

## **Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George**

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Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George was born on the island of Guadeloupe in the French West Indies, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1745. His father was a plantation owner, slaveholder, and nobleman named George de Bologne Saint-George, his mother was a Senegalese slave woman named Anne Nanon, she was the mistress of de Bolonge. de Bologne was particularly fond of Saint-George, he treated him and his mother better than he treated the other slaves he owned. Seeking a better life for his son, de Bologne moved Saint-George and Nanon to Paris, France along with his legitimate family in 1753. Upon Saint-George's thirteenth birthday he was enrolled into France's premier fencing boarding academy led by the legendary swordsman Nicolas Texier de La Böessière. Saint-George was a well-rounded student holding interest outside of fencing which included several sciences, literature and horseback riding. Within two years of enrolling into the fencing academy, Saint-George's progress was fully noticed by La Böessière and everyone at the academy; he was tall, strong, fast and held an uncanny ability to learn quickly.

A Fencing-Master named Alexandre Picard decided he wanted to duel with Saint-George, Picard often publically called Saint-George La Böessière's mulatto as an insult. The match was highly anticipated and highly attended; many people placed high wagers on the swordsman they favored to win. Saint-George would emerge victorious only adding to his legend as a master swordsman. His was rewarded for his victory by his father with a horse and buggy. He was truly one of Europe's greatest swordsmen only suffering one defeat in his extraordinary fencing career. He graduated from the fencing boarding academy in 1766 earning the titles of Officer of the King's Bodyguard and Chevalier (knight). Despite being the illegitimate son of a slave woman, Saint-George the "god of arms" was a well-respected fencer and horseback rider who's future was about to shine brighter than he may have imagined. Music would be Saint-Georges new realm that he would soon conquer, the violin and the harpsichord (an early piano) would become his new weapons. It is believed Saint-George studied the violin with Jean-Marie Leclair-The Elder, a

Baroque violinist, composer, and founder of the French violin school.

It was revealed that Saint-George was a violinist when he performed two concertos composed for him by violinist Antonio Lolli, and a set of François Gossec's six string trios, Op.9. Saint-George's musical talents indicated that he studied with great teachers but there is not enough information available to validate who the teachers were. In 1769, Saint-George became a violinist for the Le Concert des Amateurs orchestra which was directed by François Gossec. Saint-George was so good that he was the first violinist and eventually became the director of the orchestra succeeding Gossec. He was somewhat of a legendary figure in France because of his success as a fencer and violinist. His first compositions, Op. 1 a set of six string quartets were among the first quartets to be played in France. Saint-George was successful but he was still a mulatto and considered by some a second-class citizen. King Louis XVI opposed the abolition of slavery, interracial marriages were illegal and black people in France were looking for a change. Racial ignorance would rear its ugly head as Saint-George was denied the opportunity to become the director of the Paris Opera in 1775. It is believed that two of the opera's leading soprano's felt insulted by the notion of being led by a mulatto. Saint-George would compose six opera's and several songs in manuscript between 1771 and 1779 along with many other pieces of music and opera.

There are claims that Saint-George was sometimes called the black Mozart and the black Don Juan because he was just as popular as Mozart. I do not have the information to confirm that he was considered the black Mozart, but we do know he was a musical legend. Race seemed to play a critical role in some of the most important or questionable situations Saint-George would face. In 1779, he and his friend were attacked by people believed to be policemen because of his relationship with Marie Antoinette. In 1781, Saint-George began composing and conducting music with his new group Concert de la Loge Olympique after the Concert des Amateurs stopped playing together. In 1787, he conducted one of six of the "Paris Symphonies" created by composer Franz Joseph Haydn. Saint-George's ability to bounce back from adversity was uncanny; he wrote the opera's *The Girl-Boy* and *The Chestnut Seller*, he also defeated the Chevalière d'Éon a French diplomat in a fencing exhibition.

He would spend time in England supporting the blacks in their anti-slavery movement; his actions were deemed as inappropriate and troublesome by British slave dealers and owners. While in London five men would attack Saint-George in retaliation to his anti-slavery work but his swordsmanship once again allowed him to fight off the attackers. He would go on to continue his anti-slavery work as well as create a French anti-slavery group called the Society of the Friends of Black People. He would also become France's first black Free Mason reaching the 33<sup>rd</sup> degree. Injuries and age did not slow Saint-George down a bit, during the French Revolution he became captain of the National Guard. As France and Austria engaged in war Saint-George became the colonel of an all-black French legion which was often called the "Saint-George" Legion. The Saint-

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George led legion helped the French defeat Austria, he and his legion also helped to stop a French general from conspiring with Austria to defeat France.

Saint-George was publically condemned by Alexander Dumas, the father of the literary giant Alexander Dumas, due to Dumas' allegiance to the revolutionary leader Robespierre. Saint-George spent a year in jail because of Robespierre but was released in 1794 because Robespierre was no longer in power. Saint-George witnessed the impact of French and Spanish colonization of the black people of the island of Santo Domingo; black people were fighting each other as enemies even though they are only separated by a river, languages and European ideas. His name as a composer was still drawing large crowds in France which led him to become the director of The Circle of Harmony orchestra. Saint-George would die in 1799 due to a bladder infection but was a legendary figure until the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. The African presence of France was erased for over two-hundred years because of Napoleon and his racist views of African people. Like here in America, France had a rediscovering of African history, culture, and art which helped the people of France become reintroduced to this historical titan. Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward.

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