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# Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges

December 25, 1745 – June 12, 1799

French Composer, Violinist, and Conductor

Classical



- Joseph was from the French colony of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. He was born out of wedlock to a teenage enslaved Senegalese person named Anna and a married white plantation owner who was her enslaver.
- Bologne's father took him to France to be educated when he was young. His father wanted him to have all the advantages of his own social class because social factors such as racism and classism would have prevented that for a person born of a non-consensual union with an enslaved teenager.
- By age 13, Joseph was enrolled in an elite boarding school for fencing and horsemanship. He became the best fencer in the school and even traveled to compete in fencing competitions.
- When he graduated at age 19, Bologne was made an officer of the king's bodyguard and a chevalier (knight). Although he was not eligible to inherit his father's title because he was born out of an unmarried union, King Louis XIV granted him the title of "Chevalier de Saint-Georges."
- The first mention of Bologne as a musician was in 1764. His musical training is unknown, but because of his impressive technique as an adult, it is assumed that he studied music as a child.
- In 1769, Bologne became a violinist in an orchestra, Le Concert des Amateurs. Joseph became the conductor of the orchestra a few years later.
- His first compositions were a set of six string quartets. A leader in this genre, his were among the first string quartets written in France.
- When the Paris Opéra needed a new director in 1776, Bologne was a top candidate. However, he withdrew from consideration when three of the opera's prima donnas stated they would not work for someone of mixed race.
- The queen of France, Marie Antoinette, began to invite Bologne to perform at private musical gatherings of close friends. The Queen played the pianoforte while Joseph performed on the violin.
- In 1785, Bologne was the director and concertmaster of an orchestra that commissioned Franz Joseph Haydn to compose six symphonies, which Bologne conducted at their premiere.
- Joseph made trips to England, where he learned about the country's anti-slavery movement. He helped establish a group in France called the Société des amis des noirs (Society of the Friends of Black People).
- France's "Code Noir" or "Black Code" was a set of laws that restricted the freedom of Black people in religion, marriage, and business. Because of these laws and the racist and classist beliefs of that time, Joseph could not marry at the same level of society that he enjoyed.
- Saint-Georges lived mainly among the aristocracy and owed much of his success to the King and Queen. However, when the French Revolution began, he joined the revolutionaries fighting for equality. He heroically led a group of Black soldiers that came to be known as the "Légion Saint-Georges."
- Unfortunately, he was not hailed as a hero for long. The aftermath of the French Revolution was chaotic, and Joseph was accused of treason and imprisoned for nearly a year.
- After his release from prison in the late 1790s he died poor and alone at the age of 53.
- Saint-Georges' music was rarely heard for almost 200 years after he died but is now gaining well-deserved recognition. He composed string quartets, sonatas, concertos, symphonies, operas, songs, and more.

"The most accomplished man in Europe in riding, shooting, fencing, dancing, and music."  
— U.S. President John Adams, describing Saint-Georges



## Composer Connections

While Saint-Georges was employed as the director of a private opera company, he lived in a palace where Mozart was also a guest for two months.

Some of the most famous French composers in Joseph's time dedicated works to him: Antonio Lulli (1764), François-Joseph Gossec (1766), and Carl Stamitz (1770).



## Listening Lab

### **Symphony No. 2 in D Major**

This symphony has three movements keeping with the Italian style popular at that time. Take note of the tempo of each—the first and third movements are fast, and the second is in a slower tempo.

### **Violin Concerto in A Major, Op. 5, No. 2**

Bologne composed 12 concertos for violin, all written during the 1770s. Bologne himself would have been the soloist, so listen for the showy technical passages that would spotlight his talent.

### **String Quartet No. 5 in G Major**

Following the style in France at the time, Bologne's string quartets consist of two sections: an opening "Allegro" and a closing "Rondeau."

"I can no longer remain in this cruel uncertainty; I have nothing in the world with which to reproach myself; everywhere I have given proofs of my good citizenship and my republican sentiments, which are innate in me."

— **Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges**

(written in response to being removed from his command shortly before his imprisonment)



# Reflect

What are some ways that Giddens is combining music from different cultures?

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“Roots” music describes a range of genres, including folk, blues, gospel, traditional country, zydeco, Tejano, and Native American music. Why is the word “roots” a good descriptor for this music?

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# Writing Prompt

Rhiannon studied opera in college but did not become solely a singer. Explain how her formal training in school and her education from Joe Thompson combined to make her a unique musician. How were the two experiences different or similar? How does she use both in her work?

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