

# LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

## The First American Pianist and Composer

[Students of American music are aware of the important place which the subject of the following article occupies in the record of music in the nineteenth century, especially prior to the war between the States. Gottschalk's career is full of romantic incident and fascinating story. His youth, spent in the great art centre, Paris, brought him in contact with the best minds of the time and made of him a finished cosmopolitan as well as an American artist, for such he is considered in history. —THE EDITOR.]



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**L**OUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK, the virtuoso and composer, and the first American to achieve European fame by his music and his performance, was the child of romance.

In the massacre which followed the St. Domingo insurrection in June, 1793, Commandant Antoine de Bruslé, Chevalier of the Order of St. Louis, was killed, while his son, Captain de Bruslé, escaping, fled to Jamaica. Here, in January, 1800, he contracted marriage with Marie Deynant, who had likewise escaped from St. Domingo with her father, Lieutenant Deynant, and her mother. After the marriage Captain de Bruslé, with his wife and her family, settled in New Orleans, where their daughter, Aimée Marie de Bruslé, was born. Remarkable for her beauty and wit she was, in 1828, married, at the age of fifteen, to Mr. Edward Gottschalk, a Londoner by birth and a broker of reputed wealth. In New Orleans, on the 8th of May, 1829,

Louis Moreau was born. He was named from an uncle of his mother's, the Count Moreau de l'Islet, and as Moreau he was known to his friends and family.

From his father Gottschalk inherited the dignity of the English manner which, joined with the warm-heartedness of his Creole mother, gave him peculiar charm. To his mother he was tenderly attached, and from her he inherited his sensitive nervous organization, his quick sympathy, his wayward impulsiveness, and his generous, passionate nature, — all that made him the brilliant, luxurious child of the tropics that he was.

### EARLY EDUCATION

Delicate and precocious from his birth, he early displayed his love of music, which was stimulated by the singing of his mother. At three he was discovered standing on a stool picking out on the piano the melody he had heard his mother sing a little while before. Soon after he was given a teacher. At six he was studying the violin and organ. At ten he made his first public appearance at a charity concert. Later his teacher, Letellier, declared that he had nothing more to give the boy, and advised that he should be sent to France for further study. Urged by others also, his family consented, and in April, 1842, Moreau gave a farewell concert before a brilliant assemblage. In May, 1842, a few days before his twelfth birthday, he sailed on the ship "La Taglioni" bound for Havre. He arrived in Paris in July and was taken to Zimmermann, director of the piano classes at the Conservatory, who refused to receive the boy, without even hearing him, on the ground that "America was only a country of steam-engines." Curiously Gottschalk was called ten years later to sit as a judge on the same bench with Zimmermann at the *Concours* of the Conservatory.

### BEGINS HIS ARTISTIC CAREER

The young American was taken to Charles Hallé, with whom he studied for a few months, when he went to Camille Stamaty, then the foremost teacher in Paris. He studied composition with M. Maleden, who, with Stamaty, was also the teacher of Saint-Saëns. While he ardently pursued his musical studies, the languages were not neglected. Through his grandaunt, the Marquise de la Grange, he found *entrée* to some of the notable society of Paris. In the salons of the aristocracy his playing and brilliant improvisations, together with his natural elegance of manner, made him welcome. In April, 1834, the youth of sixteen made his first public appearance in a concert he gave with great success at the Salle Pleyel. Many artists were present, among them Chopin, who said at the close of the concert, "I predict you will become a king of pianists."

In 1846 he wrote his *Danse Ossianique*, and during convalescence from a long and serious illness he wrote *Bamboula*, Op. 2, *Le Bananier*, Op. 5, and *La Savane*.

During the summer of 1848 he went on a pedestrian tour through the Vosges. Returning to Paris he gave a series of brilliant concerts with Berlioz. He also frequently gave concerts at the Salle Pleyel, assisted by his friends Marmontel, Le Couppey, Ascher, Offenbach, and other artists. A strong friendship existed between Pleyel, the great piano maker, and Gottschalk. On March 25, 1850, the workshops of Pleyel & Co. were burned, and at a concert Gottschalk gave on April 28 for the benefit of the workmen, he achieved a triumph. It was after this *soirée* that Adolphe Adam wrote of him, "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."

## EUROPEAN SUCCESS

In May, 1850, wearied with overwork, he went to Switzerland, where, after recovery from an illness, he gave concerts in many places with enormous success, continuing his sojourn through the year. Returning to Paris he renewed his former successes. His position at the time may be indicated by Hector Berlioz's words in the *Journal des Débats* of April 13, 1851: "Gottschalk is one of the very small number who possess all the different elements of a consummate pianist, all the faculties which surround him with an irresistible prestige and give him a sovereign power. There is an exquisite grace in his manner of phrasing sweet melodies and throwing off light touches from the higher keys. The boldness, brilliancy, and originality of his playing at once dazzle and astonish, and the charming simplicity with which he renders simple things seems to belong to another individuality distinct from that which marks his thundering energy."

Gottschalk's fame having reached Spain, the queen, to whom he had dedicated *Le Bamboula*, invited him to visit Madrid. In company with his father the pianist visited the south of France, parting from him at Bordeaux, where he spent the months of June and July. In November, 1851, Madrid was reached. Here with court and people he triumphed. Visiting the chief cities of Spain he did not return to Paris until about December 1, 1852. He remained there with his mother and sisters for three weeks, and on December 21, 1852, sailed from Havre for New York, where his father awaited him. Paris never saw him again.

## IN THE UNITED STATES

Gottschalk arrived in New York, January 10, 1853, and gave his first concert in the ball room of Niblo's on February 10, followed by a second concert six days later. The first was an artistic success, though the receipts did not equal the expenses; the second was in Gottschalk's words "a fiasco." However, Barnum offered him \$20,000 and all expenses for a year's engagement. This was refused, and the pianist, with his father, went to New Orleans, stopping on the way at Philadelphia, where, on March 1, he played to a crowded house with tremendous applause. Reaching his birthplace the enthusiastic Louisianians received him in triumph. From New Orleans Gottschalk crossed to Cuba, where he was warmly received.

He returned to New York, and a concert tour in New England followed. His first appearance in Boston was at Music Hall, October 18, 1853. Word reached the pianist just before the concert that his father was dying, but rather than disappoint the audience Gottschalk resolved to play. The harsh criticism of John S. Dwight on this concert severely stung the pianist, fresh from his triumphs in Europe. This bitterness, coupled with the realization that his mother and six sisters and brothers in Paris were now dependent upon him, and that the debts of his father's insolvent estate were his to be paid, combined to give him a feeling toward Boston's reigning critic which his subsequent successes there never effaced. This first New England tour, moreover, proved a series of losses.

After visiting New Orleans again he concertized in the Middle States, returning to New York in the fall of 1855. Besides occasional concerts in neighboring cities, he gave in the winter of 1855-56 no less than eighty concerts in New York City.

## IN THE TROPICS

On November 2, 1856, his beloved mother died in Paris, suddenly, of apoplexy. Before the year closed Gottschalk returned to the Antilles in company with Adelina Patti, then fourteen years of age. He dallied in the fragrant islands of the West Indies for six years, in his own words, "Six years madly squandered, scattered to the winds, as if life were infinite and youth eternal. Six years in the space of which I have wandered at random beneath the blue skies of the tropics,

yielding myself up indolently to the caprice of fortune, giving a concert wherever I happened to find a piano, sleeping wherever night overtook me — on the green grass of the savannah or under the palm-leaved roof of the vaguero, who snared with me his corn-tortilla, coffee, and bananas. When at last I became weary of the same horizon, I crossed an arm of the sea and landed on some neighboring isle or on the Spanish Main. Thus in succession I have visited all the Antilles, the Guianas, and the coasts of Para. At times, having become the idol of some obscure pueblo, I would pitch my tent for five, six, eight months, deferring my departure from day to day until finally I began seriously to entertain the idea of remaining there forevermore. Abandoning myself to such influences, I lived without care, oblivious of the past, reckless of the future, and sowed both my heart and my purse with the ardor of a husbandman. The result of my prodigality was that one fine morning I found myself a bankrupt at heart, with my purse at ebb tide. Suddenly disgusted with the world and myself, weary, discouraged, mistrusting men (ay, and women, too), I fled to a desert on the extinct volcano of M--, where for several months I lived the life of a cenobite, with no companion but a poor lunatic who had attached himself to me. It was at this period that Strakosch wrote to me offering an engagement for a tour of concerts throughout the United States. I hesitated an instant, one sad look was cast upon banished days, I breathed a regret, and sighed. The dream was over. I was saved."



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### IN THE STATES AGAIN

Reaching New York in February, 1862, he made his reappearance in Irving Hall on February 11, the anniversary of his first concert in America. He was assisted by Brignoli, Susini, Mancusi, and Mollenhauer, the 'cellist. On April 14, 1862, he first appeared in Chicago in company with Carlotta Patti, George Simpson, Carl Bergmann, and others. In the three years following Gottschalk gave more than eleven hundred concerts throughout the North, the West, and Canada. The Civil War shut him out from the South.

### THE END IN SOUTH AMERICA

Engaged by Muzio to go to California, he sailed from New York April 3, 1865, and entered the Golden Gate, April 27. After many concerts in California he took passage for South America, and sailed from San Francisco, September 18, 1865. At Panama he boarded the steamer for Peru, where he gave about sixty concerts.

In Chili he was showered with honors. From January to December, 1868, he was in Buenos Ayres and Montevideo. On May 10, 1869, he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, and was at once invited to the palace by the Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro. The enthusiasm Gottschalk aroused in Rio was indescribable. He wrote, "The emperor is very fond of my compositions, especially *Printemps*

*d'Amour* and *Ossian*. My *Morte*, which is my favorite now, has had here, as in La Plata, *un succès de larmes*.

On October 24, 1869, Gottschalk sent the manuscript of *Morte* to his publishers, writing, "I believe it to be my best effort for years. Ever since I have played it it has been encored, and a great many women have hysterics and weep over it."

In August, 1869, he was so stricken with yellow fever that his physicians gave him up. He partially recovered his strength, continued to appear in public, and on November 24 conducted, at the opera house, the opening concert of a great music festival he had organized. This proved to be his last concert. The following day he was too ill to rise from his bed, and when evening came, rather than disappoint his audience, although suffering intense pain, he ordered his carriage and went to the opera house. The thronged house greeted him with shouts of welcome. On taking his place at the piano to play *Morte* he fell unconscious in a swoon and was taken home. On the 8th of December he was removed to Tijuca, a plateau a few miles from Rio. He gradually sank, and at four o'clock on the morning of December 18, 1869, breathed his last.

"His funeral became a great public manifestation. After many difficulties the body was brought to New York and services were held in St. Stephens', October 30, 1870. His monument stands in Greenwood Cemetery.

### HIS CHARACTERISTICS AS A MUSICIAN

Señ. N. R. Espadero, of Havana, who enjoyed the artist's friendship for eighteen years, states that, owing to a feverish activity, his numerous journeys and concerts, many of Gottschalk's compositions were never committed on paper. "Indeed, the published pieces are but as a shadow of his entire creations. It was necessary to persuade him." Yet he left besides the two operas, *Charles IX* and *Isaura de Salerno*, never performed, two symphonies, *La Nuit des Tropiques* and *Monte-vidio*, *Gran Marcha Solemne* (to the Emperor of Brazil), *Escenes Campestres Cubanas* and *Gran Tarantella* for orchestra, a dozen songs, and more than one hundred and twelve piano compositions.

Gottschalk was a poet of his instrument. Marmontel placed him between Liszt and Thalberg. For clearness and limpidity of touch, with unerring precision, for impetuosity of style, combined with dreamy delicacy, he had few rivals. He was a great (*Continued on page 466*)

virtuoso of individual type and shone best in the performance of his own works. Under the warmth and delicacy of his dreamy nature flowed an undercurrent of sadness that tinged all his music, which, like the man himself, was redolent of the tropics. Slight as are many of his compositions, and no one knew this better than himself, he struck a deeply individual note, and considering the period and conditions under which they were written, we cannot but admire their originality and even the daring and modernity of some of the passages.

As a pianist of the true virtuoso type Gottschalk was, in his own field, preeminent; as a composer he struck a truly individual note; and as a man he was, to the few to whom he really disclosed himself, of rare charm and loveliness.