

# Meridian Music of the Week!

## Issue No. 186 (based on previous Newsletter No.131 – September 2023)

Each week ALL our children will be listening to a piece of classical music as part of our music lessons. We'll be talking about it in class and discussing what we like, what we don't like and what it makes us think about.

Parents/carers/family - why not join in and listen for yourself at home! All music is available **free** on YouTube as well as paid services such as iTunes and Spotify.

### This week's music...



## 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Symphony No.1 in G minor by Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1779)

[BBC video about the man and the music HERE!](#)

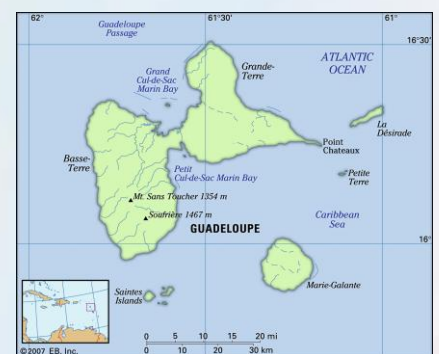
This week's composer is possibly the most extraordinary of all the ones we've talked about ever! Hardly anyone knows anything about him these days but, back in the 1700s in Paris, France, he was a one-man sensation!

He only lived for 53 years, but he packed so much into those years, it's difficult to know where to begin. For once, the **man** is even more interesting than the **music**! So, this newsletter is a little longer than

others because I want to tell you all about one of music's most incredible characters. The more you read – the more you'll be amazed! ...

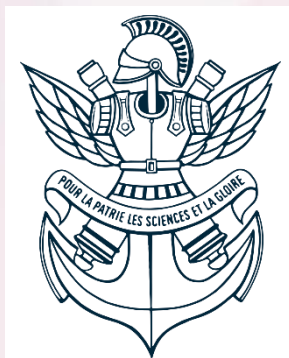
### His family...

Joseph was born in the beautiful French island colony of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean in 1745. His father was a white, wealthy sugar plantation owner and his mother, Nanon, was his wife's black slave. This meant that little Joseph Bologne was a mixed-heritage boy. Even though his father later became a nobleman (a 'Gentleman of the King's Chamber') Joseph couldn't inherit his father's grand title because, at that time, it was illegal for black people to be lords or ladies.



The island of Guadeloupe

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The badge of Bologne's school – L'Académie Royale.

## Coming to France...

Joseph's father took him to France at 7 years old for his education and left him alone at a boarding school. **Two years later**, Joseph's mother and father returned to meet up with Joseph in Paris and they lived in a spacious and quite posh apartment in a fashionable area of the city.

## Sword school!...

At 13 years old he went to the 'Académie royale polytechnique des armes et de l'équitation' – a school which taught fencing and horsemanship! He was so good at fencing that by 15 years old he was already beating the best swordsmen at the academy and, according to the headmaster's son, by 17 he had **'developed the greatest speed imaginable'**!

He most notably beat a fencing master/teacher from Rouen who had made racist comments about him. The fight was famous at the time and lots of people placed bets on it. Joseph's father was so proud of his son's victory that he bought him a handsome horse and buggy as a present! When he graduated from the Academy, he was given the title 'Gendarme du Roi' – a King's bodyguard and he also became a 'Chevalier' (a Knight).

## A bad start to adulthood...

When Joseph was 19, his father returned to Guadeloupe, leaving Joseph and his mother behind. He had arranged to leave Joseph a lot of money in his will but, just before he died, he changed his mind and, instead, he left all his money to his **daughter**! Even Joseph's mother changed her name in her will to a 'white' surname so that she wouldn't be connected to her son's African origins. Can you imagine?

## But things get better...

As a young man, Joseph was not just an excellent horse rider and phenomenal swordsman, he was, apparently, a fantastic dancer! He was invited to many balls and parties in Paris held by fashionable and rich ladies. Despite the party lifestyle, he continued to practise fencing. In fact, he is believed to have been the first to develop a facemask for fencing – as is used in the sport today.



An early fencing facemask.

By the way, fencing and horse riding weren't his only skills. Apparently, he was also a crack-shot with a pistol. His best trick was to throw two coins into the air and shoot both of them before they hit the ground!

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French composer Francois Gossec –  
Bologne's friend and colleague.

## What about the music?...

What we know about his musical ability also comes from when he was 19 years old. No-one knows how or when he learned to play the violin, but by 19 it seems he was already a great soloist! A well-known Italian composer and violinist of the time called Antonio Lolli wrote two **concertos** (a piece for orchestra and solo instrument) for him to perform – and two years later we know that a famous French composer called Francois Gossec dedicated a set of six string trios to Joseph Bologne.

So, at the age of 24, the audiences of Paris were amazed to see Joseph (who they thought was just a famous fencer) playing the violin in Gossec's new orchestra. Within four years Joseph became the orchestra leader! At the age of 27, he created a sensation with his debut as a soloist playing violin concertos that **he** had written himself – with the great Gossec now just conducting. Apparently, the ladies in the audience especially liked it (it seems Joseph was a bit of a pop-star heart-throb at the time!)

By the end of his musical career, Joseph had written one symphony, 6 operas, 14 violin concertos, 4 concert symphonies, 3 string quartets and over 12 pieces of vocal music. At least we *think* so! There are many other pieces of music which experts aren't sure about. But they may have *also* been written by the amazing Joseph Bologne.

## Famous friends...

At the age of 28, Joseph became the new director of Gossec's orchestra – and in two years' time they were known as one of the best orchestras in Paris. After this Joseph became connected with other famous composers of the time. For example, he asked **Franz Joseph Haydn** (a famous Austrian composer – see Newsletter No. 148 from last February)) to write some new symphonies for huge shows in the centre of Paris. He was so famous that the queen, Marie Antoinette (wife of Napoleon), used to come to some of the performances. In fact, the whole orchestra had to wear velvet with gold braid, lace cuffs and collars and feathers in their hats, **all the time**, just in case she turned up to see them!



Marie Antoinette – Queen of  
France

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In 1776, Joseph was still only 31, but even so it was suggested that he should become the director of the world-famous Paris Opera. But again, Joseph was the victim of racism. Some people who were against him wrote to the French queen Marie Antoinette to tell her they could never work for a black man. Because Joseph didn't want to embarrass the queen by putting her in an awkward situation, he said he didn't want the job anyway. Later on, Joseph used to play private concerts for the queen while she played piano for him.



An original painting of Joseph Bologne and Charles d'Éon in their fencing competition

## London and Brighton!...

At 40 years old, Joseph went to London because the British Prince of Wales wanted to meet 'the legendary fencer'. He also went because there was an anti-slavery movement growing in England and the French thought that Joseph could make contact with anti-slavery people there. While in London he lived with fencing experts and played lots of competitive fencing matches against the finest English swordsmen. By now he had become friends with the Prince of Wales (as a kind of bodyguard) and even visited **Brighton** to see the Brighton Pavilion!

It was while Joseph was in England that he took part in a famous fencing competition which then became a famous painting (one of only a few that exist of Joseph Bologne). The competition was arranged by the Prince of Wales on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1787 and was meant to show off the two greatest French swordsmen of the day – Joseph and a **man** called Charles d'Éon. Charles was also an amazing person. He lived the first half of his life as a man and the second half as a woman. He was a professional spy for the French king and fought as a soldier in the Seven Years War. No-one knows who won the competition – but it was clearly a big event which drew a big crowd. I think Joseph might have won as Charles d'Éon would have had some difficulty fighting in that dress!

## Tough guy!...

You didn't mess with Joseph! While he was in London, a man with a pistol tried to rob him. Joseph took his gun from him, but then four other men attacked him. He managed to knock them all out!

But it couldn't last. At the age of 45 he was the main attraction at another fencing tournament. Even though he was ill, people said that 'lightning was no faster'. But he got meningitis (an inflammation of the brain) and was unconscious for days. But even this didn't stop him from composing an opera from his sick bed!

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A black cavalry officer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French army.

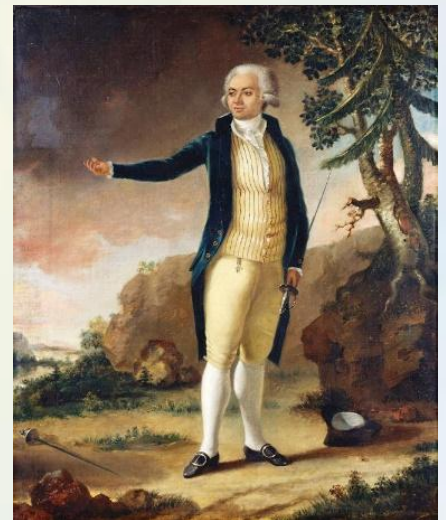
## Still soldiering on...

Once he recovered, he volunteered to join the army to fight the Austrians who were trying to invade France. Even then, he was still giving concerts in the French city of Lille at the same time! The mayor of Lille placed a crown on Joseph's head and read a poem in his honour. Just one year later he was a captain in the army fighting a famous battle against the enemies of the French.

In 1792, when Joseph was 47, the French government decided to create a new cavalry brigade for black soldiers and made Joseph its Colonel. It was the first black regiment in all of Europe. Many racist generals tried to get rid of him by spreading false rumours about his character – but Joseph was found innocent and remained the Colonel of his legion.

And the end? Joseph sadly died aged 53, a man who was a composer, a violin expert, a fencing superstar, a king's bodyguard, a friend to a queen, an army colonel, and a freedom fighter for black people... oh, by the way, did I mention that he lived for more than two months in the same house as **Mozart** when he was a relatively unknown up-and-coming star? It's TRUE!

**What a guy!**



A young (age 22) Joseph Bologne.

**Listen & enjoy...**

**Mr. Mole**

**Music Teacher**

