



Joseph Bologne,
Chevalier de
**SAINT-
GEORGES**

**Six Concertante
Quartets**

**Arabella String
Quartet**



Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745–1799)

Six Concertante Quartets

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges – a brilliant swordsman, athlete, violin virtuoso and gifted composer – might well lay claim to being the most talented figure in an age of remarkable individuals.

The son of a former councillor in the Parlement at Metz and a reputedly beautiful slave of Senegalese origin, Joseph Bologne was born near Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, and lived for some time on an estate on Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Around 1749, the Bologne family, together with Joseph's mother, returned to France and settled in Paris. At the age of thirteen, Saint-Georges became a pupil of La Boëssière, a master of arms, and also had riding lessons with Chevalier Dugast, head of the royal riding academy at the Tuileries, who considered him his best pupil. He fought his first public fencing match in Paris with Giuseppe Gianfaldoni on 8 September 1766 and although he lost, his opponent predicted that he would become the finest swordsman in Europe.

Of his musical education we know very little. In old accounts of his life it is claimed that he had lessons with Platon, his father's plantation manager on Saint-Domingue, and it has also been suggested that he studied the violin with Jean-Marie Leclair and composition with François-Joseph Gossec in France. In view of his long professional association with Gossec, it is quite likely that he received advice from him in his early career and this may have extended to instruction in composition. As the six years he spent in La Boëssière's establishment were devoted exclusively to physical training and academic studies, it is assumed that the bulk of Saint-Georges' musical education took place between 1758 and 1769, the year of his first professional engagement, as a violinist in Gossec's Concert des Amateurs. He made his public debut as a soloist with the Concert des Amateurs in 1772, performing his two violin concertos *Op. 2*. When Gossec became a director of the Concert Spirituel in 1773, Saint-Georges succeeded him as musical director and leader of the Amateurs which, under his leadership, quickly won recognition as one of the finest orchestras in France.

In 1777 Saint-Georges made his debut as an opera composer with *Ernestine* at the Comédie-Italienne. The premiere was a fiasco and the work received only a single performance. The fault was not entirely Saint-Georges' own, but even his popularity as a composer of instrumental music and his gift for writing attractive and engaging music could not save the work from instant oblivion. In the course of the same year he became affiliated with the private theatre and concerts of Mme de Montesson, the secret, unacknowledged wife of the Duke of Orleans. Utilising Saint-Georges' other talents, the duke put him in charge of his hunting retinue at his seat in Le Raincy.

After the disbanding of the Amateurs in January 1781, probably due to financial problems, Saint-Georges founded the Concert de la Loge Olympique, the orchestra for which Count d'Ogny later commissioned Haydn to compose his brilliant set of six 'Paris' symphonies. On the death of the Duke of Orléans in 1785, Saint-Georges lost his position in the household and visited London where he gave exhibition fencing matches at Angelo's Academy. He returned to Paris in 1787, composed a moderately successful comedy, *La fille-garçon*, and resumed work with the Loge Olympique.

Within six months of the outbreak of the Revolution, the Loge Olympique was dissolved and Saint-Georges returned to England in the company of the young Duke of Orléans, Philippe Egalité. Once again, Saint-Georges supported himself by giving fencing matches in London and, on this occasion, also in Brighton where he fought before the Prince of Wales. He returned to Paris in 1790 but finding the state of affairs unsatisfactory undertook a tour of northern France with the actress Louise Fusil and a horn player, Lamothe. He took up official residence in Lille in 1792 where he became captain of the National Guard. In his desire to take a more active part in the Revolution, Saint-Georges formed a corps of light troops in the summer of 1792 which was planned eventually to comprise 1000 men of colour. Known as the Légion Nationale du Midi, the corps enjoyed little military success. Saint-Georges was relieved of his command, imprisoned for 18 months, and on his release forbidden to live near his former comrades.

Unemployed again, Saint-Georges led a vagabond existence with Lamothe and lived for a time on Saint-Domingue. Around 1797 he returned to Paris where he served briefly as a director of a new musical organisation, the Cercle de l'Harmonie, based in the former residence of the Orléans family. He died in Paris in June 1799.

By the standards of the time Saint-Georges was not a prolific composer but this is hardly surprising given the exceptional range of his activities. The majority of his instrumental works were composed between c.1771–79 and issued in printed editions by leading Parisian publishers such as Bailleux, Leduc and La Chevardière during the same period.

Saint-Georges' *oeuvre* is unsurprisingly dominated by the violin concerto and the *symphonie concertante*. Of his remaining instrumental works the string quartet holds pride of place with three sets of six works. With neat but surely unintentional symmetry, these quartets include his first and last published instrumental works, the *Six Quatuors, Op. 1* (Sieber, 1773) and the *Six Quatuors concertans, Op. 14* (Boyer, 1785).

The present quartets fall midway between these two publications. Composed in 1777, according to Gabriel Banat, the best and most recent of Saint-Georges' biographers, the *Six Quartetto concertans* were issued two years later without opus number in a breathtakingly inaccurate edition by Durieu. Given the unusually high number of errors and inconsistencies in Durieu's print it seems unlikely that Saint-Georges was directly involved in its preparation. No other edition of the quartets is known although a second printing of the set using the same plates was made c.1782. The authority for this dating comes in the form of a catalogue of works – CATALOGUE /De Musique INSTRUMENTALE ET VOCALE Apartenant au Sieur / DURIEU Editeur et M^d. de Musique. Paris Rue Dauphine pres la Rue Christine au Gout du Jour – which is printed on the wrapper. Among the publications on offer are journals of Italian airs in French translation for the years 1780–82.

When Saint-Georges composed his first set of quartets (c.1772) the genre was still in its infancy in France. During the previous decade quartets by a number of foreign composers – Haydn foremost among them – had been issued by Parisian publishers, but these works had not exercised a great deal of influence on local composers. Only Gossec, Nicolas Capron and Pierre Vachon published quartets before the appearance of Saint-Georges' *Op. 1* and their works – and, in a broader sense, French instrumental music in general – seem to have provided his model. Neither in their overall structure nor style do Saint-Georges' *Op. 1* quartets show anything more than a passing similarity to the quartets of Haydn. The most notable departure is the preference for two-movement structures as opposed to the four-movement cycle Haydn adopted from *Op. 9* (1769–70) on. Although these quartets are small in scale they are not without a certain resourcefulness in terms of texture. Their lack of virtuosity is perhaps surprising given Saint-Georges' prowess as a violinist, but is wholly in keeping with the more intimate nature of the genre and its function as music to be played rather than music to be listened to by a public audience.

Saint-Georges' second set of quartets is similar in many respects to the quartets of *Op. 1*. They too are cast in two movements – generally an opening *Allegro* followed by a *Rondeau* – although one work, the G minor *Quartet*, opens with an intense *Adagio* which is followed by an aria marked *Andantino* (*Rondeau* in the basso part). The sixth quartet concludes with an *Aria con variazione* in place of the usual *rondeau* which curiously makes far less effective use of the four instruments than its counterpart in the second *Quartet* with its elaborate solos for violin I, viola and violoncello. The description of the works as *Quartetto concertans* [sic] reflects the increased independence of the four instruments in the presentation of thematic material. This emphasis on solo writing demands a corresponding simplification of musical textures and thus the quartets contain little in the way of thematically conceived part writing and there is a marked stylistic dichotomy between melodic and accompaniment functions. Saint-Georges' treatment of the lowest voice in the ensemble is interesting in that there are a number of instances where the viola plays below the 'basso' creating a typically weak succession of 6/3 chords. This type of voice leading is encountered quite frequently in works composed in the 1750s and 1760s before the emergence of a strongly differentiated chamber idiom and implies that the lowest part may have been intended to be played or doubled by a contrabass in the manner of a continuo line. However, these bass lines do not as a rule include soloistic writing in the upper tessitura. That Saint-Georges makes such extensive soloistic use of the lowest part in these quartets proves categorically that it was conceived for the violoncello. As some of the part-crossings could have been easily enough avoided it seems that Saint-Georges included them in order to explore different timbres in the ensemble. Although the quartets are small in scale and are hardly ambitious in terms of their musical structures, they are exceptionally pleasing works and contain numerous instances of the composer's rich lyrical gifts and his sensitivity to combinatorial possibilities of the ensemble.

Allan Badley



Photo: Ettore Causa

From left to right: Sarita Kwok, Alexandre Lecarme, Ettore Causa, Julie Eskar.

Arabella String Quartet



Photo: Ettore Causa

The members of the Arabella String Quartet hail from around the globe, first meeting at Yale University in 2011, when Causa and Kwok were serving on the faculty. A veritable United Nations of chamber music, they represent Denmark, Australia, Italy and France. The quartet gave its debut concert in Boston in 2012, and in recent seasons has performed across the US at Charleston Music Fest, Chelsea Music Festival, the Hammond Performing Arts Series, Temple Emanuel Chamber Series, the Alton C. Bynum Recital Series, Mistral Music and the Cosmos Club and Chamber Music Kenwood society series. The quartet remained committed to its audience through the global pandemic with high quality pre-recorded concerts and live streams, and it also has an ongoing commitment to education and engagement through workshops and masterclasses. The Arabella Quartet's debut album, *In the Moment*, was released by Naxos in May 2017 (8.579013). An innovative programme that explores time, place and mood through a series of short pieces, it was named Album of the Week by Classic FM, and critically acclaimed in *The Strad*. In addition to performing as the Arabella Quartet, its members enjoy varied individual careers. www.arabellaquartet.com

The scores and parts of Saint-Georges' Six Quartetto concertans are available from:

www.artaria.com

Sources

The source upon which the editions used in this recording have been made is:

Six Concertante Quartets

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Paris, Arsenal M4387a: Durieu print, c. 1782



A brilliant swordsman, athlete, violin virtuoso and composer, Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges might well lay claim to being the most talented figure in an age of remarkable individuals. The string quartet was still in its infancy in France in the 1770s, but while these pieces are small in scale they are exceptionally rewarding. Saint-Georges appreciated the intimate nature of this genre, avoiding overt soloistic virtuosity and exploring chamber music timbres, amply demonstrating his rich lyrical gifts and a natural ability to delight performers and audiences alike.



Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de **SAINT-GEORGES**

(1745–1799)

Six Concertante Quartets (1777)

No. 1 in B flat major	7:14	No. 4 in F major	6:47
1 I. Allegro assai	4:31	7 I. Allegro	4:47
2 II. Gratoso	2:42	8 II. Rondeau	2:00
No. 2 in G minor	10:09	No. 5 in G major	10:43
3 I. Adagio	4:48	9 I. Allegro assai	5:49
4 II. Aria andantino	5:21	10 II. Gratoso	4:54
No. 3 in C major	7:24	No. 6 in B flat major	9:54
5 I. Allegro	5:21	11 I. Allegro	6:46
6 II. Rondeau: Moderato	2:01	12 II. Aria con variazione	3:06

Arabella String Quartet

Julie Eskar, Violin I **1–6**, Violin II **7–12**

Sarita Kwok, Violin I **7–12**, Violin II **1–6**

Ettore Causa, Viola • Alexandre Lecarme, Cello

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(contemporary etching after Mather Brown, 1761–1831)

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