

AN APPRECIATION OF GOTTSCHALK AS A COMPOSER

BY WILLIAM H. SHERWOOD

I NEVER met or heard Gottschalk, but in my earlier and amateur days of piano playing I learned many of his compositions, and was a most enthusiastic admirer of his genius. I had an impression, during these years, that Liszt and Gottschalk were the greatest musical geniuses and pianists of the age. There is so much of spontaneous and artistic ardor and enthusiasm, so much grace of style and sparkle, as well as fire and tremendous brilliancy in Gottschalk's music for the piano, that this idea is not to be wondered at.

In his most popular composition, *The Last Hope*, there is such a genuine combination of tender pathos, dignity, and religious impressiveness, that its popularity, particularly among persons of moderate musical capacity, can be understood.

It is a pity that Gottschalk did not apply a higher standard of criticism, in some respects, to his compositions. It is said on good authority that he was sufficiently well educated in music and sufficiently conversant with the works of the great masters to have done so. His claim that the public did not want anything of a more classical quality is a somewhat selfish one, showing that he was apparently too easily satisfied with the applause of the masses, and not at all inclined to make a martyr of himself for the sake of the highest ideals, thereby to uplift his listeners, instead of pandering merely to their amusement and pleasure.

Almost any high-grade composer of the present day (and when I say this it includes the most popular of the real, artistic writers) would have written such pieces as *The Last Hope* and others of Gottschalk's wonderfully attractive compositions differently. There could be more attention to proportion in contrasts of theme, modulations, and musical form than was the habit of Gottschalk.

But, notwithstanding this suggestion or criticism, which I honestly believe to be the only reason why his compositions do not retain their old-time popularity, everybody will admit the startling brilliancy and genius, as well as the poetic and emotional attractiveness, of his music.

I have played *Æolian Murmurs*, *The Dying Poet*, the *Marche de Nuit*, and that extremely brilliant duet with the Spanish fire in it, *Ojos Criollos*, and several others of his original works. I have also played his wonderfully effective paraphrases on *Trovatore* and *The Battle Cry of Freedom*.

In my opinion Gottschalk could have combined all of those great qualities with which his nature was endowed, along with some of the intellectual peculiarities shown in the works of those who have written fugues and sonatas in such a manner as to have lost none of his popularity, but to have helped along the cause of good music in his time, and thereby to have won for himself a more exalted and permanent position among the great composers.

On the other hand, there are plenty of composers who might be named who have written more scholarly work, and in certain ways aspired to higher ideals, whose natural genius was not uplifting in any such degree as Gottschalk's, and whose works are undoubtedly more or less dry and unprofitable.

For my own part, I am still a most ardent admirer of Gottschalk, and I frequently play some of his concert numbers, including his inimitable *Banjo* and *Tremolo*. The spirit of the southern plantation negroes and their peculiar rhythms is unmistakable in these and others of his works. In them there is a wonderful combination of sympathetic pathos and passionate intensity, alongside of astonishing brilliancy.