

GOTTSCHALK: THE FIRST AMERICAN PIANIST.

BY EGBERT SWAYNE.

It is truly remarkable that the first pianist of American birth should have met with so unequivocal success in Europe and have made there and in all the Spanish countries of South and Central America a fame even greater than he enjoyed in his own country. Such, however, was the case with that fascinating personality, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, whose pieces now, a full generation after the death of their author, enjoy nearly or quite as wide a sale as while he was still alive and playing them.

Moreau Gottschalk was born in New Orleans, May 8, 1829, being about four months younger than William Mason, who has so long survived him. His family was mainly French, his grandfather and great grandfather having been among those exiled from St. Domingo at the time of the insurrection of the slaves. The love of music was ingrained in the family, and both Gottschalk's father and mother were cultivated people of wealth and refinement. The father is credited with speaking eight or nine languages, practically with equally facility. French and Spanish were mother tongues. The mother was a fine singer, and the little boy sat beside her day by day as she wrestled with operatic arias most in vogue, watched with a silence and an attention which were long mistaken for affection for his mother, but one day after she had been singing the aria from "Robert," and had gone out of the room, she was astonished to hear the piano played by an unpracticed hand. Thinking that some playful Indian of the neighborhood had found entrance to the house (for this was out at Pass Christian) she returned in alarm, only to find the three-years-old boy trying to discover the notes of the song. The mother remained quiet and waited the result.

The boy found the notes of the melody and most of those of the harmony. This was enough. Both father and mother were delighted with the promise of a musician in the family, and soon afterwards the regular lessons of the boy begun. By the age of seven he had been taught enough of the organ to accompany a piece upon one occasion in church, his teacher, the organist, being required in that piece for a tenor solo. The boy was of an intensely affectionate disposition and almost idolized his mother. When no more than three he conversed with an intelligence and elegance far beyond his years. Early he recognized his position as the eldest son. "When Moreau shall have brothers and sisters" he would say, "papa counts upon his working for them, and he must think beforehand that they will have a father in Moreau."

The musical education of the boy went on with such success that by the age of ten he was in demand to assist at a concert, where he seems to have been the star. The young artist played several pieces, but the one which was most successful was the "Lucia," by Henri Herz. He was now to be taken to Paris, but before his departure a farewell concert was arranged and carried through in a most brilliant manner. A monstrous bouquet was presented to the young artist upon the stage, and he turned to the stage box and exclaimed: "Mama, it is for you."

At Paris he had excellent letters of introduction and was at once received into the best houses, where for years he maintained his friendly footing. His piano teacher was Stamaty, who conducted his training with the greatest care. His biographer says:

"Moreau pursued his studies with great ardor. He possessed a very remarkable memory for music, being able to recollect hundreds of pages of it after one or two days' study. In literature, however, it was different, and he had more difficulty in retaining what he had

learned. Piqued by the remonstrances of his professor, he formed a system of musical mnemotechny, which he applied to history and geography. In the same way he applied it to the 'Art Poétique' of Boileau, and learned it by heart, and by this means soon became very proficient. At the age of seventeen he could converse with equal facility in English, French and Italian. He read Virgil, translated Dante, recited the 'Orientales' of Victor Hugo, and when twenty-two spoke Spanish like Gil Bias.

His first public concert in Paris was given in April, 1845, at the Salle Pleyel, by invitation. The hall was filled to overflowing. His sister narrates:

"The splendid playing of the young artist, at once elegant and vigorous, his expression, so pure and impassioned, and the gleams of decidedly originality, all combined to secure for him the most brilliant success. At the close of the concert the applause was immense, and a wreath of flowers was thrown to the young virtuoso. The graceful and modest manner with which he received it completed his success. Chopin, who was present, after the concert said in the artists' room, in the presence of his friends, putting his hands on his head, 'Donnez-moi la main, mon enfant ; je vous prédis que vous serez le roi des pianists'" (Give me your hand, my child, I predict that you will become the king of pianists.) These few and simple words Moreau valued more than all the bravos he had received, for Chopin was chary of his praise. From that hour he held his diploma as an artist.

"He had hitherto been known only from playing the compositions of others, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Thalberg and Chopin. He now became a composer himself. In 1846 he wrote his 'Danse Ossianique.' It was but a trifle, but gave evidence of his future greatness. This germ of originality revealed itself more and more in the pieces entitled 'Les Ballades d'Ossian,' or 'Le Lai du Dernier Menestrel', 'La Grand Valse' and 'La Grand Etude de Concert' which appeared in 1847.

"In the month of November, 1847, he wished to make his first trial in one of the provinces before a paying public, and like Liszt and Thalberg he chose for his debut the city of Sedan, which enjoyed a certain reputation for dilettanteism. He was not less fortunate than his illustrious predecessors, and was received with rapturous applause."

Later he played in Geneva and there was received with equal success. Julius Eichberg, the violinist, afterwards so long resident in Boston, wrote in the *Nouvelliste Vaudois* (Oct. 26, 1850):

"The gift of universality, such as is manifested among some chosen artists, is a rare gift. The domain of Art is so immense that to embrace it in its entirety, to be perfect in each of its branches, is a thing so phenomenal that one can understand why men of talent take up a specialty.

"Under this title we must consider the talent of Mr. Gottschalk, the young and celebrated American pianist, as a musical event. Go see him before his Erard piano, which is, parenthetically, the grandest and most formidable which has issued from this famous workshop, and which Erard has presented to him.

He will play for you the nocturne with its mysterious ways, the caprice with its eccentric bonds, the melody sadly insinuating, as Chopin or our friend Bovy-Lysberg might play it; ask

him for the concert-stueck of Weber, the profound sonata in F minor of Beethoven, or a Fugue of Bach, the metaphysician of Art, and he will play them in such a manner that our learned and celebrated professor, Mr. Pierre Wolff, so competent a judge, shall salute him with the title of grand artist.

“Grand artist truly, who knows no difficulty on his instrument, and whose playing recalls that of Liszt and Thalberg; who will touch you to tears in relating to you on his piano some dreamy legend of his distant country the ‘Bananier,’ the ‘Savane,’ or in making you behold the African splendors of the ‘Bamboula,’ that negro dance. Finally, marvellous composer and pianist, the meteor of last winter's season at Paris, fondled and feted everywhere, Mr. Gottschalk is twenty years of age.”

A year later Berlioz wrote a highly appreciative article upon his genius (*Journal des Débats*, April 13, 1851). And of similar quality was an appreciation by M. Adolf Adam, the famous composer and member of the Institute. His notice appeared in the *Assemblée Nationale*, April 29, 1851:

“Immediately after the solemnities of Easter, the series of mundane concerts recommenced with more fury than ever. Mr. Gottschalk has given at Pleyels’ a soiree for the benefit of the workmen who had sustained losses owing to the fire. Never was the reputation and vogue of an artist so promptly and generally established as that which Mr. Gottschalk enjoys today. And, nevertheless, there have been neither pompous puffs nor any sort of charlatanism. Mr. Gottschalk was born at New Orleans and came to Paris to finish his studies. He received lessons on the piano from that excellent professor, Mr. Stamaty, and studied harmony and composition with Mr. Maleden. All these labors were, however, only those of an amateur; but, unknown to himself, the amateur was already an artist, a great artist.

The memories of childhood recalled to him the negro airs, to which he had been nursed; he translated them upon the keyboard, and we have the ‘Bananier,’ the ‘Bamboula,’ the ‘Mancenillier,’ and those charming and simple melodies which art and science extract in the most distinguished way. Mr. Gottschalk has become the man a la mode, the indispensable pianist. But the public who idolize him are unmerciful to him. When Mr. Gottschalk has played a piece they cry ‘Bis’; through excess of courtesy the young pianist plays a new one; the audience, more and more enchanted, again demand ‘Bis,’ the performer plays again a new piece, which they again wish to hear repeated, and it would not be right because they would not stop before the inexhaustible complaisance of the author. We have seen this exchange take place four or five times in succession.

“Mr. Gottschalk has all the grace and charm of Chopin, with more decided character; less magisterial than Thalberg, he has perhaps more warmth; less severe than Prudent, he has more grace and elegance. And then, all his pieces are very short, and a great way always to please is not to wish to play too long.”

Verily a half century still finds the last point well taken.

The foregoing will give a sufficiently clear idea of the position the young pianist had acquired in Paris and in France. Late in 1851 he started for Madrid, having been invited to play there by the Queen, to whom he had dedicated a piece. In a letter dated Nov. 19, 1851, he gives a long and graphic account of his first appearance at the palace. As so minute a story of an affair of this kind is rare since the days of Mozart it is worth quoting in full. He says (*Madrid*, Nov. 17, 1851):

“The Queen has not yet decided to allow me to play before her. The nobility show themselves somewhat reserved towards me. It is said that the Queen, on hearing that I am an American exclaimed that she would never patronize an artist of that nation. Whether this be true or not, the rumor of it has spread abroad, and the courtiers dislike to show me too marked a courtesy for fear of irritating Her Majesty. I cannot, however, complain now; they are all excessively amiable towards me, and for this reason: His Excellency, the Duke of Riansares, husband of the Queen Dowager Christina, receives me frequently, and treats me in the kindest manner possible. The Queen Dowager has also sent me an invitation to the ball and supper which she is to give in her palace on the 19th inst., to celebrate the anniversary of the birthday of her daughter, Queen Isabella. The King, Queen, royal children and all the court will be present.”

Again (Madrid, Nov. 19, 1861):

“Hardly had I returned from putting my last letter in the postoffice when the secretary of His Excellency, the Duke of Riansares, came in haste to announce that Her Majesty the Queen wished to hear me play in her apartments that very evening, before a select audience, and without the ceremony of a public ordeal; the audience was to be the King, the Queen, the Queen Dowager, and the Duke. This is the greatest mark of honor that could possibly be conferred on me at this court, as I shall be the first artist ever admitted so freely to the private apartments of the palace.

“My secretary immediately donned his best coat, white kid gloves, etc., and escorted my two pianos to the parlor of Her Majesty. At 9 o'clock in the evening the King's pianist came for me, and in a quarter of an hour we were at the foot of the grand staircase of the palace.

“At the top of the staircase two sentinels stopped us. An officer asked our names, and then allowed us to pass on through a long gallery, splendidly ornamented, where at every twenty feet was stationed a halberdier enveloped in his mantle. At the end of the gallery an officer received us and introduced us into a grand saloon, decorated in a wonderfully brilliant style. Our cloaks were here taken from us. Two tall, fine-looking men, whom I ascertained to be servants, stood before the fireplace warming themselves and attracted my eye by the richness of their dress of blue cloth embroidered with gold, knee breeches, white silk stockings and court swords. A young nobleman on service, dressed in the richest court costume, covered with orders and ribbons, marshalled us into the antechamber, and requested us to wait. He went to inquire of the chamberlain on duty if we could be presented to Her Majesty. A moment after we entered the Salle des Gentilhommes, where five or six great officers of the state, in court costumes, were on duty awaiting Her Majesty's orders.

“We passed through still another grand saloon, and came at last to a square-shaped apartment, at one side of which was a door hidden by tapestry and opening into the room where Her Majesty was to receive us. The young nobleman who accompanied us made some private signal. He was answered and we were ushered in.

"At first I was completely dazzled by the flood of light which filled the saloon. A young man of strikingly elegant exterior stood before me, and said to me in good French, with a most pleasant smile and tone of voice: ‘Ah, Monsieur Gottschalk, how happy I am to receive a man of your talent. It is a fortune for Spain to possess a pianist whose wide-spread reputation is

based on such sure grounds.' This amiable and graceful young man was the King. A lady, of large size and certain age, but very dignified and courteous, rose at my entrance and saluted me with the utmost affability; the Queen Dowager. Behind her chair stood the Duke, her husband, whom I already knew.

The King, with true delicacy of feeling, in order not to oblige me to remain on my feet, all alone, before the royal presence -- as required by etiquette -- stood up near me the whole evening. I have never met with a more amiable or polished gentleman, having more happily the art of uttering words which go to the heart of an artist. A rustling of silk announced Her Majesty's approach. The King came near me and said, Monsieur Gottschalk, it is the Queen.' The tapestry over the door was raised, and Queen Isabella entered. She received my salutation with the most gracious smile.

"The Queen is very tall and stout. She has fine blue eyes, and hair of a chestnut color, and lips inclined to thickness. After a moment's silence Her Majesty said to me in Spanish: 'Whenever you are perfectly ready to play. Monsieur, I shall be happy to hear you.' I first played my duo for two pianos assisted by the King's pianist. At the finale I heard Her Majesty rise and place herself behind my chair. The King was to my right, leaning on the piano, the Queen Dowager a little farther off.

Several times I could hear the Queen exclaim in Spanish: 'I never heard anything so beautiful.'

"After the piece was over the King came and complimented me, and the Queen said to me: 'very good, Monsieur Gottschalk, that was very good.' The King requested the 'Bananier,' one of my own compositions, on a Creole air, that you in New Orleans must have heard very often. I play it,' said the King;

'it is a great favorite of mine.' I played the piece, and the Queen and her mother appeared to be charmed with it. The King asked me for another of my pieces. I played the 'Danse Ossianique,' which produced as flattering an effect as its predecessors. The Queen came to me, and addressed me a compliment conceived in the most gracious terms; she then asked me for another performance. I played the 'Moissonneuse.' The King said: 'That is good music. Monsieur Gottschalk; that is poetry itself. It will not be appreciated in Spain; the only pianists we admire here are those who perform acrobatic feats on their instruments.'"

The concert career of Gottschalk in America commenced with New York, March 1, 1853, and the hall was crowded. Nevertheless it appears from later entries in his journal that upon the entire series in New York he lost about twenty-four hundred dollars. This happened to follow hard after his father's refusal of an engagement of the young pianist with Barnum, who offered twenty thousand dollars for a tour of eighty-five concerts.

Accordingly Gottschalk went to New Orleans, where he was greeted with open arms by the enthusiastic amateurs. His concerts were a great success and a society presented him with a grand gold medal, so large and so rich that it is stated to have contained gold to the value of nine hundred dollars.

Later on Gottschalk returned to Europe, and then after certain successes there he visited the West Indies, where he was lost to sight of the public for several years. Perhaps his own account of this period of his life is sufficiently explicit for present purposes. Under date of New York, February, 1862, he writes:

"Here I am again, after an absence of six years, once more in New York! Six years foolishly spent, thrown to the wind, as if life were infinite, and youth eternal; six years during which I have roamed at random under the blue sky of the tropics, indolently permitting myself to be carried away by chance, giving a concert wherever I found a piano, sleeping wherever the night overtook me on the grass of the Savannah, under the palm leaf roof of a 'vaquero' with whom I partook of the 'tortilla' of the maize, coffee and bananas, and which I paid for on leaving in the morning with 'Dios se lo pague' (God repay you); to which he responded by '*Vaya usted con Dios' (God go with you)-- these two formulas constituting, in this savage country, the operation so ingeniously perfected among the civilized peoples which is called settling the hotel bill.

"When I became tired of the same horizon I crossed an arm of the sea and landed on a neighboring island, or on the Spanish main. In this manner I have successively visited the Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Swedish and Danish Antilles, the Guianas and the shores of Para. Sometimes the idol of an ignorant pueblo, to whom I have played some of their ballads. I have stopped for five, six or eight months among them, putting off my departure from day to day, and have at last, seriously resolved to go no further; or, detained in a hamlet where the piano was still unknown, by the ties of an affection with which my fingers had nothing to do (O, rare and blest affections),. I forgot the world, and lived only for two large black eyes which veiled themselves with tears whenever I spoke of beginning again my vagabond course, again living as the birds sing, as the flower expands, as the brook flows, forgetting of the past, careless of the future.

"I sowed my heart and my purse with the ardor of a sower who hopes to harvest an hundred ears for every seed, but the fields in which spent doubloons are harvested and the loves of the springtime again blossom were not yet ready for the husbandman, and my heart and purse, exhausted by double prodigality, one fine day were discovered to be dry.

"Then, seized with a profound disgust of the world and of myself, tired, discouraged, suspecting man and woman, I hastened to conceal myself in a desert, on the extinguished volcano of N__ where I lived for many months like a cenobite, with no other companion than a poor fool that I had met in a small island, who had attached himself to me, followed me everywhere, and loved me with an absurd and touching constancy which one only meets with in dogs and madmen. My friend, whose folly was quiet and inoffensive, believed himself to be the greatest genius in the world. He suffered, he said, from a gigantic and monstrous tooth (and it was by this that I recognized that he was insane, the other symptoms being found among too many individuals to be considered an abnormal trait of the human mind) -- a monstrous tooth which periodically increased and threatened to encroach upon the whole jaw. Tormented with the desire to regenerate humanity, he divided his time between the study of dentistry, which he learned for the purpose of constantly combating the fantastic progress of his molar, and a voluminous correspondence which he carried on with the Pope (his brother), and the Emperor of the French (his cousin), in which he pleaded the interests of humanity, and called himself the Prince of Thought, and raised me to the dignity of his illustrious friend and benefactor. In the midst of this intellectual ruin one thing only survived--his love for music. He played upon the violin, and a singular thing, although insane, he understood nothing of the music of the future.

"Perched upon the edge of the crater, on the very top of the mountain, my tavern overlooked the whole country. The rock on which it was built hung over a precipice whose depths were

concealed by cacti, convolvuli and bamboos. The one who had preceded me had surrounded this lower ground with a parapet and made of it a terrace, which was level with the bedroom. He had requested to be buried there and from by bed at night I could see by the moonlight the white tombstone a few steps from my window. Every evening I moved my piano upon the terrace, and there, in view of the most beautiful scenery in the world, which was bathed by the serene and limpid atmosphere of the tropic, I played for myself alone, everything that the scene which opened before inspired--and what a scene ! Figure to yourself a gigantic amphitheater, such as an army of Titans might have carved out in the mountains; to the right and left virgin forests, filled with wild and distant harmonies, which are like the voice of silence; before me twenty leagues of country whose magic perspective is rendered more marvellous by the transparency of the atmosphere; over my head the azure of the sky; below the declivities, surmounted by the mountain, descending gradually towards the plain ; further on the green savannas; then lower a gray point -- it is the town, and further on again the immensity of the ocean, whose line of deep blue forms the horizon.

“Behind me was a rock on which broke a torrent of melted snow, that turned from its course, leaped with a desperate bound and engulfed itself in the depths of the precipice, which gaped under my window.

“It was there that I composed “*Responds Moi*,” “*La Marche des Gibaros*,” “*Polonia*,” “*Columbia*,” “*Pastorella e Cavaliere*,” “*Jeunesse*” and other unpublished works. I let my fingers run over the keyboard, wrapped up in the contemplation of these marvels, whilst my poor friend, to whom I did not listen, divulged to me with childish loquacity the high destiny to which he proposed to elevate humanity. Do you comprehend the contrast between these ruins of intelligence that, like a clock out of order, strikes all its ideas at random, and the majestic serenity of that nature which surrounded me? I felt it instinctively, and my misanthropy softened me, became indulgent toward others and myself; I was cured of my wounds, my despair vanished, and soon the sun of the tropics, which gilds all things, dreams as well as fruit, gave me back my vagabond life, strong and confident.”

As shown by the date of the foregoing, Gottschalk was engaged in a concert tour through the Northern States during the very height of the civil war. His diary gives curious glimpses of the difficulties of travel, the preoccupation of all with the great contest then raging, and makes plain the sympathies of the artist himself, which despite birth in the South had been from the first with the North, he having been strongly antislavery in sentiment from early childhood.

This, however, is too long a story, and must wait another opportunity.