

# MUSICAL CLUBS

## AN EVENING WITH AMERICAN COMPOSER

*Mathews, William Smythe Babcock,*

(“Music” Monthly Magazine – Jan 1898)

Owing to the composite character of our American civilization in which so many different nationalities are mingled, several of which maintain as long as possible their own language and customs, there is a certain crudity in the national life and a want of ripeness which as yet has prevented the development, of what properly can be called an American school of musical composition. Almost all our composers have been educated in Germany, many of them at Leipsic, and their compositions do not differ in a striking degree from those of good German composers. Minor traits of individuality and differences of imaginative scope are noticeable and afford marks of distinction; but essentially considered there has been very little music composed in this country, which is at the same time good and so characteristically American that it could not have been produced under any other circumstances. Nevertheless, there have been at least two American composers who are characteristically American and could not have been produced under any circumstances different; and a number of others in whom the American traits are well defined.

The two American composers of original and characteristic genius are the late Louis Moreau Gottschalk and the famous march king, John Philip Sousa. As the compositions of Mr. Sousa have shown themselves able to take care of themselves, and as his popularity needs no assistance from this quarter. I will consider his case first, and say that in this son of an Italian father and a German mother born and raised in the city of Washington. D. C., we have a thoroughly, characteristic American, in whom different heredities mingle in a curious way and give rise to a certain originality of temperament and style. While Mr. Sousa from his career and probably by his natural temperament has naturally taken the position of a popular composer, he has done so almost entirely in consequence of the inherently popular character of the music he has turned out, which, for striking rhythm and melodic piquacy has taken the ear not alone of the United States but of the whole world. His marches being widely played in all foreign countries where they are received with the liveliest demonstrations of approval. In fact,

very much the same kind of mild excitement that a chic American girl awakens in a foreign reception, the band music of Sousa affords to the travel worn palates of European bandmasters. It stirs them up and gives them a new sensation. It is a mistake therefore to speak of this artist in terms implying an unwillingness to classify him among serious composers. He is entitled to a very honorable place among those who have loved their fellow men so well that they have made them feel good.

In the year 1829 our two first American pianists were born: Louis Moreau Gottschalk in New Orleans, and William Mason in Boston. The heredity environment and training of these two men were as different as it is possible to imagine. Gottschalk was the son of a German who came to New Orleans by way of England, and in this country married a French woman. New Orleans at that time was practically a French city and the French language was very largely spoken in the family life. The boy, Louis Moreau Gottschalk showed talent for music at the earliest possible age and made a number of public appearances of a very interesting and creditable kind and by the age of thirteen, when he was sent to Paris to go on with his education, he had already established quite a little reputation. In Paris he was educated under the late Charles Hallé and Stamaty and in 1844, at the age of fifteen, he produced his first two works called ballads. "Ossian" and "The Dance of the Shades." His concert career in Europe began in 1846, when he was seventeen years of age and he gave a series of concerts at the Italian Opera in Paris in which he was associated with the celebrated Hector Berlioz.

He made a genuine furore as pianist and Berlioz, in charmingly turned phrases speaks of him as follows:

"Gottschalk is one of the very small number who possess all the different elements of a consummate pianist - all the faculties which surround him with an irresistible prestige, and give him a sovereign power. He is an accomplished musician — he knows just how far fancy may be indulged in expression. He knows the limits beyond which any liberties taken with the rhythm produce only confusion and discord and upon these limits he never encroaches. There is an exquisite grace in his manner of phrasing sweet melodies and throwing of light touches from the higher keys. The boldness and brilliancy and originality of his play at once dazzle and astonish and the infantile naïveté of his smiling caprices, the charming simplicity with which he renders simple things, seem to belong to another individuality distinct from that which marks his thundering energy ; thus the success of M. Gottschalk before an audience of musical cultivation is immense."

His first American tour was made in 1852-4. Then ensued a time of travel in the West Indies, but in 1862 he was back in New York again and his American tours lasted until 1869, when he went to South America, where he died at the comparatively early age of forty.

There is a disposition at the present time to undervalue the work of Gottschalk. He was a melodist pure and simple, and his distinction from an American standpoint consists in his having given a new note to his music by availing himself of the rhythms and characteristic cadences of negro, creole and Spanish nationalities in the southern United States and Central America. At the present time of the pianistic day, when very little attracts attention unless it is very difficult, it seems incredible that works so simple in their nature as those of Gottschalk could have attracted the attention they did; but there is more in this simplicity than at first sight appears, even if we admit that from a critical standpoint the introductions and endings are entirely too long for the matter they contain. Gottschalk himself had a way of doing them which made them seem extremely significant, and when he came to the melody itself it was played with such a delicacy and such a masterly touch that it seized the attention and concentrated the interest to a remarkable degree. Harmonically considered almost all his works are within rather narrow limits, but as compared with the French composers of the day when his works made so much furor in Paris, Gottschalk has nothing to apologize for since his music has a charm and a distinction of originality superior to almost all of that time or the present.

Many of the things with which Gottschalk made a great effect in his concert tours would not have been composed if he had lived thirty or forty years later. I mean now his four hand arrangements of the overture to "William Tell" and "Oberon." These are extremely brilliant and sensational arrangements, and are well worthy the attention of boarding schools and clubs desiring something but of the ordinary way. It was his custom, in his concerts to play the upper part himself while the best available local performer played the other part. This gave most of the melody and all of the brilliant work to the masterly fingers of the pianist himself.

The poetic thread or suggestion underlying many of his pieces is very slight. Nevertheless it is not without value. Take for instance the beautiful "Marche de Nuit" a piece which opens with six lines of introduction, amounting practically to an excellent study of crescendo, the idea being to show the effect of the march music in the extreme distance and its gradual approach. At length, we come to the march itself, and it is a pleasant and agreeable melody and the difficulty of the whole is no more than is now well within the powers of a pupil in the early fifth grade. The famous "Last Hope" is well known to all, and is one of the most persistent melodies which any American composer has produced in instrumental music. The introduction and the coda are both much too long, and can only be saved by a certain distinction in the manner of performing them. I made a notice in these columns last month of what Mr. Wolfsohn said, that such was the charm of Gottschalk's personality and touch that everything he played impressed itself and you remembered it a very long time. Dr. Mason tells

me that in these pianissimo runs in alt, which abound in so many of his works, Gottschalk's fingers were like little steel hammers, the tone being: perfectly clear and like a bell, but not pianissimo in the true sense of the term.

It seems puerile now that in his concerts Gottschalk could have made an effect with his famous piece, "The Banjo," which is a very realistic transcription of a negro banjo performance, the banjo effect on the piano in his case, I think, having been accomplished by the touch, whereas many others find themselves obliged to lay a sheet of music on the strings in order to impart to the vibrations the peculiar twang of the original.

Another and more favorable example of his talent is in the beautiful "Slumber Song," which can be had for voice or for piano alone. There is another class of pieces by Gottschalk which seem very peculiar at the present time. They are the rather loud and somewhat difficult concert fantasies called the "Bamboula," or "Negro Dance," and "Jerusalem," the latter being made upon certain melodies in Verdi's "I Lombardi." Another piece of his which made a great effect in his concerts and was a general favorite of students was the "Eolian Murmurs" a pleasant melody with a lot of fine pianissimo work to represent the murmurs. Speaking of the misleading effect of the Gottschalk performances, I will mention that the well known piece, "The Dying Poet," was played by him many and many a time in public, to the great pleasure of the audience, but before we gather up stones to throw at the American concert audiences of the early '60s, let us not forget that within the last few years audiences have shown themselves equally vulnerable to the charm of Paderewski's Minuet, a work in no respect superior to the slightest of our American pianist. In this case, as in the former, it is a question of the personality and appealing nature of the performer.

The other American pianist produced in the year 1829 had a totally different heredity, environment and education. William Mason also showed his talent at an early age and was seriously taught the piano under the direction of his father, the late very distinguished and eminent Dr. Lowell Mason, who at that time and for about twenty years later, exerted a most commanding influence in Boston and the country at large. Mason's advance was so rapid that by the time he was thirteen or fourteen or a little later, he appeared in public with orchestra in Boston, playing the Mendelssohn G minor concerto, and I think he had played the Weber Concertstück. In the season of 1846 and 1847 he played the piano part in the chamber concerts given by the Harvard Musical Association. In 1849 he went to Leipsic and became a pupil in theory of the distinguished Moritz Hauptmann. Upon Hauptmann's death he went to Prague for a year with Dreyshock, and then to Liszt at Weimar. This was in 1851 or thereabouts, and here he remained some time. Returning to America in 1854 he removed to New York and took the commanding position which he has almost ever since occupied as teacher and as concert pianist. While there are traces of American training in the musical compositions of Dr. Mason,

these traces are very few, the general character of his work being distinctly German. His musical talent was strong upon the harmonic side, but upon the melodic side his imagination was not so free. He has produced several volumes of compositions, probably about one hundred in all, almost every one being elegantly written and well made, and many of them of a classical elegance of style. His reputation as a composer has suffered from his limiting his work always to the field of the salon and especially to the piano. I believe he has never composed an original song, although he has arranged several which have been very useful indeed. It is as a composer for the piano that we have to speak of him.

The most sensational of the Mason pieces is his famous "Silver Spring," which was composed shortly after the late Scandinavian pianist, Haberbier, had visited Weimar and had played many brilliant effects of running work upon the piano, in which the hands were used "interlocking," as it is called; that is the left hand taking now, and then one or two notes of the run. This method of dividing up a run has the effect of imparting a certain amount of arm element to the touch, whereby the tone becomes considerably heavier and more brilliant. It was thought at Weimar at that time that piano playing would very likely take this direction in future and that the day of running work in the fingers of one hand along had practically passed. Accordingly, Mason experimented in these new effects which Haberbier had suggested, and worked out this piece, the "Silver Spring." As he told me, he first had to find out an accompaniment figure which pleased him, and then to discover in which chords it would go most easily, because the location of the black keys with reference to the white plays a very important part when the hand has to fall in its place in rapid motion. When he had ascertained these points, he then had to consider what key would afford the greatest number of chords of this character, and so at last he came to the key of A and the chords he has in the "Silver Spring." When he had arrived at this point it was necessary to provide a melody and, as the melody had to fit the accompaniment, the melody was made last and in this way he arrived at the seeming "impromptu" of the "Silver Spring." This is his own story to me many years ago, and it may have had a humorous exaggeration in it, not to be taken too seriously. I mention it because somewhere about the same time when Mason told it to me, I had been talking with Dudley Buck one day and we were speaking of Mason with very great admiration, especially for the elegance of his style as illustrated in some of his then recently composed works, such as his "Cradle Song," his two impromptus, "At Evening" and "At Morning," his romance Etude and the like, and Buck said, "If Mason ever had an inspiration it was in that beautiful melody in the 'Silver Spring.' I have arranged a church tune from it and my choir sings it with never failing delight. It will not do to say that Mason has no gift for melody when he has produced a piece like that."

With reference to the trend of piano playing in the direction of this interlocking work, there were several years when it looked as if the Haberbier suggestions would bear no fruit, but latterly in the Tschaiikowsky concerto, to some extent, and in the Schytte concerto in C sharp minor, to a very great extent, the interlocking principle is employed.

One of the first of Mason's pieces which attained anything like persistent popularity, was the "Danse Rustique," which, by the way, is one of the best finger studies for piano students in the fourth grade of which I have any knowledge. It is one of those pieces which can always be learned even by a pupil who is not very smart, provided she will practice it carefully and earnestly enough. It is a piece which cannot be played well without very careful practice and which, when well played, produces a good effect. Hence it has a remarkable pedagogic value if the teacher knows when to put it in and how to handle it when it is once there. I may mention in this connection that many years ago, when I was assisting Dr. Mason in the summer classes at Binghamton, it happened in one year that nearly all the pupils had to take one lesson a week of him and one of myself, there not being time enough for him to give all the lessons required. This made it necessary for me to carry out his directions and talk over many points with him, and it was there that I learned the value of the "Danse Rustique" from a pedagogic standpoint, since nearly all these pupils came in with careless habits of practice and the first step was to teach them how to learn a piece and work it up to a reasonable state of preparation. Dr. Mason left the school one week before its ending, leaving me to finish out the work. When he had gone I wrote him that it seemed to me there had been an important omission in his work that year, as I had found two pupils who had not had the "Danse Rustique" and that he had better send me the missing two copies without delay. While this piece makes no very important figure in the aesthetic world, it is by no means a composition to be treated with disrespect. There is a great deal of energy in it and the second subject is very pleasing indeed, and the modulating work in the middle of the piece, where the elaboration would naturally stand in a serious work, is of considerable range and ingenuity and thoroughly characteristic of the author.

One who wishes to know Mason should study some of the lighter aspects of his productions; and first of these, since it is more nearly related to what I have just now been mentioning, is the "Romance Etude" in G minor. This is a pretty melody, often in thirds, in G minor, lying in the convenient soprano range of the piano. Long runs cross this melody, in Thalbergian manner, from one end of the keyboard to the other, and at times the scale business gives place to charming arpeggios, figures which transfer themselves from one hand to the other. The scale is a curious minor scale with a sharp fourth and is therefore anything but inviting to the fingers, at first. The effect of the whole, when well played, is very charming, although it is more the effect of a study than of a poem.

Still lighter in their characteristics are his charming and half jocose variations on the old French air, "Ah vous dirais-je maman," better known in school circles of my time as "Haste thee, Winter, haste away," There is a very playful effect in these variations and in the title Mason calls them "Variations Grotesques," but when he sent a copy to Liszt that amiable critic replied that the word "grotesque" had no place in piano playing; that they should properly be called jocose, or something of that sort.

Thoroughly interesting in every way is the remarkable series of duets for teacher and pupil. Here are eight little nursery melodies, which at the time these variations were composed were among the best known in this field, and the pupil, supposed to be a small child, plays them generally with one hand alone, or with both hands in octaves, very rarely in parts. The teacher meanwhile adds the harmonies, and wonderfully interesting and highly diversified harmonies they are. And in the same line with these are two other pieces which were originally written for the Mason and Hoadley Method for Beginners; a march in which the pupil plays under the five fingers entirely, while the teacher adds the most strange and diversified harmonies, and a waltz, in which the pupil still has nothing more than five finger positions to deal with.

I consider these pieces superior to anything of this kind that I have ever seen, in point of cleverness and harmonic wit.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the work of Dr. Mason with these half jocose illustrations of his genius. He has a very elegantly written "Berceuse" which if very well done produces a lovely effect. A trifle more flexibility in the melody would have been an advantage, but it is a beautifully made piece and is well worthy attention. He has also a ballad of very considerable dramatic force, and I have always been fond of his "Reverie Poétique," which is very much in the style of Henselt. A melody without a great range but running in two parts upon rather diversified harmonies, constitutes the first part of this piece, and it is afterwards developed or varied in double notes, which are principally sixths, in a very lovely manner. The only drawback, aside from the difficulty of playing it well, is the length to which it is spun out. Undoubtedly it is a little monotonous, owing to the same motive coming over so many times. On the other hand, however, it pretends at the start to be nothing more than a poetic "revery," and it has the character of a revery-something which dwells and muses and perhaps never arrives. I mentioned before two reveries called "In the Morning" and "At Evening." The first of these is a very clever study and both are well worth playing.

The works of both these composers have a distinct and pronounced pedagogic value, but in wholly different directions, and both appeal principally to American pianists. The Gottschalk pieces now are mainly used in the earlier stages of instruction for forming good

melody habits. They appeal to the poetic sensibility of the players who as yet are hardly ready for Chopin or any of the more elaborate composers. Dr. Mason's works, especially those I have here mentioned, appeal upon the opposite side to the harmonic sense, and to the sense of working out a theme with good consistency and persistency. While the Gottschalk pieces improve the style of melody and the sparkle of the playing, the Mason pieces conduce to system and regularity in study and to a serious and careful treatment of the left hand part as well as the right, and they have in them some of that quality which belongs to nearly all the works of Bach, when undertaken by students: they promote seriousness and musical feeling.

Hence I propose the following program as on the whole affording a good idea of the works of these composers:

#### PROGRAM.

Gottschalk-Weber:

Overture to "Oberon." Four hands.

Mason :

Amitie pour Amitie. (Available for four hands if preferred.)

Air and Variations Grotesques. "Ah Vous Dirais-je Maman."

Spring Dawn Mazurka.

Reverie Poetique.

Gottschalk:

Marche de Nuit.

The Banjo. (Negro Sketch.)

Song, "Slumber On."

Mason:

Eight Duets for Teacher and Pupil. (Ditson Co.) Four hands.

March and Waltz for Teacher and Pupil. Four hands.

Gottschalk :

Aeolian Murmurs.

The Last Hope.

Mason :

Reverie, "Au Matin."

The Silver Spring.

Gottschalk-Rossini:

The Overture to "William Tell." Four hands.