

Chevalier and the life of composer Joseph Bologne: Why the mean-spirited attack on Mozart and Gluck?

David Walsh
4 July 2023

Chevalier, directed by Stephen Williams and written by Stefani Robinson, is a biographical film inspired by the life and career of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799), the French-Caribbean violinist, conductor and composer.

Bologne's mother was a slave on his father's plantation in Guadeloupe, the French colony in the Caribbean. Raised and educated in France, Bologne became renowned for his music as well as his fencing and other skills. The future American president, John Adams, in 1779 referred to Bologne as "the most accomplished Man in Europe in Riding, Running, Shooting, Fencing, Dancing, Musick." Bologne/Saint-Georges was very much a figure of the Enlightenment, the epoch which, in the first place, made possible the emergence of the son of a slave as a leading artistic and social personality.

At the time of the French Revolution of 1789, Saint-Georges, who had been made a *chevalier*, a lower-ranked knight, by Louis XV, became the commander of a legion of black volunteers in defense of the revolution. However, from 1793-94, in part because of his musical association with Marie Antoinette before and after she became queen of France, Saint-Georges was imprisoned by the revolutionary authorities for 11 months. He died in relative obscurity in 1799.

Saint-Georges composed numerous works, including several *opéra comiques*, of which only one, *The Anonymous Lover* (1780), survives in its entirety. He also wrote 14 violin concertos and two symphonies, along with chamber music pieces, including sonatas and string quartets. He is considered to be one of the pioneers of the *symphonie concertante*, an orchestral work in which one or more solo instruments contrast with the full orchestra. His work continues to be performed.

This is obviously a remarkable figure, with an equally remarkable and eventful life, and entirely worthy of dramatization.

Unfortunately, *Chevalier* is seriously marred, not only by the gravitational pull of identity-racial politics but by a generally low level of historical knowledge and understanding. This is another instance—the most recent of many—where the creators simply decided at a certain point to make things up, apparently in the interests of generating a myth they thought would be helpful to themselves.

The film follows Joseph as a child, ripped from his mother's arms in Guadeloupe and sent to an austere, unforgiving French boarding school, where he suffers abuse because of his origins.

Joseph, now a young man (Kelvin Harrison Jr.), becomes a celebrated swordsman, defeating a fencing champion who has taunted him with racial slurs. Following his victory, in one of many unlikely and contrived sequences, Marie Antoinette (Lucy Boynton), the queen of France, anoints him Chevalier de Saint-Georges: "Well, come on. Someone get him a shiny sash or something. Let's make this festive."

Saint-Georges has female admirers, such as La Guimard (Minnie

Driver), a ballerina and slightly aging star of the Paris Opera who will not react well to his rejection. He does fall in love with Marie-Josephine (Samara Weaving), an independent-minded woman married to a brute, the Marquis de Montalembert (Marton Csokas).

Saint-Georges sets his sights on becoming the director of the Paris Opera: "There are countless men with titles in France, but there is only one head of the Paris Opera. There is no greater post, and I want it. I can do it. I can fill that theater every night. I will put it on the map."

However, the committee in charge favors the German-Bohemian composer, Christoph Gluck (Henry Lloyd-Hughes). The queen proposes a competition for the post. Gluck and Saint-Georges will each write an opera, and "the music committee" will "select a victor based on the quality of the production."

Joseph's mother, Nanon (Ronke Adekoluejo), arrives in Paris, but a great distance remains between mother and son, because she is black and loyal to her Afro-Caribbean customs and culture while Saint-Georges has accustomed himself to "white" society. (The "greatest evil," she informs him, "is not what they have done to our bodies. It is what they have done to our minds.")

Saint-Georges convinces the writer Madame de Genlis (Sian Clifford), someone with connections, to produce his opera, *Ernestine*. She agrees, predicting they will "defeat Gluck and rub his nose in all that greasy smarm." Against her husband's will, Marie-Josephine stars in the production. In the end, however, in part because of a petition signed by La Guimard, complaining that Saint-Georges "belongs to a sub-human race and such a man should not be allowed the honor of holding the highest musical position in France," the directorship of the Paris Opera goes to Gluck. Saint-Georges attends a performance of Gluck's winning opera, drunk, and insults La Guimard, the composer and the queen.

Marie-Josephine has a child, who is dark-skinned. Montalembert takes the child away and apparently has him killed.

The French Revolution arrives, tepidly as portrayed in the film, and Saint-Georges organizes a concert to support its ideals. "I'm putting on a concert. Invite anyone. Everyone. Charge them a fair price. The funds will go to those who need it. Food, resources. The rest we'll use to help fund the revolution."

Marie Antoinette berates him for his ingratitude and further warns that "there will be no new France. You cannot topple what has been ordained by God." Events will prove her wrong.

As noted above, racial politics and an unserious attitude toward history

fatally damage *Chevalier*.

The first scene sets the tone. At a concert in Paris, following the completion of his scheduled pieces, a youthful and arrogant Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Joseph Prown) turns to the audience for “requests.” His “Violin Concerto No. 5” is called out. Beginning to play the piece, Mozart is interrupted by Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, who comes out of the audience and asks if he can join the composer on the violin. Mozart agrees, sneeringly, (“Well, I hope this won’t be embarrassing for you”) and proceeds to be outplayed by this “dark stranger.”

No such incident ever took place. Saint-Georges may have attended a performance by Mozart, a 10-year-old child prodigy, during the Mozart family’s visit to Paris in 1766. When Mozart was in Paris again in 1778, his father urged him to approach the Le Concert des Amateurs, the orchestra where Saint-Georges served as conductor, for a possible commission. In his biography of Saint-Georges (*The Chevalier de Saint-Georges—Virtuoso of the Sword and the Bow*), Gabriel Banat points out that Mozart followed Leopold’s advice and sought out Saint-Georges. Banat goes on, “They met at a difficult time in Mozart’s life, for on July 3, 1778, Wolfgang’s mother died in their tiny, dank apartment on rue du Gros Chenet.” Wolfgang, “alone and helpless,” found lodging through an admirer. “It is a matter of record that from July 5 to September 11, 1778,” writes the biographer, “Mozart and Saint-Georges lived—and dined—under the same roof.”

Referring to the initial sequence in *Chevalier*, the *Guardian* reviewer comments that this “is the moment that Amadeus finally knows how Salieri felt. Strutting with arrogance, Mozart is challenged to a violin duel and upstaged by a precocious rival. ... Whether this showdown ever took place is doubtful but it makes for a playful opening.” People who take comfort in such ethno-historical wishful thinking are driven by something other than an interest in truth and reality.

Chevalier generally plays fast and loose with Saint-Georges’ life and times. It suggests that Joseph is roughly taken from his mother, Nanon, at a tender age, by his father George (Jim High) and kept from her as long as the latter is alive, until Joseph is an adult. In the film, Nanon tells her son, once she has arrived in Paris, over images of her distraught self: “After he took you from me, I ran to find you nearly every day. ... I fought anyone who tried to stop me. ... I did not care if I died. I chose to fight for you, my son. And now, I am here.” None of this is true.

In reality, mother and son were separated for only 20 months. Nanon came to live in Paris in 1755, and Banat writes that it is clear that “George Bologne was not ashamed of their relationship, either at home or in France. As for Joseph, there is no question that he was and remained deeply devoted to his mother.”

As for Nanon’s economic situation in Paris, “she certainly did not need to work because he [George] left her and Joseph an annuity more than adequate for a comfortable lifestyle.” George “was always generous to a fault, seeing that Joseph had the best of everything,” and “Nanon was well taken care of ... She had a nice apartment where the boy could feel at home—whether his father was sharing it with her or not.”

Mozart is hardly in need of a defense, but the lesser-known Christoph Gluck perhaps could use one. Why the malicious, entirely gratuitous assault on an important, revolutionary figure in the history of opera? Have the filmmakers looked into the history at all? Nearly all the facts presented in the film surrounding Gluck are fictional.

Each time Saint-Georges refers to Gluck, his comments are dipped in spite and jealousy. Told that the composer has “hopped over from Vienna” and that he is “putting on a concert for someone,” Saint-Georges snidely responds, “Someone without ears or taste, probably.”

American violinist Rachel Barton Pine, an admirer and performer of Saint-Georges’ music, replying to the question, “Did he [Saint-Georges]

disparage other composers and musicians on a regular basis?,” writes that “Such a characterization contradicts what we know of Bologne’s character from contemporary reports. For example, in La Borde’s entry on Bologne in his *Essay sur la musique* (1780), he writes: ‘In addition to his multiple talents ... M. de Saint-Georges possesses the uncommon virtues of great modesty and gentleness.’”

In any event, Christoph Willibald Gluck never sought the Paris Opera position and Saint-Georges had been rejected for the job well before Gluck arrived in Paris. They were never asked to write competing operas, nor did Saint-Georges ever attack Gluck in public. All of this is fanciful, and stupid.

Gluck himself was embattled while in Paris, fighting for his innovations against stale, outworn traditions.

A little history is called for. After registering success with his operas in Vienna at the Hapsburg court, Gluck (1714-1787) became critical in the 1750s of the traditional Italian forms, which he felt had become threadbare and unnatural.

Catherine Dault asserts that “Gluck looked for a way to free himself from the tyranny of musical hedonism. The real turning point in his career came with a decisive meeting, with an Italian scholar attracted to the new aesthetic concepts advanced by Diderot and Rousseau: librettist Raniero di Calzabigi (1714-1795) whose ambition was to revive opera.”

With Calzabigi’s help, Gluck deliberately set out to reform lyrical drama. The masterpiece that emerged in 1762, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, based on the Greek myth) “was the first attempt to implement the ‘opera reform’ that Gluck wanted: ‘My purpose was to strip music of the abuses which, introduced by the poorly understood vanity of the singers or by an exaggerated complacency on the part of the masters, have long marred Italian opera. ... I intended to restrict music to its true office, which is to serve poetry for the uninterrupted expression of the action, and without damping it down with superfluous ornamentation.’”

The plot of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, which follows Orpheus’ descent into hell and the initial failure of his efforts to bring his beloved wife Eurydice back to the land of the living, embodies the socially progressive philosophical ideals of the time and the rejection of the ancient version, in which nature and death still hang over humanity like a fate. “Only the intervention of Love,” Dault points out, “which stops Orpheus’s hand as he draws his sword to kill himself, allows a happy ending consistent with the spirit of the Enlightenment. This favourable outcome points to a permanent faith in man’s capacity to triumph over Fate through courage and virtue. The couple have defeated Death and are once again together despite a momentary setback.”

In performance, Gluck demanded a greater naturalness. Banat: “He [Gluck] insisted that the chorus, too, had to act and become a part of the drama—that they could no longer just stand there posing stiffly and without expression while singing their lines. As for the soloists, they were especially exposed to his temper, for Gluck could not abide what the French considered proper acting: the men posturing, feet apart, one arm thrust forth, the women, hands clutching at their throats or pressed against their bosoms. His demand that they actually feel emotion in order to convey it to an audience was completely novel to them.”

Moreover, as Rachel Barton Pine comments, it was hardly likely that Bologne/Saint-Georges “hated” Gluck. On the contrary, she explains, “one of the motivations for promoting Bologne was that he was known to be a ‘Gluckiste.’ Bologne’s success in transforming the Amateurs into one of the finest orchestras in Europe persuaded his backers that he was exactly the right man to galvanize the Opéra and raise its standards.”

These two deservedly famed arias, “Che farò senza Euridice” (“What will I do without Euridice”) from *Orfeo ed Euridice* and “Divinités du Styx” (“Gods of the River Styx”) from *Alceste* (1767), another “radical, new work,” respectively, amply demonstrate the enduring power of

Gluck's work.

The effort to elevate Saint-Georges by denigrating Mozart and Gluck is false, unworthy and unnecessary. Each was an extraordinary artist and personality, shaped by the dynamic, often shattering conditions of a revolutionary epoch.

Over the years, the WSWs has systematically criticized those fighting for privileges based on race and ethnicity who accept the existing sum of spending on social programs, for example, and merely seek a fatter share for "their" nationality or skin color (in reality, often, their own pockets). Some of the guiding notions in *Chevalier* seem to borrow from that impoverished way of thinking.

Director Stephen Williams, best known for *Watchmen* (the mini-series, 2019), *Undercovers* (2010) and *Lost* (2004), told an interviewer from *Screenrant* that the filmmakers did not "set out to make a cradle-to-grave biopic." With a script by Stefani Robinson (*Atlanta* and *What We Do in the Shadows*), Williams explained that the intention was "to make a movie that was an imagining of this historical figure, but one where we used our own connection to the material to get at what we experienced to be the truthful essence of this person's life." They did this "even where factual aspects of it were either not known to us or rearranged and redeployed to better tell the story of this portion of [Joseph's] life in as cinematic and as operatic a way as possible."

This is a convoluted manner of saying that Williams, Robinson and company were not especially interested in the facts of Bologne's life and interpreted his life story through the prism of their contemporary middle class prejudices and concerns. In fact, they actively imposed many of the latter on their work. The results are accordingly weak.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact