

## Saint-Georges: Marie-Antoinette's pop idol

**He was the illegitimate son of a slave girl who became the toast of 18th-century Paris. So how come the composer who inspired jealousy in Mozart, was adored by the French queen and banned by Napoleon, has been forgotten? Jessica Duchen tells the story of Saint-Georges**

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Joseph Boulogne, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was nicknamed "the black Mozart", but he was a great deal more besides: an all-round celebrity, effectively a Pop Idol for the 18th century. He penned violin concertos, string quartets and operas, and conducted the premieres of some of Haydn's best symphonies; yet he was known primarily as a champion fencer, a superlative athlete and, later, the first black colonel in the French National Guard after the Revolution.

His influence extended from the pre-revolution French court to the anti-slavery movement in England. Next month at the City of London Festival there's a rare chance to sample his music in two concerts that unite the festival's themes for the year: the arts of France and the 200th anniversary of the parliamentary abolition of the slave trade.

Some give Saint-Georges, as he's usually called, the birth date of 1739, others 1745; the place of birth is Guadeloupe. He was the illegitimate son of George de Bologne Saint-George, a plantation owner and former gentleman in the King's Chamber at the court of Louis XV. His mother, Nanon, was a young slave girl from Senegal.

It says much for his father that when he returned to France in 1759, he took with him not only his wife and daughter, but also his black mistress and her child. He took care to ensure that the lad had a fine education and that his prodigious gifts would be well developed. Henry Angelo, a famous swordsman who ran a London fencing academy, would later describe Nanon as "one of the most beautiful women Africa has ever sent to the plantations", adding that "St Georges

combined in his person his mother's grace and good looks and his father's vigour and assurance."

A violin bow and a fencing rapier each require the utmost control, with speed, precision and finesse. The young Saint-Georges wielded both, apparently effortlessly. His father's plantation manager gave him his first violin lessons. Later in Paris, he studied with Jean-Marie Leclair, the composer of some of the finest Baroque violin music to emerge from France; and with François-Joseph Gossec, whose early classical style, replete with elegance and charm, was very much in the idiom that Saint-Georges himself would adopt.

Gossec, with the help of wealthy patrons who may have included Saint-Georges's father, in 1769 launched an orchestra called the Concert des Amateurs; Saint-Georges became its leader and took over as director four years later. His musical reputation was already flying high; his violin concertos were being snapped up for publication and his orchestra was not only technically superb but unusually big. In 1781, he founded the Concert de la Loge Olympique, which soon became the largest orchestra in Europe.

When Saint-Georges presented the first performances of Haydn's six Paris symphonies in 1787, having visited the great composer in Austria to discuss their commission, the orchestra contained some 40 violins and as many as 10 double basses. This year, the City of London Festival's director Ian Ritchie had hoped to recreate Saint-Georges's orchestra to perform Haydn, but the plans fell through. A pity, given the popular illusion that classical-era orchestras have to be small. The result could have been revelatory.

Despite all his successes, Saint-Georges still could not escape the colour of his skin. Under the French laws of the time, he was not allowed to marry. His love life, though, sounds as prodigious as his other activities; with his athletic prowess, grace, manners, good looks and musical renown, it was no wonder that he developed a reputation as a Don Juan. Among the women he was close to was Queen Marie-Antoinette: she invited him to play for her at Versailles in 1774, and later described him as "my favourite American". He gave her music lessons; she frequently attended his concerts and enjoyed watching him off duty, skating on the Seine in winter.

In 1775, the Queen did her best to have him appointed director of the Opéra. The attempt failed, and the correspondence of Baron von Grimm makes it clear why. He describes Saint-Georges as "A young American... who combines the most gentle manners with incredible skill in all physical exercises and very great musical talent... but the artistes nevertheless at once addressed a petition to the Queen to beg Her Majesty that their honour and the delicacy of their conscience made it impossible for them to be subjected to the orders of a mulatto." The "artistes" won.

One person who might not have been pleased to hear Saint-Georges described as "the black Mozart" was Mozart himself. Aged 22, he spent part of 1778 living in Paris with his mother, who died there. His published correspondence contains scant mention of Saint-Georges, and he was friendly with the musician's arch-rival, Joseph Legros, director of the Concert Spirituel. If anything, Mozart positively avoided Saint-Georges, ignoring his father's advice that he should play with the Concert des Amateurs, but there's no doubt that he knew his music: one melody of his ballet suite *Les petits riens* was virtually plagiarised from Saint-Georges, and it has also been suggested that the theme of Mozart's wonderful "Ave Verum Corpus" is derived from a melody originally by the American.

Given Mozart's struggles to establish himself in the French capital, Saint-Georges could have inspired considerable jealousy in him. The latter was, after all, the toast of the town: a famous musician, an athlete who could swim across the Seine using one arm, and popular with women, especially Marie-Antoinette. Mozart's last opera, *Die Zauberflöte*, contains a villainous character, Monostatos, who is black - the lecherous servant of the evil Queen of the Night, lusting after her daughter Pamina. Could jealousy dating back to Mozart's traumatic time in Paris have fed this singularly nasty streak? There's no proof, but a certain emotional logic seems present in the notion.

Saint-Georges's interest in the abolitionist movement comes as no surprise. He went to England several times in the late 1780s - primarily to give displays of his swordsmanship for, and with, the Prince of Wales. He soon became widely celebrated on this side of the Channel, coining fashions and even being described as the forerunner of Beau Brummel. After the outbreak of the French Revolution, he came to Britain again with his friend the Duke of Orleans, Philippe-Egalité, who encouraged his connections with anti-slavery activists. That involvement may have been responsible for an attempt on his life in London in 1790.

Back in France in 1791, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the Revolution's egalitarian cause. He signed up to the National Guard in Lille; the following year, he became colonel of a company of 1,000 black and mulatto soldiers, known subsequently as the *Légion Saint-Georges*. He appointed as a commander a man who shared his background as the son of a plantation owner and slave: Alexandre Dumas, father and grandfather of the two authors of the same name. Their legion helped to deflect an Austrian invasion of northern France and Saint-Georges himself foiled a treasonous plot by Dumouriez in 1793.

His military life came to a catastrophic end just five months later, however, when he was falsely accused of misappropriating funds and found himself thrown into prison for a year and a half. Failing to be reinstated to his rank on his release, he travelled to St Domingue - but encountering a civil war there, in which mulatto commanders were fighting in favour of slavery, did nothing to improve his spirits.

By the time the Chevalier de Saint-Georges died in 1799, his career, musical, military and athletic, had collapsed. He had suffered that common fate of celebrities: public adulation followed by equally public destruction. When Napoleon brought back slavery in 1802, Saint-Georges' music was banned.

Today, at last, it has been revived. Though many of his contemporaries produced works in a similar vein, the classical "galante" style, Saint-Georges's music - notably his marvellous virtuoso writing for the violin - possesses a freshness, vitality and flair that sets it apart from the crowd. Perhaps his day is dawning once again.

*Stéphanie-Marie Degand plays the Saint-Georges Violin Concerto No 2 at Middle Temple Hall, London EC4 on Thursday, 28 June. The Psophos Quartet play the Saint-Georges' Quartet Op 14 No 3 at St Margaret Lothbury, London EC2 on Monday 2 July ([www.colf.org](http://www.colf.org); 0845 120 7502)*