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Cultural Commentary: Louis Moreau Gottschalk - America's Dashing Musical Ambassador

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Regensburg. . . continued

Many of the Jews took up temporary residence in Standtamhof just across the Danube from where they attempted to negotiate permission to return. Eventually they succeeded, but their communal way of life was destroyed never to be restored. The Jews continued to live and carry on business in Regensburg largely because they served necessary economic roles but always on sufferance and at the pleasure of the city government and the Christian citizens.

It is well known that the European anti-Semitism which reached its murderous culmination in the Nazi era had its roots in the Middle Ages. Perhaps less well known, however, is the fact that prejudice against the Jews was by no means universal during the medieval period, even in Germany. Between 1100 and 1350, the Jews of Regensburg were not only tolerated, but were also granted the same protections accorded to Christian citizens, often in defiance of papal edicts, emperors' decrees and the exhortations of religious fanatics. Today we are experiencing a resurgence of interest in the Third Reich, stimulated by movies like *Sophie's Choice* and the publication of Hitler's spurious diaries, as well as by our continuing fascination with some of history's most evil men. But as we recall the horrors of the Nazi period, we should remember also the twentieth-century counterparts of the citizens of Regensburg, those Christians who hid Jews in their attics, helped them escape to England, or even adopted Jewish children. In these Christians, as in their Regensburg forebears, the sense of justice overcame the vicious prejudice around them, and they kept this humanitarian spirit alive in a dark age.

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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Louis Moreau Gottschalk: *America's Dashing Musical Ambassador*

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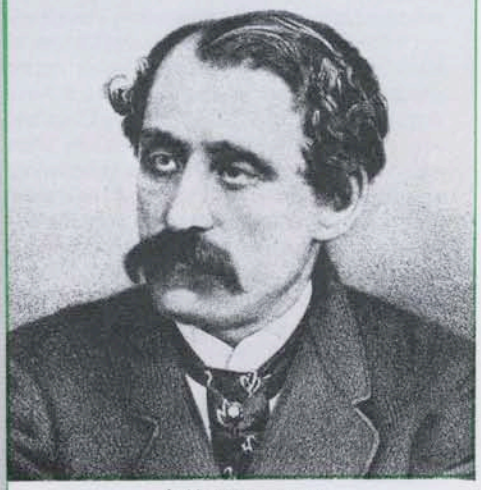

L. M. GOTTSCHALK

Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829 - 1869), the first American pianist and composer to achieve international fame, can truly be described as a musical ambassador. He toured France, Switzerland, Spain, the U.S., Canada, the West Indies and South America. But ironically, although Gottschalk's compositions and piano virtuosity made a great impact abroad, his work received an unenthusiastic and in some cases hostile reception from the musical establishment in his native country.

Gottschalk was born in New Orleans of Jewish and Creole parents and was reputed to have been one-eighth Black. His keyboard talent was recognized early: he began taking piano lessons at the age of three, and at seven he substituted for his teacher as organist at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. When he was only twelve, the child prodigy left New Orleans to go to Paris for further study.

In Paris, Gottschalk was introduced to the leading composers and writers of the day. He studied piano with Sir Charles Hallé, who founded the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, England, as well as with Camille Stamity, a pupil of Kalkbrenner and Felix Mendelssohn, and Camille Saint-Saëns. With Pierre Maleden he studied composition. In the salons of Paris he became acquainted not only with other musicians, such as Chopin, Berlioz, Offenbach and Bizet, but also with writers like Hugo, Dumas Pere, Gautier and Lamartine.

In probably the greatest period of pianists, Gottschalk was compared favorably with such paradigms of piano artistry as Chopin, Liszt and Thalberg. His playing was described somewhat extravagantly by contemporaries as resembling a "cascade of pearls," and "glittering stardust": he had "the golden touch." The Romantic Period's emphasis on the subjective and emotional quality of music, coupled with a greater freedom of form, molded Gottschalk's artistry. Berlioz praised him as "one of a very small number of those who possess all the different elements of the sovereign power of the pianist, all the attributes that environ him with an irresistible prestige." Chopin also praised him: according to Gottschalk's sister, after hearing her brother's performance of Chopin's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in E Minor*, the Polish composer proclaimed that Gottschalk would become "king of the pianists."

In addition to winning renown for his piano virtuosity, Gottschalk also developed a reputation as a composer. His piano works introduced Europeans to the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of the New World. Three of his most popular compositions, "Bamboula," "La Savanne" (Ballade Creole), and "Le Bananier," (Chanson Negre) were based on New Orleans Negro folk tunes. According to the French composer Hector Berlioz, "Everybody in Europe now knows 'Bamboula,' Le Bananier,' . . . 'La Savanne' and twenty other ingenious fantasies in which the nonchalant grace of tropical melody assuages so agreeably our restless and insatiable passion for novelty."

Gottschalk returned home and travelled by stage coach and railroad car throughout the United States and Canada. He was the first concert pianist of international stature to perform in many small towns in the East, middle and far West.

Gottschalk's kind of recital was somewhat different from those of our own day. The program was highly varied, and often included a few opera selections, a movement from a concerto, a symphony, a play, a juggler, and some piano solos. As Gottschalk was the visiting artist, he was expected to include the local talent on the program. If a work pleased the audience, the artist was expected to repeat it -- many

times. It was understood that all the profits of the evening went to the artist, and if he triumphed, he might be crowned on stage with a laurel wreath.

Another type of program which delighted audiences was the multiple piano program. For these events, the stage held anywhere from two to forty pianos and gave the local amateurs an opportunity to play. In Rio de Janeiro in 1869, the *Anglo-Brazilian Times* reported a concert that included the *National Hymn* played by forty young ladies on thirty-five pianos.

Gottschalk participated in some of these large-scale concerts. During a visit to Rio de Janiero, he was given command of the Army, Navy and National Guard bands. Eight hundred performers were under his baton. According to Gottschalk's journal, the group comprised "eighty-two snare drums, fifty-five strings, sixteen bass drums, six flutes, eleven piccolos, sixty-five clarinets, sixty trumpets, sixty trombones, fifty-five saxhorns, fifty tubas and French horns -- assembled into nine bands of the National Guard, four of the Imperial Navy, one of the Army, one of the War Arsenal, and an orchestra of seventy 'professore' and two German orchestras." Gottschalk instrumentated fifteen thousand pages of music, working with eleven copyists right up to the performance. However, only by repeating the program two days later, at reduced prices, could he hope to gain from this inordinate expenditure of energy, money and time.

Wherever Gottschalk went, it was necessary for him to secure sponsors, and his musical appeals to patriotism served him well in Europe. In Switzerland, his arrangements of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* made him popular. In Spain, his *El Sitio de Zaragoza* (The Siege of Saragossa), a *Symphony for Ten Pianos* based on Spanish airs, endeared him to that country. These works included all the fanfares and battle sounds traditional in this type of composition. Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory* and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* were of the same genre.

Returning to this hemisphere, Gottschalk continued his earlier success by arranging the national airs of the Americas. In 1862 he dedicated *The Union* to General George McClellen, and performed it in the North and East during the Civil War. In 1864 he played this piece for President and Mrs. Lincoln. *The Union* is a combination of *The Star Spangled Banner*, *Hail Columbia* and *Yankee Doodle*, with the appropriate imitation of drums, bugles and guns in thundering octaves. Capitalizing on the success of this formula, Gottschalk is said to have replaced the American anthems with Spanish airs, calling the result the *Grand National Symphony for Ten Pianos: Bunker Hill*. In Chile, he called it *Solemne Marcha Triumful a Chile*; in Uruguay, *Marche Solenelle;* in Brazil, *Grand fantasie sur l'hymne national bresilien.*

Despite his success abroad, Gottschalk was not greatly admired in the U. S. In Boston, in October 1853, he was severely criticized by music critic John S. Dwight for not playing the standard classical repertoire, by which he meant the works of Beethoven and the other German masters. Gottschalk, whose training had been in Paris and who was French in taste and manners, found himself in a country dominated by German musical culture. In Boston, all the symphonies of Beethoven had been performed except the first, with the ninth having been played twice. Dwight was particularly proud of an open letter to his newspaper from the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* of Leipzig, complimenting Boston on its musical accomplishments. Gottschalk's salon works and opera transcriptions were not substantial enough for the people who wanted to hear Beethoven. Thus his music, which in time would emerge into jazz and musical comedy, as well as American folk songs, Afro-Cuban melodies and spirituals, was ignored by critics of that time.

In the West Indies and South America, however, no critic like Dwight existed, and Gottschalk's influence on the musical life of those countries was enormous. He performed his opera transciptions and arrangements of native songs and dances to the delight of audiences who were described as "primitif" and "ardente." The pianist's compositions were the inspiration of such composers as Ignacio Cervantes (1847-1905) of Cuba and Juan Morel Campos (1852-1891) of Puerto Rico. These Afro-American and Afro-Cuban elements were later to evolve and be developed by such diverse Black American composers as Scott Joplin (1868-1911), Thomas Turpin (1873-1922), Duke Ellington (1899-1974), T. J. Anderson (1928 - present), and Hale Smith (1925 - present), to name only a few.

Commenting on the arts in society, Harold Cruse, author of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, states "the cultural arts are the mirror of the spiritual condition of a nation and the use of a nation's social ingredients in its art reveals a great deal about how a nation looks at itself." The fact that Louis Gottschalk and his music had to go to Europe and South America for recognition is an indication of the failure of American society to accept music not recognized as in the classical tradition. Even in our own times, the musical descendants of Gottschalk have had difficulty gaining acceptance from the establishment. In 1965, for example, the Pulitzer Prize Committee declined to award Duke Ellington its prize for excellence in American music, despite Ellington's forty years as a musician of international renown.

In recent years, indigenous American music has received more serious attention. William Bolcom, American pianist and composer, comments on the importance of one's own national music: "I am not a nationalistic composer, or pianist or musician. By accident of birth, however, I am an American . . . I have been fascinated by what that means. One can't be bound by it, but one ignores it at one's peril, for then the musician is fated to be nothing by a dispossessed European. Only by understanding it and accepting it can we transcend being American to make music that is truly universal."

A century before, Louis Gottschalk had also been fascinated by the unique qualities of native American music. After a career abroad and years of obscurity, he is still unrecognized as a major contributor to our national musical heritage.