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Bamboula: Danse de Nègres

L.M. Gottschalk of Louisiana

In the United States of the 19th century, the vernacular and cultivated traditions of music diverged: on the one hand, John Dwight of Boston advocating a sterile cultivated tradition that worships the German classics; on the other hand, a public enjoying the vernacular music of parlor songs, social dances and minstrelsy. In this context, Louis Moreau Gottschalk is a refreshing figure: his music, though part of the cultivated tradition, embraces multiculturalism by incorporating ideas from folk music of his childhood in the melting pot of New Orleans.

Gottschalk composed *Bamboula* in France in 1844-45, encouraged by Chopin and Liszt and influenced by French romanticism and its attraction for the unique and exotic.

Gottschalk named his piece *Bamboula* after an Afro-Caribbean drum and associated dance. The principal melody of *Bamboula* is based on a Créole folk song *Quand patate la cuite na va mange li!*. Gottschalk probably heard this song in his childhood from his Grandmother and nurse or from street performances of the bamboula dance.

Bamboula is roughly divided into three sections. The first section presents three motifs, each with a distinct melody and rhythm. The second section, more lyrical, introduces a fourth motif and ornaments it. The third section recalls previous motifs in a sort of confusion. The first motif introduced can be considered a leitmotif as it comes back at the end of each section. In terms of keys, the first and second motifs are in D-flat major, the home key, the third motif is in F-sharp major, and the fourth motif is in B-flat minor, the relative minor of the home key.

The piece begins with a strong bass counting the measure. The first few measures hints at the first motif, before it is introduced in its full form. The first motif has a simple but memorable melody (sol, re, fa, mi, do) and rhythm (3, 1, 2, 2, 1 followed by an insisting bass (1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 2) three times). Like the others, this motif is repeated several times in row. For example, when it is first introduced, it is repeated three times as is, then twice in different harmonies, and finally two times as it started. This motif definitely has an Afro-Caribbean feel to it. To me, it sounds as if it was played on steel drums. The repetition and insisting bass contributes to the dance-like quality.

The second and third motifs, also introduced in the first section, showcase a variety of rhythms. The second one has a more wavy texture, and the third one has more vivacity. These two motifs are not insisted upon as much as the first one. They are each repeated twice. The overall form of the first section is AAAA'A''AABBCC twice then AA.

The second section sharply contrasts with the first section. First, it is in minor. Then, it is more slow, gracious and melodious. Like the first section, the motif is repeated many times, but with a sense of progression. The motif is then elaborately ornamented, and, in the rhythm, there are hints of the first section. Finally, the first motif comes back, just twice, and ends the section.

The third and last section starts with a scintillating motif that seems to merge the first and second motifs. The scintillation continues, and the motif of the second section comes back in this scintillating variant. The scintillation manages to oscillate between variants of different motifs: second, third, fourth (i.e. all but the first). Finally, it comes back to the first motif, which is insisted upon and ends the piece.

The last section gives a sense of dizziness, almost trans by reverberating the previous motifs. The listener is now familiar with the music, but still unable to pinpoint exactly when and where he first heard each phrase, as if he was listening to some music from his lost childhood, fuzzy about the details of time and space. This dizziness is accentuated by the absence of the most recognizable motif, the first, until the very end. When it finally comes back, the listener feels at home.

Like Chopin, Gottschalk pushes the expressivity of the piano to its limits. At times, it's hard to believe that all this music is coming from one instrument. The texture varies from

percussive to voice-like. The piece also has shifting moods. The many virtuoso passages reveal they were composed in a time where the composer and performer were one.

Like Chopin as well, Gottschalk took his inspiration in the folk music of his natal land.

Before Dvorak's plea to American composers and before Charles Ives, Gottschalk prefigures the emancipation of American music from the European model.