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1869. Brazil. Louis Moreau Gottschalk dies at the age of 40. Europe, America and Latin America mourn the passing of a musical genius. However, New Orleans' native son is quickly forgotten.

1982. Paris. During a break in filming, producer-director John Huszar and Philippe Entremont, former director of the New Orleans Symphony, formalize plans made a year earlier to collaborate on a film tribute to Gottschalk. The agreement is sealed with a handshake and last May, three years later, "Gottschalk: A Musical Portrait" premiered at Loyola University. A national PBS broadcast is scheduled for the 1986-87 season. The Loyola premiere, hosted by the College of Music Visiting Committee, was part of fund-raising efforts for the music school's concert piano.

If memory does not serve you as to who Louis Moreau Gottschalk was, you are not alone. Gottschalk can be counted among New Orleans' forgotten native sons: For more than a century his story has been a well-kept secret. It is a story which Huszar felt needed to be told.

"The artistic decisions were simple," recalls Huszar in New Orleans for the screening. "Every other decision has been agony."

Among the challenges have been fund-raising, educating a public about the film subject and even gathering background material. When he began his research on Gottschalk, Huszar was surprised that few people in New Orleans knew about the composer. Robert Offergeld, a musicologist, historian, author and critic, is credited for leading the rediscovery of Gottschalk and his music. In 1970 he published the first definitive catalog of the maestro's compositions and currently is working on a comprehensive biography of Gottschalk.

Born in 1829, Gottschalk was the eldest of seven children. His father was a businessman from London with Jewish origins; his mother, a French Catholic refugee from the slave uprisings of Haiti.

His musical talents revealed themselves early and by the age of 5 Gottschalk could play the piano and violin. On walks to Congo Square, today called Beauregard Square, the youth was exposed to the African rhythms of the slaves chanting and dancing. These impressions would resurface later in his compositions. By the age of 7 Gottschalk was a substitute organist at St. Louis Cathedral.

Six years later his father sent him alone to Paris with plans to enroll him in the prestigious Paris Conservatory of Music. He was denied admission. The director of piano classes remarked, "America makes locomotives, not musicians." Still, Gottschalk remained in Paris, living with his mother's relatives. He studied piano privately with Charles Halle and within three years made his private debut at the Salle Pleyel.

Chopin, who was in the audience, praised the young pianist and predicted that Gottschalk would become "the king of pianists." The New Orleanian soon began to show such promise. Four years later at his public debut he played his compositions, "Louisiana Dances," "Bamboula," "le Bananier" and "la Savane" — all based on the African and Creole rhythms impressed during his childhood. The Parisian audience was charmed. The press showered Gottschalk with congratulatory messages from Berlioz, Theophile Gautier and Victor Hugo.

# A MUSICAL TRIBUTE

A NEW YORK DIRECTOR  
AND A FRENCH CONDUCTOR  
BRING THE LIFE AND MUSIC  
OF NEW ORLEANS-BORN  
COMPOSER GOTTSCHALK  
TO THE SCREEN



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By  
**Sandra E. Cordray**

The same year the "pianiste-compositeur Louisianis" had the double satisfaction of being invited to sit on the honors jury of the Paris Conservatory where he heard all piano students play for their examination, "Bamboula."

In answer to why Gottschalk was forgotten, Huszar begins, "One needs to put into perspective the degree of fame Gottschalk enjoyed. A ladies' man, he was like a rock star of today. At the end of a concert women would fight over his gloves. They would accost him on the street and clip locks of his hair. There probably wasn't that kind of fervor for any artist until today's rock stars . . . and this is during the 1850s and '60s. His fame was incredible."

P.T. Barnum offered Gottschalk a lucrative contract which was refused. However, the honeymoon period with his public ended with a scandal in San Francisco involving a minor. Gottschalk did not deny the seduction, but denied the girl's age. History would prove him right; however, the composer imposed self-exile. He toured South America and settled in Brazil. There he enjoyed one of the most prolific periods of his life, writing two operas and planning a return trip to Europe.

In his journal, "Notes of a Pianist," Gottschalk wrote:

"I again begin to live according to the customs of these primitive countries . . . indolently permitting myself to be carried away by chance, giving a concert wherever I found a piano, sleeping wherever the night overtook me."

The Emperor of Brazil made available for Gottschalk the combined bands of the Army, Navy, and National Guard. Gottschalk staged his largest concert with nearly 800 musicians. He wrote two of his most brilliant works in Brazil — "Marche Solennelle" and "Grande Fantasie sur l'hymne national bresilien."

The day after his "monster concert" Gottschalk agreed to give another recital. He collapsed at the keyboard and was carried from the stage by his friends. A week later he died of complications from yellow fever.

Upon hearing about his death, Amy Fay expressed in a letter a fan's sorrow: "I was dreadfully sorry to hear of poor Gottschalk's death, but what a romantic way to die . . . to fall senseless at his piano. If anything more is in the papers about him you must send it to me for the infatuation that I and 999,999 other American girls once felt for him still lingers in my breast."

*Philippe Entremont's conducting of Gottschalk has been called a fresh, vital interpretation of the composer's orchestral works. As music director and conductor of the New Orleans Symphony, Entremont led the orchestra into the national television spotlight, performing the music of its "hometown" composer.*

"No matter how huge his success was in Brazil at the time, he was out of favor in America," explains Huszar. "He didn't have a school or a following at the time. It's not as if he had been giving master classes and had students who carried on his musical technique or his ideas of musical composition. He was a popular artist, but working in the romantic or classical tradition. He wasn't pushing the limits of music all that much. He was very much of his time and then the times simply change."

Gottschalk's sisters were living in Paris when their brother died. They sent his body to New York where it was interred at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

It was in his own city, New York, at the public library, where Huszar found most of the background material on Gottschalk. Early during his research a treasure trove of Gottschalk memorabilia surfaced through the efforts of historian Offergeld.

As Huszar relates, Offergeld had written to someone he thought was a relative of Gottschalk. The letter was unopened until after the recipient's death.

Recalls Huszar, "A year later Bob received a call from the deceased's nephew who came across the letter while sorting through his uncle's belongings. A trunk had been discovered and it contained original autographed scores of Gottschalk, his letters, daguerreotypes of him and his father, programs and medals."

From that point on, Huszar says, the look of the film changed. There also was a roll of letters. A hatpin of Clara's, Gottschalk's sister, was stuck through the roll marked, "to be burned." His sisters, observes Huszar, "were overzealous in protecting his reputation as a ladies' man."

For the film director three key elements comprised the film — Gottschalk's life story, setting the tone and mood, and the music. The decision to film most of the project in New Orleans "was a natural one," explains Huszar, "because it's a 'hometown boy makes good' story. And virtually no one in New Orleans had latched on to the idea."

Huszar also was surprised that the New Orleans Symphony had never been televised nationally. He could have selected any orchestra in the nation. "However, Philippe (Entremont) had transformed the New Orleans Symphony . . . and his interpretations of Gottschalk, both the piano pieces he plays and the orchestral works . . . it's like a first hearing."



Huszar adds that Entremont "has a very French sensibility, like Gottschalk. The majority of the interpreters of Gottschalk were from the German school of music. Gottschalk gets a little too romanticized, too sentimentalized in most of the recordings around these days. Entremont's playing is very clean, very crisp. His interpretations go back to the score, in a sense, without embellishment."

The producer-director is pleased that an audience, exposed for the first time to Gottschalk's music "will not be hearing some kind of mishmash. When you hear the music and see the show you'll know why he achieved the reputation he did."

"Gottschalk: A Musical Tribute" is representative of Huszar's films. The film is a production of FilmAmerica, Inc. which Huszar founded and serves as president and project director. FilmAmerica projects are "firsts" on distinguished Americans and their work. The New York-based corporation is publicly supported and non-profit. It was formed for the purpose of developing, producing and distributing educational films and videos devoted to the arts in America. Its "Americans in the Arts" series is biographical in nature with each film focusing on a distinguished American artist's work, motivation and life story.

Huszar, a graduate of Pratt Institute, knows from experience the difficulty independent filmmakers encounter in funding projects. "Someone with a great deal more experience than what I had in funding for the arts asked me, 'Why are you knocking your head against the wall? Why don't you form a non-profit corporation and raise the funds for the projects you want to do?'" recalls Huszar.

The adviser became one of FilmAmerica's first board members. The name FilmAmerica, adds its president, embraced the corporation's goals — "to film America . . . distinguished Americans in the arts . . . subject matter that's uniquely American in scope."

In the last 15 years Huszar has produced several documentary and performance programs for PBS, CBS, CAMERA THREE, as well as films for education distribution. He has filmed in Europe, Japan and South America, garnering several awards in national and international film festivals. Huszar's films are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and major museums across the country.

Recent credits include: "Virgil Thompson Composer," a one-hour documentary presented nationally on the PBS network; "Ansel Adams Photographer;" and a series of four, one-hour programs on the life and music of Maurice Ravel which he worked with Philippe Entremont on in 1982.

In choosing a project Huszar says it must be one he believes in "totally or there's just no point at all in doing it. It's just too easy to do a bad show or to do half the work. But I happened to believe in the work of and the integrity of Ansel Adams and Gottschalk and the others. Why put up a three-year fight over the Gottschalk project?

"There would be no reason for doing it at all as far as I can see unless you really believe wholeheartedly in the project," he answers. "Once you do that, the rest of it's pretty easy . . . something comes across the screen. There's a certain intensity. I certainly don't work to garner good reviews or please the critics or the public because I can't do that. Who knows what they're going to say!"

For this producer-director, the reward is satisfaction. "It's



*As president and project director of Film America, Inc., John Huszar has produced a series of award-winning programs on distinguished Americans in the arts.*

the work that's fun," he continues. "That's more fun than premieres or anything else in a sense. Premieres give you butterflies, but work gives you satisfaction."

Huszar says he doesn't subscribe to the "masterpiece theory of creating any work of art. You do the best you can with what you've got. Sure, some (projects) turn out to be more fun than others, but that's just human nature."

Huszar admits he has succeeded in "carving out a niche for myself, which sounds awfully self-serving, where I wanted to do projects which were firsts," he explains. "I knew there had been nothing done on Virgil or Adams or Gottschalk. And a number of previous things had been firsts and it's something you kind of fall into. I don't think anybody's that clever that they can really plot out their career the way they want it to happen. Fate's too fickle for that. But they were subjects which interested me and had some meaning."

He says that impressions filed away, invariably resurface. "In junior high school I saw the film, 'The River,' which is one of the best uses of an original music score. Some impressions you tuck away in the back of your mind."

With Gottschalk, Huszar had been given an album collection of his music 10 years before he suggested the project to Entremont. When Huszar learned that Virgil Thompson lived in New York the director says, "I made it my business to meet him."

He recalls how the late Ansel Adams was revered by his students "and here come these brash New Yorkers telling him where to stand because he's blocking the light . . . Most of the time he would know, calculating the exposure, the lens. What happened is that he trusted us. So he let us get away with things like bossing him around. See, that's what film directors do," laughs Huszar. "They point a lot and tell people where to go."

And Gottschalk? For this director, "It's the first story in American music. It's an important story to be told." □