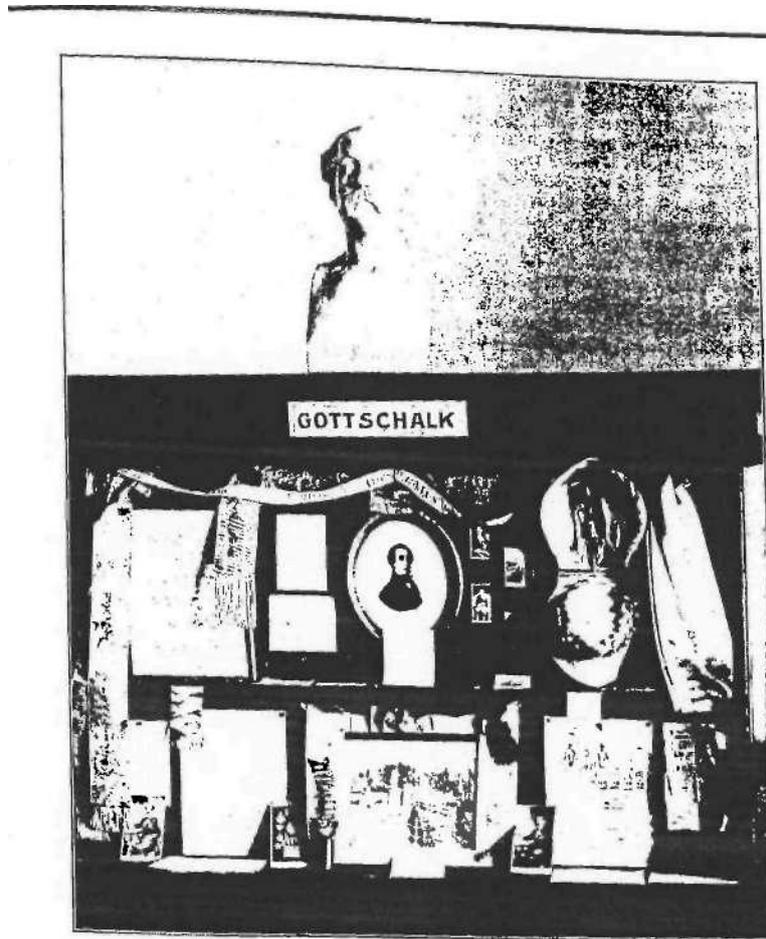


## L. M. GOTTSCHALK THE MOST POPULAR OF AMERICAN COMPOSERS

BY W. S. B. MATHEWS



*The above is from a photograph of the Gottschalk Collection in the Louisiana State Museum, at New Orleans, gathered largely through the efforts of William L. Hawes, to whom THE MUSICIAN is indebted for the privilege of reproducing it. The most interesting numbers are the manuscripts of the Scherzo Romantique, Musical Thoughts, and Danse Ossianique; autograph letters, glove worn by Gottschalk, photographs of Gottschalk, portraits, photo of decorations received by Gottschalk, and a life-size marble bust made by the celebrated sculptor Francheschi.*

As pianist, composer, personality and man, Louis Moreau Gottschalk was an honor to his native land. Born in New Orleans, of a German father and a French mother, his early musical impressions were those of the Creole songs, which have since been so beautifully exploited by Mr. Gable and others, and those monotonous dances of the negroes, who were in the habit of continuing a single strain for hours, — a strain often no more than four measures in length.

It was such music as this which Gottschalk brought out in his first pieces,— such as *Le Bananier*, *Danse Ossianique*, *Bamboula*, and many others. For this one fact alone, if his splendid career had no other, Gottschalk ought to be an object of care to the women's clubs, which just now are taking in vast stores of research upon folk music.

But the early musical influences of Gottschalk included also Italian opera and French opera, which at that time was an established feature of the southern city. Often they had a stock company of their own, with many good artists; at other times they had the Italian company

from Havana. Thus the early musical influences of this young master were full of variety and character.

Gottschalk's concert career lasted twenty years and more, and was as full of romance as ever artist enjoyed. It began with his farewell benefit concert in New Orleans, before his departure for Paris, where he was to be educated. New Orleans came again to the front gloriously after his return from Europe. In Paris he was pupil of that splendid teacher, Stamaty, who cherished the boy's talent as a gift from God.

His mother, with the younger children, came to Paris in 1846, and there Moreau established the family home, his father being detained in New Orleans by the troubles of a business which was not altogether succeeding. The Gottschalk home in Paris was a gathering-place for the best of the young musicians. Such men as Berlioz, Escudier, the Chicago teacher of singing, M. Devin-Duvivier (who had an opera brought out at the Grand Opéra in 1859), and the spirited and promising youngsters as well as the lions of the musical day — all found in this simple and charming home a congenial atmosphere, with that accent of superiority which genius alone can afford.

At his first public concert, in 1845, Chopin was present. At a later concert Thalberg himself, the superior and finished gentleman of the world, sought the young artist and said: — "Young man, I predict for you a future such as few men have yet seen." The boy was then sixteen. He spoke fluently English, French, and Italian; later he added a perfect knowledge of Spanish. He had a prodigious memory for music, and discovered ways of extending this retentiveness to other branches of knowledge. He was a well educated and accomplished gentleman, a man of the world. Meanwhile it was just as well that his Parisian admirers, such as Berlioz and Escudier, had placed themselves on record concerning him, for their words carried far in the artist world and with the public. Hence when he tried his first provincial concerts in 1849 they were wholly successful. They were followed by a splendid series of successes in Switzerland and in Italy, and the next year he visited Spain, where he became a favorite with the royal family and was heard many and many times with delight. His genius was perfect for this. His commanding and fascinating touch, his marvelously crisp execution, his delightful and vivacious rhythms, were just right for the Spanish ear. And here again his successes reechoed in the Spanish countries of South America.

While his mother lived he refrained from this inviting region, for she had always a presentiment that he would fall ill there and die. But when she was dead, he gave himself the chance and sailed from San Francisco in 1865, giving concerts all the way down the west coast and up the east until he reached Rio de Janeiro, where after an illness of yellow fever he ventured too soon into the concert room, overtaxed his strength, had a relapse, and died. The splendor of this part of his career may be inferred from its close, — a festival, in which he had under him about eight hundred musicians, and one of the great attractions was his own symphony, *A Night in the Tropics*. It had been in like spirit all the way along.

Gottschalk had two long tours in the United States. The first was in 1855 and 1856, during which he played in New York alone more than eighty times; and again in 1863 to 1865, he played more than eleven hundred concerts under the management of the late Max Strakosch. It was too soon. The country was not ready for its prophet. Moreover, it was war times and the country had troubles of its own.

In his charming and naïve *Notes of a Pianist*, one may read the story,—the mean little towns, the lack of intelligent appreciation, the occasional moments of real homage, the terrible hotels, and all the rest. He mentions one concert (this was with a full company, Mme. Anna LaGrange being the star singer), of which the gross receipts amounted to about \$148. I think this was in Wilmington, Del.

His qualities as melodist appear in his own original cantilena, in such pieces as the ever favorite *Last Hope*, a melody which has not yet lost its charm; and the *March of the Night*, a fanciful composition which imagines the passing of Fingal's hosts. The melodic type is just enough above the average to lend distinction to a type of melody which was then in the ascendancy. They do not write melodies any more — even in Italy. But in 1850 they did, for Verdi was in the ascendancy, and Donizetti had passed but a little while before. Also in *The Dying Poet*, *Ricordati*, and the *Tremolo*.

The best of his Creole effects are to be sought in such pieces as the *Creole Eyes (Ojos Criollos) Danse Ossianique*, *Pasquinade*, an extremely attractive piece, and the like. For the negro effects, the *Banjo*, *Bananier*, *Bamboula* (very difficult), etc. To these we ought to add his extremely showy arrangements for four hands, of the overture to *William Tell*, overture to *Oberon*, and the four-hand arrangements of several of his own compositions, especially the *Jerusalem* fantasia, from Verdi's *I Lombardi*.

There are also several lovely songs, of which I think the *Slumber On* is the best. It is also arranged as a piano piece, called *Cradle Song*. That these compositions have not yet lost their charm everybody knows who has heard an artist like Mme. Carreño play any of them, or has watched the boarding-school programs when not too much conserved by the German professors. Even in Germany itself, the compositions of this first of American musical popularities are highly esteemed in amateur circles.

Of Gottschalk the composer it is possible to speak handsomely or very severely, according to the standpoint which one chooses to take. If, for example, we think of the rubbish which the pianist composer appended to that beautiful melody, the '*Last Hope*', and note therewith his utter lack of rational working out of a theme, it is quite permissible to speak slightly. But if, on the other hand, we think of those very remarkable examples of brilliant and effective piano playing, the *Tremolo* study and the *Pasquinade*, it is necessary to class the composer high among the pianists of his time.

Moreover, the progress of universal piano playing has been such that the things which were enough under Gottschalk's own hands to class him among the great pianists, have now been done so well by pianists of much inferior rank, that the works are assigned to students, as incidents of teaching, many grades below what we now regard as concert rank. Such things have happened to all the lesser pianists, such as Schulhoff, Satter, Dussek, Leopold de Meyer, and all the lesser lights of the keyboard. Only it did not happen to the composers last named to originate any such attractive melodies for amateurs as Gottschalk's *March of the Night*, *Last Hope*, *Ricordati*, *Dying Poet*, and the like. These melodies are superior of their kind. They have style and taste in them; it is true that they belong to a phase of pianistic art which seems to have gone by, yet they please and benefit many.

It is evident that Gottschalk understood the piano as it was in his day. Unlike Beethoven, Chopin, and Schumann, he did not have the prophetic insight to imagine what the piano might become. Hence in all his works there is not one single simple musical song of the heart. Melodies sometimes beautiful there are, but all are superficial and all run to trills, ornaments, and furbelows; the charming personages of his creation are so loaded down with laces and trimmings that it is positively difficult to make out what the personality would be like. Hence Gottschalk cannot be classed among the composers who belong to the world swim. His "little steel fingers," as Mason called them, were precisely adapted to performing those beautiful groups of fiorature which we find so abundant in his music. And his touch had such a distinction that had he chosen to fill up the evening by playing scales and arpeggios, even the slightest seeming thread of musical connection would have sufficed to make the

evening charming. He had a finger eloquence like that the old lady described of the preacher, who could make an audience cry by simply pronouncing the word Mesopotamia.

Along with this vague charm, he had also a certain remarkable technic of his own, an exact, precise, spirited interchanging of the hands upon chords and repeating notes, such as we find illustrated again and again in his *Tremolo* study and the *Bamboula*; also in the *Pasquinade*

I notice that Mr. Elson, in his work on American music classes Gottschalk with French composers; but I do not agree with him. Gottschalk was French, it is true, as French spirit develops in New Orleans. But then he was also very Spanish, very creole, and he appreciated the negroes, whether in slave Louisiana or in Cuba and elsewhere. He certainly was American, but he did not get on well with the North. He had a large clientèle in New York; but in Boston he chose to interchange on his program a bagatelle by Beethoven and a thing of his own with the sad result that the late Mr. John S. Dwight fell into the trap and appreciated the Beethoven while not liking the Gottschalk. Naturally when he found out his mistake he was not pleased.

Mme. Carreño told me once that Gottschalk thought himself capable of much better than he published; and he said that when the public was ready to advance he would be found in the vanguard. He did not understand that a natural leader does not wait for his public to take the first step; he sets the pace himself. Hence we must hold fast to this charge of superficiality - which is but another name for innate popularity, because the majority of folks are superficial.