

The Bamboula, an american pianist

(Article extracted from « La France Musicale », march 1849
(translated by Robert.E.Peterson, 1881)

Who does not know the 'Bamboula ?' Who is there who has not read the description of that picturesque, exciting dance, which gives expression to the feeling of the negroes ? Joyful or sad, plaintive, amorous, jealous, forsaken, solitary, fatigued, ennuied, or the heart filled with grief, the negro forgets all in dancing the 'Bamboula.' Look down there at those two black-tinted women, with short petticoats, their necks and ears ornamented with coral, *le regard brûlant*, dancing under the banana tree; the whole of their bodies is in movement; further on are groups who excite and stimulate them to every excess of fancy ; two negroes roll their active fingers over a noisy tambourine, accompanying it with a languishing chant, lively or impassioned, according to the pose of the dancers. Little negroes, like those on the canvas of Decamps, are jumping around the fiddlers ; it is full of folly and delusion. The 'Bamboula' is at its height.

This attractive dance has frequently furnished a theme for instrumental compositions, which, however, have not obtained all the success that we expected from them. The Creole airs transported into our salons lose their character, at once wild, languishing, indescribable, which has no resemblance to any other European music ; some have thought that it was sufficient to have the chants written down, and to reproduce them with variations, in order to obtain new effects : not so, the effects have failed. One must have lived under the burning sky from whence the Creole draws his melodies; one must be impregnated with these eccentric chants, which are little dramas in action ; in one word, one must be Creole, as composer and executant, in order to feel and make others understand the whole originality of 'Bamboula.'

We have discovered this Creole composer; an American composer, *bon Dieu!* Yes, indeed, and a pianist composer and player of the highest order, who as yet is only known in the aristocratic salons of Paris, and whose name will soon make a great noise. We have German pianists, Hungarian, Russian, Italian pianists. We have ended by discovering French pianists ; and now we have an American pianist. His name is Gottschalk. Close the lips, advance the tongue, appear a little like whistling, and you will have the key to the pronunciation. Gottschalk is already a marvellous pianist; his school is that of Chopin, Thalberg, and Prudent united together. He has taken from one his lightness, grace, and purity; from the others, their unrestrained passion and their attractive brilliancy ; and I can assure you that for

a long time a pianist so original, so sympathetic, has not been seen. Gottschalk has composed several pieces, among others, one which is a *chef d'œuvre*. This piece he calls 'Bamboula,' I have heard this 'Bamboula' ten times; in the salons of Mme. Merlin, of Mr. Orfila, of the Marquis d'Albucenza, etc., and ten times the young artist has had to repeat it amid the warmest applause.

On these words, *Quand patate la cuite na va mange li, na va mange li*, the Creoles chant a short, but poetic and nonchalant motive. Gottschalk has taken the first four bars of this motive, and on this theme has embroidered all sorts of charming fantasies. The pianist vigorously attacks the Creole chant, then follows a second motive in *f sharp* of an original and singing rhythm. The accompaniment he makes very *staccato*, the middle chant, played languidly, contrasts in a strange, but deliciously poetic way, with the bass, which always energetically marks the rhythm.

On the third chant, in *b flat*, comes a variation with a *crescendo fortissimo*, and directly afterwards the same motive in *b flat* reappears, and progressively disappears ; hardly is it finished, when the *rentrée* is made by a dazzling trait *dash*, which I can only compare to a cascade of pearls; this trait very beautifully brings back the motive in *d flat*. After this succeed variations in triplets, made with wonderful lightness. The theme in *b flat* reappears with a *pianissimo* variation, whose harmonies are of unrivalled richness. The pianist immediately falls back on the chord of *d flat*, escapes by an ascending *fusée*, and immediately returns to the theme, *b flat minor*, by a descending scale made with prodigious agility. But why continue the analysis of this 'Bamboula ?' How give with the pen even an incomplete idea of it ? I would say, and would repeat it a hundred times, that there are new variations, motives in *b flat*, or in *d flat crescendo, forte*, traits, arpeggios, etc. 'Bamboula' is a musical poesy which defies analysis, and Gottschalk is a pianist whose name is inscribed in the front of popular favour. Behold his horoscope ! He will march alongside of the stars of the piano, in the midst of applauses and triumphs.