
The Music King from New Orleans

BAMBOULA! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk. By S. Frederick Starr. Oxford. 564 pp. \$35

World famous in the mid-19th century, the American piano virtuoso and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk is all but forgotten today. Is this obscurity deserved? Or is it an injustice for which we should blame a snobbish musical establishment that has never fully appreciated America's distinctive musical legacy? In *Bamboula!* the historian S. Frederick Starr goes a long way toward answering these questions—and tells a colorful tale in the bargain.

Gottschalk (1829–69) was born in New Orleans to a mixed Jewish and French Creole family. At the age of 12 the young prodigy went to study in Paris, where a few years later he won acclaim for his Louisiana quartet. For these four pieces, including *Bamboula*, he drew upon the vernacular of his New Orleans childhood, especially the Creole melodies that he picked up from the songs of his Haitian nurse and the syncopated rhythms that he heard in the music of the city's enslaved black population.

Gottschalk's borrowings were, to some extent, consistent with contemporary European musical practice. Among the early romanticists, folk music was considered a fresh source of vitality, an antidote to the stale artificiality of classicism. But Gottschalk did something far more radical than any early European romanticist imagined. He drew on Afro-American music. Half a century before ragtime and jazz even appeared, much less found their way into the work of such European modernists as Debussy, Milhaud, and Stravinsky, Gottschalk was writing

complex pieces in which the songs and rhythms of African people in the New World played a significant part.

Indeed, Gottschalk hardly thought of his borrowings as borrowings at all. Unlike European music folklorists, he was not, Starr says, self-consciously seeking "an exotic alternative to the world in which he moved." What were "noble savages" to European musical audiences were to him real people, and he was tapping "a living voice from deep within his own receding past." "Let his audience treat *Bamboula* and other Creole pieces as exotica," Starr writes. "For Moreau they bore the stamp of the viscerally familiar, of loss, of nostalgia."

Yet the very authenticity of Gottschalk's folk sources might have hurt his reputation. In the early 19th century, the Germans were



among those who embraced folk music as a challenge to the universal claims and aesthetic rigidity of French classicism. But by midcentury that challenge had been met, and the triumphant musical culture of Germany was beginning to make its own universal claims and impose its own aesthetic rigidity. In the process, the Germans came to despise folk music as vastly inferior to their ideal of "absolute music" as the highest art, accessible only to the cultivated elite.

Gottschalk fell short of the new German-fostered ideal, not least because he was a shameless entertainer. After his early trip to Paris, he never returned to Europe. Instead, he lived out his days on the road, hustling a living as a musician from one end of the Americas to the other. Starr brings out the picaresque quality of Gottschalk's life, and many scenes in *Bamboula!* brim with details and atmospheric qualities reminiscent of the works of Latin American magical realists. Gottschalk toured western Puerto Rico in 1857, for example, packing a pair of pistols to protect himself. After one concert, "live doves with gilded plumage and adorned with ribbons descended on the stage, and then the entire party proceeded to a huge banquet." With similar vividness, Starr portrays Gottschalk in the winter of 1864, crammed into cold, sooty trains with rowdy Union recruits; in 1865, making scandalous headlines in San Francisco; in 1866, being cheered by a huge Santiago crowd that included the president of Chile and the country's archbishop.

Throughout his career, whenever he could, Gottschalk would organize crowd-pleasing "monster" concerts featuring scores of pianos and hundreds of musicians. On such occasions, as in today's stadium rock concerts, musical expression was sacrificed to sheer spectacle and volume. It may be said, in Gottschalk's defense, that these excesses were committed in an era lacking electronic amplification. Nor was Gottschalk the only such culprit. "Monster" concerts were a staple of most 19th-century

virtuosos, European as well as American.

The highbrow charge against Gottschalk is that, over time, his romanticism degenerated into sentimentalism. His most popular compositions, selling millions of copies in sheet music, were songs such as "The Last Hope" and "The Dying Poet," each of which he himself referred to as "*un succès des larmes*" (a tear-jerking hit). Starr reminds us that these songs expressed the heartache of ordinary Americans aggrieved by the losses and hardships of the Civil War or by the uprooting effects of industrialization. But the fact remains that, musically speaking, they are kitsch.

The best description of kitsch as a decadent form of romantic music comes from the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus:

When the *noble simplicité* of a classical style descends to the marketplace, the result is banality—the mere husks of classical forms—but hardly ever kitsch. Kitsch in music has hybrid ambitions which far outreach the capabilities of its actual structures and sounds. . . . Instead of being content with modest achievements within its reach, musical kitsch has pretensions to big emotions, to "significance," and these are rooted in what are still recognizably romantic preconceptions, however depraved.

Against the charge of kitsch, it is impossible to defend Gottschalk completely. With his contemporary Stephen Foster, he stands convicted of founding the maudlin "hearts and flowers" school of American popular song.

But one should not forget Gottschalk's other side, the side represented by his use of Afro-American music. For Gottschalk's actual playing did not just delight his upper-crust audiences; it won the admiration of his "sources," from the Afro-Cuban musicians who introduced him to *contradanzas* to the Puerto Rican drummers who taught him the difference between a *tresillo* and a *cinquillo*

rhythm. In ragtime and jazz, Gottschalk (and the early European modernists after him) found wit, simplicity, and emotional restraint—qualities that amount to the very opposite of kitsch.

Gottschalk's attraction to Afro-American music raises a critical question. The exuberance of this sound comes, as we know, from that elusive but essential rhythmic quality known as "swing." Swing is made up, according to the French musicologist André Hodeir, of several ingredients, the most important being "infrastructure," or a regular structural beat, often implied rather than played, and "superstructure," or other rhythmic patterns surrounding the structural beat, often given equal if not greater accentuation. The problem with most European composers' uses of Afro-American music is that they borrow the irregular patterns of the "superstructure" but fail to place them in proper tension with the structural beat. "By destroying the basic pulsation," Hodeir writes, "our composers killed the principle of attraction on which the phenomenon of swing depends." This leads to the question: did Gottschalk know how to swing?

Alas, we will never know, because Gottschalk's playing, like that of his fellow virtuosos, is lost to us. Recording had not yet been invented, and Gottschalk failed to notate many of his compositions. In part he feared having his work purloined, but Gottschalk also understood the difficulty, well known to 20th-century composers, of notating Afro-American rhythms. Though we may never know for sure, it is possible that Gottschalk was the Count Basie of his time.

Even if he was, that would have done little for his reputation among the guardians of "absolute music." Quoting Gottschalk's archenemy, the Boston music critic John Sullivan Dwight, Starr emphasizes how chilly the judgments of such guardians could be:

For Dwight, the ideal performer would be an all-but-invisible person who . . . would perform with no "show or effect," so that "the composition is before you, pure and clear, . . . as a musician hears it in his mind in reading it from notes." The inevitable next step was for members of the audience to bring the score into the concert hall. In Dwight's Boston, score-reading became a mark of culture. Gottschalk loathed the practice.

The loathing was returned, expressed in endless gossip about Gottschalk as a mercenary and rake. Remarkably, this prudish tone persists even today. In the liner notes to a recent recording of Gottschalk piano pieces, the German writer Klaus Geitel sneers at Gottschalk's "love of money," which "rained down upon him copiously," and sniggers about the composer's reputation as being "a Don Juan who delighted in creating havoc among the crowds of enchanted ladies who formed his continual entourage."

True, Gottschalk did spend most of his adult life trying to make money. And, yes, he was a handsome fellow whose music thrilled men and women alike. But as Starr's biography makes clear, the gossips rarely stopped to consider how hard Gottschalk's life truly was. A sensualist and an aesthete, Gottschalk enjoyed flirting with innocent young girls. But he was also a near celibate. The lifelong burden of providing for his penniless and incompetent relatives (mother and siblings both) kept him from developing lasting romantic relationships.

Implicit in Starr's narrative is a defense of Gottschalk on the grounds that art music cannot flourish long without a vital connection to the musical vernacular. Indeed, it was the loss of this connection that hastened the decline of German music, first into the self-indulgence of late romanticism and then into the sterility of serialism. Gottschalk himself was a Jacksonian democrat who distinguished between refined "airs" and true refinement of mind. He had no patience with the European snob-

bery that sees only money-grubbing commerce in America. To the contrary, he saw a positive, enterprising spirit with the potential to apply America's wealth to the task of educating America's taste.

Anyone familiar with Starr's superb *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (1985) may expect *Bamboula!* to extend the earlier book's thesis that a commercial culture provides a healthy environment for the arts. *Red and Hot* illustrates the difference between the deadly "people's cultures" designed for the masses by their totalitarian masters and the rich popular culture that developed in the more-or-less free marketplace of America, giving rise to jazz among other musical glories.

Yet Starr's sympathy for commerce remains strangely muted in *Bamboula!*, possibly out of reluctance to pass final judgment

on Gottschalk the composer. Unfortunately, this reluctance means that Starr stops short of assessing Gottschalk's proper place in the history of Western music. But Starr does make it clear that even if the greatest strength of Gottschalk's music was a rhythmic force lost with live performance, his place should not be forgotten. Indeed, now that young musicians routinely gain fluency in both the European and the Afro-American idioms, a swinging revival of Gottschalk's music may be in store. Beyond that possibility, the life of this forgotten eccentric, this failed aesthete, sheds real light on how the music and culture of the last century gave rise to the perplexities of our own.

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How Beastly Our Beatitudes?

THE MORAL ANIMAL: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life. By Robert Wright. Pantheon. 467 pp. \$27.50

THE HUNGRY SOUL: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature. By Leon Kass. Free Press. 248 pp. \$24.95

What can the study of nature, and, above all, of human nature, teach us about how we ought to live? According to both Robert Wright and Leon Kass, the answer is clear: a great deal. Such an answer marks a valuable turning away from the dominant assumptions of an age that, believing in the moral silence of an indifferent nature and the moral neutrality of objective science, sees human nature as nearly infinitely malleable and solely shaped by social forces. Both Wright and

Kass are convinced that such a mistaken view of human nature, fostered by our social and natural sciences, is in part responsible for the moral confusions from which we suffer today. By their willingness to examine human nature, both authors return us to the originating Socratic question of our philosophical tradition.

Yet, beyond that common purpose, Wright and Kass can agree on very little because they look for human nature in opposite directions. Wright, gazing backward at our evolutionary past, constructs just-so stories of how our natural tendencies may have *come into being*; Kass, "taking human nature as we find it," explores its *current* meaning and its possible improvement through custom and culture. Which approach, then, is the correct one? Which ac-