and of scattering the light passages from the top of the keyboard. As to prestesse, fugue, éclat, brio, originality, his playing strikes from the first, dazzles, astonishes; and the infantine simplicity of his smiling caprices, the charming ease with which he renders simple things, seem to belong to a second individuality, distinct from that which characterizes his thundering energies." Escudier, writing of his characteristic compositions, "Le Bananier," "Le Bamboula," "La Savane," and "Ossian," says that Gottschalk resembles no one, and is a pianist who has the prime merit of copying no other composer. Théophile Gautier admires him for the possession of that rare faculty, a distinct individuality, which he traces to the fact that "after having formed his talent by solid studies, he left it to wander carelessly in the fragrant savannas of his country, from which he has brought back to us the colors and perfumes" that equal in charm "the chants of the Muezzin and the reveries under the palms which Félicien David and Ernest Reyer have noted with their souvenirs of the East."

These criticisms were passed on Gottschalk when, at the age of twenty-two, he gave a series of concerts in France and Switzerland. He was born at New Orleans in 1829, and showed a strong inclination for music at the early age of seven. In 1842 his father sent him to Paris to continue his musical studies. His master in composition was Mr. Maleden, who also numbered Saint-Saëns among his pupils. It is of psychological interest to learn that at this period of his life he had a most remarkable memory for music, which enabled him to recollect hundreds of pages after a few days' study, while in literature, on the contrary, his memory was so defective that he had to invent a system of musical mnemotechny which he applied to history and geography. At the age of sixteen he gave his first public concert in Paris, on which occasion it is said that Chopin, in the artists' room, put his hand on the boy's head and said: "Donnez-moi la main, mon enfant; je vous prédis que vous serez le roi des pianistes." After his successful French and Swiss concerts, Gottschalk made a tour through Spain, where his reception was at first somewhat cool because the Queen was reported to have said that she would never patronize an American artist; on which account the nobility were reserved toward him. Soon, however, the tide turned, and the pianist was invited to play before the

King and his family at a private soiree. The extraordinary favors shown him on this occasion excited the envy and hatred of the court pianist, who on a subsequent occasion endeavored to avenge himself by slamming a carriage door on his rival's fingers. The pain was so severe that Gottschalk fainted, and amputation of his little finger was at first considered necessary. Fortunately he objected to this, and the finger, recovering, subsequently became more powerful than it had been. After leaving Madrid, he visited other Spanish cities, where his triumphs were not diminished by the fact that the Queen had written to the authorities that he should be received with the greatest distinction. His glory culminated in the receipt of a letter, accompanied by a magnificent sword, from the famous bull-fighter Don José Redendo, in return for an invitation to one of his concerts.

After reaching this sublime height of terrestrial glory an ordinary mortal would have rested on his laurels. Not so Gottschalk. Early in 1853 he left Europe for America, which at that period was anything but a paradise for musicians, in spite of the extraordinary success of a few favored artists. His experiences in this country, from New York to San Francisco and from Panama to Rio Janeiro, where he died in 1869, are contained in the 'Notes' now under consideration. They cover a period of fifteen years, those relating to the years 1862-1868 being in the form of a diary. The letters written to his family, which will probably be published at some future day, will supply the lacuna found in the last year of his life. Miss Gottschalk declares that although numerous letters have been addressed to Gottschalk's friends in Rio, to his physician and his landlord, his family up to the present day know absolutely nothing about his last moments nor about the true cause of his death, although it is known that he had an attack of yellow fever four months before his death. Great trouble was also experienced in securing possession of his personal effects, his manuscripts and literary remains. After four years' delay, the trunk containing them was at last secured, but the papers it contained were so soiled and torn that Miss Gottschalk at first despaired of being able to arrange them and carry out her brother's "cherished scheme of publishing his travels." It is fortunate that she rallied from her despair, for otherwise we should have been deprived of a book which is not only of interest on account of its simple but vivid descriptions of events in various countries, and its revelations of the tastes and characteristics of an original musician, but which will some day be of inestimable value as showing more clearly perhaps than any other record the attitude of various rude and semi-civilized communities toward music and virtuosity.

A desire for literary fame was not the only motive which induced Gottschalk to fix his impressions on paper. The horrible monotony of concerts, as he calls it, the invariable repetition of the same pieces, the daily round of railroad ears, isolation in the midst of the crowd, forced him, in order to avoid becoming brutalized and being converted into an automaton, to adopt the habit of making of his note-book a sort of mute confidant to whom he could entrust all his joys and sorrows. How much he needed such a confidant becomes apparent when we read of the reception accorded him in some of our extreme Western towns, which contrasted so vividly with his European experiences. The newspapers seemed to oppose his "invasions" frequently, and recommended only the patronizing of local concerts, "because the money then does not leave the locality." Being ill on one occasion for three days in a town in Nevada, and finding himself completely isolated and deserted, he gives vent to his feelings in these words:

"I defy your finding in the whole of Europe a village where an artist of reputation would find himself as isolated as I have been here. If, in place of playing the piano, of having composed two or three hundred pieces, of having given seven or eight thousand concerts, of having given to the poor one hundred or one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, of having been knighted twice, I had sold successfully for ten years quarters of salted hog, . . . my poor, isolated chamber would have been invaded by adorers and admirers."

He explains the worship of wealth in this country as due to a sort of gratitude to any man who has fixed in the country the capital which augments its prosperity. Even in San Francisco, the newspaper editors seemed to him ignorant of the elementary laws of politeness, inasmuch as of all whom he had invited to a supper at his hotel, after having paid them a personal visit, only two came, the others not even sending a note of excuse. The fact that at that period only the circus flourished in San Francisco, while concerts never succeeded — Ole

Bull, Strakosch, and others having "left in confusion"—leads him to make some admirable remarks on the attitude of primitive communities toward his art:

"Music, of all the arts, is the last to implant itself, and only takes deep root in old civilized societies. It is too abstract, it appertains too much to the domain of thought and feeling, to flourish where the physical forces are in full activity. It is an art for idlers and dreamers. Neither the one nor the other is found among men who have to build houses to shelter themselves and who have to seek their food. The plastic arts are the first, after spoken poetry, which suggest themselves to the minds of primitive peoples."

It must not be inferred from this that Gottschalk's efforts were always and invariably unappreciated in the great West. On his departure from California, the admiration of his friends found expression in a fine gold medal with his initials set in diamonds, and other signs of appreciation were not wanting. In most of the smaller towns, however, he could not conceal from himself the fact that the usual audiences of one hundred or one hundred and fifty who paid their dollar, not knowing exactly what sort of a "show" or "panorama" they were going to see, were generally disappointed, and vowed to wreak their vengeance by ignoring the next pianist who might come along. Still, he could not help "remarking the propriety of conduct of these audiences, who, however wearisome our music must appear to them, submit to it without protest." Perhaps the majority of those who listened to him were as ignorant of music as the Indian of whom he tells an amusing story on page 369. This Indian had heard Gottschalk play "Hail, Columbia," and after he had left the room, examined the piano, which, to his astonishment, responded to his own touch. When Gottschalk returned he sat down at the piano, and with all the force of his arms began to beat the keys, calling out triumphantly, "You see, I never tried before, and I make more noise than he." At Zanesville he was greatly annoyed on one occasion by a charming young girl and her mamma, who occupied a front seat and passed the whole of the concert in watching his feet. Being ignorant of the use of the pedals, they apparently saw in his movements only a kind of queer trembling and odd and rudimentary steps in dancing which afforded them an inexhaustible source of amusement. We might cite many more of these characteristic anecdotes, but those here given will suffice to show that the 'Notes of a Pianist' contains much that is amusing as well as instructive. Gottschalk was able to converse fluently in five or six languages, but his notes and letters were written in French, the present volume being a translation by R. E. Peterson. His style is occasionally unpolished, but in general it has the merits of simplicity and directness. His descriptions betray close observation and an eye for the picturesque, while a poetic vein is revealed by such lines as these written near Dayton, Nevada:

"The mountains are brought so near that, seen from the height where we are, through this blue vapor, they seem to be the waves of an ocean which, by a magical effect, have become petrified in the midst of a tempest. The breeze, which blows softly, brings to us the thousand distant sounds from the deep valleys and high peaks. A bird, concealed at the bottom of the precipice, gives forth its monotonous song, composed of three notes, which it repeats without interruption."