

THE AMERICAN QUALITY IN THE MUSIC OF LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK

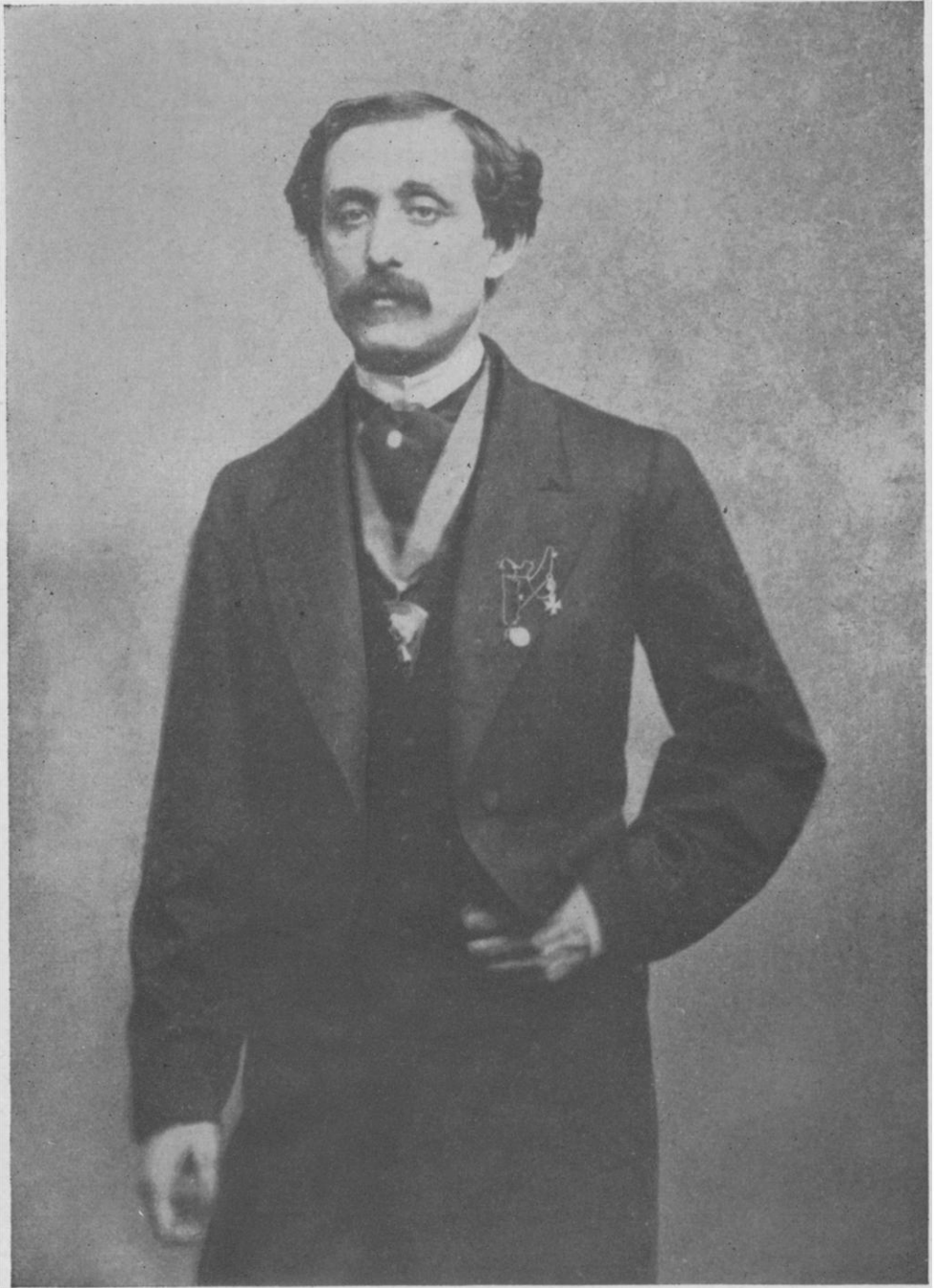
By CARL E. LINDSTROM

IF A MERCIFUL but dishonest researcher could only argue persuasively that Louis Moreau Gottschalk did not write "The Last Hope", he might do the cause of American music so great a service as to wipe out the stain of his mendacity. Gottschalk might have lied about it, but didn't; even in his own time the swooning composition was so conspicuous an object in music-shop windows that he was nettled, but he never denied parenthood. And so a distinctive American composer sinks into the rapidly closing pit of oblivion, anchored by the notoriety of one of his tawdriest compositions.

Gottschalk was one of those sensitive souls who show their contempt of the world by encouraging its misjudgment. He liked applause but expected the public to seek out and perceive his worth through any screens or barriers he chose to set up. During his lifetime he did little to dispel the easily acquired notion that he was a fop. Though he had a passionate devotion to his native America, he seldom spoke English; he refused to play "Dixie" in Canada, being a Unionist at heart, and, Southerner though he was, he wept when Lincoln died; in France he was an American who played fascinating Creole compositions of his own and Beethoven's later Sonatas. In the United States, instead of attempting to improve the execrable taste of the period, he compromised utterly by playing "Murmures Éoliens", "The Dying Poet", or operatic fantasias, and spoke patronizingly of Beethoven and Chopin.

Even the most conscientious investigators of today have been content to take Gottschalk easily at superficial valuation. "As a piano player he was hailed all over Europe, and his sugary compositions as well as eccentric behavior equaled the best in Paris and London."¹ The word "eccentric" clings to his memory like a cockle-burr. "Amid the welter of dustladen, mediocre scores

¹ "Music in Western Civilization", by Paul Henry Lang, 1941.



Louis Moreau Gottschalk

and names of scores (for many of them have vanished), we come upon the eccentric Louis Moreau Gottschalk writing unwieldy historical tragedies. . . ."²

Helen L. Kaufmann, in her readable but disorderly and unindexed "From Jehovah to Jazz", does Gottschalk more justice than anyone else by distinguishing between his essentially American compositions and his folderol.

He was a well-trained musician, and a sound composer, albeit he tossed off sweet little piano pieces for his sentimental admirers to play in their boudoirs. "The Last Hope" and "The Dying Poet" had a great vogue with them. "Bamboula," "Ojos Criollos," "Le Bananier," "Danse Ossianique" and others, containing as themes some of the songs Gottschalk had heard the Creoles sing during his early life in New Orleans, are of stronger caliber. [Note "Creoles" for "Negroes".] Replete with color and passion, they boast complicated rhythmical devices, with enough syncopations to make them sound extremely modern though their composer died in 1869.

A program of American piano works was presented by John Kirkpatrick in New York in 1936, containing pieces by Charles Griffes, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and Henry Ives [*recte* Charles Ives], all living except Griffes. Three Gottschalk pieces concluded the program in a blaze of glory—"Souvenir de Porto Rico," "Danza" and "El Cocoye." They held their own even in comparison with the others. In rhythm and harmony they were surprisingly jazzy, with combinations of sound that certainly were unorthodox in their own day!³

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He loves his country best who is first a citizen of the world. The roots of the transplanted man acquire in foreign clay a sense of discrimination that probes the native soil with a singular affection when he returns to it.

An emigré at the age of thirteen, Gottschalk was really a Parisian before he was an American. He knew the inns of the Vosges before his head found the crude pillows of Nevada hotels; he heard the patter of salon applause and the ovations of the Salle Pleyel before Illinoisians whistled their approval at Bloomington; he gave a command performance in the chambers of the Queen of Spain before playing to a Washington audience in whose first row sat President Lincoln; he knew what it meant to be praised by Chopin before encountering the vitriol of Boston's John

² "The Opera, a History of Its Creation and Performance", by Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock (1941), 473. Gottschalk has little claim to enter the record as an operatic composer, since no opera of his was ever performed.

³ "From Jehovah to Jazz", by Helen L. Kaufmann (1937), 214 et seq.

S. Dwight. And upon leaving New York for California he wrote: "With a heart swollen and agitated by all the emotions which the moment of separation from those we love brings with it, when launching ourselves into the unknown, I embarked on the third of April [1865] on board the *Ariel*."⁴

It was a time when America was raw with the ferment of unassimilated blood from Europe. Gottschalk was a penetrating but not particularly sympathetic observer and he recorded his judgments unsparingly. He resented the Irish, was contemptuous of the English, impatient with the French-Canadians for their hybrid speech, and he saw Germans everywhere, particularly German musicians.

In St. Louis "I was introduced to an old German musician, with uncombed hair, bushy beard, in constitution like a bear, in disposition the amenity of a boar at bay to a pack of hounds. I know this type; it is found everywhere. It should be time that the many great unknown musicians should be convinced that a negligent toilet is the maladroit imitation of the surly and misanthropic behavior of the great symphonist of Bonn."⁵

At Philadelphia he berates "four choristers, all German. What pronunciation!" At Williamsport he encounters a volunteer band. "Is it necessary for me to say that it is composed of Germans? There are five of them: A cornet à piston with a broken-down constitution (I speak of the instrument), a cavernous trombone, an ophicleide too low, a clarinet too high, a sour-looking fifer—all of an independent and irascible temper but united for the moment through their hatred of time and their desire vigorously to cast off its yoke."

In 1865 at Stockton, California, he finds that "The teacher of piano is an old German player on the trombone, who, not being able to play the piano, hums the air to the scholars." In the Sandwich Islands "the military music is organized and directed by a German."

It does not argue the Americanism of Gottschalk to show that he despised other nationalities; rather, the contrary. But his prejudice against Germans can soundly be attributed to his perception of what Germans were doing to America—that is, superimposing

⁴ "Notes of a Pianist" by Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1881), 346.

⁵ This and subsequent direct quotations of Gottschalk are from "Notes of a Pianist".

upon its life a matured culture, tradition and all, that threatened to neutralize the native flavors. No reader of Gottschalk's memoirs will doubt that he possessed acumen and intuition to a high degree. His early successes in Paris, based as they were mainly upon his Creole compositions and his individual style, which was called an American style, fully testify to Gottschalk's appreciation of the dialectical force of his own music.

Gottschalk was remarkable in this respect: the earlier his compositions, the greater their originality. Those most worth-while, "Bamboula", "La Savane", "Le Bananier", "Le Mancenillier", "Le Banjo", are practically boyhood works, while the great mass of stuff composed in the prime of his manhood is drawing-room froth of the unabashed pot-boiler variety.

Gottschalk was so typically the Creole that his manner, language, and appearance obscured the conventional Americanism that was part and parcel of his makeup; but to deny that he represented home-grown culture is to argue that Creole New Orleans was not an American city, which is unfairly to circumscribe the rich variety of our national life. Gottschalk's melodies, harmonic tints, and especially his dynamic rhythms were, according to his own remarks, based upon his observation of the slave dances at Place Congo and upon his recollection of the songs of the bayous.

It is interesting to note that the hot jazz of the Olivers, the Armstrongs, the Bechets, and their blithe cohorts, whose musical value has been questioned but whose Americanism never can be, came out of this same New Orleans.

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Although the search for a distinctly American—that is, a United States—music still goes on in some quarters, the quest seems generally to be somewhat less urgent than it was earlier in the present century. Actually our country was one of the earliest contributors to the colorful and savory banquet with which chauvinism climaxed the revels of Romanticism.

Our folk-songs have been conned and found to be mainly English and Scottish; our Indian lore has been found to be of little artistic utility; our most determined composers have tried to found an American music by taking European tonal cameras and using them to photograph filling-stations, skyscrapers, and other phenomena of the American scene. All this has been to no avail, and

some day it will become apparent that history has already been made and that its documents were unrecognized while they were being written. It will be clear that the Negro will have been responsible for the bulk of our nationalistic expression, less perhaps in the spirituals than in the blues and jazz; that the Jewish-Irish-Negro elements in the popular song of Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood, meretricious though most of the output may be, is basically an American musical expression of nationalistic import. Even in his tawdrier moments, Gottschalk foreshadowed coming events, the salon pieces having all the surface brilliance, melodiousness, rhythmic vim, and harmonic treacle that, compounded, produce the familiar essence of the commercial popular song.

The significance of Gottschalk's worthier compositions lies in the fact that his Creole qualities, which astonished Paris in the 1840's, put the United States in the forefront of the nationalistic movement.

John Kirkpatrick, in his notes on the music of Gottschalk,⁶ says of "Le Bananier", "Bamboula", and "La Savane": "It is to be wondered if the composition of these three peculiarly Creole pieces has anything to do with the successes in Paris in 1844 of some of Glinka's nationalistic music." This is possible but not too likely, since Glinka had very little success in Paris in that year. Rosa Newmarch says that after the failure of "Ruslan and Ludmila" at St. Petersburg, in November, 1842, he went to Paris in a state of discouragement, arriving there in 1844. To be sure, excerpts from his music may have been heard in more or less public gatherings; Berlioz wrote in a highly complimentary way of Glinka, but no one else took much notice of him.

Mr. Kirkpatrick's notes are on the whole sympathetic. They reflect a modern point of view, but make surprisingly little distinction between the Creole quality and effective pianism. He justly calls attention to pieces that are "dull", "redundant", "rhetorical", "gaudy", "platitudinous", "theatrical", etc. He regards the "Chant du Soldat" as "a really noble conception"; he likes "Souvenirs d'Andalousie" because it is a "fine potpourri" and has "a form of very pleasing symmetry". "Souvenir de Porto Rico" is a good patrol with "integrity of form" and "a certain epic breadth". All of which is very well, but when it comes to the truly flavorsome

⁶ "Observations on Four Volumes and Supplement of the Works of Louis Moreau Gottschalk in the New York Public Library, New York City" (manuscript).

pieces, "Ojos Criollos" is merely "typical Cuban dance music"; "La Gallina" is "just more Cuban dance music"; and of "Réponds-moi" nothing more is said than that it has more élan than "Ojos Criollos". "Le Banjo" he understandably regards as "One of the finest . . . with masterly treatment of effects . . . and immense verve."

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Press notices, when culled by sympathetic hands, are to be taken with a generous discount, but it is impossible to read those selected by Clara Gottschalk from European journals as a preface to her brother's memoirs without realizing at least what qualities in the young pianist most impressed his Continental listeners. The critic of "La France Musicale" might have given lengthy consideration to Gottschalk's Beethoven playing; instead he saved all his space for a rhapsody, too long to quote in full, upon "Bamboula".

Who does not know of "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, bored, or the heart filled with grief, the Negro forgets all in dancing the "Bamboula".

Léon Escudier, in reviewing another concert, disregarded music by Liszt and others and saved his praise for " 'Le Mancenillier', an adorable composition" and observed that "Bamboula" was repeatedly encored.

Julius Eichberg, in the "Nouvelliste Vaudois" of Geneva, compared Gottschalk to Liszt or Thalberg when playing Beethoven's Sonata in F minor or the Weber Concertstück, but found him a pianist "who will touch you to tears in relating to you on his piano some dreamy legend of his distant country, the 'Banancier', the 'Savane', or in making you behold the African splendors of the 'Bamboula', that Negro dance."

Charles Schriwaneck wrote to the editor of the "Gazette de Lausanne" that Gottschalk's chants of the New World brought tears to the eyes, that they suggested forests of rare trees, vast prairies, the Rocky Mountains, and the indolent Creole swinging gently in his hammock!

Oddly, Hector Berlioz, who was complimentary enough in the

“Journal des Débats”, said nothing about the original compositions but remarked extensively about Gottschalk’s playing of Beethoven’s Sonata in A.

Adolphe Adam, in the “Assemblée Nationale”, was charmed by the American compositions and added that Gottschalk had become “the man *à la mode*, the indispensable pianist”.

Théophile Gautier in an article in the “Presse” of March 31, 1851, compared Gottschalk with Liszt, Prudent, and Thalberg and, while he mentioned no compositions by name, remarked:

If Mr. Gottschalk has been able, although still young, to acquire this individuality which escapes so many others, it is perhaps owing to the fact that, after having formed his talent by solid studies, he has left it to wander carelessly in the fragrant savannas of his country, from which he has brought back to us the colors and perfumes. What pleases us in music, as in all other things, is novelty; and we have been as much charmed by the melodious jewel-box of the American artist as we already have been by the chants of the Muezzin and the reveries under the palms, which Félicien David and Ernest Reyer have noted in their souvenirs of the East.

While the Paris salons were acclaiming the Creole dances, in 1848, Dvořák was too young to have begun his musical studies, which later led to his expression of Bohemian art; Smetana was an exile, not to found Czech opera for more than another decade; Grieg was five years old, Rimsky-Korsakov four, and Balakirev eleven. Falla, Bloch, and Sibelius were yet unborn. Before Gottschalk’s arrival in Paris, not much music that might be called nationalistic had appeared, with the exception of Glinka’s “A Life for the Czar”.

It is a tenable thesis that American music has taken a determinative direction only in modern social dances. This music—whether called swing, jazz, or ragtime—has had a polite hat doffed in its direction by Europeans such as Debussy, Stravinsky, Krenek, and Tansman. Not one of these, however, has been so potent an influence as H. Panassié, who broke a critical lance in its behalf in “Le Jazz Hot”.

Those who have probed for jazz origins have been satisfied that the raucous, pagan, erotic manifestation came out of New Orleans bordellos, and they have then let it abide in sin without inquiring how it got there. From Africa, of course. But the migration was past history by a century or two when jazz came to the fore. Negro music, it must not be forgotten, flourished in the

Antilles for generations, and there is good evidence that its formative years were spent there. No one knew it better than Gottschalk, whose romantic career oddly enough steered somewhat the same course—from Haiti, whence his ancestors stemmed, to New Orleans, to Paris, and thence back to the United States. For just as France put its seal of approval on the glamorous virtuoso, so did Panassié in “Le Jazz Hot” send jazz home to be recognized, and it became a cult in its homeland. It is almost possible to draw a straight line from Louis Moreau Gottschalk to Duke Ellington. When Dvořák composed the “New World” Symphony in 1893, it was superficially concluded that the Negro idiom had for the first time found its way into art music. Even a casual glance at Gottschalk’s piano pieces reveals that the adoption had taken place at least forty years earlier. Moreover, in both spirit and substance the Creole came nearer the heart of things than did our Bohemian visitor.

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On May 11, 1842, the sailing vessel “Taglioni” cleared from New Orleans for Le Havre, France, with a cargo of lead, cotton, hides, and ham. The clearance papers⁷ cited no passengers, but under the special care of George L. Rogers, master of the vessel, was a thirteen-year-old lad, Moreau. (Gottschalk was never during his lifetime known to relatives and friends as Louis.) The boy had already made a stir in the city by reason of musical precocity, having only a short while before performed to a packed house at the Théâtre d’Orléans. He had also played the organ at the Cathedral of St. Louis and studied piano and violin with teachers of local repute. His father had been convinced, or himself concluded, that Moreau’s education must be continued in Paris. It was not unusual for New Orleans parents to send their sons to France.

There was tremendous luxury in the city. The young men were sent abroad to be educated—usually to Paris. There these young Creoles were well liked, for they were handsome young fellows and they were plentifully supplied with money, money gained by the sweat of the Negro slaves on Papa’s plantation back in Louisiana. In Paris the young men did as they pleased, gambled, studied if they liked, fought and made love.⁸

⁷ Checked by the writer with the Office of the Collector of Customs in New Orleans.

⁸ “Fabulous New Orleans”, by Lyle Saxon, 1928.

Edward Gottschalk was a stock-broker who maintained his family in some affluence, although upon his death in October, 1854, his estate was insolvent. Moreau applied himself to good purpose in France, studying with Camille Stamaty and Pierre Maleden. He made the best of connections through his grand-aunt, the Marquise de la Grange, and the salons of Paris were open to him. His mother was Aimée de Bruslé, whose parents, Captain Théodat Camille de Bruslé and Marie Josephine Alix Deynaut, were refugees from the terrible insurrection of the Negroes at Santo Domingo, during which Moreau's great-grandfather, the Chevalier Antoine de Bruslé, governor of the parish of St. Rose, was killed.

The young pianist's way was made easy in Paris by his aristocratic connections, but he conquered in his own right too by reason of his personal charm and a dazzling keyboard style. Having triumphed in the capital, Gottschalk set out for the provinces, where he enjoyed equal success. His first concert was played in November, 1847, at Sédan. He toured Spain and Switzerland before he was twenty-one, and, after two more years spent mainly in Paris giving lessons, he sailed for New York in December, 1852, aboard the Humboldt.

His first New York appearance was at Niblo's on February 10, 1853, the concert being repeated six days later. During 1855 and 1856 he gave a total of eighty concerts in New York.

In 1856 he went to the Antilles and made joint appearances at Havana, Port-au-Prince, and elsewhere with Adelina Patti, then fourteen years old and at the very threshold of her sensational career. His concert activity on the whole was rather desultory in the West Indies; he played only when he felt like it or when local or official pressure was brought to bear on him to take part in gala events. He frankly admitted having succumbed to the languor of the tropics, and for six years lived a life of extreme leisure on a remote sugar plantation, made available to him by the owner.

At length he began to yearn for a more active life and determined, at about the time of the outbreak of the Civil War, to return to the North American concert field. He toured the East and Canada many times, played in California and Nevada in the stage-coach days, and crowned his career with a circuit of South America. He died at Rio de Janeiro December 18, 1869, of yellow fever.

His absorbing journal, "Notes of a Pianist", covers a little more than the last decade of his life. Although it is wanting in organization and comprehensiveness, it reveals marked literary talent. These lacks were in a fair way to being filled by Alfred Louis Moreau Gottschalk, a nephew of the pianist, when he was lost with the mysteriously ill-fated S. S. Cyclops in 1918. After serving some years as consul general in Peru and later in Rio de Janeiro, he had been at the point of retiring to collate and preserve considerable data that he had collected about his uncle.⁹

The worst that can be said of Gottschalk is that he permitted a crude public taste to shape his compositions instead of exercising his truest talents towards the elevation of American standards. Although he received an offer of \$1,000 for "Murmures Éoliens", he could not have been unaware of the worth and originality of his early American compositions, for the French public had testified unmistakably.

Even his native New Orleans showed some perception of his more distinctive qualities, for two writers of nostalgic reminiscences mention neither "The Dying Poet" nor the "Berceuse", but "Bamboula"¹⁰ and the "Danse Nègre"¹¹.

Richard Hoffman, the father of the sculptress Malvina, paid generous tribute to the fellow-pianist with whom he had appeared in many concerts:

Possessed of the languid, emotional nature of the tropics, his music recalled the land of his birth and the traits of his people. He became at one time the rage in society; he was overwhelmed with attentions from the fair sex, and was sought after both in public and private. He must have been completely overpowered by these testimonies of esteem had he not been endowed with more strength of character than is generally accorded to him. . . .

He devoted himself [in his programs] almost entirely to his own compositions, which were full of character and charm, and he remains today the one American composer of genuine originality, the "Bamboula," "Marche de Nuit," "Le Bananier," "Jota Aragonesa," and others too numerous to mention bearing abundant testimony of his genius.¹²

More recent is the estimate of John Tasker Howard:

⁹ The writer has a letter to this effect from the composer's niece, Clara Aimée Gottschalk of New York.

¹⁰ "Social Life in Old New Orleans", by Eliza Ripley, 1912.

¹¹ "New Orleans; the Place and Its People", by Grace King, 1917.

¹² "Reminiscences of Richard Hoffman", in *Scribner's Magazine* for April, 1910.

It is evident that [John S.] Dwight [of Boston] missed the point when he listened to Gottschalk, for the Creole knew and could play the best in music literature. A conversation reported by George Upton sheds light on this matter:

"I remember asking him [Gottschalk] why he didn't play that class of music (Beethoven, Mendelssohn, etc.) in his concerts. He replied: 'Because the dear public don't want to hear me play it. People would rather hear my *Banjo* or *Ojos Criollos* or *Last Hope*. Besides, there are plenty of pianists who can play that music as well or better than I can, but none can play my music half so well as I can'."

His music "was definitely of his time, dated, yet it showed the broad background behind the American of cosmopolitan environment and heritage who composed it. Gottschalk of the 19th century should not be undervalued as a factor in the development of American music."¹³

The following incident gives some evidence concerning his feelings about national ties. Gottschalk encountered at Acapulco, Mexico, a tavern-keeper who hailed from New Orleans.

This old tavern-keeper saying to me at this obscure hole on the coast of the Pacific, "I am from New Orleans," awakening all at once my sleeping memories, in a moment became a friend.

"I also," I said to him, "am from New Orleans."

The poor man hated the North without being acquainted with it. After having asked me the news about many of the best known people of New Orleans, he spoke to me of Morphy, the chess-player.

"There is glory for Louisiana! But from his childhood he showed what he would be some day. He is not like another little prodigy, Gottschalk, who promised marvellous things, and whose father sent him to Europe in hopes of making a great musician of him. Nobody has heard anything more said about him. What has become of him?" I confess that I found myself a little embarrassed in answering this question. My self-esteem was considerably hurt. I told him that the little prodigy was still a pianist, and that without having precisely realized the expectations of his countrymen, he had notwithstanding continued to work at music.

It is to be feared that his countrymen, concerned with heaven only knows what kind of expectations for American music, failed to realize how near a true course Moreau Gottschalk had steered.

¹³ "Louis Moreau Gottschalk, as Portrayed by Himself", by John Tasker Howard, in *The Musical Quarterly* for January, 1932.