



# Bamboula!: The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk

*S. Frederick Starr*

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## **Bamboula!: The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk** S. Frederick Starr

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was an American original. A spellbinding piano virtuoso, he was America's first internationally recognized composer, whose "classical" works received accolades from Hector Berlioz and Victor Hugo, and whose arch-romantic melodies became for Americans the standard expressions of common emotions. Perhaps most important, his immensely popular Louisiana and Caribbean pieces--such as *Danza*, *Pasquinade*, or *Bamboula*--anticipated ragtime by fifty years. Indeed, the colorful and exotic textures of Gottschalk's music establish him at the head of what is today the mainstream of popular American culture. In *Bamboula!*, S. Frederick Starr presents an authoritatively researched, engagingly written biography of America's first authentic musical voice. Starr paints for us a striking portrait of Gottschalk's childhood in 1830s New Orleans, a city madly devoted to music, where opera companies, music halls, fiddlers and banjo-pickers, church choirs, and Army bands all contributed to what Starr calls "the most stunning manifestation of Jacksonian democracy in the realm of culture to be found anywhere in America." We meet Gottschalk's African-American nurse Sally, who regaled him with the creole songs, legends, and lore of her native Haiti, which would inform some of his finest music. We travel with Gottschalk to Paris, where he was a sensation, playing in fashionable salons for the likes of Lamartine, Gautier, and Dumas; and we join his flight from the Revolution of 1848 to a town north of Paris, where he composed his first great works--*Bamboula*, *La Savane*, *Le Bananier*, and *Le Mancenillier*--all published over the name "Gottschalk of Louisiana." Starr describes Gottschalk's successful return to New York City in the early 1850s, where he enjoyed a degree of popularity never before accorded to an American performer or composer, becoming our first homegrown concert idol. But Starr also examines the life-long struggle between the Catholic Gottschalk and earnest Protestant champions of "serious" music, a battle that pitted the austere values of northern Europe against the brighter sensibilities of Paris, Louisiana, and the West Indies.

Based on extensive research, including hundreds of letters written by Gottschalk (in French, Spanish, and English) which are used here for the first time, *Bamboula!* illuminates an exotic but tragic life, as well as one of the most democratic phases of American cultural life, a world of bustling impresarios and America's first bohemian circle. A major biography in every sense, it will help reestablish Gottschalk's place in American musical history.

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