
MUSIC

Our Gottschalk

Terry Teachout

WHO WAS the first important American classical composer? It depends on how you define “first,” “important,” and “classical.” Aaron Copland, born in 1900, was the first composer to produce a large body of recognizably American-sounding concert music that continues to be performed regularly—unless you count as a classical composer George Gershwin, born in 1898, whose *Rhapsody in Blue* was the first piece by an American to enter the standard repertoire.

Charles Ives, born in 1874, and Charles Griffes, born in 1884, can both claim chronological precedence over Copland and Gershwin, but the proto-modern music Ives wrote prior to World War I has never been popular except among critics and a handful of performers, while Griffes, easily the most gifted American composer of his generation, died too young to establish himself as a major figure in American music. None of his works, not even the remarkable Piano Sonata of 1918, is heard with any frequency today.

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As for the American composers whose European-style concert music was briefly in vogue around the turn of the 20th century, they were devoid of originality, and none of them, not even the once-popular Edward MacDowell, born in 1861, wrote a single piece that has stayed in the repertoire. A far stronger case can be made for John Philip Sousa, born in 1854, whose marches are miniature masterpieces with an unmistakably American flavor that have at least as strong a claim to being called “classical music” as do the waltzes of Johann Strauss or the operettas of Arthur Sullivan.¹

If, however, a concertgoer of the mid-19th century had been asked to name an American classical composer, his answer would almost certainly have been Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Born in New Orleans in 1829, Gottschalk was the first American concert pianist of note and a prolific composer whose works were the first by an American to be widely played on both sides of the Atlantic. Though their popularity declined sharply after his death, Gottschalk's music has since been the object of numerous “revivals.” Yet no internationally known concert pianist of the postwar era has played his pieces save as a

novelty, and they are no more familiar today than in 1961, when Harold C. Schonberg, then the classical-music critic of the *New York Times*, wrote the first article to be published in the 20th-century mainstream press that treated Gottschalk not as a period piece but as a figure of significance.

THE NEAR-COMPLETE failure of Gottschalk's music to be taken up by American pianists is all the more inexplicable in light of the fact that so much of it incorporates elements of the folk and popular music of the Americas. In such tangy miniatures for solo piano as “Bamboula” (1848), “The Banjo” (1855), and “Souvenir de Porto Rico” (1858), he used Latin American and Afro-American melodies and rhythms in an idiomatic way that preceded by a half-century their similar use in ragtime and early jazz. Every Amer-

¹ David Allen Wehr's 1994 recital of Griffes's piano music contains the Piano Sonata (Connoisseur Society CD 4205). The best available recording of MacDowell's most successful large-scale work, the D Minor Piano Concerto of 1885, is by André Watts with Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony (Telarc CD-80429). The best single-CD compilation of Sousa's marches is *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, performed by the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (Decca 410 290-2).

ican composer who blends classical and popular music is following in his footsteps—though few have heard the works in which he foresaw their attempts.

As well as a pianist and composer, Gottschalk was a superb writer of prose. During his lifetime he published in magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*, and after his death in 1869 the notebooks on which he based his articles were edited by his sister and brought out in book form as *Notes of a Pianist* (1881). Known mostly to specialists in American music, *Notes of a Pianist* is a work of the highest importance, the first book of permanent interest by an American artist who was not a full-time author and a matchlessly vivid document of American musical life during the Civil War. Reissued in 1964 in a revised and annotated edition, it soon went out of print and remained unavailable until this past spring, when Princeton University Press republished it in tribute to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.²

Most of *Notes of a Pianist* is devoted to the years 1862 to 1865, during which Gottschalk barnstormed around the U.S. by train, giving one or two concerts a day in cities and towns from coast to coast. In many cases he appeared before audiences that knew nothing about classical music, recording in his notebook the reactions of his listeners (“The other evening before the concert, an honest farmer, pointing to my piano, asked me what that ‘big accordion was’”). He described his nonstop travels with a mixture of amusement and exasperation:

Eighteen hours a day on the railroad! Arrive at seven o’clock in the evening, eat with all speed, appear at eight o’clock before the public. The last note finished, rush quickly for my luggage, and en route until next day, always to the same thing! I have become stupid with it. I have the appearance of an automaton under the influence of a voltaic pile.

Unfortunately, Gottschalk had little to say about his own music in

Notes of a Pianist. To learn more about it, one must turn to *Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk*, S. Frederick Starr’s splendidly written, comprehensively informed 1995 biography.³ This book, one of the half-dozen best biographies of an American composer, fills in the gaps left by *Notes of a Pianist*, and in so doing answers the fascinating question of how an elegant, cultivated Creole who studied in Paris and befriended Berlioz should have ended up playing for Abraham Lincoln, crisscrossing the Western Hemisphere, and producing what would ultimately be recognized as the most original classical music to be composed in 19th-century America.

GOTTSHALK’S IMPROBABLE story begins with his tangled ethnic heritage. His father Edward, a merchant and slave trader who kept a black mistress, was a secular, London-born German Jew, while his mother Aimée was a Francophone Creole whose shabby-genteel Catholic parents had moved to New Orleans from Haiti, then a French colony.⁴ The eldest of eight children (not counting five half-siblings born to his father’s mistress) and the only one with musical talent, he began to study piano at the age of five. At that time, classical music was more popular in New Orleans than in any other American city, and the young Gottschalk grew up hearing a rich mixture of French and Italian opera, Creole folk song, and minstrel-show music, all of which would find their way into his later compositions.

In 1841, Gottschalk’s father sent him to Paris for further musical training, and four years later he made his recital debut there, playing Chopin’s E Minor Concerto and an operatic fantasy by Liszt. Though the concert, at which Chopin was present, was a success, Gottschalk did not appear in Paris again until 1849. Instead, he spent the next two years studying composition intensively, and when he returned to the concert stage it was as a virtuoso composer-performer in the manner of Chopin and Liszt.

Hector Berlioz, who in addition to being a great composer was a music critic of the utmost discernment, wrote a review of an 1851 recital by Gottschalk that leaves no doubt of its quality:

He phrases soft melodies with perfect grace and has mastered the keyboard’s delicate traits. With regard to deftness, spirit, surprise, brio, and originality, his playing dazzles and shocks. . . . In the presence of a musically civilized public Mr. Gottschalk’s success is immense.

The works that had the biggest impact on Gottschalk’s first audiences were “Bamboula” (named after an Afro-Caribbean drum), “Le Bananier,” and “La Savane,” respectively subtitled “Danse des Nègres,” “Chanson Nègre,” and “Ballade Créole.” These pieces, whose thematic material was adapted from Caribbean folk songs he had learned in childhood from his black nurse and Creole grandmother, appear to have been inspired by Chopin’s mazurkas and polonaises, themselves based on Polish folk-dance forms.

No American composer had ever made use of such material, and Gottschalk’s treatment of it was arrestingly original. From the drum-like repeated bass notes that open “Bamboula” to the dark, languid chromaticism of “La Savane” (whose main theme American listeners will recognize as a minor-key prototype for “Skip to My Lou”), these pieces speak in a wholly personal voice that took Europeans by surprise, and to

² Princeton, 433 pp., \$24.95.

³ Reissued in 2000 as *Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (University of Illinois Press, \$25.00 [paper]). Starr has also contributed a new foreword to Princeton’s reprint of the 1964 edition of *Notes of a Pianist*.

⁴ In 19th-century New Orleans, Louisiana-born whites of French descent were known as “Creoles.” (The same term would later be used for blacks with French blood, who were initially called “Creoles of color.”) As an adult, Gottschalk was bilingual but wrote in French and spoke English with a strong French accent. His half-Jewish parentage notwithstanding, he was raised as a Catholic and practiced that religion for his entire life.

which they responded with delight.

Though Gottschalk's immaculate pianism was universally appreciated, it was the novelty of hearing such exotic music played by an American that made "Gottschalk of Louisiana" (as he was billed) a full-fledged celebrity. As a Paris journalist wrote, "We have discovered this Creole composer; an American composer, *bon Dieu!*"

IN 1853, Gottschalk returned to the United States, presumably in order to capitalize on his European *réclame*. Copyright was then in its infancy, and it was impossible for classical composers, even popular ones, to live off their music (which they usually sold to publishers for flat fees). To earn a living, then, he would have to perform, and it seemed a safe bet that "Gottschalk of Louisiana" would go over big in his native land.

Edward Gottschalk died that same year, leaving behind a mountain of debt and a widow and seven younger children with no means of support. At the age of twenty-four, his eldest son's fate was thus sealed: from then on, Gottschalk would lead the life of an itinerant virtuoso who composed on the side. In order to pay his family's bills, he gave recital after recital and turned out dozens of short, marketable piano pieces, many of which were improvised in performance and later transcribed by an amanuensis.⁵ He never went back to Europe, evidently fearing that he would not be able to reestablish himself with audiences there.

Musical life in America was still very much a work in progress in 1853, and Gottschalk shrewdly tailored his programs to suit the tastes of his audiences. Except on special occasions, he played only his own works, which ranged from glittering operatic paraphrases to the piquant Creole miniatures that had first won him fame. These latter pieces grew rhythmically more daring during his five-year stay in the Caribbean, where Gottschalk heard native Latin American music for the

first time and incorporated it into such pungent vignettes as "Souvenir de Porto Rico," "Réponds-moi" (1859), "La Gallina" (1863), and "Pasquinade" (1863). Their use of syncopation anticipated the ragtime idiom, as well as the "Spanish tinge" that Jelly Roll Morton later declared to be an indispensable part of jazz.⁶ He also wrote a two-movement "symphony" called *A Night in the Tropics* (1859) that fuses Berlioz-like orchestral rhetoric with Latin rhythms played on the güiro and maracas, which had never before been used in classical music.

In addition, Gottschalk turned out pieces specifically aimed at American audiences. The best known of these is "The Banjo," a brilliantly exact evocation of the playing of minstrel-show instrumentalists. (In it Gottschalk quotes from Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races," a practice that would later become a hallmark of Charles Ives's style.) No less well received were such essays in musical nationalism as "The Union" (1862), a spectacular Lisztian fantasy on "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Hail, Columbia," and "Yankee Doodle" that he played at the White House in 1864.⁷

Most successful of all, though, were "The Last Hope" (1854) and "The Dying Poet" (1864), a pair of salon pieces in which Gottschalk took the quasi-operatic idiom of Chopin's nocturnes and simplified it to the point where it could be enjoyed by musically naive listeners and executed with ease by amateur pianists. Not only were these sentimental cameos beloved in his own time, but they remained so well into the 20th century, long after his other works were forgotten. "The Dying Poet" eventually became a standby of silent-movie pianists, while the Protestant hymn "Holy Spirit, Light Divine" is sung to this day to a tune adapted from the main theme of "The Last Hope" and known as "Gottschalk."

GOTTSCHALK'S POPULISM was neither cynical nor simple-minded.

Though *Notes of a Pianist* is full of sardonic asides about the musically illiterate listeners for whom he often played, its author was nonetheless an ardent patriot (and a supporter of the Union side in the Civil War) who sought to foster a distinctively American musical culture.

As he well knew, he was fighting an uphill battle, and not merely with those smug philistines who, like the young Mark Twain, had no use for any kind of classical music:

I like Gottschalk well enough. He probably gets as much out of the piano as there is in it. But the frozen fact is, that all that he *does* get out of it is "tum, tum." He gets "tum, tum" out of the instrument thicker and faster than my landlady's daughter, Mary Ann; but after all, it simply amounts to "tum, tum."

Gottschalk also ran into opposition of a different but no less philistine kind from the critics of Boston, where one newspaper dismissed his compositions as "the veriest trash that was ever offered to a Boston audience." To these well-meaning but priggish defenders of the classical faith, who believed devoutly in the need to convert their readers to the Austro-German tradition, ev-

⁵ Any ambitions Gottschalk may have had to master the larger musical forms were thereafter thwarted by his need to earn a living. On the other hand, he appears to have been a natural miniaturist who, like Chopin and Hugo Wolf, had no feel for large-scale form, and without exception his best pieces all range in length from two to seven minutes.

⁶ Morton almost certainly played Gottschalk's music as a young man in New Orleans, and circumstantial evidence suggests that it was also known to Scott Joplin and other ragtime composers.

⁷ *Notes of a Pianist* contains this memorable description of Lincoln: "Tall, thin, his back bent, his chest hollow, his arms excessively long, his crane-like legs, his enormous feet, that long frame whose disproportioned joints give him the appearance of a grapevine covered with clothes, make of him something grotesque and strange, which would strike us in a disagreeable manner if the height of his forehead, the expression of goodness, and something of honesty in his countenance did not attract and cause his exterior to be forgotten."

everything about Gottschalk gave offense. Not only did he presume to play his own music instead of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, but he drew freely and creatively on the innovations of American popular musicians. The Boston-based *Dwight's Journal of Music and Art*, the most influential American music magazine of the time, went so far as to launch a long-lasting critical vendetta against Gottschalk, dismissing his Creole genre pieces as "musical rigamarole . . . trivial and insulting."

Gottschalk would have none of it. "I admire the beautiful wherever I find it," he wrote, "never bothering myself to demand its passport." Not only was he proudly eclectic in his musical tastes, but his New Orleans upbringing had made it impossible for him to take seriously the Puritan mindset he encountered north of the Mason-Dixon line. In *Notes of a Pianist* he complains about New England's rigidly enforced Sabbath customs ("Ennui—ennui—ennui"), and compares the tedium of a Boston Sunday to the "arid natures" of those "musical Puritans" who "never judge until they are assured that it is proper."

Gottschalk's refusal to bow to the proprieties of 19th-century American life brought his performing career in this country to an untimely end in 1865 when he was falsely accused of having seduced a young California woman with whom he was seen after hours. The ensuing scandal forced him to flee to South America, where he spent the last four years of his life playing recitals and presenting a series of "monster concerts" modeled after the large-scale orchestral performances he had seen Berlioz give in Paris. Weakened by overwork and a tropical fever of unknown origin, he collapsed in the middle of a concert in Rio de Janeiro, dying a month later.

WITHIN A FEW years of Gottschalk's death, the high-minded critics, composers, and performers who looked askance at his flamboyant

Franco-American populism had come to dominate the American musical scene. As a result, his works (except for "The Last Hope" and "The Dying Poet") ceased to be performed. Having died too early to make recordings, he became little more than a footnote to the history of 19th-century American music, though a few well-known pianists, including Josef Hofmann and Guiomar Novaes, continued to play his pieces on occasion.

Forgotten, too, was the hope expressed in a review of his New York debut:

We believe his compositions and playing—pure, national, and classical—will have a happy effect on the rising generation, and be the foundation of a school at once legitimate, and characteristic. His "Bamboula," "Le Bananier," etc., are truly original specimens of a new and delightful, a purely American, or if you please Southern, Creole school, the Gottschalk School, as it may yet be called.

So they were—but Gottschalk was born too soon to exert anything like that kind of fertilizing influence on America's self-consciously Eurocentric classical-music culture. Not until the arrival of Copland and Gershwin did other American composers become sufficiently sure of themselves to turn their backs on Austro-German romanticism and go their own stylistic way.

Starting in the 30's, a group of American enthusiasts embarked on a sustained effort to revive interest in Gottschalk's music. Harold C. Schonberg and Robert Offergeld wrote about him with infectious and well-informed enthusiasm. Lincoln Kirstein, a lifelong advocate of distinctively American art, encouraged the choreographers of the New York City Ballet to set dances to his music, one of which, George Balanchine's *Tarantella*, became a permanent part of the company's repertory. The pianists Eugene List, Jeanne Behrend, and John Kirk-

patrick (the last of whom was, significantly, a disciple of Ives) performed his works regularly. List made the first modern recordings of his music in the 50's and 60's, while Behrend edited the 1964 edition of *Notes of a Pianist*.⁸

Yet despite this fervent advocacy, Gottschalk's music remains on the fringes of the standard repertoire, written about but rarely played. Why is this so? One reason is that the salon pieces and virtuosos showstoppers that dazzled his 19th-century listeners no longer suit the more sophisticated tastes of modern-day audiences, though they can still be brought to life when played with panache (and without condescension). His Creole and Caribbean genre pieces, on the other hand, are as engaging today as they were to the listeners of his own time. Indeed, it is puzzling that the postmodern vogue of "world music" has not led to a resurgence of interest in a composer who was a multiculturalist *avant la lettre*.

In spite of the inexplicable absence of Gottschalk's music from American concert halls, the fact that his best pieces have all been recorded makes it possible for anyone to listen to them and marvel at his prophetic prescience. But Louis Moreau Gottschalk was more than a prophet: he was a composer of real accomplishment and rare individuality whose music still gives pleasure to all those lucky enough to make its acquaintance. Perhaps the reprinting of *Notes of a Pianist* will increase their number, and in so doing enhance the posthumous reputation of the man whose claim to the title of America's first important classical composer is stronger than ever.

⁸ All of the pieces mentioned in this essay are available on CD as part of a compilation of pioneering Gottschalk recordings by Eugene List and various assisting artists, coupled with a performance by Maurice Abravanel and the Utah Symphony of *A Night in the Tropics* (Artemis Classics ARCL 1906, two CD's). Individual tracks from this album can be downloaded from iTunes.

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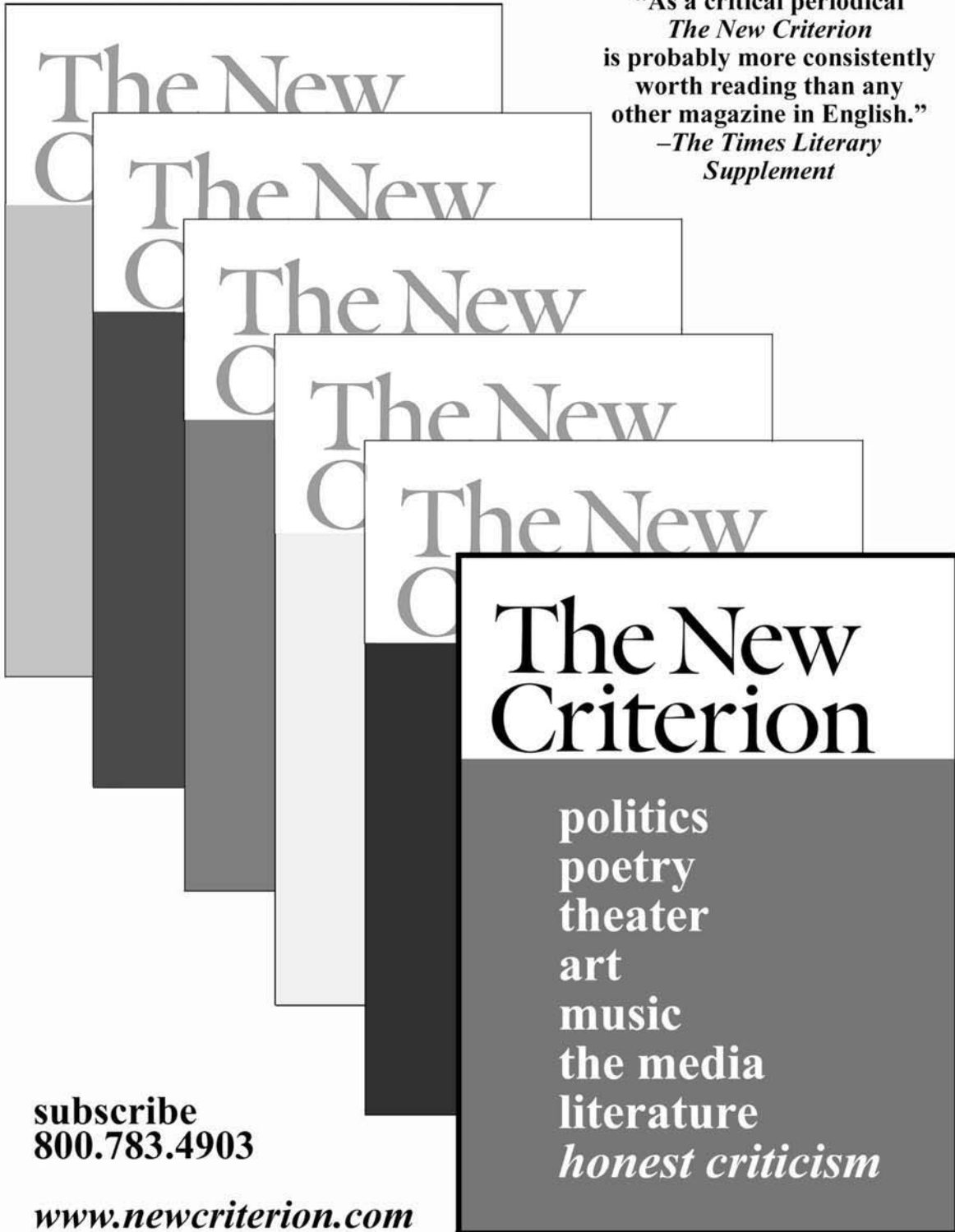
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