GOTTSCHALK AND HIS PERIOD

BY EMIL LIEBLING

SOME masters take their fame with them when descending to Avernus; with others, as in Tausig's case, their memory becomes legendary and they are canonized long after death; others again, Hummel, Dussek, Onslow, Moscheles, Thalberg, and Kalkbrenner, are consigned to somewhat undeserved oblivion; and Gottschalk seems to have suffered this unmerited and aggravating fate. It is the old story: popularity is only for the fleeting hour; lasting fame must rest on a more solid foundation than the frenetic plaudits of audiences or the sympathetic pleasantries of friendly contemporaries.

On the other hand, who can deny that many compositions, once invested with a subtle and irresistible charm, have no longer the power to move or interest us. The relentless onward march of time and events, the inevitable development and growth of the age, a disposition to throw aside the conventional and familiar,—all these factors explain the constant changes which mark popular taste and approbation.

The new candidate for public favor enlists universal sympathy, and mainly on this ground can the interest in the production of many modern works be explained or justified. One need not be a pessimist to asseverate that only those works which represent definite structural qualities and absolutely unchangeable forms are destined to endure the lapse of time; and to this reason certain works by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven will probably owe a longevity which their less fortunate brethren, who emphasized the purely emotional phases of music, will not enjoy.

An interesting article could be written on the purpose of the composer in composing at all; whether he simply writes because he must and cannot help it, and does so to please himself; or if he has the ulterior aim of satisfying the public. And the dear public! What does that pleasant and hydra-headed monster really enjoy? Does it not often suffer the long classical work, hoping for the piece of candy in the little effervescing encore? Has there really been the grand evolution or simply a revolution? Do we need a new musical scale based on quarter and eighth intervals, or enharmonic tones, as was lately suggested in an *Atlantic Monthly* article, or are we not devoid of composers who can create a broad stream of melody, followed by a logical and masterful development? Is the poor little harassed pygmy, the *leitmotif* which is invested, enlarged, and tortured through endless ramifications until it finally expires in the oboe, after having successively masqueraded through all the instruments of the orchestra, forever to replace melody?

There was in the long ago a suspicion that music and melody were synonymous, but we have bravely gotten over that mistaken idea. It is now much cry and little wool, and the alphabet of music, the diatonic scale, no longer suffices; we disregard the half tones, and proceed in whole intervals *à la Debussy et al.* Just as we have the problem play, so we must have problem music; and the turgid vaporings of modern masters have become the order of the day. Correct values have been shifted and we cultivate the bizarre, the exotic, and the unnatural. What we really need is new and original musical ideas, and not a change from the accepted major and minor scales; the alphabet is all right. Now say something new, gentlemen! There was a happy age when the gifted incumbent of the "Easy Chair" in *Harper's Weekly* enjoyed the early Thomas Concerts of the seventies at the old New York Terrace Garden, when program books explaining musical Puzzles were unknown, when people did not prate anent musical analysis and were in happy unconsciousness of the precise entrance of the coda, and when a concert was intended as an enjoyment and not a scientific excursion into the unknown. It was to such audiences that Gottschalk submitted his art. He enjoyed playing for them; they

loved him for it, and that was his reward; and so he traveled from city to city, leaving a charming record in his *Notes of a Pianist,* delightful reflections by the wayside, evincing keen judgment and power of observation in his comments on passing events. And periodically he would retire to his beloved isles of the West Indies, where life's waves beat more slowly against the shore of time, and where his own idiosyncrasies melted imperceptibly into the languid rhythms of the tropics. Gottschalk was impressionable to a degree, and strongly reflected his surroundings; he gave as much as he received and did his best; let us honor him for that.

His charming personality readily won all hearts; his attire suggested the Parisian dandy, yet devoid of affectation or foppishness. He always looked the part. At his concerts he invariably appeared in white gloves (in Contrast to the modern virtuoso, who handles his audience without gloves), and faultless dress. His playing, I am told, was fascinating, elegant, and extremely brilliant. While in Europe he played the classical répertoire, but found it expedient to exploit his own works in his native land. His compositions are of the same salon genre as those by Prudent, Goria, Ascher, Jaell, and other exponents of the French school; his technical resources are limited, and he depends upon melody, striking rhythms, and startling contrasts for his effects. Whether his art would have appealed as strongly to the present era is purely conjectural; he would very likely have grown with his opportunities and developed with his times.

From a portrait in the collection of William L. Hawes
LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

A critical survey of Gottschalk's piano works affords the following classification:—

1. Compositions directly traceable to local influences, and therefore reflecting the rhythm, coloring, and atmosphere of foreign nationalities: *Bamboula, La Savane, Le Bananier, Banjo, Souvenir de Porto Pico, Ojos Criollos, Réponds-Moi,* and *La Gallina.* Artistically of questionable value or importance, they are not quite unlike our modern ragtime, the stepchild of a ragged muse, the epilepsy of music; they reproduce negro themes and Cuban dance forms, and when it is all said and done, one asks: *cui bono?*

2. Transcriptions: — *God Save the Queen, Home, Sweet Home, Battle-cry of Freedom, Miserere from "Trovatore,"* and some other operatic arrangements. In these Gottschalk introduces some startling effects, seemingly novel, but in reality traceable to the Thalberg school.
3. Original compositions: — *Ossian, Serenade, Last Hope, Le Mancenillier, Marche de Nuit, Ricordati, Pasquinade, Pastorella e Cavagliere, Tremolo, Dernier Amour, Printemps d''Amour, Murmurs Eoliens, Berceuse, Scherzo, Solitude.* These works exhibit his talent and limitations alike. There is melody of the Nevin type, we find clever modulations in the introductions to the *Last Hope* and the *Marche de Nuit,* the *Pastorella e Cavagliere* abounds in attractive detail and tells a musical story exceedingly well; in the *Æolian Murmurs* Gottschalk even essays a canon; the *Scherzo* is constructed à la Chopin, but withal a valuable contribution.

Collectively speaking these compositions never transcend the limits of salon music. They show decided paucity of thematic development throughout, and often offend by a mere jingle which is ceaselessly reiterated throughout an entire opus, as in the *Last Hope* and the *Pasquinade,* which even the puissant Carreño cannot divest of its triteness. The *Tremolo* and *Dernier Amour* are études, technically pretentious, but musically *nil,* and the compositions of the *Dying Poet* type, published under the nom de plume Seven Octaves, are of the Leybach *Fifth Nocturne* sort. On the other hand a song, *Oh, Loving Heart, Trust On,* is melodious, dignified, well scored, and gives the promise of better things.

Gottschalk amused and pleased his period, but he did not educate his audiences. The logical sequel followed, the world advanced and laid him *ad acta.*

If there is a lesson in these observations, it points to the fallacy of making concessions to prevailing popular taste. Brahms, Wagner, Beethoven, simply follow the irresistible impulse to create; they are not concerned about emolument or temporal preferment. If their work finds recognition, well and good, and if not, they can well afford to wait. The lesser lights cannot wait for posterity, as they realize that posterity will never wait for them, hence the rush for immediate celebrity and tangible results.

Gottschalk was too much concerned about the present, hence he lost the future. At the very time when he plead the immaturity of American audiences as an excuse for the make-up of his programs, Mason was introducing the master works of chamber music in New York, and S. B. Mills played the Chopin, Schumann, Beethoven, and Liszt *Concertos* and the entire classical répertoire.

There is, after all, an unerring instinct which enables public opinion to pronounce the correct verdict, and perchance fifty years from now it will be decided in the case of the lamented MacDowell whether he will prove to have been merely a milestone or an epoch in music. Alas for the mutability of art, but such is inexorable fate, and only the new Titans who dwell on Parnassus escape inevitable oblivion.

Gottschalk was fortunate in rounding out his career in America before the great pianist-musicians, beginning with Rubinstein, set the pace; later on he would have had to cut bait or fish; somehow it seems difficult to assume that the dreamer of the Antilles could have rivaled the *Jupiter tonans* of the piano, as Mr. Upton designates Rubinstein in his latest charming book, *Musical Memories.* You cannot eat the lotus and drink Lethe and afterwards commit deeds of valor. Gottschalk met the world as *he* saw it, He found his reward in the plaudits of his audiences and his pleasures in the affection of his friends. All these he had to the fullest extent. Who can ask more?