

# A Rousing Anthem of National Unity

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by Ryan Izana

The best Fourth of July celebration I could give myself would be to play through (even sloppily) Louis Moreau Gottschalk's dazzling display of fireworks, "The Union: Concert Paraphrase on National Airs." It's a terrific concoction of approximately eight minutes of American patriotic tunes, where Gottschalk weaves together "Yankee Doodle," "Hail, Columbia" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," the last not yet the official anthem of the United States.

Composed in 1862, Gottschalk (1829-1869) dedicated "The Union" to his favorite Union general, George B. McClellan.

The composition begins with a brilliant cannonade of octaves followed by a downward right-hand cadenza, as the composer leads to an exposition of the "The Star-Spangled Banner" marked *malinconico*, or melancholy. He then proceeds with trumpet calls and echoes on the piano, followed by droll drum rolls heard no less than 76 times in the left hand deep in the bass while playing "Hail, Columbia" in the right hand. Gottschalk is now ready to combine "Yankee Doodle" in the right hand with "Hail, Columbia" in the left in deft counterpoint. More trumpet calls follow, and then a blast of triple fortissimo octaves, *Con Furia*, plunging from the key of B-flat into a plush E-flat major, and once more joins "Yankee Doodle" with "Hail, Columbia," this time in glorious chordal pomp. It all ends grandioso, in triumph.

"The Union" traveled with the pianist through the Civil War years. Its measures captivated his northern audiences in small villages and large cities. It was often received with a tear and always with wild applause, yells and whistles; the last disdained by the aristocratic Gottschalk.

Playing his "Union" attested to New Orleans-born Gottschalk's northern sympathies. Born May 8, 1829, Moreau, as he was known, spent his first 13 years in a lush exotic New Orleans, where his musical roots were deeply embedded. When allowed out, the city's huge slave population congregated at the Congo Square (now Louis Armstrong Park). It was there that the young Gottschalk heard uninhibited cries along with the singing and dancing of Afro-Caribbean tunes, rhythms and Creole melodies.

Gottschalk loved his native city, but could not abide the hell of slavery. Years later he wrote, "When you have observed its horrors as I have, when you have seen thousands of victims die through unimaginable tortures, then you would condemn without forgiveness the greatest of the inequities which the ages of barbarity bequeathed to us."

In his early teens the already formidable pianist traveled to Paris, where he hoped to be accepted at the celebrated Paris Conservatoire. But Pierre Zimmerman, its director, had an aversion to Americans. With typical French condescension he exclaimed that, "America was a land of steam engines...the country of railroads but not musicians," not deigning even to listen to the prodigy. So instead Gottschalk studied piano privately with Camille Stamaty, who prepared him for a concert in 1845 that both Hector Berlioz and Frédéric Chopin attended. The concert's high point was Gottschalk's performance of the latter's E-minor Concerto. Afterward the Pole warmly embraced the 16-year-old and supposedly told him that one day he would be a king among pianists.

By that point the teenager was already composing such exotic works as "La Savane," "Le Bananier (Chanson nègre)" and "Bamboula (Dance de nègres)." These pieces created a sensation when he introduced them in the Paris salons.

By age 20 Gottschalk was performing throughout France, Switzerland and especially Spain, where he was idolized. Audiences were instantly beguiled by the slim, pale and handsome youth who spoke Greek and Latin, was an excellent fencer and a master horseman, besides being charming and witty. Always the consummate showman, Gottschalk entered the stage looking full of ennui and disdain at the prospect of performing, while at the piano peeling off his white gloves as his languid eyes surveyed the auditorium.

After P.T. Barnum made a fortune by bringing Jenny Lind, also known as "The Swedish Nightingale," to the U.S. in 1850, the sweet smell of U.S. dollars brought Gottschalk home three years later. Traveling with his tuner and two specially built 10-foot Chickering Grands that he called his mastodons (a concert grand is usually 9 feet long), he drew great attention in little towns where people had never even seen a concert grand piano before.

After four years of success in the U.S. and Canada, he grew bored of American Victorian prudery and yearned for more sultry climes. The next several years he wandered through Cuba, Puerto Rico and the West Indies. In Puerto Rico he wrote his masterly "Souvenir de Porto Rico" and "The Last Hope," the latter being one of the most popular piano pieces of the 19th century. Around this time he also began his incomparable diary, much later published as "Notes of a Pianist," the finest musical reportage ever written by a pianist. (It was reissued by Princeton University Press in 2006.)

Returning home in time for the Civil War, he crisscrossed the country and by his own account traveled 80,000 miles from coast to coast.

On March 24, 1864, the pianist played a concert in Washington with President and Mrs. Lincoln in the front row. The program naturally included "The Union." Gottschalk noted that "the President's eyes have an expression of goodness and mildness." Coincidentally, just a year before in Cleveland, Gottschalk had seen John Wilkes Booth acting, and had remarked in his diary that "he had something deadly in his look." The day after Lincoln's assassination Gottschalk performed "The Union"

at a memorial service on the steamship Constitution, a private boat returning from Mexico.

Gottschalk's amatory career was legendary—he was always swamped with young women begging him to play his tear-jerker "The Last Hope." After a dalliance with a teenager caused a scandal in 1865, Gottschalk left for South America, where for the rest of his life he played, loved and composed in almost every country of the continent. He gave his last concert in Rio de Janeiro where, while playing his newly composed "Morte," he collapsed, dying a few weeks later on Dec. 18, 1869 at the age of 40.

Gottschalk is buried next to his brother Edward in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, N.Y. His grave, which had been vandalized in the 1950s, was in a wretched state until October, when a contemporary replacement for the original allegorical statue, "The Angel of Music," situated on the original marble base, was unveiled.

Gottschalk's music is sadly underperformed, although there are fine recordings of "The Union" by Lambert Orkis on an 1865 Chickering Grand as well as by Cecile Licad. But his place in American music is secure. As a composer, he glorifies the piano with dashing boldness. In his best music one may hear circus bands, banjos, Sunday horse races, Caribbean melodies, an insouciant humor and drollery, hints of an emerging ragtime, and at times unabashed sentimentally. It is the most important pianistic output by an American of the mid-19th century.