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Louis Moreau Gottschalk: Notes of a Pianist

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Foreword

Gottschalk and His *Notes of a Pianist* by S. Frederick Starr

Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869) was America's first internationally recognized composer, its first virtuoso pianist, first musical nationalist, and first Pan-American artist in any field. At once a Jacksonian democrat and a snob, he was hailed in his native New Orleans as "the Chopin of the Creoles," yet he supported the Union during the Civil War. His sentimental compositions moved generations of Americans to tears, even as his lively syncopated pieces anticipated ragtime and jazz by fifty years. Fluent in four languages, he was a matinee idol on a global scale yet found time also to be a dedicated educational reformer and, as this volume amply demonstrates, a spirited writer.

Gottschalk died in Rio de Janeiro at age forty. Eleven years later *Notes of a Pianist* was published in Philadelphia. The manuscript had been saved from oblivion by his sister, Clara Gottschalk, who may also have been responsible for the destruction of the notebooks in which the composer had recorded his impressions. Whether she bowdlerized them in the process of translation and editing is as intriguing a question as it is unanswerable. What is certain is that the translation from Gottschalk's original French by Clara's future husband, Dr. Robert E. Peterson, is graceless and wooden, lacking most of the irony and sentiment that gives the original its piquant flavor.

Notes of a Pianist spans the years 1857, when Moreau (as he was called) was twenty-eight, to December 1868, when he was thirty-nine and had only a year more to live. It covers Gottschalk's musical peregrinations across the United States, Canada, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, and all of coastal South America except Venezuela and Colombia. The only region he did not visit was the American South, whose cities were less frequented by touring artists before the Civil War and were then off limits during the years of combat. The *Notes* are a tale of picaresque adventure, combined with social and political commentary and droll asides on anything that touched Gottschalk's fancy, including his im-

pressions of the cuisine of Cleveland, the mores of California mining camps, and spitting everywhere in the United States.

Several writers, including Robert Offergeld, one of Gottschalk's many would-be biographers, and Jeanne Behrend in the otherwise excellent introduction that follows, mistakenly refer to the *Notes* as a diary. In only one sense is this true. As a touring artist, Gottschalk was condemned to spend endless solitary hours in smoky train cars and shabby hotels. Setting down impressions in his small notebooks was for the gregarious Moreau a form of escape from squalor, boredom, and loneliness. In the same mood he penned hundreds of letters (as yet unpublished) to his five younger sisters, who were in his charge after the death of his English-born father in 1853 and, five years later, of his mother. But only rarely are the *Notes* or letters truly confessional, even when we know Gottschalk was going through wrenching personal crises. In letters he reported on raucous times with his friend, the famed Italian tenor Pasquale Brignoli, and wrenching conflicts with the Bohemian *artiste* Ada Clare, but neither is mentioned in the *Notes*. By contrast, they are filled with details and explanations that would have been out of place in a diary but quite relevant if he was writing for a public audience, as was in fact the case.

Sent to Paris just before his twelfth birthday, Moreau's nonmusical education was almost entirely literary in character. He had a deep knowledge of French letters and was to draw on works of French poetry for the names of countless compositions. Thus, it was as natural for Gottschalk to write as it was for him to compose music or play the piano. In addition to his letters to his sisters he kept up a steady correspondence with friends and professional colleagues on three continents and penned voluminous letters (in Spanish) in behalf of political and educational reform in South America, issues to which he was ardently dedicated.

Gottschalk was a charter member of America's first group of self-styled Bohemians, which met at Pfaff's Saloon on lower Fifth Avenue in New York during the years 1857 to 1863. The group included many of the best artistic and literary talents of the day. Walt Whitman knew and respected Gottschalk, but kept somewhat aloof; however others, including editor Henry Clapp, Jr., illustrator Sol Eytinge, Jr., painter Frederic Church, and journalist William Dean Howells, drew him into their convivial mischief. Gottschalk's contribution to this raucous group was to arrange for himself to write reviews of his own concerts and submit them to his arch-enemy in Boston, John Sullivan Dwight, for publication in the highbrow *Dwight's Journal of Music*. That he actually succeeded in this ruse on at

least two occasions is testimony to Gottschalk's professional competence as a writer, as well as to his boundless self-confidence.

During his Parisian years young Moreau made contact with Hector Berlioz and Liszt, both of whom wrote frequently for the monthly French musical press.¹ Gottschalk doubtless also read Berlioz's engaging book of travels, *Voyage musical en Allemagne et en Italie* (2 vols., Paris, 1844). He would have understood that such works were not only effective tools for self-promotion but that they could also supplement a meager income from performance and composition. Both were urgent issues for a young concert artist seeking to make his way in America, to which he returned in 1853, and for a young man saddled with the maintenance in Paris of his spendthrift mother and five siblings.

Thus, what became the *Notes* began as a series of contracted articles for *La France musicale* and later for *L'art musical*. This explains not only such long asides on French culture as Gottschalk's account of his visit to the émigré Anna de Lagrange in the wilderness of upstate New York (p. 202) but also his rather snide references to Anglo-Saxons, who "as a race lack the pensive element so indispensable in the arts" (p. 76). Both were intended to remind Parisians of his bona fides as a French insider. These articles were in turn translated and reprinted as far afield as Milan, Mainz, St. Petersburg, New York, and Boston.

Treating them as a commercial venture, Gottschalk mined his articles for as much publicity and money as he could derive from them, never hesitating to use the same material twice, modifying it as necessary for different audiences.² Adaptations for the French public stressed his musical successes in America, as if preparing the way for an eventual return to Paris. American versions underscored his credentials as a native son and patriot. Sometimes Gottschalk did not even bother to adapt his texts. Thus, a number of sections of what became the *Notes* appeared first in a French language paper issued in New York, the *Courrier des Etats-Unis*, and then in translation immediately thereafter in the *Leader*, *Once a Month*, *Home Journal*, and the *Saturday Press*.³

¹ "Everlastingly to write feuilletons for one's bread! This indeed is the lowest depth of degradation." Berlioz, *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz from 1803 to 1865*, ed. Ernest Newman (New York: n.p., 1947), p. 352.

² For example, he used versions of his colorful account of his stay in Matouba, Guadeloupe, in both *La France musicale* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. See S. Frederick Starr, *Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 280–81.

³ Starr, *Gottschalk*, p. 317.

The many reports and journal entries that eventually became the *Notes* can be neatly divided into three distinct groups and phases, each of them involving a somewhat different intended audience. The first, spanning the years 1857 to 1862, covered Gottschalk's travels in the Caribbean, his two stays in New York, and the early phase of his Civil War-era tours. During this period the author had no intention of publishing a book and was content to produce a stream of articles, mainly for the French musical press but also, when convenient, for New York monthlies.

These early passages are by far the most self-promoting sections of the *Notes*, and with good reason. Gottschalk achieved signal successes during this period, especially in New York and Havana, yet his career was by no means secure. He had no steady agent, his publishers were eager but inept, and he was trying desperately to send off a hefty check each month to his family in Paris.

After his return to the United States in 1862 and his decision to swear allegiance to the Union, Gottschalk's career took off. His sheet music sold briskly, and he toured constantly as the headline act of a small "opera" company that included several of the best Italian singers of the day, all of them artists revered by the renowned Verdi. His music was known and beloved by audiences in the smallest towns of the interior, most of which could now be reached by train. As a handsome and suave New Orleanian who spoke English with a French accent, Moreau was a matinee idol, beloved by the female part of his audience. As a Southern Unionist who shamelessly wove "Hail Columbia" into his performances, he was warmly embraced by Northern patriots and the families of soldiers who were dying by the thousands.

In this phase of his career, Gottschalk felt fully confident in himself both as an artist and a writer, and allowed himself free rein. His travels took him to the battlefronts in Pennsylvania and Virginia, and also to obscure frontier regions then little known to the residents of East Coast cities. Also, he met many of the great figures of the day, including President Lincoln, who attended several of his concerts. Gottschalk therefore transformed himself into a travel writer.

With few exceptions, the best travel books on America had been written by foreigners. Back in the eighteenth century the Frenchman Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, in his *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782), had asked (and answered) the epochal question, "What then is the American . . . this new man?" Gottschalk set out to do the same. As a patriot he railed against the silly and primitive stereotypes of

American life that abounded in Europe, offering his own judgments instead.

It was in this period that Gottschalk probably came to see his jottings not just as a series of articles but as a book. An important stimulus to this decision was his reading of Anthony Trollope's great travel book, *North America*, issued in two volumes in 1862. Trollope (1815–1882) was at the height of his fame as a novelist after the publication of his *Barchester Towers* in 1857. At the outbreak of the American Civil War, an American friend, Kate Field from Boston, invited Trollope to tour the country and set down his impressions in a book. Trollope came by this subject naturally, his mother, Frances Trollope (1780–1863), having written in 1839 an acclaimed but sharply critical travel book entitled *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Gottschalk knew and admired the Fields for their well-known publishing house, and must have been stung by Mrs. Field's approach to Trollope. In his own notes from this period he singled out Trollope's "stupid remarks" (in this case on Baltimore's supposed "Englishness"), even as he acknowledged that at times the Englishman "perfectly seized" his subject. Henceforth Gottschalk seemed determined to produce his own "American" response to Trollope and other European travel writers.

This second period ended abruptly when Gottschalk hastily departed San Francisco for Panama and then South America in September 1865. Up to that moment he had intended to return to New York and eventually to France. But a former manager, Emanuele Muzio, and the head of a rival piano firm to the Chickering firm that Gottschalk endorsed, teamed up to lure him into a misadventure and then used the resulting rumors to raise a fury of anger against him in the California press. Gottschalk had indeed shown poor judgment in traveling to Oakland from San Francisco for a rendezvous with two proper young women from a private academy there, but otherwise did nothing untoward. But the hostile articles and a (false) rumor that a lynch-mob was being raised against him caused the thin-skinned Gottschalk to flee the country in self-imposed disgrace. In reality, the entire episode evaporated as quickly as it had arisen. But Gottschalk did not learn this for several years. In the meanwhile, the incident had shattered his self-confidence, and also his dream of publishing a best-selling travel book.

Over the ensuing years of travel and performance across South America Gottschalk continued to record his impressions in his notebooks. His first-hand accounts of a revolution in Peru and bloody wars in Paraguay, along with his increasingly dyspeptic ruminations on politics and cul-

ture in the independent Spanish states, make these some of the most interesting chapters in the entire volume. They are also the most personal, as he allowed his personal gloom to find expression in his choice of subjects and his manner of treating them.

By 1868, though, he had hit upon a new mission for himself and his travel notes. Appalled by the state of culture and education in America's southern hemisphere, Gottschalk reinvented himself as an educational reformer. Through this new role he would regain his high standing among cultural leaders in the United States (which in fact he had never lost) and prepare the way for his triumphant return. He was well on his way to succeeding at this when he suddenly died of peritonitis on December 17, 1869.

As a consequence of his early death, Moreau Gottschalk's travel book remained unfinished, a collection of published articles in French and English, along with hundreds of pages of notes and random jottings in French spanning a decade. From the literary polish of the articles and *feuilletons* that Gottschalk allowed to appear in print, we can be sure he would have strongly objected to the publication of his incomplete and rough manuscript. We can be equally sure that, had he lived, Gottschalk would have taken as much time as was necessary to shape his manuscript into a well-structured whole, developing some of the more telegraphic passages into lively prose and creating smooth transitions between them. This was precisely what he did with the manuscript scores of his several operas, which he carried with him for years and worked on during free moments in Nevada mining camps or on shipboard in South America. Like his *Notes of a Pianist*, the operas all remained incomplete at the time of his death. Unlike the *Notes*, however, they survive only in a few incomplete fragments.

Even though Gottschalk left us only a mass of sketches from which the present volume was assembled, it is possible to speak of a number of his main preoccupations and conclusions about the New World at mid-century. Regarding the United States, he was an ardent but by no means uncritical patriot. His loyalty to the Union was genuine, and he had no doubts as to America's continental destiny. At the same time, he had only a superficial acquaintance with the American Constitution and showed little interest in America's institutions of government. Instead, his patriotism focused on the vitality of the American economy and on Americans themselves as practical problem-solvers and entrepreneurs.

These same qualities, in Gottschalk's eyes, gave America's popular culture a rough-hewn and elemental quality, dominated by an overrid-

ing concern for money and, at its worst, coarse and vulgar. Yet they also accounted for the vigor of America's emerging cultural life, the ferocious ambitions of its impresarios, the generosity of its patrons, and the eagerness of Americans on the rough frontier to furnish their new towns with opera houses, libraries, and lyceums from whose podiums touring lecturers spread enlightenment to all and sundry.

In his *Notes*, Gottschalk also reveals himself as a thoroughgoing democrat, a cultural Jacksonian who treats the pretensions of the New England elite—epitomized in his mind by Bostonians—as insufferably pompous. By the mid-1860s he had made contact with other New Englanders, however, especially the literary and educational elite of Boston, whom he came to revere and who in turn accepted him as one of their own.

Gottschalk, a practicing Catholic and true son of tolerant New Orleans, loathed Puritanism, and especially the strain of post-Puritan secular perfectionism epitomized by the Boston music critic John Sullivan Dwight. He despised not only the joyless view of life of its adherents but also the preachiness and squinty-eyed intolerance that they masked behind a façade of high-mindedness. Yet his views in this area, too, evolved over time. In South America he witnessed what he considered the total absence of such civic-mindedness, which was evident to him in the utter neglect of education. Moreover, he observed there what he perceived as the abysmal ignorance of the Catholic clergy. His solution to all these problems was to apply large doses of the very American penchant for social uplift and perfectionism that he had earlier viewed with such skepticism.

To the end of his days Moreau Gottschalk was a musical romantic and loyal disciple of Chopin, who had attended his debut concert in Paris and praised the young American. Yet he was also a musical populist, whose greatest contribution to the art were his many tone poems, *souvenirs*, dances, and other compositions that drew on the vernacular music of his era. These included musical references to folk themes, popular songs, and the compositions of his older contemporary Stephen Foster, as well as to the syncopated music of the Caribbean world and Louisiana. In all these pieces, and in his *Notes of a Pianist* as well, Gottschalk reveals himself as a deep-dyed localist. In his travel writings he revels in the local and specific, in all the cultural peculiarities that define and distinguish the life of each locale he visits. He throws himself with gusto into each new world he encounters, and the procession of these encounters adds immensely to the picaresque character of the *Notes* as a whole. Gottschalk's travels would have been impossible without modern railroads, steamboats, and ocean-going steamships. Yet in

the *Notes* these modern means of transport leave him celebrating the distinctive delights of each locale, in short, affirming the truths of romanticism against an emerging national or global monoculture that is devoid of all romance.

By 1881, when *Notes of a Pianist* was finally published, Gottschalk's music still enjoyed immense popularity, but the man himself had been largely forgotten. The publication of the *Notes* gave rise to a surge of published recollections of their singular author. Americans once more paid tribute to a virtuoso, beloved matinee idol, and composer of soulful melodies. This time, however, they acknowledged his skill as an observer of the national and international scene, his talent as a portraitist, his keen wit, and his engaging writing style. But with the passage of a few more years all this was forgotten and the *Notes* had passed into oblivion, where they remained until 1964.

In that year a Gottschalk revival was well underway. In 1950 the German-born Uruguayan scholar Francisco Curt Lange had published his meticulous study of the composer's last year in Rio;⁴ in 1958 Vernon Loggins had published his comprehensive but fanciful biography;⁵ in 1960 John G. Doyle had completed an important dissertation on Gottschalk's compositions for piano;⁶ and in 1961 critic Harold C. Schoenberg had penned an article on the forgotten musical pioneer for the *New York Times*.⁷ Meanwhile, Robert Offergeld had begun collecting Gottschalkiana with an eye to reissuing it on the centennial of Gottschalk's death in 1969.

Amidst this rising tide, a concert pianist and writer from Philadelphia, Jeanne Behrend, persuaded the publisher Knopf to reissue *Notes of a Pianist*. Her qualifications as its editor were impeccable, for it was she who helped launch the Gottschalk revival in 1956 with the republication of many of his works for solo piano in an edition by the Philadelphia music publisher Presser. Behrend's gifts as a performer had long since won the deep respect of Leopold Stokowski, the renowned conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Over the years she was to star in

⁴ Lange, "Vida y muerte de Louis Moreau Gottschalk en Rio de Janeiro (1869)," *Revista de Estudios Musicales* vol. 2, no. 4 (August 1950): 43–147; vol. 2, nos. 5 and 6 (December 1950 and April 1951): 97–350.

⁵ Loggins, *Where the World Ends* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958).

⁶ Doyle, "The Piano Music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1969)," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1960).

⁷ Schoenberg, "Civil War Pianist," *New York Times*, April 23, 1961.

many recordings with Stokowski and his Philadelphians, among them well-known works by Bach and Poulenc, but also compositions of such lesser luminaries as John Philip Sousa, Arcady Dubensky, and Emmanuel Feuermann. Her solo and two-piano recordings (with Alexander Kelberine) included pieces by Ravel and Samuel Barber, and also the major piano works of John Alden Carpenter.

Behrend's interest in *Notes of a Pianist* arose from her close knowledge of Gottschalk's music, which resulted in a number of remarkable performances before audiences in Philadelphia. In spite of the fact that these performances were more faithful to Gottschalk's own spirit and performance style than almost any of the many score recordings issued over the past two generations, the surviving tapes have yet to be issued commercially.

In her new edition of the *Notes*, Behrend supplemented the forgotten text with intelligent and interesting notes. Moreover, she penned an introduction that long stood as the best overall appreciation of Gottschalk's life and works. This in turn inspired a number of other researchers, who began scouring libraries and archives for forgotten Gottschalk material. This process culminated in the discovery by Robert Offergeld of a large trunk full of Gottschalk manuscripts in the basement of a Philadelphia brownstone owned by a collateral descendant of the composer. Offergeld himself did not live to write a new biography, but generously turned over his trove of notes to the author of this foreword, whose biography of Gottschalk appeared first in 1995.⁸

The most recent chapter of the saga of Gottschalk's *Notes of a Pianist* began on August 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ripped through Gottschalk's hometown of New Orleans. Only five months earlier Princeton University Press had named Peter J. Dougherty as its new director. A thirty-three-year veteran of the publishing industry and author of the acclaimed book *Who's Afraid of Adam Smith?*, Dougherty immediately conceived the idea of publishing some work as a tribute to the wounded city that has given so much to American culture. From this humane impulse arose the decision to reprint Behrend's Knopf edition of *Notes of a Pianist*. Every new reader who takes delight in this wonderful book can thank Dougherty, and Princeton University Press, for their timely and happy initiative.

⁸ S. Frederick Starr, *Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), reissued in paperback as *Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (Urbana, Ill., 2000).