

## Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799)

First known as **Joseph de Bologne**

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Original painting of Saint-Georges by Mather Brown (1787)

Joseph de Bologne, Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was a composer, violinist, and conductor. He was a kind and gentle man, and one of the most important musicians in France 1765-1789. Through the years, he was also known as an amazing marksman, equestrian, ballroom dancer, and the best fencer in France.

Joseph was born on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. His father was a wealthy plantation owner and his mother was a slave.

His family moved to France when he was 10 years old and Joseph was enrolled in a boarding school. In the mornings, he studied literature, science, music, dance, and fencing. He excelled at both fencing and playing the violin. Through much of his life, Joseph would find that the best fencers in the world wanted to fence with him. When Joseph left boarding school, he entered life as a nobleman.



In 1766, Saint-Georges began studying composition. He went on to compose seven violin concertos, string quartets, small symphonies, vocal music, a ballet, and six operas.

Throughout his career, Saint-Georges was a part of various privately funded and highly regarded orchestras. He made his solo debut performing one of his own violin concertos. His music was very expressive but also required virtuoso skill! He was also a busy conductor, and well respected by the musicians.

His reputation as a conductor continued to grow. Saint-Georges was appointed director of the Paris Opéra but the offer was withdrawn because some singers, dancers, and actresses refused to take direction from him because of the color of his skin. He moved on. By the 1780s, Saint-Georges was the main conductor of one of the best orchestras in France, maybe the best in all of Europe! This orchestra commissioned Franz Joseph Haydn to write six symphonies, numbers 82-87. These were nicknamed “Paris” symphonies.



*A scene from a performance at the Paris Opéra*

Saint-Georges was a very busy and popular person! Aristocrats all across Europe knew of him and he had many friends. For as much as he was included as a peer in circles of the wealthy, however, he was also often reminded of his mixed heritage. He seemed to have been the only black man of the time who lived the life of a nobleman.



Life changed drastically for Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges in 1789 with the start of the French Revolution. He was sympathetic to the peasants. He gave up his wealth, music, and comfortable life to join their cause. He commanded a group of men from the West Indies who had come to France to offer their services.

At one point during the Revolution, Saint-Georges was wrongly accused of misusing money meant for his troops and sent to prison.

When Saint-Georges was released from prison, he decided to return to his father’s plantation on the island. He was hoping he could claim the land and sell it. When he arrived, Joseph found a slave rebellion in progress across the entire island.

With nothing left of his first home, Saint-Georges returned to Paris. Everything was different. The city had changed. No one knew him. The fame and respect he had for much of his life had disappeared. He lived a much quieter life now and died within a couple of years.

**I can tell which instrument is playing the melody.**

View String Quartet No. 5 in G Major. <https://youtu.be/6ASJMvFLYYI> (0:00-4:28) Can you follow the melody as it is passed from one instrument to another? What else do you notice?



**I can draw to show the mood or story I hear in music.**

Listen to part of this violin concerto by Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges and think about the mood or imagine a story that goes along with the music. [https://youtu.be/kmih\\_OL2Zg](https://youtu.be/kmih_OL2Zg) (0:00-9:23) Listen again and draw a picture to show the mood or story you imagined.

