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## **Porch and Playhouse, Parlor and Performance Hall:**

### **Traversing Boundaries in Gottschalk's *The Banjo***

**LAURA MOORE PRUETT**

#### *ABSTRACT*

*This article reconsiders the cultural significance and historical impact of the well-known virtuosic piano composition *The Banjo* by Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Throughout the early nineteenth century, the banjo and the piano inhabited very specific and highly contrasting performance circumstances: black folk entertainment and minstrel shows for the former, white middle- and upper-class parlors and concert halls for the latter. In *The Banjo*, Louis Moreau Gottschalk lifted the banjo out of its familiar contexts and placed it in the spaces usually privileged for the piano. Taking its inspiration from both African-American and minstrel banjo playing techniques, Gottschalk's composition relaxed and muddled the boundaries among performance spaces, racial and class divisions, and two conspicuously different musical instruments in an egalitarian effort to demonstrate that, contrary to the opinions of some mid-nineteenth century musical critics and tastemakers, both the piano and the banjo have a place in the shaping of American music culture.*

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the banjo occupied a very specific set of circumstances in the United States. Adapting the instrument from its African roots, black slaves on southern farms and plantations played it in their meager spare time for

entertainment and distraction.<sup>1</sup> In addition, white musicians then appropriated the banjo, featuring it during blackface performances on the minstrel stage.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the piano inhabited a very different pair of settings: the middle- to upper-class white parlor, where amateur (usually female) players practiced and entertained family and friends, and the concert hall, as both a solo and accompaniment instrument.<sup>3</sup> The music performed in these four contrasting cultural spaces sometimes overlapped: black slave songs were heard in minstrel shows, and newly-composed minstrel songs were occasionally re-appropriated by black slaves for their own entertainment or published as sheet music for performance in the parlor; European art music was performed both in the parlor and the recital hall, and it was often lampooned on the minstrel stage. However, it was rare that music from either the slave tradition or from minstrelsy found its way into the concert hall.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk used the piano to lift the banjo and its playing styles out of its familiar contexts and place it in a new setting: the concert hall. In the early 1850s composer and pianist Gottschalk was establishing himself in New York as a virtuoso performer following his years of training and concertizing in Europe. Although other banjo-themed piano works were performed and published in the mid-nineteenth century, it was Gottschalk's inimitable and appealing performance style that brought the piece to the fore and fostered what became an enduring popularity. While some critics denounced him for playing

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<sup>1</sup> See 1825 quotation from a slave named Aaron in Dena J. Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology* 19, no. 3 (September 1975), 348.

<sup>2</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 102.

<sup>3</sup> At least until the end of the Civil War, there is no evidence that the piano was ever used as a performing force on the minstrel stage.

“only his own music,” a fact that he lamented in his memoirs, published as *Notes of a Pianist*, Gottschalk was among the first American performers to build a career around playing original compositions.<sup>4</sup> Deliberately drawing attention to the contrasts and similarities between the banjo and the piano, Gottschalk’s piano composition *The Banjo* complicates and permeates the boundaries among musical styles, performance spaces, and social hierarchies that were just being constructed by critics and audiences engaged in the initial stages of instituting an American musical style.

The banjo had been a familiar instrument to American audiences since the eighteenth century. In addition to commenting upon the perceived differences between whites and blacks in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson noted that “the instrument proper to them [black slaves] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa.”<sup>5</sup> The history of the banjo, both its African predecessors and prototypes and its subsequent development and alterations in the Americas, has been well documented in the literature.<sup>6</sup> Dena Epstein’s pioneering 1975 article “The Folk Banjo” documented an Africa-to-America chronology that was confirmed and extended by later scholars, including Robert Winans, Robert Lloyd Webb,

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Moreau Gottschalk, *Notes of a Pianist*, ed. Jeanne Behrend (New York: Knopf, 1964), 173–74.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: Stockdale, 1787), 233.

<sup>6</sup> On African predecessors, see Eric Charry, “Plucked Lutes in West Africa: An Historical Overview,” *Galpin Society Journal* 49 (1996): 3–37, and Michael Theodore Coolen, “Senegambian Archetypes for the American Folk Banjo,” *Western Folklore* 43, no. 2 (1984): 117–32; for the American history of the instrument, see Epstein, “The Folk Banjo,” Robert B. Winans, “The Folk, the Stage, and the Five-String Banjo in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Folklore* 89, whole no. 354 (1976): 407–37, Robert Lloyd Webb, *Ring the Banjar! The Banjo in America from Folklore to Factory* (Cambridge: MIT Museum, 1984), and Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

Michael Theodore Coolen, and Karen Linn. James F. Bollman and Philip Gura's focused study of the nineteenth-century banjo specifically identified it as "America's Instrument," emphasizing its presence and significance in a myriad of musical settings and styles by the end of the century. The most recently published book on the topic, by historian Laurent Dubois, reframes Bollman and Gura's moniker as "America's African Instrument," emphasizing the banjo's complicated history "of ebbs and flows, exchanges and crossings, one in which music and society have interacted over the centuries, and one in which ideologies about music have changed over time in different societies."<sup>7</sup>

The murky history of black playing techniques and its assimilation by white performers on the minstrel stage centers on individual and influential figures such as E. P. Christy, who witnessed slave banjo performances at Congo Square in New Orleans, applying those experiences to his performances with Christy's Minstrels. In addition, Joel Sweeney, who learned frailing-style (i.e., downstroking) techniques from plantation slaves, went on to teach such noteworthy early minstrel banjoists as William Whitlock of the Virginia Minstrels and George Swayne Buckley of the New Orleans Serenaders (later known as Buckley's

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<sup>7</sup> James F. Bollman and Philip Gura, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2016), 11. Of additional interest is Leo Mazow's *Picturing the Banjo*, which accompanied an exhibition at the Palmer Museum of Art in 2005–06 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). In addition to including 120 images of the banjo from the nineteenth century and beyond, the book includes an essay by Mazow, "From Sonic to Social: Noise, Quiet, and Nineteenth-Century American Banjo Imagery" (95–113), which is noteworthy for its description of the "silencing" of black music and musicians within nineteenth-century American artworks.

Serenaders).<sup>8</sup> Christopher Smith's recent and comprehensive study investigates not only the African-American roots of blackface minstrelsy, but also makes connections to the Anglo-European styles that informed the genre as well, resulting in a veritable musical "creolization."<sup>9</sup>

With an upbringing common to many southern bourgeois city dwellers, Gottschalk likely heard the banjo in a variety of contexts during his formative years. Black banjoists such as "Old Corn Meal" and John "Picayune" Butler, who initially played for tips on the streets of New Orleans in the 1830s, became so popular that they were eventually featured at the St. Charles Theatre in that city.<sup>10</sup> The shadowy Pic Butler, a black banjo virtuoso from the West Indies, was either performing on Broadway or had been appropriated as a Jim Crow-like caricature by white minstrels by the time Gottschalk debuted in New York in 1853.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), and Winans, "The Folk, the Stage, and the Five-String Banjo," 417–19. See also Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 102: "To obtain materials for their shows, the white minstrels visited plantations, then attempted to recreate plantation scenes on the stage. They listened to the songs of the black man as he sang at work. . . . The melodies they heard served as bases for minstrel songs, and they adapted the dances they saw to their needs. The musical instruments originally associated with plantation 'frolics' became 'Ethiopian instruments' —banjos, tambourines, fiddles and bone castanets." On the Buckley family, see Robert B. Winans, "Buckley," *Grove Music Online*.

[<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2234604>].

<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sydney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–49.

<sup>11</sup> Current research is unclear on this point; Butler is referred to by name in reminiscences by white banjoists Albert Baur and Frank Converse in connection with the first American Banjo Tournament, held in New

Blackface minstrel shows were undoubtedly part of Gottschalk's musical world; under the pseudonym "Seven Octaves," a name under which he published several of his more sentimental potboilers, he reviewed an 1856 New York concert by the aforementioned Buckley's Serenaders.<sup>12</sup> While the banjo was not common in white households in the 1850s, it was certainly a familiar one to the middle-class audiences of his solo piano performances. Using his ever-present marketing and business acumen, Gottschalk capitalized on the popularity of both the minstrel show and the instrument in his composition.

Later in his life, Gottschalk reflected on the year following his return to the United States from his Parisian training in 1853. Although he was composing and performing regularly, he recalled significant financial losses incurred in New York and New England; his father's subsequent and unexpected death left him scrambling to support his widowed mother and six siblings, whom he had left living in Paris. In the midst of great sadness, loss, and impending poverty, he finally caught a break:

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York on 19 October 1857, but new research suggests that this individual was in fact a white performer who had adopted the name. See comments by Tony Thomas in "The Hard Truths about Picayune Butler" at the *Minstrel Banjo* website, <http://minstrelbanjo.ning.com/forum/topics/the-hard-truths-about-picayune-butler> (26 October 2013).

<sup>12</sup> "Seven Octaves," *Morning Times*, undated clipping, Music Division, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, New York. Cited in Starr, *Bamboula*, 147. For advertisements of both events, see the *New York Daily Times* (21 August 1856), 5. In the same review Gottschalk also mentioned a concert he himself had performed with Madame La Grange, writing that "Gottschalk played as only he can play. . . . The audience were [*sic*] very enthusiastic and the illustrious artistes were rewarded with rapturous applause and beautiful flowers; but we will not particularize, as we expect a fine *critique* from the Albany correspondent of the Musical Review, who signs himself *Allegro*."

At last one day I played some of my compositions for Mr. Hall, the [New York] publisher. “Why do you not give a concert to make them known?” he said to me. “*Ma foi*,” I answered him, “it is a luxury that my means no longer permit me!” “Bah! I will pay you one hundred dollars for a piano concert at Dodsworth’s Rooms.”

Eight days later [20 December 1854] I played my new pieces in this small hall: *The Banjo*, the *Marche de nuit*, the *Jota aragonesa*, and *Le Chant du soldat*. Its success surpassed my most brilliant expectations. . . . *The Banjo* [op. 15], *La Marche*, and many other pieces bought by Hall were published and sold with a rapidity that left no doubt as to the final result of Hall’s speculation, which time has only corroborated. Everybody knows of the enormous edition that was published of *Banjo*. . . . I have always kept at the bottom of my heart a sentiment of gratitude for the house of Hall, who first discovered that I was worth something; and from that moment dates the friendship that unites me to his family, and that time has only ripened.<sup>13</sup>

*The Banjo* appealed to Gottschalk’s middle-class American audiences and proved financially profitable in both ticket and sheet music sales. His popularity as a concert pianist aided in its eventual eclipse of its counterparts, ensuring its place as an iconic and enduring work that successfully and metaphorically linked the various performing spaces of the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

### **Earlier Banjo Imitations**

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<sup>13</sup> Louis Moreau Gottschalk, *Notes of a Pianist*, ed. Jeanne Behrend (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 49-50.



While Gottschalk's may be the most famous "banjo" piece for solo piano, in fact numerous earlier and later works celebrated the instrument. The earliest extant, by Anthony Philip Heinrich (1781-1861), was published in 1825 as part of the second set of *The Sylviad*, op. 3. The full title of his composition is "A Sylvan Scene in Kentucky, or the Barbecue Divertimento, comprising the Ploughman's Grand March and the Negro's Banjo Quickstep."<sup>14</sup> Described by Heinrich as a "light fancy sketch characteristic of the Western Woodlanders,"<sup>15</sup> the movement titled "The Banjo Quickstep" consists of a number of dancelike sections for piano. Constant and unexpected shifts in key and harmonic motion typical of Heinrich permeate the work, which culminates with an adaptation of his song "All Hail to Kentucky," which first appeared in 1820 in *The Dawning of Music in Kentucky, or The Pleasures of Harmony in the Solitudes of Nature*, Heinrich's op. 1. The ten-minute piece is consistent with Heinrich's proclivity to sectional design, with some moments that sound very like improvisation on a porch stoop and others more closely related to classical European style. This very early example, like so much of Heinrich's oeuvre, is singular in its design and inspiration.

Similarly, several European composer-pianists who either toured in or permanently emigrated to the United States performed and published concert works that, while not directly evoking the sound of the banjo, did incorporate American popular tunes associated with minstrel shows. Austrian pianists Leopold de Meyer (1816–83) and Henri Herz (1803–88)

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Philip Heinrich, *The Sylviad: Or, Minstrelsy of Nature in the Wilds of North America*, ed. J. Bunker Clark (Boston: 1823, 1825-26; reprint, Greenleaf, WI: Connors, 1996): 265–87.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

were among the first European artists to perform in the U.S., beginning in 1845.<sup>16</sup> Both composed showpieces that quoted the crowd favorite “Yankee Doodle” as well as the patriotic hymn “Hail, Columbia,” just as Gottschalk did in his later piece *L’Union*.<sup>17</sup> Herz’s 1848 *Impromptu burlesques sur des mélodies populaires des Christy’s Ménestrels*, Op. 162, is based on Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susannah!” and Charles T. White’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia.”<sup>18</sup> Another composer, the German-born and extremely prolific Charles Grobe, wrote several sets of variations on Foster songs, including “Camptown Races” (op. 283), “Ring, Ring the Banjo” (Op. 302), “Massa’s In The Cold Ground” (op. 367), and “My Old Kentucky Home” (op. 385).<sup>19</sup>

In the 1850s, explicit banjo imitations for piano rapidly multiplied. American composers, including Gottschalk, increasingly signified the instrument in their titles and, somewhat less frequently, in their music. Joseph Benedict’s 1851 “Banjo Polka” is an uncomplicated duple-meter polka for pianoforte, with simple chords accompanying a diatonic

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<sup>16</sup> R. Allen Lott, *From Paris to Peoria: How European Composers Brought Classical Music to the Heartland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Henri Herz, *Variations Brilliantes et Grande Fantaisie sur des Airs Nationaux Américains* (Paris: J. Meissonnier et Fils, n.d. [ca.1846]), and Leopold de Meyer, *Grande Fantaisie pour le Piano sur les Airs Nationaux Américains*, op. 52 (New York: Scharfenberg & Luis, 1846).

<sup>18</sup> Allen Lott, *From Paris to Peoria: How European Virtuosos Brought Classical Music to the American Heartland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96.

<sup>19</sup> See Eric Schissel, “List of Compositions by Charles Grobe,” International Music Score Library Project/Petrucchi Music Library [[http://imslp.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_compositions\\_by\\_Charles\\_Grobe](http://imslp.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Charles_Grobe)].

melody.<sup>20</sup> The banjo of the title hardly sounds in the work, however: it is implied only in upper-neighbor grace notes that ornament the first section's melody.

Another noteworthy, if rather peculiar banjo-themed work for piano from the 1850s is the "Imitation of the Banjo for the Piano" by W. K. Batchelder. Dedicated to T. F. Briggs of Christy's Minstrels, the piece likely predates Gottschalk's publication by at least a year.<sup>21</sup> The cover page avers that the piece includes "the favorite banjo melody as played in the scene illustrating the Power of Music, as represented by Briggs and Horn."<sup>22</sup> The eight-measure introduction alternates between tonic and subdominant sonorities in an arpeggiated, dotted-rhythm melody over block chords in the left hand. The indication for "Banjo Solo" (m. 9) opens a section of music wholly unlike the introductory passage: an almost monophonic,

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<sup>20</sup> "Banjo Polka" (Louisville, KY: Peters, Webb, 1851). Available at *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music* [<http://www.loc.gov/collections/american-sheet-music-1820-to-1860>]. Other than this publication, no additional information about Benedict, including his dates or any other compositions, has yet surfaced.

<sup>21</sup> Boston: Russell & Towman, n.d. (ca. 1854). The piece is included in the Levy Sheet Music Collection, Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University [<http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/9562>], where it is erroneously dated 1861, likely due to its inclusion in *The Welcome Guest: A Collection of Modern Pianoforte Music* (Boston: Henry Tolman & Co., 1863). Gura and Bollman dated the piece 1850 (271, fn. 3). But the most compelling evidence is the work's inclusion in a list of "newly published" compositions for sale by Nathan Richardson at the Musical Exchange in Boston, in the *Musical World and Times*, 10, no. 1 (2 September 1854), 10. No additional biographical information on W. K. Batchelder has yet surfaced.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Briggs and Eph Horn often performed a banjo duet together in a minstrel scene to demonstrate, as indicated in an 1851 playbill, "the power of Music on the Ethiopian race. Horn will here portray the influence of music upon a respectable, aged colored individual from away down souf [*sic*]." See Playbill 12 in William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 49.

sparse, one-note-at-a-time crossed-hands texture alternating between the right hand playing triplets and short syncopated gestures in the bass clef, and the left hand, which is limited to playing only single sixteenth-note taps on the F above middle C (Example 1). The texture later expands to include simultaneous thirds in the right hand, but the left hand never strays from its single allotted pitch. In a discussion on the “Minstrel Banjo” website, one writer comments that the piece is “scored as though written (without transposing) for a banjo tuned f-Bb[flat]-F-A-C (although the score doesn't reach the bass string). It seems to be a transcription of music as played on a banjo rather than a pianist’s fancy, and is a fairly easy piece in stroke style.”<sup>23</sup> More than any other piece discussed here, Batchelder’s work comes across as a true banjo imitation: a note-for-note copy of Thomas Briggs’s banjo playing. Yet the piece is specifically and explicitly linked with the minstrel tradition, not African-American banjo techniques; furthermore, it is unlikely that much of Gottschalk’s target audience would have known it.

**[insert Example 1 about here.]**

Finally, Maurice Strakosch’s solo piano work “The Banjo: Capriccio Characteristique” was first published in 1852, and he performed the work in concerts at least through 1853.<sup>24</sup> While

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<sup>23</sup> User OK-4, “Batchelder’s ‘Imitation of the Banjo for Piano’,” *Minstrel Banjo* [<http://minstrelbanjo.ning.com/forum/topics/batchelder-s-imitation-of-the-banjo-for-piano>]. The writer also transcribed the piece into banjo tabulature and recorded himself performing it on banjo.

<sup>24</sup> “The Banjo: Capriccio Characteristique” (New York: Firth, Pond, 1852). Available at *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music* [<http://www.loc.gov/collections/american-sheet-music-1820-to-1860>]. The title of Strakosch’s work combines elements of various languages in its own idiosyncratic spelling of “characteristique.” For Strakosch’s performances of the piece, see John H. Baron, *Concert Life in New Orleans:*

Czech-born Strakosch (1825-87) is less known for his compositions than for his career as an American manager and impresario, this piece seems to demonstrate an increased interest in and understanding of the banjo's sound in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Strakosch's composition features a primary theme that outlines an arpeggiated tonic (A major) chord with a few passing tones. It is first presented in the bass clef, sounding in the banjo's true register, under a quintuplet figuration that features rapidly repeated notes on a dominant pedal (Example 2). The continuously repeated accompaniment pattern and the placement of Strakosch's melody in a range similar to the banjo's suggest the sound of the instrument more strongly than either Heinrich's or Benedict's earlier works and may have affected Gottschalk's compositional choices the following year. Later in the piece Strakosch introduces a new, undulating, arpeggiated melody, again in the left hand and bass/tenor range, featuring a triplet figure that even more directly echoes banjo playing techniques. A third segment follows, in which a persistent, descending triplet figure is tossed between the two

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*A Comprehensive Reference* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013): 360–62. The March 1853 concerts Baron describes in New Orleans would have been similar in programming and repertoire to those the Patti-Strakosch company performed across the country during their tour.

<sup>25</sup> During the 1850s, Strakosch managed and performed on piano for the American tours of the Patti family, including Amalia, whom he married, and her sister Adelina; he later added the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull to the troupe. In the later years of the decade Strakosch joined forces with Bernard Ullman in New York to form the ill-fated Ullman and Strakosch Opera Company. In the 1860s Maurice helped to arrange a contract between his brother Max, also a manager and impresario, and Gottschalk; Max managed Gottschalk's American tour from 1862 until Gottschalk departed for South America in 1865. See Katherine Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Companies in the United States, 1825-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 145–47, and William Brooks, "Strakosch, Maurice," *Grove Music Online* [<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/45358>].

hands. The piece progresses in a loose arch structure, returning to the undulating melody before concluding with the primary theme in recapitulation. Its sectional form, banjo-style figurations, and 1852 publication in New York show that Strakosch's work uncannily foreshadows, and may even have influenced, Gottschalk's composition.

The two men both toured the country, often crossing paths, throughout 1853. Gottschalk first performed in New York on 11 February, at Niblo's Saloon.<sup>26</sup> On 26 May, Strakosch performed his banjo capriccio on Marietta Alboni's farewell concert at Metropolitan Hall. Although Gottschalk had not yet premiered *his* banjo piece in New York, at least one critic in the city was already making connections between the two composers:

[Strakosch's] characteristic Capriccio of "the Banjo" pleased us greatly; the more so as we shall refer to it in proof of an assertion we made a short time ago in an article on Gottschalk. We said: "we believe his compositions and playing – pure, national, and classical – will have a happy effect on the rising generation, and be the foundation of a school, at once legitimate, and characteristic." . . . It detracts nothing from the credit due to the amiable and talented Strakosch, himself an excellent composer, when we assert that we find the first fruits of the "Gottschalk school" in the work of one of our most eminent Pianists; for the "Banjo," clever as it is, is redolent with [Gottschalk's] "Bamboula" and "Bananier."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Niblo's was a small concert hall constructed by impresario William Niblo adjacent to his larger opera house known as Niblo's Garden. Unlike the rougher concert saloons that proliferated in the Broadway area, Niblo's was a respectable establishment and a fine acoustic space for Gottschalk's debut. See T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), 9–10, and Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> *The Albion, or, British, Colonial, and Foreign Weekly Gazette* 12, no. 22 (28 May 1853), 260.

In attributing influence on Strakosch's piece to Gottschalk, the *Albion* critic must not have been aware that Strakosch's piece had been published in 1852, before he heard Gottschalk play his own music in New York. However, it is most telling that by May 1853, only four months after his arrival, at least one critic already viewed him as the protagonist of a new American musical style.

**[insert Example 2 about here.]**

**[insert Example 3 about here.]**

By October 1853, Strakosch had played at another farewell concert in Boston's "New Music Hall" (the present-day Orpheum Theatre); Ole Bull's last performance in that city before his departure for Europe featured both Adelina Patti and Strakosch, billed as "the celebrated pianist and composer," playing his "new" piece "The Banjo."<sup>28</sup> Gottschalk performed there three days later; his *Banjo* was not on the program.<sup>29</sup> The following year saw Gottschalk's trip to Cuba, and shortly afterwards Strakosch turned his attention largely to opera management. Yet the popularity of his "Banjo" had by no means evaporated. By 1856, a year after Gottschalk's op. 15 was published by Wm. Hall & Son and the same year Strakosch was battling Max Maretzek and Bernard Ullman for control of the Academy of

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<sup>28</sup> *Daily Atlas* 22, no. 91 (15 October 1853), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Atlas* 22, no. 93 (18 October 1853), 3. It is tempting to speculate that he attended Bull's final concert and was perhaps inspired by Strakosch's composition to write his own, although Starr and Smith (see below) both date the composition of Gottschalk's work earlier that year.

Music, the *New York Musical World* announced that Strakosch's work had sold out "several large editions," likely benefiting from the overwhelming popularity of Gottschalk's.<sup>30</sup>

To recapitulate the impact of Gottschalk's immediate banjo-imitation forebears, Benedict's work was among the first in the 1850s to hint at the increasing popularity of the banjo, Batchelder then attempted to reproduce its sounds and techniques, and Strakosch shrewdly capitalized on it. But it was Gottschalk who found a way to both successfully imitate the instrument and celebrate its national impact in a way that appealed to concert audiences, music critics, and consumers of sheet music. The music critic for the New York French-language paper *Courrier des États-Unis* was quick to point out that, although banjo imitations were becoming more ubiquitous in the mid-1850s, Gottschalk's belonged at the top of the heap: "When working in a standard form, he [Gottschalk] finds incredible delight in imitation, such as, for example, in the Banjo, the masterpiece of the genre."<sup>31</sup> Several years later, the same critic reviewed a concert performance in which Gottschalk apparently showcased the entire gamut of his pianistic capabilities:

You could say he has traveled, this evening, roughly the complete range of different styles that a pianist could attempt. Furthermore, the selections chosen for the official program, in response to public sentiment, also demonstrate a particular audacity in drawing from his repertoire the best pieces to highlight the various faces of his multiple talents. Airs de bravura, fantasies, tours de force, reveries, cavalier melodies and pastoral harmonies, he has by turns conquered all these genres, to crown them

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<sup>30</sup> *New York Musical World* 13, no. 2 (19 January 1856), 36.

<sup>31</sup> "Lorsqu'il est aux prises avec la forme sensible, il trouve des bonheurs incroyables d'imitation comme par exemple, dans le Banjo, le chef-d'oeuvre du genre." R.T., "Chronique de New-York: Gottschalk," *Courrier des États-Unis*, 14 April 1856. Translation by author.



with the humorous caprice that everyone applauded under the title “Banjo”. . . . About “The Banjo,” we have nothing to say; this is an old success for which its composer has found the secret of the Fountain of Youth.<sup>32</sup>

An “old success” indeed; by the time of this review in 1862 the composition was nine years into its lifecycle. Having first composed it in 1853 and performed it in New Orleans in February 1854, Gottschalk significantly revised the piece over the next year before its initial publication in September 1855 in the version most audiences heard, as op. 15. Yet the original version, which was heard in New Orleans and published posthumously as op. 82, gives a rare and significant glimpse into Gottschalk’s compositional process and places him as a banjo imitator earlier in the growth of the genre than the chronology of op. 15 would suggest.

### **Banjo, op. 82 (Second Banjo)**

Gottschalk’s composition now called *Second Banjo*, op. 82, served as a sketch of sorts for the later work.<sup>33</sup> Based on an undated list of compositions in Gottschalk’s handwriting housed at the Music Division of the New York Public Library for Performing Arts, S. Frederick Starr

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<sup>32</sup> “On peut dire qu’il a parcouru, dans cette soiree, la gamme a peu pres entire des styles differents que peut aborder un pianiste. En outre du choix qu’il avait fait pour le programme officiel, il a mis, en repondant aux rappels du public, une coquetterie particuliere a tirer de son repertoire les morceaux les plus propres a faire ressortir les faces diverses de son multiple talent. Airs de bravoure, fantaisies, tours de force, reverie, melodie cavaliere et harmonie pastorale, il a tour a tour aborde tous ces genres, pour les couronner par cette boutade humoristique que tout le monde a applaudie sous le titre de Banjo. . . . Du Banjo, nous n’avons rien a dire; c’est un vieux succes, pour lequel son auteur a retrouve le secret de la fontaine de Jouvence.” “Concert de Gottschalk,” *Courrier des États-Unis*, 12 February 1862. Translation by author.

<sup>33</sup> Op. 82 was published posthumously in 1873 in Boston by Ditson and in Paris by Escudier, in an edition by Nicolas Ruiz Espadero. There is no extant manuscript.

posits that the piece was written during Gottschalk's stay at the United States Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York in 1853, but Paul Ely Smith argues that he was inspired to compose the piece in New Orleans that same year.<sup>34</sup> There are parallels between the two compositions, but op. 82 features a simpler formal and harmonic structure and more focus on figuration than melody. In addition, while op. 15 employs an actual minstrel tune, Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races," op. 82 has no explicit relationship with music from the minstrel stage, bypassing it in favor of more direct connections with African and African-American banjo techniques as Smith has posited.<sup>35</sup>

Op. 82, then known simply as *The Banjo*, is a series of variations on a melody that also appears in an 1853 composition, "Banjo Dance," op. 7, by T. Franklin Bassford, a Gottschalk devotee who dedicated the work to him.<sup>36</sup> The theme is set almost identically in both Bassford's and Gottschalk's works. Because the two compositions were written in the

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<sup>34</sup> Louis Moreau Gottschalk, list of compositions (n.d.), Music Division, New York Public Library for Performing Arts, New York; see Starr, *Bamboula*, 146-48. Paul Ely Smith, "Gottschalk's *The Banjo*, op. 15, and the Banjo in the Nineteenth Century," *Current Musicology* 50 (1992): 47-61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See also correspondence discussing Gottschalk's sources for *The Banjo* from both Starr and Smith in "Communications," *Current Musicology* 54 (1993): 106-9.

<sup>36</sup> New York: Horace Waters, 1853. Available at *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music* [<http://www.loc.gov/collections/american-sheet-music-1820-to-1860>]. Not much information exists about Bassford's birth and life; Vera Brodsky Lawrence states that he was a "protégé of Richard Grant White and probably a pupil of Gottschalk." See *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong*, Volume 2: *Reverberations, 1850-1856* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 740. Bassford was an American pianist who performed at least twice with Gottschalk (13 March and 16 May 1856) and in his own concerts. He died later that year when his ship bound for France was wrecked off the coast of Nantucket in November (Ibid.).

same year, it is possible, as Gottschalk bio-bibliographer John Godfrey Doyle speculates, that the melody was already popular at the time.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, Gottschalk could have taken the melody from Bassford's homage and reworked it, perhaps as a sign of appreciation or gratitude. Newspaper reviews suggest the latter: with regard to a performance on 1 February 1854 at Mechanics Hall in New Orleans, the *Courrier de la Louisiane*, *The Daily True Delta*, *The New Orleans Daily Crescent*, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, and *L'Abeille* (*The Bee*) all stated that the work entitled "The Banjo" played at this concert was a set of variations based on Bassford's work.<sup>38</sup> These reviews also confirm that the New Orleans audience heard op. 82, not the now-famous op. 15, which was published the following year (1855).

The melody of Bassford's work is illustrated in Example 4. Bassford effectively evokes the banjo's sound through the arpeggiated and chordal accompaniment and occasional syncopations (for example m. 15, beat 2). The "forward-backward" roll that appears in the left hand (mm. 14, 16, and 18) suggests a link to West African khalam techniques described by Smith, although such arpeggiation can readily be found in Anglo-European music of the time as well.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "The airs varied by Bassford and LMG [sic] may have been known to the public and thus common property." See John Godfrey Doyle, *Louis Moreau Gottschalk, 1829-1869: A Bibliographical Study and Catalog of Works* (Michigan: College Music Society, 1983), 267.

<sup>38</sup> *New Orleans Daily Picayune* (1 February 1854), 5. *Courrier de la Louisiane* (1 February 1854) and *L'Abeille* (31 January and 2 February 1854), cited in Doyle, 267. *The Daily True Delta* (31 January 1854), 3. *The New Orleans Daily Crescent* (31 January 1854), 3. The reviewer at the *Daily Picayune* described the piece as an "amusing little caprice" that Gottschalk "played charmingly."

<sup>39</sup> Smith, "Gottschalk's *The Banjo*," 53.

[insert Example 4 about here]

There are many similarities between Bassford's composition and Gottschalk's: both use black-key tonics, are structured around eight-measure phrases, and feature similar accompanimental patterns.<sup>40</sup> The two pieces share other characteristics also seen in the earlier Strakosch piece, such as the use of rapid figuration and cross-rhythms between hands. Yet in a comparison of the two works, Gottschalk's creativity and skill in his treatment and variation of the theme is evident.

In Gottschalk's *Second Banjo* the two hands are equally balanced most of the time. The primary melody, which we have already seen in Bassford's work, initially appears at measure 61 (see Example 5). Despite the different meter, the layout of the theme is quite similar to Bassford's. Both composers employ similar sextuplet arpeggios in the left hand, and aside from Gottschalk's descending-sixth ornamentation every other measure, the melodies are almost identical. At measure 95 a transitional section begins, which leads from I to V 4/3 in the main key. A trill in the right hand is accompanied by a sustained, *vibrante* left-hand chord (measures 105-8). This is where the two works diverge: at a similar point in the music, Bassford's composition continues much in the same style, using sextuplet arpeggios and occasional right-hand trills for textural interest; chromatic octaves in both hands highlight the closing section. In Gottschalk's work, however, the transition leads into a virtuosic and syncopated repetition of the antecedent/consequent phrases from the beginning of the piece.

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<sup>40</sup> While it is widely acknowledged that black-key tonics facilitate the performance of rapid passage work, it is possible that the pentatonic sound identified with these keys and heard in pieces like "Camptown Races" may have also played a role in Bassford's and Gottschalk's choice.

Measures 123-204 recall the melody and harmony of the first section but feature aurally exciting and technically challenging variations, as seen in Example 6:<sup>41</sup>

**[insert Example 5 about here.]**

**[insert Example 6 about here.]**

While its melody is pleasing and the variations are exciting, unlike op. 15, op. 82 has a rather static quality due to its unmodulating G-flat major key and virtually unrelieved repetition. In addition, because the melody used by both Gottschalk and Bassford likely did not originate in a minstrel show, the piece has no overt connections to minstrelsy. Smith theorizes that Gottschalk wrote op. 15 during his time in New Orleans in 1853-55, inspired by and perhaps directly recording the banjo techniques of an African-American player he met there.<sup>42</sup> That may be true; we will likely never know. But in comparing the earlier version (op. 82) with the later one, it becomes clear that Gottschalk deliberately altered his concept of the work, incorporating not only more interesting harmonies and further exploration of African-related banjo techniques but also a melody found in blackface minstrelsy, when he revised it into the now-famous *Banjo*, op. 15.

### ***The Banjo*, op. 15**

*The Banjo*, op. 15, was subtitled “Grotesque Fantasie, An American Sketch.”

Composed in 1854–55, the piece was dedicated to Richard Hoffman, a talented pianist who

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<sup>41</sup> An “easier” version is printed above the score for facilitation of performance by less experienced players.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, “Gottschalk’s *The Banjo*,” 56.

often assisted on Gottschalk's concerts in New York.<sup>43</sup> Since its first use in the 1480s to describe ancient Roman decorations unearthed at the Domus Aurea site, the term "grotesque" has meant strange or fantastic.<sup>44</sup> Modern historians employ the term primarily in reference to blackface minstrelsy.<sup>45</sup> W. T. Lhamon points out a number of such nineteenth-century uses of the term, including a reference to the Jim Crow dance as "the grotesque mask which life wears on one of its mysterious faces."<sup>46</sup> The word is also found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to describe a performance by Liza's young son Harry: "The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music."<sup>47</sup> Here, the term clearly serves not only to describe the

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<sup>43</sup> The atypical spelling of "fantasie," as opposed to the French "fantaïsie," appears in the original publication.

<sup>44</sup> According to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "It was left to the Renaissance, digging up its own past, to christen the style. . . . More because of the setting than because of any qualities inherent in the designs themselves, a consensus soon emerged according to which the designs were called *grottesche*—of or pertaining to underground caves." *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 27. See also Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), especially 20 and 58.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), and Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 138–39.

<sup>47</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly* (London: Routledge, 1852), 11.

scene but also to consciously distance the narrator from it. Such dissociation likely factored in most nineteenth-century references to the grotesque; Gottschalk himself used the term several times in his *Notes* to refer to excessively decorated or peculiar sights and stories he encountered during his travels.<sup>48</sup> The use of the term for *The Banjo*, therefore, carried specific and deliberate connotations regarding minstrelsy and its inherently loaded racial tensions at the time of its publication and greatest popularity.

The title page of the original William Hall & Son edition of *The Banjo* features an eye-catching visualization of the word “banjo,” which uses drawings of seven banjos and a tambourine to form the letters of the word. The word “The,” above “Banjo,” is formed of bones, another instrument commonly used in minstrel shows (see Figure 1). While the banjo has clear African roots, the tambourine’s Middle Eastern origins are less directly linked to black cultural practices; the bones likely arrived in the Americas via Irish and other European immigrants and may have been adopted by slaves as a replacement when plantation owners banned the use of drums.<sup>49</sup> All three instruments, however, were omnipresent in the minstrel shows, to the extent that two stock characters, “Tambo” and “Bones,” derived their names from the instruments they played. Their appearance in the cover art for Gottschalk’s composition is yet another calculated link, this one on the part of the publisher, to the minstrel tradition.

**[insert Figure 1 here (full page if possible)]**

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Gottschalk, *Notes*, 74, 138, 282, 308.

<sup>49</sup> See Robert B. Winans, “Bones,” *Grove Music Online*

[<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51806>].

Synchronously, Gottschalk's music directly evokes blackface minstrelsy by quoting Stephen Foster's minstrel song "Camptown Races." At the same time, however, the work features brilliant virtuosic elements that are equally divided between banjo-picking techniques from both southern black and white minstrel styles and Gottschalk's own pianistic style. *The Banjo* begins with an eight-measure introduction marked "Ardito" (bold or brave).<sup>50</sup> As illustrated in Example 7, the jaunty, syncopated melody, heard in octaves in both hands, suggests a minstrel-like tune, but its source is not easily identified until it reappears in the coda. The piece itself is structurally straightforward: balanced, eight-measure phrases feature diatonic harmonic progressions within the tonic key. Each phrase begins with the tonic chord and ends with either an authentic or half cadence. There are two identical short digressions into the dominant, both prepared by a secondary dominant seventh chord (in measures 70 and 138). The entire form is depicted in Table 1.

**[insert Example 7 about here]**

**[insert Table 1 about here]**

The structure of the work is straightforward, focused on repeated rhythmic motifs and featuring a progressive building of intensity to the climactic ending. Yet the repetition itself, developing into an ultimately cyclical construction, imparts a banjo-style character to the work. This, in large part, is what makes Gottschalk's composition simultaneously both striking and accessible. The first A section is subdivided into seven eight-measure phrases,

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<sup>50</sup> Op. 15 was published in F-sharp major, the enharmonic equivalent of op. 82's G-flat major and the key of Bassford's earlier work. No reason for the change is evident.



with a six-measure vamp appearing between sections 3 and 4. The B section includes one eight-measure phrase and a four-measure vamp transitioning back to the tonic key. The second A section includes all seven phrases, but phrase 3 is now only four measures long and the vamp is also only four measures. The second B section is identical to the first. The final A section features four measures of phrase 1, eight measures of phrase 2 and four measures of phrase 4. As the A sections become shorter, the rate of the composition's unfolding thus increases, imparting to listeners a sense of escalating speed.

The phrases in sections A and B lack strong melodies or any sense of developmental progression. Instead, the focus is on generating distinctive rhythmic motives for each phrase (Example 8). Often, when phrases are repeated (in the second and third A sections, for example), slight rhythmic variations add interest, such as the added sextuplets in the second A section (Example 9).

**[insert Example 8 about here]**

**[insert Example 9 about here]**

The absence of melody, combined with static harmony and a steady, strumming beat, conjure for the listener the idiomatic sound and style of the banjo itself. Smith has demonstrated that *The Banjo* mimics a brushless downstroking technique (especially mm. 39-42 and 55-58) typical of the early minstrel banjo style.<sup>51</sup> Yet he also finds imitations of “up-picking” present in the piece, such as the sextuplet in the first measure of Example 9 above. Up-picking, or plucking the strings upward, was and is used in combination with downstroking in some West

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, “Gottschalk’s *The Banjo*,” 48–49. Smith includes tablature transcriptions of these excerpts to reinforce his point.

African plucked-lute traditions.<sup>52</sup> Based on these observations, Smith argues that Gottschalk's sources must not only have been minstrel performers, but also had to include African-American musicians. Given Gottschalk's youth in New Orleans as well as his return there in 1853–55, there is no reason to contest Smith's conclusions.

The lack of melodic interest in the A and B sections is compensated for in the coda. Here the melody from the introduction returns, but now, rather than ending after eight measures on a half cadence, the entire sixteen-measure theme is heard, and the source material is immediately apparent: Stephen Foster's plantation song, "Camptown Races."<sup>53</sup> While there are differences between Foster's original 1850 melody and Gottschalk's 1855 adaptation, similarities abound. In Gottschalk's version the rhythm is simplified, and all syncopation is removed. Significant melodic differences occur only in the first and fifth measures and in the last phrase (Example 10).<sup>54</sup>

**[insert Example 10 about here]**

In the coda of *The Banjo*, this melody is first heard "ben misurato e tranquillo," over relatively simple accompaniment and very static harmony: other than one IV chord (mm. 181), the entire accompaniment is in the tonic (Example 11). The melody is then repeated

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–53.

<sup>53</sup> S. C. Foster, "Gwine to Run All Night; or, De Camptown Races" (Baltimore: F. Benteen, 1850). Reprinted in *Stephen Foster Song Book: Original Sheet Music of 40 Songs*, ed. Richard Jackson (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1974): 14–17.

<sup>54</sup> The melodies have both been transposed to F major for ease of comparison. Gottschalk's is in F-sharp major, while Foster's song originally appeared in D major.

twice with sixteenth-note chords rapidly alternating between hands. During the second and third iterations, Gottschalk progressively increases the dynamics, energy and tempo, as indicated in Table 3. Gottschalk continues to intensify the impact and excitement through the final six measures of forcefully repeated tonic chords that end the piece.

**[insert Example 11 about here]**

**[insert Table 2 about here]**

Throughout the piece, Gottschalk focuses not on development of melodic material but on repetition of rhythmic cells. This compositional choice connects the work to both its African and minstrel forebears, rather than to the European classical forms Gottschalk studied during his formative years in Paris. While the formal structure is akin to the classical rondo, unlike the rondos by 19th-century European composers there is no extended development or significant harmonic movement in Gottschalk's work. The overall form is simpler than a Romantic-era rondo; its iterative approach is more closely related to popular song forms of the time than classical ones. Taken in combination with the work's title, cover art, and musical references to banjo-picking techniques, Gottschalk's thoughtful use of a formal plan that departs from classical tradition and, rather radically, draws on African cyclical structures shifts the banjo from the front porch and minstrel playhouse into the concert hall in a more intentional and authentic manner than had been previously attempted by any pianist or composer.

*The Banjo* additionally repositioned its subject through its notation, publication, and subsequent dissemination to amateur parlor pianists. In his "Reminiscences of a Banjo

Player,” Albert Baur recalled that before the Civil War “everybody thought it impossible to write music for this instrument,” and therefore most early banjoists did not read music.<sup>55</sup> It was only in the late nineteenth century that “classical” banjo players began playing from notated music. While the first banjo tutor appeared in 1848, banjo music notation did not become standardized until the end of the century, and most performers continued to learn via an aural musical tradition throughout the 1850s and beyond. Piano music, on the other hand, was from the beginning of the century a print repertoire.

As a result of its oral tradition, the music of blackface minstrelsy was immediately accessible to a large group of performers. It was a significant musical culture that, unlike European-influenced styles, required few “inherent resources” such as formal education to be performed.<sup>56</sup> Banjo music, whether performed by black musicians or within the context of the minstrel show by white performers in blackface, did not require musical literacy for performance, whereas Gottschalk’s music did indeed demand specific inherent resources in the performer, including musical literacy and a high degree of technical proficiency. The two learning processes are contrasted not only by how knowledge is acquired but also by the values established through that process: reason and print became more respectable than the traditional modes of learning through personal communication and transmission. As Dale Cockrell eloquently articulates the shift, “The old way [i.e. the oral tradition] was a

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<sup>55</sup> Albert Baur, “Reminiscences of a Banjo Player,” *S. S. Stewart’s Banjo and Guitar Journal* (February–March 1888), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10. Lott draws the term “inherent resources” from Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981).

performative culture of the ear; the new [printed music] a mediated culture of the eye.”<sup>57</sup> In short, it was better to imitate a banjo on the piano than actually play one.

In marketing *The Banjo* for performance within the parlor, Gottschalk removed the banjo from its original contexts and repackaged it for the middle class. Yet the very audible presence of said banjo may have in fact delegitimized him among the musically “educated,” as some of the reviews quoted below attest. In his composition of *The Banjo*, Gottschalk mediated old and new, performative and practical, aural transmission and printed notation. The negotiation of boundaries inherent in the work illustrates the constant shifts in class and racial awareness and understanding at the middle of the century.

### **Critical Responses: “Perfectly Truthful” or a “Desecration of the Instrument”?**

Reception of *The Banjo* was mixed. “Gamma,” who wrote in the *Albion* in November 1855, was effusive:

Gottschalk is in New York! . . . Our delight at the encounter was great, for Gottschalk is not only in our eyes one of the most marvelous pianists of the present epoch, but he is also a composer of the first rank, a man possessing both head and heart, a poet, a genuine poet! . . . [I]n his last and still more pleasant production, “The Banjo,” what a fiery, impetuous peroration! . . . Gottschalk is said to be American, but we do not believe it. His birthplace was the country of Poetry and Love, and his cradle the lap of the presiding Goddess of the Piano.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>58</sup> “Gamma,” *Albion* (17 November 1855), 548.

Henry Watson provided a detailed description of Gottschalk's 1855 New York concerts in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, and was similarly enthusiastic. *The Banjo*, he reported, "took the house by storm and drew forth a tumultuous encore. It is a composition so perfectly truthful that it almost becomes classic. We shall not attempt to describe it – to judge of its effect, it must be heard."<sup>59</sup> And although Theodore Hagen wondered why Gottschalk did not play more music by the "serious masters," he still found that "his dashing daring playing, his restless melodic phrasing [in *The Banjo*] created really interesting pictures . . . of Southern life and negro enjoyments [belonging] to the soil and, at least, the traditions of its people."<sup>60</sup> In Hagen's review, a clear conceptual connection was made between the piece and black music-making; minstrel shows were not necessarily part of the equation. In calling the piece "perfectly truthful," Watson did not necessarily make an explicit link to either the black or the minstrel traditions; rather, he linked the rendition only to its primary subject; that is, the banjo itself.

The piece rapidly took on steam, not only in the northeast and larger cities but also across the South and Midwest, featured in public and private performances both by Gottschalk himself and by the amateurs who by then were purchasing the widely available sheet music.<sup>61</sup> By 1862 Gottschalk was back in the United States after an extended tour in Latin America. *The Banjo* was showcased as a highlight at his concerts across the country.

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, Vol. 2, 664.

<sup>60</sup> Theodore Hagen, *Review and Gazette* (29 December 1855), 432; quoted in Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, Vol. 2, 665. Capitalizations and punctuation appear as in the original.

<sup>61</sup> As one example, on Monday 9 June 1856, Miss Anna Dupree of Clinton, Mississippi, performed *The Banjo* on the Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Nashville Female Academy as part of the graduating class. *Nashville Union and American* 27, no. 240 (14 June 1856), 3.

For the most part, critics and audiences were delighted: In a February appearance in Hartford, Connecticut, “the performances of both Gottschalk and Sanderson on the piano were rapturously applauded. The way in which Gottschalk played some of the national marches, introducing the drum and fife effects, was a caution to ordinary players; and that banjo imitation! How was that done? The concert on the whole was a very satisfactory affair.”<sup>62</sup> The next month the *New York Clipper* reported on “a comical circumstance...said to have occurred during Mr. Gottschalk’s recent performances in Brooklyn”:

A resident of that pious suburb, who did not usually visit any place of amusement, but had ‘looked in’ a few times (on the sly) among our minstrel troupes in New York, invited some friends, and took them to hear Mr. Gottschalk, because he understood that such was the fashion. Our Brooklyn friend bore himself that evening with becoming fortitude and resignation until the great pianist gave some of his magnificent imitations of the banjo, when he commenced applauding heartily, saying, ‘Well, that is music! But I don’t see where the cuss keeps his banjo!’<sup>63</sup>

This incident occurred at a so-called “Gottschalk Gala Night,” on Monday 3 March 1862 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The event followed a Friday evening concert and Saturday matinee at the New York Academy of Music.<sup>64</sup> All three performances featured full-length renditions of Donizetti operas, *Lucia di Lammermoor* for the evenings and *Betty* for the matinee, with Gottschalk performing solo piano works between the acts. The “fortitude and resignation” evidenced by the “Brooklyn friend” for Italian romantic opera apparently

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<sup>62</sup> *Hartford Daily Courant* (28 February 1862), 2.

<sup>63</sup> *New York Clipper* 9, no. 47 (8 March 1862), 375.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, 27 February 1862, 7, and 3 March 1862, 5.

evaporated at the novelty and freshness of Gottschalk's *Banjo*, and his final remark clearly indicates the success and impact of the work's evocation of the banjo.

In July, Gottschalk used the piece as his finale for a Saratoga, New York performance: "The performance of Mr. Gottschalk concluded with the "Banjo," which was rendered by him with that delicacy of touch which has rendered him so famous. . . . His creations of fancy and powers of expression may now be ranked among the brightest records of his profession."<sup>65</sup> To round out the year, Gottschalk performed the piece in Madison, Wisconsin on the second day of Christmas. According to the local reviewer, "Mr. Gottschalk, in response to an encore, gave an imitation of the banjo, that was surprisingly natural."<sup>66</sup>

Even after Gottschalk's death, writers continued to reminisce about his inimitable compositional and performance style. An obituary in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* of Philadelphia had this to say: "Gottschalk is, I think, the only composer who has attempted weaving any *real* negro music, with its strange intervals, into his pieces. The "Dance des Nègres" and his banjo pieces are good representations of their peculiar style."<sup>67</sup> And while not specifically referencing *The Banjo*, an 1881 article about the posthumous publication of his diary as *Notes of a Pianist*, edited by his sister Clara Gottschalk Peterson, remarked, "His method, which was perfect of its kind, was secondary to his inspiration. His was a school apart of its kind and most original in its nature. New men, with new ideas, musical or otherwise, have often thrown at them the charge of being *bizarre*. Such quaintness as this young master had was neither over-fanciful nor abstruse, but *sui generis*. There never was a

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<sup>65</sup> *Daily Saratogian*, 28 July 1862, 95.

<sup>66</sup> *Wisconsin Daily Patriot* 8, no. 202 (27 December 1862), 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 7 (March 1871), 333.



bar of Gottschalk's writing which was vulgar or commonplace. . . . [B]oth as an instrumentalist and composer he easily takes the first rank among Americans, and we should respect his memory as that of a true artist, who did much to educate public taste in this country."<sup>68</sup> The writer's use of language to describe what Gottschalk's music was not—not over-fanciful, not abstruse, not vulgar or commonplace—seems to be a direct response to critics who both valued complexity and intellectualism and shunned the popular styles that had by 1881 begun to take center stage in the development of an American musical culture. Further, his claim with regard to the pianist's desire to “educate public taste” is in fact supported by Gottschalk's own writings and reviews. In his pseudonymous review of Buckley's *Serenaders* noted above, for example, he remarked that “the Buckley's [*sic*] sing well and the Theatre was crowded at their performance. Their burlesques are very funny and the music of them is very enjoyable. Mr. Percival has an admirable voice and Frederick Buckley's violin playing was a great deal too good for the audiences, who had not the manners to listen to that part of the entertainment that pleased good taste.”<sup>69</sup> Gottschalk was committed to the composition and performance of music that would educate as well as entertain listeners.

Not all listeners wholly enjoyed *The Banjo*, however. The New York correspondent for Bostonian critic and editor John Sullivan Dwight's *Journal of Music*, identified only as “-t-,” heard Gottschalk perform *The Banjo* at Dodsworth's Hall in December 1855, as part of a

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<sup>68</sup> “A Great Musician: Review of *Notes of a Pianist*,” *New York Times*, 23 October 1881, 6. To me, the use of the word “vulgar” here reads almost as a direct response to Dwight's 1862 review of “The Banjo” quoted below.

<sup>69</sup> “Seven Octaves,” *Morning Times*, undated clipping, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York. Cited in Starr, *Bamboula*, 147.

series of concerts in the 580-seat space.<sup>70</sup> He found it “curious, not as a composition, but inasmuch as its notes sound for all the world like those of a Banjo, and totally *unlike* those of a piano.” Then the reviewer shifted from curiosity to condemnation: “But is this not a desecration of the instrument? It really gave me pain to hear that beautiful Chickering “Grand” put to such a use.”<sup>71</sup> By introducing the piano into his review, the critic pointed to the significant crossing of racial and class boundaries that Gottschalk effected in his composition: the grand piano, the central, almost sacred instrument of the classical European tradition, was transformed into the banjo, an African-American, gourd-derived lute appropriated for use in blackface entertainments.<sup>72</sup> The reviewer thus confirmed his awareness of the social transformations initiated by the work’s performance.

Dwight himself finally heard Gottschalk play the piece in October 1862. He was disappointed with most of what he heard, but specifically called out *The Banjo* as “a humorously close imitation of the vulgar original; good enough for a joke.”<sup>73</sup> Likely the most negative of all the reviews of the piece, Dwight’s comments point to the crux of his perspective: in one pithy sentence, Dwight simultaneously dismissed the piece itself as “a joke” as well as more broadly condemning both popular music, symbolized by the “vulgar original,” and the African-American culture and traditions that minstrelsy caricatured. Yet even as he tossed off his flippant jibe, Dwight also acknowledged the fact that the piece is—in

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<sup>70</sup> Starr, *Bamboula*, 221–2.

<sup>71</sup> *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 5 January 1856, 108. Capitalizations and punctuation appear as in the original.

<sup>72</sup> For more on the significance of the piano in the nineteenth century in Europe and America, see Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954).

<sup>73</sup> *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 18 October 1862, 231.

fact—a “close imitation.” A humorous one, to be sure, but clearly even Dwight could hear the banjo, sounded via the piano, in Gottschalk’s rendition. Therefore, Gottschalk’s success can be measured not only through the flattering reviews but also via his detractors.

Condemnations of excessive originality also frequently appeared in reviews of Gottschalk’s performances. In 1862 a contributor to *Dwight’s* remarked, “He always plays his own compositions in public. As these are peculiar, it is difficult closely to compare his style with that of other eminent composers.”<sup>74</sup> In response, Gottschalk later reflected:

“He plays only his own music.” Of all the criticisms of which I am the object on the part of the impotent and jealous who, like thorns and barren bushes, encumber every avenue of art in America, I avow that this is the one that I am the least disposed to accept. . . . I compose, and what I compose is unfortunately my own, and, further, the public seems to like my music; hence their rage. I understand it, but what I cannot understand is that, after taking a great deal of trouble to find fault with me, they make into a crime what in me really is a merit. . . . I begin to regret having received from God the afflicting gift of being able to create. . . . Do you insinuate that the classics are superior to all we accomplish? . . . If this be the case, ‘your humble servant,’ is not the man for you. I do not understand that art is like a uniform in which all of us must be aligned and drilled like Prussian servants.”<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps one final piece of commentary can situate *The Banjo* more fully between the highly critical and overly effusive assessments considered thus far. In October 1855, following Wm. Hall & Son’s publication of *The Banjo* along with *Bamboula*, *La Jota*

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<sup>74</sup> Chanterelle, *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 1 March 1862, 383.

<sup>75</sup> Gottschalk, *Notes of a Pianist*, 173–74.

*Aragonesa*, and *Jerusalem*, a music critic for the *New York Daily Times*, most likely Charles Bailey Seymour, commented not only on the works themselves, but also on Gottschalk's idiomatic compositional technique:

These pieces are written in a fluently brilliant style, and intended of course for the saloon or concert-room. They are redolent of Gottschalk peculiarities, for this young artist does not deem it necessary to keep in the ordinary sheepwalk of Art, but strikes out for himself, occasionally, to the great horror of the traditionalists. The piece [*The Banjo*]. . . is, we believe, Mr. Gottschalk's latest production. We are by no means fond of Banjo pieces, looking upon all such as desecrations of the proper resources of the piano-forte. But they serve their purpose, and are a quaint relief to more meritorious productions. Gottschalk possesses the Southern sentiment for this characteristic sort of music, and embodies all the life and action it is possible to delineate in his sketches. We can readily understand that, quickly and rhythmatically [*sic*] performed, this Banjo piece creates a *furore*. In Philadelphia, the composer had to play it three times. . . . Mr. Gottschalk aims for new effects, not old ones that can be picked up from any piano-forte instruction-book. He possesses the gift of genius – originality – and all the unkind criticisms that ever were or ever may be written, cannot take this from him. . . . He is one of the greatest *pianists* in the world, having perhaps but one equal. He is original, not only in his compositions, but in his execution of them, producing a *quality* of tone which has never been approached on the instrument.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from wondering who the “but one equal” pianist might be (Liszt? Thalberg?), the reader gleans a great deal of information from this report, and quickly. The intended

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<sup>76</sup> *New York Daily Times* 5, whole no. 1285 (31 Oct 1855), 1. Italics in original.

performing spaces for these compositions, at least according to Seymour, are public, fee-charging venues; any parlor performances within the home would be incidental. Of course the sheer fact of their being sold, very successfully, as sheet music strongly points to the widespread existence of such private performances. Acknowledgement is given to Gottschalk's inimitable style and "genius." The concept of originality, to the point of "peculiarities," is given a kind of backhanded support; while Seymour admits the "life and action" heard in his pieces, he also points out that these characteristics bring "great horror" to more traditional-minded listeners. Finally, even though banjo imitations are by no means the critic's favorite type of piano composition and are in fact a "desecration" of the instrument, Seymour concedes that Gottschalk's *Banjo* "creates a *furor*" with its "new effects." Gottschalk's "Southern sentiment"—to the New York critic, his exoticism—is, apparently, to be thanked for this rather more acceptable banjo homage. In both his compositions and his performances, his desire to escape the "ordinary sheepwalk of Art" triumphs where others have failed. In Seymour's eyes, this is not a perfect piece, but at least it is challenging to play, entertaining to hear, and, above all, original.

## Conclusions

Gottschalk's initial impetus for writing a banjo imitation was far surpassed by the composition's eventual impact. In addition to the similar pieces in circulation before his attempt, several were published in the wake of its popularity. Banjo-themed works for piano that appeared after Gottschalk's include James Bellak's "Banjo Polka: A Characteristic Sketch," op. 562 (1856), H. C. Harris's "The Banjo: An Original Imitation of this Inimitable Instrument" (1857), Carl Erfolg's "The Banjo: Scherzo" (1873), Claude Melnotte's

“Melnotte’s Banjo” (1874), Edgar H. Sherwood’s “Banjo Fantasie: Pasquinade” (1875), Mrs. Mary F. Lovering’s “Banjo Solo” (1881), and J. W. Turner’s “Banjo Imitation for Piano” (1883). Mrs. Lovering’s work includes a note remarkable for its time to “place a paper on or between the strings,” evidently to evoke a banjo-like sound from the piano.<sup>77</sup> While Bellak and Harris were clearly capitalizing on the wild success of Gottschalk’s piece, the works from the 1870s and 80s may also reflect the banjo’s gradual incursion into the bourgeois parlor and onto the concert stage.<sup>78</sup>

But of all the banjo imitations for piano composed in the United States, Gottschalk’s is the only one that has endured to show up again and again in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in contemporary music anthologies, on audio recordings, and in countless YouTube performances.<sup>79</sup> It is also the only one that appears to take inspiration from both African-American and minstrel banjo playing techniques. And finally, it is the only one that provoked such strong and contrasting reactions among its listeners. In essence, Gottschalk symbolically brought the banjo into the concert hall and the parlor before it actually made its entry into those spaces about twenty years later. In doing so, he made explicit, whether intentionally or

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<sup>77</sup> One wonders if John Cage ever came across Mrs. Lovering’s publication. See *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music*, American Memory, Library of Congress [<http://www.loc.gov/collections/american-sheet-music-1820-to-1860>].

<sup>78</sup> See Sarah Meredith, *With a Banjo on Her Knee: Gender, Race, Class, and the American Classical Banjo Tradition, 1880–1915* (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> *The Banjo* is included in the widely-used *Norton Scores: A Study Anthology*, ed. Kristen Forney (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), and on recordings available on CD including (but not limited to) performances by the following: Philip Martin (Hyperion, 1990), Leonard Pennario (Angel, 1992), Amiram Rigai (Smithsonian Folkways, 1995), Eugene List (Vanguard, 2002), and Cecile Licad (Naxos, 2003). A quick search on YouTube for “Gottschalk Banjo” brings up more than 5,000 results, including several performances of the work on banjo.

subconsciously, the significance and impact of the banjo as an American instrument well before it was universally recognized as such. Gottschalk's *Banjo* relaxed and muddled the boundaries among performance spaces, racial and class divisions, and two conspicuously different musical instruments in an egalitarian effort to demonstrate that, contrary to the opinions of some mid-nineteenth century musical critics and tastemakers, both the piano and the banjo have a place in the shaping of American music culture.

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