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Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk

Notes, Dec, 1995 by D.W. Krummel

A major Gottschalk biography has been high on the American music desiderata list, for reasons having to do as much with the sources and the sentiment as with the rather exotic man and his music. The wondrous abundance of documentation and loving memorabilia beckons us, along with the pianists and historians alike who have endorsed our fascination with the sad-eyed virtuoso. S. Frederick Starr's new biography testifies to what must have been great fun marshaling the evidence: one envies him his efforts.

The sources are richly concentrated in the New York Public Library, but otherwise widely dispersed around the world. Many friends were called on, beginning with the late Robert Offergeld. He may (according to Starr, p. 453) never have written the first line of his definitive biography, but his Centennial Catalogue *New York: n.p., 1970*) testifies to diligent and sound scholarly habits, and his notes were available to Starr. Also impressive is John G. Doyle's *Louis Moreau Gottschalk, 1829-1869: A Bibliographical Study and Catalog of Works* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1983), a long freight-train of references in search of a station. Other scholars have added more curious baggage: and it cannot have hurt one bit to have the likes of Vera Lawrence and Richard Jackson controlling the switches. Starr garbles an occasional message from his informants, but his skills in assimilation are impressive.

Starr pieces together the story clearly and convincingly, helped by Gottschalk's itinerary of so many short residences in so many interesting places, which lends a neat structure to the account. Gottschalk's life is probably more interesting than his works, but the task of integrating the two is hard to argue convincingly, mostly because the story itself fascinates as it unfolds. New Orleans, Paris, Philadelphia and the East Coast, Cuba and the Caribbean, San Francisco, and South America are all in there. His ethnic authenticity is something that few romantic piano virtuosos could match, partly because there are so many ethnic authenticities. Missing in the music may be any discernible Jewish character, although Starr makes a nice case for the strong familial commitments having informed personal decisions throughout his life. Any African-American ties are well past

considering.

But can one trust press notices, correspondence, and other Gottschalk memorabilia, with their ample puffery and personal self-promotion? Often may not Starr undermine his own credibility by building his account around such sources? The answer may well be yes, but when someone like Gottschalk is the subject, the reality and the mystique fit together disturbingly well. One gets swept along - 450 pages of breathless text leave one rather numb.

Starr's prose is energetic, and in ways that resemble Gottschalk's music: its strength is not in conceptual subtlety but in colloquial vigor. And for all the fascinating color, there are too many notes and they go on rather repetitively, and dwell a bit too often at the tonic and too long at the secondary dominant level. Lucid explanations often make for a rich narrative, as for instance in chapter 6 on the intrigues of the Spanish tour. But perhaps because of such external color, Gottschalk's persona remains elusive. The mixture of nervous pace and earnest rhetoric - Gottschalk's dazzling passagework, Starr's equation of scholarship with fastidious concern for minute detail - become rather too much like concealment devices. By page 447 one is ready to murder an author who drags Jelly Roll Morton into the account, then reminds us of Morton's real name, and then that of Morton's piano teacher.

Like Gottschalk's attempts at Bellini-like cavatina, Starr becomes heavy-handed as he reaches for sustained argument. While he rarely misses a chance to mention that countless scores are now lost (guided by Offergeld), he never faces up to Gottschalk's acknowledged "repugnance for writing down" the music in the first place (cf. p. 417), or exploring Lange's conception of one Gottschalk work as an "elastic, migratory product." (Starr uses the term "matrix" on p. 395: it is probably a good one, but what does it mean?) Chapter 11 also seems irrelevant: John Sullivan Dwight's criticisms may have pained Gottschalk and effectively wrecked his Boston career, but delving into the underlying ideology becomes tendentious. Gottschalk is not the only one to have failed to ponder any ties between Dwight's transcendentalism and Franz Liszt's Transcendental etudes.

While Gottschalk's music may often seem banal (no Chopin here), the irony is that his own prose - admittedly as doctored in translation by his sister - is a wonderfully rich and cosmopolitan personal testimony. Read Starr against the parallel passages in Jeanne Behrend's edition of Gottschalk's *Notes of a Pianist* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1964) and the story comes to life. Starr does well in driving a rather wooden stake through the voodoo and hokum, but he does all this knowing that the sleepy-eyed vampire virtuoso will still get to our blood.

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