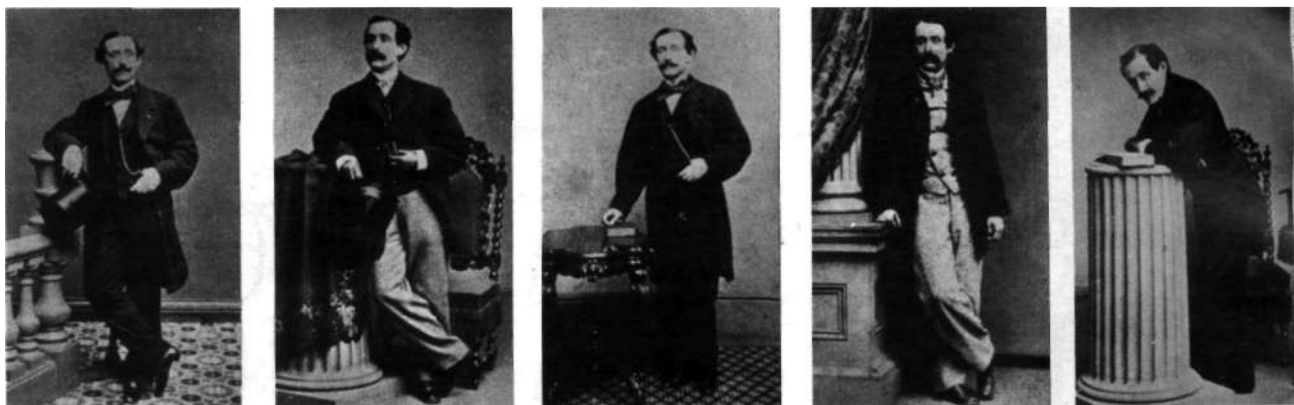




THE PATIENCE OF LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

Reviewer Robert Offergeld feels we have kept him waiting long enough

I HAVE been listening with great interest to a new and newsworthy Angel release called "The Union," which gives us Leonard Pennario in a peculiarly substantial program of Louis Moreau Gottschalk piano pieces. The album takes its title of course from Gottschalk's extraordinary Civil War battle piece of the same name, and, for reasons to be noted below, it may come as a surprise to those who imagine that the sentimental nostalgias of nineteenth-century America were as fragile as our grandmothers liked to pretend. I don't know whose rather sweeping sense of synecdoche it was at Angel that spotlighted in this fashion Gottschalk's most muscular example of patriotic Americana, but the notion turns out in the doing to have been an inspired one.

To begin with, the lively sense of news given off by this release has little to do with repertoire as such, for there are other versions currently available of everything we find here. What is not generally available elsewhere is Mr. Pennario's refreshing point of view about the nature of Gottschalk's music. He obviously has all the proper feelings about its unique historical context. But he just as obviously does not regard this context as its only or even its principal value, and it will help us measure the high merit of this approach if we briefly note the *kinds* of Gottschalk that Mr. Pennario plays.

The categories are mainly three:

(1) Three Afro-American pieces developed from New Orleans material for European or South American audiences (*Le Bananier*, *Bamboula*, *Pasquinade*).

(2) Three Afro-Hispanic pieces developed from West Indian sources for West Indian audiences (*Danza*, *Souvenir de Porto Rico*, *Ojos criollos* — not, as Angel has it, *Creole Eyes*, by the way; no authentic edition calls it that).

(3) Three pieces developed from United States material for United States audiences (*The Union*, *The Banjo*, *The Last Hope*).

Now it was the very essence of Gottschalk's posthumous bad luck that none of the three audience groups noted ever got to hear what he wrote for the other two. And the resulting ignorance in all quarters regarding the range of his *total* production is what permitted our massively Germanic musical establishment to dispose of Gottschalk's "case" without ever bothering to consult more than a fraction of the musical evidence.

One result of this cultural kangaroo court has been the intimidation in some degree of even those who now feel that Gottschalk got a rotten deal. After all, the verdict of German musicology was supported, and not reluctantly, by people like J. S. Dwight, the Harvard Academics, and Edward Mac-Dowell. So

perhaps Gottschalk's stuff is best approached as a collection of more or less charming period pieces. Maybe, after all, it is best to play it at a certain distance, as if between stylistic quotation marks — with nice clean lines, an ironic bow to Victorian elegance, and as little real sentiment as may be.

Possibly. But I'm happy to say that Mr. Pennario does not seem to think so. With his performance of *The Union* (he opens his program with it) he tackles the Gottschalk "case" at its most critical point, for even some of Gottschalk's partisans have felt uncomfortable about this allegedly opportunistic patriotic barnstormer. Mr. Pennario makes it clear that they needn't have upset themselves. In his hands *The Union* to begin with *sounds* perfectly gorgeous (which is more than can be said for a lot of far brainier American music that has been written since). One good reason for its sounding so grand is of course Mr. Pennario's highly sensuous and anything but monochromatic tone (Gottschalk's contemporaries always reached first for coloristic adjectives in describing *his* playing). Another good reason is his effortlessly wide dynamic range, which means that his virtuoso climaxes disclose no sense of strain. Still another is his interesting and completely successful exploitation of Gottschalk's predilection for high treble razzle-dazzle (Mr. Pennario somehow makes his modern Steinway sound as coolly crystalline as Gottschalk's famous Chickerings were supposed to). And to all this he adds a nice capacity for the kind of ringing and indeed heroic "large utterance" that the Romantic poets were so fond of.

ALL in all, what I am saying is that Mr. Pennario deliberately gives *The Union* the all-out, uninhibited, fully committed treatment. In the process, the hackneyed musical materials of the piece (*Yankee Doodle*, *Hail Columbia*, *The Star-Spangled Banner*) reveal a deeper expressive coherence than we suspected them of, and the parallel form of the piece discloses an inspired logic of its own. It turns out to be exactly what its early audiences *felt* it was — a knockout example of Civil War scenic art. I can't imagine anyone in his right mind wanting a note of it (or of Mr. Pennario's) changed.

Another of Gottschalk's bigger pieces, the exuberant *Bamboula*, has even more notes than *The Union* (it dates from the composer's youth in Paris). In particular, the *Bamboula* in some hands tends to wander and lose steam at the close. Not so in Mr. Pennario's version — and since this piece and *The Union* are the only ones that can present difficulties for modern ears in the matter of maintaining psychological tension,

the rest of his program, given his feeling for it, is really home free.

FOR obvious reasons, Gottschalk's most successful pieces — *The Banjo*, *Danza*, *Pasquinade*, *Minuit à Seville* — have also become the most familiar items in the current revival. It is gratifying to be able to report that Mr. Pennario's sympathetic view of their composer has given us some delightfully fresh images of the pieces we can least afford to take for granted.

This is particularly important until such time as a few more American pianists lose their fear of the nineteenth-century musical establishment. We may then hope to hear recordings of less familiar material, including some unpublished small masterpieces in the vein of Gottschalk's best Cuban Dances. I catalogued these pieces in 1969, and at the same time I mentioned my expectation that still others then unknown were likely to turn up.

So guess what. One such did that very thing, just six weeks before *these* lines were written.

Anyone out there listening?

GOTTSCHALK: *The Union*, Op. 48 (R.O. 269); *Danza*, Op. 33 (R.O. 66); *Pasquinade*, Op. 59 (R.O. 189); *The Last Hope*, Op. 16 (R.O. 133); *Le Bananier* (R.O. 21); *Bamboula*, Op. 2 (R.O. 20); *The Banjo*, Op. 15 (R.O. 22); *Souvenir of Puerto Rico* (R.O. 250); *Creole Eyes* [sic], Op. 37 (R.O. 185); *Midnight in Seville*, Op. 30 (R.O. 170). Leonard Pennario (piano). ANGEL S-36077 \$5.98.