

# OPERA NEWS

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## *The Chevalier*

**KATONAH, NY**

**Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts**

**7/10/22**

**U**NTIL RECENTLY, the subject of Bill Barclay's touring concert-theater work *The Chevalier*, which was presented at Caramoor on July 10, was unknown even to the most avid consumers of classical music. And yet the life of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges—eighteenth-century violinist, conductor, composer, abolitionist, and swordsman—is an incredible story. In his lifetime, Bologne (1745–99) was a renowned violinist, performing throughout Europe. He was also music director of the Paris-based Le Concert Olympique, which performed in the grand salon of the Palais Royal. His career blossomed during the pre-revolutionary era of Marie Antoinette; he received the French “chevalier” title from Marie Antoinette's grandfather-in-law, Louis XV, for his fencing skills. In 1785, Bologne commissioned Haydn to compose what would become known as the “Paris” symphonies for the Concert Olympique; he conducted the works at the Tuileries. His compositions included violin concertos, quartets, symphonies, symphony concertantes, which are just beginning to be performed more frequently. Of his six operas, his comic opera *L'Amant Anonyme* (The Anonymous Lover) is the only one that exists complete today.

Given Bologne's triple-threat composer/soloist/conductor status, and the era in which he lived, comparisons to Mozart are inevitable. But Bologne was Black. He was born on the island of Guadeloupe, the child of an enslaved woman and a slave-owner. Although he had a noteworthy career—no less than President John Adams called him the “most accomplished man in Europe”—discrimination and racism curtailed every aspect of Bologne's life. Bologne's work as an abolitionist took place as Western Europe was still actively involved in the very profitable slave trade—including those who employed him. During the French Revolution, he served as a colonel on the side of the French Republic; he and Marie Antoinette played music together. Many of Bologne's musical compositions have been lost. Plenty of his chamber music exists, was sprinkled in between *The Chevalier's* dialogue, along with incidental music by Mozart and Gluck. Bologne's music is very much in the style of the Mozart period. The play's central characters are Joseph Bologne, Marie Antoinette, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and librettist Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, best known for writing the novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The role of Bologne is split, played by actor R.J. Foster, who does not perform music, and the gifted young violinist Brendon Elliott, who does not speak. This was accomplished without fuss, with both character versions onstage simultaneously, and it neatly solved the inevitable mismatch if a single performer tried to tackle both. The character of Marie Antoinette was also split (actor Sarah Baskin and pianist Erasmia Voukelatos). The eleven-member Harlem Chamber Players provided the orchestral backdrop, performing mostly short Bologne selections in between the action (the ratio was perhaps 2:1 spoken dialogue versus music).

*The Chevalier*'s simple set in Caramoor's Venetian Theater featured a dining table with a dirtied French flag covering it, music on stands, a Steinway piano, and eleven Harlem Chamber Players string musicians arrayed in a semi-circle upstage. Barclay's Laclos opened the first scene with a snarky "Liberté, égalité" quip that connected unsettled periods of history, past and present, adding, with raised eyebrow to the audience, "It has been a challenging two years, has it not?" The play is set in 1778; Mozart's mother has just died and he is living for a time in the same Paris building as Bologne. (This actually happened.) Imagining the musical influences that might have passed back and forth, what the two might have talked about: that is the primary focus of the play. Mozart (Ian Unterman), wearing pink pants, his hair and frilly white shirt disheveled, is an acting-only role, and a hammy one. He gets over-the-top lines like, "The ghosts of Lully and Rameau vomit the same chords," which he follows up by bellowing "C-G-C-G-C-G-C" pitches repeatedly. He is nakedly jealous of Bologne, quoting a well-known description of Bologne of the time as "the Voltaire of the musical arts." Bologne displays a quieter, more thoughtful, sardonic wit. He makes musical suggestions to Mozart, such as the idea of writing a piece in Sinfonia Concertante form ("You should try it!" he says to Mozart). The humor provides a counterweight to the harsh reality and heavy injustice of Bologne's lived experience, and the parallels to today's continuing racial inequities, which weigh over the action.

Bologne did write his own Sinfonia Concertante, though Mozart's is the one frequently played in concert halls today. In the play, Marie Antoinette calls Bologne "the fastest fiddler in Paris," and requests that he perform a concert and provide her with music lessons. As the queen and Bologne debate musical structure, in typically French flirtatious fashion, Bologne advocates for a less one-sided solo approach in a violin sonata, with the piano taking an equal role: "I don't like power—not over others," he says. In a violin sonata, he says, "I want the voices to enjoy each other." In real life, Marie Antoinette advocated for a different kind of progress: she wanted Bologne to be considered to head up the Paris Opera. During the revolutionary period, though, the queen's powers to change the minds of those petitioning to block the appointment of a "mulatto" director of the Paris Opera, were limited. "You can't even protect yourself," Bologne notes acidly. Marie Antoinette, herself born in Vienna, says, "We are all outsiders here. Until I produce an heir." Bologne warns her, "When the revolution comes, you had better know which side you're on." Marie Antoinette responds, "I'm practicing that."

During this period in France, Marie Antoinette's husband, Louis XVI, established Les Police des Noirs, which required all free Black people in France to register with the government, with the potential goal of sending them back into slavery in the French colonies. *The Chevalier* does not cover the immediate post-revolutionary years, but it incorporates a scene in which Bologne is bandaged after having been ambushed by five Frenchmen with pistols, who advise him, "Keep the bloody slaves where they are." The play flies by, and it ends mid-story. Barclay's program note describes *The Chevalier* as "merely Act I of a longer play that takes us through Bologne's revolutionary years." So perhaps there will be more, but in the meantime, Barclay's play is touring North America, with one specifically modern-day goal: participating musicians in any production must join the National Alliance for Audition Support, which provides audition grants for Black and Latino musicians, who for more the history of classical music have been mostly or entirely absent from European and American concert stages. —*Jennifer Melick*