THE NEW ORLEANS PIANIST, 19-year-old Louis Moreau Gottschalk, lay delirious in Paris. It was 1848. Worry over his parents' financial straits and the feeling of guilt for his responsibility in their predicament had driven him into a high fever.

His mother, at his bedside, saw him clenching and unclenching his fists in a fast rhythm. His lips moved as though he were trying to sing.

Then, coming to, he asked for pencil and music paper and began scribbling notes. When the page was half-filled he fell back on his pillow with a smile of relief: "Maybe now I won't hear the drums any more," he said, and dropped into a deep sleep.

That half-page of scarcely legible notes was to play a vital part in the future of the New Orleans musical genius.

As Vernon Loggins describes him in a new biography, "Where the Word Ends" (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge; 1958), Gottschalk was the first American to win world renown as a piano virtuoso. He was also the first American composer whose music was accepted favorably in Europe, and the first composer-to make serious use of American folk themes.

His name today is meaningless except to a few, but in his time Gottschalk was considered the successor to Chopin and Liszt.

Gottschalk was born May 8, 1829, in a house on N. Rampart near Canal in New Orleans. He died Dec. 18, 1869, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, of a ruptured appendix. When stricken he was on a concert stage, playing a piece entitled "Dead." His detractors, and he had many, said he died as the result of a sandbagging by the jealous husband of a woman whose affections he had stolen.

In his 40 years Gottschalk lived a full life. At the age of 7 he played mass on the organ at St. Louis Cathedral, a completely impromptu performance that only a few people knew was not the playing of the regular organist. After arduous study in Paris, he made his debut there at 15. He appeared to be headed for a brilliant career as both a composer and piano virtuoso when he found out about the financial difficulties of his father, still in New Orleans. He decided to forego composing, to concentrate on making money by giving recitals so he could pay off his father's heavy debts.

But to launch his playing career he needed to create some sort of sensation, he felt.

It was about this time that Gottschalk's worries worked him into the high fever. When he recovered he found the musical notes but paid them little attention, considering them merely delirious ravings recorded.

Then, some months later, the French revolution of 1848 broke out. He fled with his mother and her other children to an insane asylum outside Paris to escape the bloody fighting in the streets of the capital. When he casually mentioned the notes to the head physician one day, the doctor immediately was interested: "Did you find any value in what you wrote?"

"No," Gottschalk said. "That is, I don't think so. Just some Negro tunes that have been a part of me all my life."

"They're perhaps more a part of you than you've ever thought," the physician said. "It might be to your advantage to study their musical possibilities."

When Gottschalk followed the doctor's suggestion, he found he had written a composition, Calling it "Bamboula: Dance of the Negroes," he first played it at a Paris soiree. His audience refused to go home till he had repeated it twice. "Bamboula" became the rage of Paris. Gottschalk now had a name. He was on his way to glory—however shortlived.