

LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

Henry Charles Lahee

“Famous Pianists of today and yesterday”,
1901

Louis Moreau Gottschalk gained the proud distinction of being the first American pianist of international renown. He was born at New Orleans, his father being an Englishman and his mother a Creole. His birth took place in 1829, and, according to the custom of virtuosi, he exhibited his musical talent during his infancy in ways peculiarly gratifying to his relations, but of no special interest to the world in general. After studying music for some years under the best teachers to be found in his native city, Gottschalk, in 1842, was sent to Paris, where he became a pupil of Camille Stamaty, who was considered the best French professor at that time. Being a youth of refined manners, he soon became a favourite amongst the elite of Paris. In 1845 he gave a concert at the Salle Pleyel, which secured him a great deal of applause, and encouragement from Chopin, who was present and predicted that he would become the king of the pianists. By 1850 he was fairly launched on the career of a virtuoso, and travelled through France, Germany, and Spain, receiving decorations from royalties and much attention from people of less magnificence. One of the most touching incidents in his career was the presentation of a sword by Don Jose Redondo, the eminent toreador.

At Valladolid he met with an accident, for the court pianist, presumably consumed with jealousy, took advantage of Gottschalk in an unguarded moment and slammed the door of a carriage on his fingers, causing injuries from which his accurate and conscientious biographer declares it took him ninety-one days to recover. There may have been some compensation for this injury, from the fact that the Infanta of Spain invited him to dinner and "playfully and kindly presented him with a cake made by her royal hands."

Before leaving Spain he complimented the nation by composing a piece called, " Le Siege de Saragosse." This was written for ten pianos, and was performed for the first time at Madrid. "Gottschalk appeared at the head of his aides-de-camp, all dressed in the same manner. . . . There is a passage where Gottschalk in a most ingenious manner imitates a military parade, accompanied by the beating of the drum ; it produced such a sensation that all the people, men and women, rose to their feet, and he was compelled to repeat the entire passage."

At the end of 1852 Gottschalk left Europe, and in January of the following year arrived in New York, where he commenced a brilliant career by giving a concert at the ballroom attached to Niblo's Theatre. Such was his activity that he gave in one season eighty concerts in New York. He travelled through the West Indies, South America, Mexico, and California, meeting with some thrilling adventures, especially in Peru, where a revolution was in progress and bullets permeated the atmosphere.

Returning to the United States in 1862, he gave more than eleven hundred concerts in three years. In 1869, during a tour in South America, he was stricken down by yellow fever, but recovered sufficiently to give several concerts at Rio de Janeiro. On November 26 he was again taken ill, but attempted to play in the evening. Hardly had he commenced playing when he fell unconscious, and was at once taken to his hotel. A few days later he was removed to Tijuca, a plateau about three miles from Rio, where he died on December the eighth.

There is no doubt that Gottschalk was a brilliant artist. His record throughout the world shows that to be the case. But in parts of the United States he at first failed to please the public, and

sustained large financial losses. A critic in the New York Courier declared, in 1853, that "we, the public, have begun to regard the pianoforte in the concert room as an intolerable nuisance."

Another wrote: "We could not but regret that so much stupendous and wonderful labour produced so little music, and we could not but smile at seeing the enthusiasm of his audience always rise in direct proportion to the manual exertion which his performance required."

Nevertheless he received encouragement in Boston in these words:

"He is the only pianist we have heard who can electrify and inflame an assembly. He has the dexterity of Jaell, the power of Meyer, and the taste of Herz."

Gottschalk had the misfortune to travel in this country at a time when the majority of the public were unable to appreciate a high class of music, and when the country was distracted by the war of the Rebellion.

Once he ventured too near the scene of hostilities and was obliged to make an undignified retreat. In San Francisco he had an experience somewhat similar to that of Herz in New Orleans. There was to be a piece played on fourteen pianos. One of the pianists fell ill, and Gottschalk had to accept the services of an amateur, who was considered a marvelous musician, who played Liszt, and Thalberg, and considered them quite easy. A short rehearsal convinced Gottschalk that this amateur would upset the whole business, but he was unable to decline his services. As an alternative the action of the piano was surreptitiously removed, and the young man was thus deprived of the honour of wrecking the concert.

Gottschalk has left a very interesting volume of "notes" relating his adventures.