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## Gottschalk & Origins of Ragtime

By [Larry Lobel](#)

[ Editor's note:

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[ This article was originally composed by Larry circa 980801  
[ in response to the article on this subject by Ed Berlin in  
[ MMDigest 980731. The e-mail evaporated somehow in transmission  
[ to MMD; we apologize for the delay.

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[ Ed Berlin's opening statement was:

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[> Much of what Gottschalk wrote has similarities with ragtime,  
[> but that is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Gottschalk  
[> had a direct influence on ragtimers. What evidence indicates  
[> "it's almost a certainty"?

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[ Larry now continues the thread below.

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[ -- Robbie

Ed Berlin is skeptical about my assertion that 'it's almost a certainty' that Joplin and the early ragtimers were influenced by Gottschalk's music. I'd like to offer some supporting quotes:

Frederick Starr writes in "Bamboula!," his exhaustive biography of Gottschalk:

"Syncopated music and ragtime are often seen as having exploded full-blown...before an astonished public in the late 1890s. However, two generations before this, Moreau Gottschalk had prepared the soil as he performed his own Caribbean-inspired syncopated works before a thousand audiences across Civil War America."

"... it is undeniable that many chord progressions, bass lines, and even melodic devices employed by ... Gottschalk recur later in Joplin's music."

"One biographer of Scott Joplin [Haskins & Benson, 'Scott Joplin'] speculated that Joplin heard 'the currently popular tunes played in syncopated style, most notably those of Louis Moreau Gottschalk.' "

"Another Joplin biographer [Gammond, 'Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era'] focused on his early study with a German 'professor' in Texarkana, Texas. He argued that this anonymous piano teacher 'no doubt' introduced Joplin to Gottschalk's works, and went so far as to suggest that...pieces by Gottschalk had exerted a particularly strong influence on the composer of the 'Maple Leaf Rag.'

"All of the Gottschalk works that contain the most conspicuous proto-ragtime elements...were not only in print throughout the period in

which ragtime composers were growing up, but also selling well. Moreover, the major ragtime composers ... had all benefited from classical training in music. All had ample opportunity to play Gottschalk's compositions and probably did so."

"No ragtime composer exploited Caribbean and Creole syncopated rhythms more thoroughly than Jelly Roll Morton. Did Morton know Gottschalk's pioneering works in this genre? It is all but certain, since Morton's teacher, J. Nickerson, moved in the same circle of classically trained black Creole musicians as several Gottschalk contemporaries. ... Morton recalled a cutting contest among several of the best ragtime composers in which each participant tackled the 'Miserere,' Gottschalk's most popular operatic transcription. Clearly, the participants all sprang from the pianistic world that Gottschalk first defined and knew both the operatic pieces he featured and almost certainly his more accessible ballads and syncopated works as well."

"...the public continued to love Gottschalk's music. Editions of his hits rested on the music racks of parlor pianos from coast to coast. 'Even today,' wrote a turn-of-the-century Philadelphian, 'it is Gottschalk's music .. that still remains supreme among 'fashionable pieces.' "

"Whether thumped out on parlor pianos, cranked out on music boxes, or pumped out on player pianos, Gottschalk's melodies became the stereotyped mode in which Americans expressed many common emotions. Rare was the silent film which did not specify for the pianist to play (his) 'Tremolo' at moments of rising emotion, 'The Dying Poet' as hero and heroine parted, and 'Morte!!' as the heroine expired."

Robert Offergeld, music scholar and writer for Stereo Review magazine:

"The most important of (Gottschalk's) compositions ... are virtuoso piano pieces developed from Gottschalk's juvenile recollections of New Orleans songs and dances in the Afro-American vernacular, and are unquestionably the first so devised. Their rhythmic vitality, jazz-like phrase-forms and exotic coloration...(were) not unnoticed by the composing fraternity."

\* \* \*

There has always been a condescending attitude towards Gottschalk's music in 'highbrow' circles, which may explain why his compositions don't often appear on concert programs and why Joplin and other ragtimers may have neglected to mention his influence on them.

Certainly John Stark would have no reason to mention Gottschalk's music, which was put out by rival publishers.

Larry Lobel  
Virtuoso Piano Service  
Petaluma, CA

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