

# *Our First Musical Ambassador*

Louis Moreau Gottschalk

By ERNEST L. BOLLING

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY in his "Roundabout Papers" —in the number entitled "Nil Nisi Bonum" — says of our beloved and genial Washington Irving: "Irving was the first ambassador whom the New World of letters sent to the Old."

Between Irving and Gottschalk there is this analogy : Irving was the first American writer to gain general recognition abroad; Gottschalk was the first pianist from our shores to be acclaimed by Europe a great artist. From all that may be gathered from a mass of books, magazines and periodicals concerning him, he has never been surpassed in the charm of his touch and in his magnetic personality by any American pianist.

Rubinstein and the lovable Mendelssohn — Mendelssohn, whose works are so perfect in construction — are to a certain degree being pushed aside. And it is well to point out to a quickly-forgetting public the exalted place that Gottschalk held for many years.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was born on May 8, 1829, in New Orleans, Louisiana — not far from the wild and picturesque of Lake Pontchartrain. In the "Life of Gottschalk," by Octavia Hensel, it is stated his mother was a French Creole, and his father a Jew of Spanish origin; but one is inclined rather to take the statement of Robert E. Peterson, M.D., of Philadelphia, who married one of Gottschalk's sisters. Dr. Peterson says, in a biographical sketch attached to Gottschalk's "Notes of a Pianist," that the pianist's "father was an Englishman and his mother a Creole of noble origin."

Gottschalk's ancestors on his mother's side, all of noble French, were residents of the Island of St. Domingo. In the fearful insurrection and massacre which took place when the British abandoned the island, the French escaped, some to various West Indian islands and some to Louisiana, then in possession of the French Government. Among the latter was Gottschalk's mother, who married Edward Gottschalk, a rich broker and gentleman of great culture, and a remarkable linguist, speaking eight or nine languages. This was the pianist's father.

## *Tropic Influence*

WHEN Moreau was a small child, his father, on account of his mother's health, took the family to Pass Christian, on the Gulf of Mexico, which at that time "was a charming but wild and almost uninhabited spot." This semi-tropical country, where grow the beautiful live oaks, cypress trees, forests festooned with the fantastic Spanish moss, palmettos, banana plains and hedges of beautiful Cherokee roses, and where the air is laden with the delicious aromas from rustling orange groves and from the fragrant Cape jessamines, doubtless left a deep impression on the youthful Moreau, for in later life he always had a predilection, nay, an unquenchable love, for the Tropics.

Moreover the Creole environment in which Gottschalk lived, the disposition he had inherited from his mother, the tales of the Indians, and the songs of the negroes early impressed his life. Such impressions may be found in *La Bamboula*, *Le Bananier*, and *La Savane*, written when he was about sixteen or seventeen years of age.

### *Gottschalk as a Performer*

UNDOUBTEDLY, Gottschalk was one of the greatest pianists of his time. The late Dr. Robert Goldbeck, who was himself an eminent concert pianist and second to none in the profundity of his scholarly attainments, spoke of Gottschalk as “a most triumphal pianist,” and played some of his pieces in his public performances.

Dr. William Mason wrote of Gottschalk: “His strong rhythmical accent, his vigor and dash, were exciting and always aroused enthusiasm. He was the perfection of his school, and his effects had the sparkle and effervescence of champagne.” Carl Bergman, that strict classicist, remarked that he “always heard Gottschalk with intense enjoyment.” He could not resist the charm of Gottschalk's matchless performances.

The great Frenchman, Hector Berlioz, and A. Marmontel of the Paris Conservatory were most enthusiastic in their praise of Gottschalk. It seems to me Berlioz was one of the most zealous of Gottschalk's admirers, both as to his performances and compositions.

In his “Some Musical Recollections of Fifty Years” (published in Scribner's Magazine), Richard Hoffman, of New York, says Thalberg and Gottschalk joined forces and played several two-piano pieces at the Niblo concerts, and one, the variations on themes from “Il Trovatore,” the joint composition of these two pianists, was wonderfully effective, creating tremendous furor. To quote Hoffman, “a remarkable double trill which Thalberg played on the middle of the piano, while Gottschalk was flying all over the keyboard in the ‘Anvil Chorus,’ produced the most prodigious volume of tone I ever heard from the piano.” Hoffman further says of Gottschalk, “he was possessed of a ringing, scintillating touch, which, joined to a poetic charm of expression, seemed to sway the emotions of his audience with almost hypnotic power.”



LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

### *What Fellow Musicians Said*

**G**EORGE WILLIAM WARREN, the famous organist, for years at St Thomas's Episcopal Church, on Fifth Avenue. New York was a devoted friend of Gottschalk. At a concert, arranged by Mr. Warren for Gottschalk, in Albany, in May, 1856, some of the numbers on the program were compositions of Chopin, Henselt's etude of perennial beauty, *If I Were a Bird*, a transcription by Liszt on motifs from Berlioz's "Benvenuto Cellini," and several of Gottschalk's own compositions. Warren was unstinted in his praise of the pianist and said that his use of the pedals "was a study producing results most unique and interesting."

The late William H. Sherwood, distinguished pianist, wrote that there is no doubt that Gottschalk knew as much about the pedals as any of the most famous pianists of today.

Teresa Carreño, the "Lioness of the Piano" and one of the most wonderful of the long list of great pianists I have heard, herself a pupil of Gottschalk and one time a teacher of Edward MacDowell, said Gottschalk produced the most exquisite pianissimo she ever heard, that it was "like zephyrs sighing upon the golden wins of a poet's harp," and that "no one approached him in his trill,"

Gottschalk, "in his twentieth year, had won the applause of Europe. Berlin vouched for the greatness of his genius and was among the cities most decided in their praise."

### *Chopin and Gottschalk*

**C**HOPIN was present at one of Gottschalk's appearances in Paris. After the concert he sought Gottschalk and, placing his hands on his head, said, "Donnez moi la main, mon enfant; je vous prédis que vous serez le roi des pianistes!" ("Give me your hand, my child. I predict you will become the king of pianists!") Since Chopin was known to be chary of his praise, Gottschalk valued this more than all the *bravos* he had hitherto received. It is written that Gottschalk could play Chopin as no one else could save Liszt. Like Chopin, his life covered only the brief span of forty years.

L. Gaston Gottschalk, vocalist, wrote me many years ago that his brother Moreau played for Chopin, as related above, but that he did not think he ever took lessons from Chopin.

Gottschalk was skilled at improvisation. R. B. Espadero, speaking of his remarkable gift in extempore playing, said that "Gottschalk, at such moments, reminded him of those Hungarian ladies, who, in their enthusiasm for dancing, scattered and destroyed clusters of pearls and jewels negligently attached to their *chevelure*." In this he reminds me of Victor Hugo whose thoughts often flowed so fluently he could not always write them down.

### *As a Composer*

**G**OTTSCHALK was the first American to show a decided originality in what he wrote. Many of his earlier attempts, such as the *Dying Poet*, he published under the *nom de plume* of "Seven Octaves." Edward MacDowell, for the compositions of his youth, used the fictitious name of Edgar Thorne. Neither composer should be judged by these earlier attempts.

I shall never forget the effect produced by the matchless Teresa Carreño in the zenith of her power, when she played his *Apotheose*, *Grande Marche Solennelle*, *Il Tremolo* and *Pasquinade*. While some parts of the *Apotheose* are given over to technical display there are in this piece moments of exquisite melody surrounded with difficult, but most fascinating, ornamentations, like the fringes of a Persian shawl or the delicate lace-work on my lady's silk handkerchief. And what enormous virility and dash and sparkle did Carreño put into the *Pasquinade*, a piece which in my opinion Joseffy spoiled in what he called a concert arrangement. He did not comprehend the atmosphere in which Gottschalk wrote this piece — that is, the richness, the Tropics which is further expressed in his *Pasquinade* and *Bamboula*, the latter written on parts of a dance tune of the Voodoos, a song well-known in Louisiana.

THERE are beautiful ideas in *Souvenir de Lima*, reminiscent of Chopin — a reminder of spring violets and Southern zephyrs — not the Miami sort, however! “Ricordati” is a lovely little nocturne, redolent of the Tropics, a breath, as it were, from that warm clime — “sweet, luscious,” as someone has called it.

*Manchega* is an etude, a little tricky in the rhythm. *Dernier Amour* is another etude which has the peculiarity of having the melody falling on the second note of the triplets. *Pensee Poetique* someone has changed in one edition — and for the worse, of course. *Solitude* has a gentle beauty and *Printemps d’Amour* has the rosy freshness of love’s springtime, and reminds one of Sydney Lanier’s phrase, “Music is love in search of a word.”

There is *Marche de Nuit* which has fine crescendo and descendo effects respectively in the opening and close. Of this Gustave Choquet wrote, “when Gottschalk was in one of those drawing rooms where agreeable conversation on music and the arts alternates with the dance, it happened there was a reading from ‘Ossian,’ and, inspired and filled with poetic thought, he sat down at the piano. In spirit he sees *Fingal* and his companions. The hosts of heroes defile before him. The piano responds to his touch ... the war phalanx descends from the heights ... they approach! ... as a silver cloud, they glide away. They disappear.”

*Murmures Eoliens*, *La Savane*, *Berceuse*, *Le Bananier*, *Last Hope*, *Banjo*, *Paraphrase on “Il Trovatore,”* and *Il Tremolo* are a few of Gottschalk’s pieces. Anent this “Banjo,” Debussy must have heard this piece and had a lingering memory of it, unconsciously, when he wrote his “Minstrels.” Gottschalk composed upwards of a hundred piano pieces, besides his symphony called, “A Night in the Tropics,” several operas, and rarely beautiful songs, such as *O Loving Heart Trust On*. The words are given herewith in part:

*There are thoughts which seem to come from heaven  
To calm all pain, all pain and strife.  
As dew falls on the parched flow’r  
To nurture it to life.  
There comes to me a happy thought,  
One morn, when hope, seemed gone:  
It whispered low, in accents sweet,  
It whiskered low, in accents sweet,  
O loving heart, trust on, trust on.*

This song was sung by Adelaide Neilson.

*The Appeal to Virtuosos*

MADAME Annette Essipoff Leschetizky had several of Gottschalk’s pieces on her programs when she appeared in America. Madame Madeline Schiller, eminent concert artist, always “brought down the house” whenever she performed Gottschalk’s *Il Tremolo*. Madame Novaës, the great Brazilian pianist, plays Gottschalk’s concert transcription of the Brazilian national hymn.

Arthur Friedheim plays his *Banjo*, though I regret that in the final measures he uses the “ossia” version and not the main notation which Gottschalk himself used and which is far better. There is a posthumous piece called the *Second Banjo* purporting to be by Gottschalk. Somehow I do not think that Gottschalk wrote this — it is so inferior to the first *Banjo*, *Op. 15*, which is the best thing of the sort published. When Gottschalk played this in Philadelphia he was forced to repeat it three or four times in order to satisfy the audience.

*Gottschalk’s Banjo and the Farmer*

THE LATE William Bolling (the writer’s father) who, by the way, was the first to introduce in Virginia the matchless technical ideas of Dr. William Mason, used to play Gottschalk’s *Banjo*. This was along in the latter part of the 1860’s or first half of the 1870’s when Gottschalk’s name was on every tongue. He played this piece with a great deal of brilliancy

and used to tell of the effect it always had on an old farmer in one of the counties of Virginia when he was visiting the farmer's house.

The old gentleman being fond of music, my father thought the *Banjo* would please him; so he opened up with Gottschalk's *Banjo*. At one point in the piece the old farmer, without the least warning, suddenly jumped up in the center of the parlor floor, shouting and dancing with all his might. My father, naturally enough, was not only astonished but frightened at this unexpected out-burst of enthusiasm, and was greatly pacified when the old farmer, who really was a cultured and highly esteemed citizen, explained that he just couldn't help giving vent to his feelings in this manner. And ever afterwards when my father played this piece, the old farmer would, at a certain period in the piece, jump up and shout in ecstasies of delight.

Gottschalk's last appearance was in Rio de Janeiro. He had been feeling ill; yet, with his usual indomitable will-power had come on the stage. He dropped from his seat while playing his *Morte* or *She is Dead!* He lingered a while but succumbed on December 18, 1869. The Emperor of Brazil and all the city paid great homage to him as his body reposed in state. As to the reasons for his death one account has it that some mischievous students struck him in the back with a sand bag as he was leaving the theater, Gottschalk having incurred their animosity by rebuking them for disturbing his piano tuner. But, from all my readings, I believe he had appendicitis, a disease which was largely unknown to the medical fraternity of those days.



A MONUMENT TO GOTTSCHALK, IN GREENWOOD, BROOKLYN

When I mentioned *Last Hope* I neglected to call attention to those little musical ribbons, or, one might say, rainbow effects, toward the latter part of the piece; there is written over them another version with the words, “Comme l'auteur le joue,” that is, “as played by the composer” – a far more effective way, of which few have taken cognizance. This combination of the chromatic scale, arpeggio and double octave skip I give as played by Gottschalk:



Gottschalk, who was called the “Poet of the Piano,” apparently had two sides to his personality. One side he represented when he thundered over the keyboard like a roaring tropical storm; the other side he expressed when in his Cuban dances he pictured the fascinating West Indian girls dancing, their eyes rivaling in effect their scintillating jewels. Yet through it all you can perceive that sad minor vein to which I have already alluded. He indulged at times in that dew-drop touch so liked ; his scales were like pearls let loose from a charming Creole girl's necklace, the released beads rolling over a polished floor.

In March, 1842, before starting to Paris, Gottschalk gave a concert in St Louis' Hall, the largest at that time in New Orleans. Many years ago, when I was in the Crescent City, I met an elderly lady at the famous old St. Charles Hotel. She gave me some interesting bits about Gottschalk, saying he always came out smiling, and, after seating himself, would take off his white kid gloves, toss them on the piano, then dazzle and charm his audience. At the close of the concert the beautiful and fashionable girls of New Orleans would scramble for the stage, cut up the gloves into slips, each one taking a bit of the immaculate gloves as a souvenir!

Gottschalk was received with open arms in New Orleans, in 1853, his last visit there. Concert after concert was given. At one of them three hundred bouquets were thrown to him, and, to his great surprise, almost everyone had a ring attached to it. At the final concert, the appreciative people of New Orleans presented him with a “splendid gold medal which contained nine hundred dollars' worth of gold. It had upon one side an elegantly executed head and bust of Gottschalk, encircled in a wreath of laurels, and, upon the reverse, ‘A L. M. Gottschalk, ses Compatriotes de la Nouvelle Orléans, 11 Mai, 1853.’ ”

#### *Gottschalk and Patti*

ONCE WHEN the impresario. Strakosch, took Gottschalk and Adelina Patti to Havana, Cuba, the Havanese were so boisterous in their enthusiasm and applause that Patti was frightened at the unusual demonstrations and ran off the stage; Strakosch and Gottschalk had to exert all of their persuasive powers to bring her back. The great singer and the pianist divided honors in that island.

I think it was in Cuba, in one of the rural districts, that Gottschalk used to have his piano rolled out on the portico at nightfall. Here, amid the tropical air, redolent with the aroma of oranges, and surrounded by banana, pineapple and other plants and trees indigenous to that luxurious clime, the stars looking down from the dark blue canopy, he would sit and extemporize for hours.

When in the North, Gottschalk, says one writer, would seat himself at the piano — always more readily if a vase of his favorite violets and heliotrope stood near — and the improvisations that flowed beneath his skillful fingers came from a happy, loving heart, as breezes float through an orange grove.

Gottschalk never married. He said that “his only bride was music.” He did not like snow — said that to him it looked like death. George William Warren said Gottschalk used to bite his nails so much that the keys were often spotted with blood after a performance.

#### *As a Writer*

GOTTSCHALK. was aristocratic in his bearing, polite and affable, as is characteristic of the French. He spoke and wrote generally in French, but he also spoke English fluently, as well as Spanish and some other languages. He was well read and highly cultivated, as may be easily seen by reading his “Notes of a Pianist” (now out of print). In it one could find revealed many aspects about South America, absorbing to the attention.

He tells that once, when the family had gone to Pass Christian to avoid the scourge of Asiatic cholera, an old Indian stopped at the door of the cottage and watched inquisitively his hands running over the keyboard. While the family were at tea the old Indian slipped in and let his hand fall on the keys; at the sound produced, his face lit up. Then he began to pound with all his might and called triumphantly to Gottschalk's father, “You see. I never tried before, but I make more noise than he!”

In his "Notes" he tells of the filthy streets of Lima, only the vultures doing the work of scavengers! In Panama he saw the President of the State, "Sobrerano," a dark mulatto, who received him in his shirt-sleeves and slippers, in a filthy, miserable, little house. The President's mother, an old negress, went to market every morning, bare-footed, and attired in her chemise only! When in Spain the court pianist became afflicted with what the Bard of Avon calls the green-eyed monster, and intentionally slammed the carriage door on Gottschalk's hand, hoping to put it out of commission.



GOTTSCHALK WITH HIS MEDALS

### *The Pictures in this Article*

ONE OF the pictures appearing in this article is from an autographed photograph. Another shows Gottschalk as he appeared on the stage, with his breast covered with medals, presented to him by crowned heads and other celebrities. He said he did not care for all this, but that the public liked it and he wished to please the public. Gottschalk was a faithful, unswerving friend, and remained to the piano manufacturer and publishers who befriended him in his struggling days ever loyal. Though offered large sums for his compositions when he had attained the heights of fame, he could not be enticed from the publishers who had paid him \$30.00 apiece for three of his compositions when all other publishers had declined them; and the three works alluded to proved a gold mine to the publishers.

Another picture shows him seated beside the piano in a seemingly pensive mood, taken, no doubt, in the drawing-room of one of the fashionable families of New York, for the elite of Gotham vied with each other in their lavish display of social attention to the handsome and aristocratic Gottschalk.

I must here acknowledge my indebtedness to Miss Bertha Pollack who kindly took for me a picture of Gottschalk's monument, which, so far as I know, has never before been reproduced in print. This beautiful monument, in white marble, represents the figure of an angel, with one hand holding a trumpet of fame, the other an open book with the names of six of his compositions engraved on its leaves. It stands in Greenwood, Brooklyn. The pieces referred to are *Le Bananier*, *Last Hope*, *Murmures Eoliens*, *Marche de Nuit*, *Dernier Amour* and *Morte!*

At the foot of the angel is a lyre, its silver strings broken.

On the base of the monument are the words:

*In loving memory of  
Louis Moreau Gottschalk  
The Celebrated American Pianist  
And Composer.  
Born in New Orleans, Louisiana  
8<sup>th</sup> of May, 1829.  
Died in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,  
18<sup>th</sup> December, 1869  
Aged 40 years.  
His noble heart and generosity made him beloved by all.*

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#### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS ON MR. BOLLING'S ARTICLE

1. What circumstances of his life gave Gottschalk his love for the Tropics ?
  2. What European musicians especially admired Gottschalk?
  3. In what particular aspects of piano technic did Gottschalk excel?
  4. What moods did he express in his playing and in his composing ?
  5. For what pieces especially is Gottschalk deserving of fame ?
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*"I believe that art comes not of ability but of necessity. The practical artist can do something. What is innate within him he can develop, and if he only wills he can. What he wills - whether good or bad, shallow or profound, modern or antiquated-he can. But, above all, the artist must. He cannot influence what he produces; it depends not on his own will. But since necessity drives him, he can produce. He can even acquire what is not innate- manual skill, mastery of form, virtuosity. But such qualities are his own, not those of others. Genius, in other words, learns only from itself; talent chiefly from others. Genius learns from nature, from its own nature; talent learns from art." - Arnold Schönberg.*