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Violin Hero and the Knight's Blues: The Life and Legacy of The Chevalier de Saint Georges

We are gathered here to today to discuss the “potential for art and music to provide a neutral platform for cultural exchange” through a variety fields, all of which bring new problems and yet offer new solutions improving the role of cultural diplomacy. As an American, I take advantage of capitalize on the month of February, traditionally Black History Month, to present a figure in World Music whose name finds itself in the paratext and between the lines of traditional historical narrative. My fields are French and Francophone Literary Studies, Caribbean Revolutionary Studies, and Ethnomusicology, and Linguistics.

Before the 1637 publication of *Discours de la Méthode* and well before the 1641 publication of *Les Méditations Métaphysiques*, a younger 22-year-old Descartes wrote and published in Latin the *Compendium Musicae* for his friend and fellow *physico-mathématicien*. Instead, in typical Cartesian method, he uses his analytical skills—equipped with "lute" and "flute". He deduces the science of music by cutting strings and by blowing in to tubes. Let us take Descartes' first paragraph of the *Compendium Musicae* as a starting point: “It seems that the human voice is for us the most agreeable thing for the only reason above all other that it is conformed to our spirits. Maybe more so it, is more agreeable coming from a friend than from an enemy, from the fact of sympathy and of antipathy of the passions; for the same reason that, they say, the skin of a sheep stretched out on a drum stays mute if a skin of the wolf resonates on another drum.” What happens with music and cultural diplomacy when musicians are not friends? What is this tension in the “saying” of Descartes? How can only be racist or biased in a field such as music? For my presentation honoring Black History Month, I have chosen a Africana person whose revolution was not in rock, jazz, or blues, but rather a violinist who revolutionized Western Classical Music by moving beyond “high” or “low.” Nevertheless, if searched for, one certainly can aesthetically find all of these genres in music before the 1789. My point here is to illustrate a long forgotten theory of “cultural and artistic exchange,” which acknowledges that all people and instruments are created equally with the empirical case study of *The Violin Hero/Knights Blues : is a Musico-Historiographical Case-Study of Der Ritter Saint Georges (1745-1799)*.

In the “The Awakening of the Negro,” a concise biographical and ethnographic study of post-bellum education in the American South essay, Booker T. Washington, American Political Leader, educator, author, and orator, commences his study on the needs of the African American Community at the end of the 19th Century with a short anecdote from his childhood :

“When a mere boy, I saw a young colored man, who had spent several years in school, sitting in a common cabin in the South, studying a French grammar. I noted the poverty, the untidiness, the want of system and thrift, that existed about the cabin, notwithstanding his knowledge of French and other academic subjects. Another time, when riding on the outer edges of a town in the South, I heard the sound of a piano coming from a cabin of the same kind. Contriving some excuse, I entered, and began a conversation with the young colored woman who was playing, and who had recently returned from a boarding-school, where she had been studying instrumental music among other things. Despite the fact that her parents were living in a rented cabin, eating poorly cooked food, surrounded with poverty, and having almost none of the conveniences of life, she had persuaded them to rent a piano for four or five dollars per month. Many such instances as these, in connection with my own struggles, impressed upon me the importance of making a study of our needs as a race, and applying the remedy accordingly.”
“Some one may be tempted to ask, Has not the negro boy or girl as good a right to study a French grammar and instrumental music as the white youth? I answer, Yes, but in the present condition of the negro race in this country there is need of something more. -Booker T. Washington, *The Awakening of the Negro*, 1896.”

What I have to further support Washington’s claim I am pleased to support an historical figure whose legacy has been somewhat hidden in layers and layers of paratext both musical and material written form. *The Violin Hero/Knights Blues : is a Musico-Historiographical Case-Study of Der Ritter Saint Georges (1745-1799)*.

He was born Joseph Boulogne to George Boulogne and Nanon on December 25th, 1745. His father was a white planter, and his mother was an enslaved worker on a local plantation on the island of Guadeloupe. His father already had an “official” wife as well as a young daughter at the time of Joseph’s birth. That he departed with both his mother and his father has surprised many researchers. The entire family flees Guadeloupe for legal reasons travelling to Saint-Domingue, back to Guadeloupe, after a royal pardon then moving a few years later on to Paris by way of Bordeaux to finally settle down in Paris.¹

This historical time period upon which I will elaborate is referred to as 18th Century French Enlightenment Studies. “The Seven Years’ War was a major military conflict that lasted from 1756, as a result of the French and Indian War that erupted in North America in 1754, until the conclusion of the treaties of Hubertusburg and Paris in 1763. It involved all of the major European powers of the period.”² The more pertinent fact is that, France lost all of Canada, and gained a small territory known as Guadeloupe, the birthplace of Saint-Georges. It therefore is more ideal to place Saint-George not only in his time, but also his space in the Caribbean and Americas due to its interconnectedness with Western European Historiography as expressed by many authors

² Wikipedia

most notably C.L.R James--whose *Black Jacobins* builds bridges between the political discourse human rights and slavery in the Americas with the condition in Western Europe leading to the French Revolution. The period 1787-1804 starts with rumors of slave revolts in colonial Saint-Domingue, through the 1789 capture of the Bastille, through the terror, and eventually ending with the 1804 Haitian Revolution lead by Toussaint Louverture.

Susan Buck-Morss resumes the political stakes in a dense article entitled "Hegel and Haiti".³ This is a critically engaging narrative which attempts to reconcile the material absence of New World Triangular Trade in the foundational and burgeoning totalizing theories of the relationship between slave and the master in Western European epistemology of the 19th century German Philosopher Friedrich Hegel.⁴ While Morss is certainly not the first writer to make note of this blatant absence she postulates that excuses of institutionally defined disciplines are insufficient because they avoid "the awkward truth that if certain constellations of facts are able to enter scholarly consciousness deeply enough, they threaten not only the venerable narratives, but also the entrenched academic disciplines that (re)produce them"(822). First, Buck-Morss starts with visual representations of slavery in The Dutch Caribbean after which she acknowledges her self-described "circuitous" approach to filling in Hegel's epistemological void. Secondly, so as to not make a complete scapegoat of Hegel, she surveys the literature of other philosophers of the French Enlightenment through the Revolutionary Wars focusing on a similar absence in the 1762 publication of Rousseau's *Le Contract Social*, but also acknowledging Diderot's abolitionary engagement in the association: *Amis des Noirs*. Thirdly, she hypothesizes that Hegel was surely a reader of *Minerva*, a journal which sufficiently covered insurrections in the French Caribbean--Saint Domingue, Guadeloupe and Martinique--showing that he would have indeed had access to the news of the real manifestation of the slave/master dialectic. Finally, after allegations of "racism"--although aware of the possible anachronistic usage of the term--on behalf of Rousseau and Hegel, Buck-Morss' goal is to bring into critical question the structures and/or disciplines which have allowed for "Hegel" and "Haiti" to be treated as over determined codes in specific disciplines with no relationship to one another, therefore, bracketed by space, by time, and by traditional concepts of discipline. At the end of the article, referring to the process of crossing "disciplines" and/or codes, she asks, "What un-disciplined stories would be told"(865)?

In this vein, Joseph become our most "un-disciplined story" because at very young age, Joseph was known for this athletic agility and swordsmanship not only limited to the region of Paris, but also throughout Europe. There are numerous accounts attesting to his skills. These sources include the narrative of the son of his master-fencing teacher La Boëssière who states he had "the price-less advantage, to benefit from lessons with [his] father and to be raised alongside Saint-Georges"(Banat, 56). There is also Alexander Dumas (son), the famous writer of the *roman*

³ Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000). P. 846

⁴ for more information see "Hegel and the Black Man" in [Black Skin, White Masks](#)

d'épée (sword novel) as in the Three Musketeer (Trois Mousquetaires) who, according certain historians, liberally and falsely attributed descriptions about Saint-Georges to his own father—the famous General Alexander Dumas.

The first of only two lost duels was at the age of 19 with the Italian fencing master Giovanni Falconi (1739-1770), with the winner nevertheless naming “the first swordsman in Europe” and on his technique stating that “truly his thrusts are as quick as lightning. He has a very long lunge [lunge] and his *passades* are virtually impenetrable” (Banat, p. 96). The second was an exhibition duel with the Chevalière d'Eon (1728-1810) a former transvestite spy for the French Monarchy during 1787 in London, England. There are every graphical renditions of this work. While these were exhibition matches, there was also a time when a French aristocrat tried to have him assassinated by a band of French thugs in the streets of Paris. The record states that Saint-Georges defended himself against the entire group with few injuries.

Because records are so unclear at this time, it is only supposed that he studied violin with Jean-Marie Leclair. He received dedications from Antonil Lolli (1764), François-Joseph Gossec (1766) and Carl Stamitz (1770). Banat explains that many technological transformations that the modern violin is undergoing throughout Europe such as the arrival of the new violins and new bows from Italy with allowed violinists to play more brilliantly given the concavity of the bows. In terms of his corpus, the sonata illustrates the ground work for violin composition for the following century notably a masterful balance of both the Vienna and the Mannheim School of composition. The “Mannheim School” a style of composition practiced additionally by both Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) examples such as the Mannheim Rocket theme as in Mozart's 40th symphony. It was also Saint-Georges who conducted the premier of Haydn's six famous “Paris Symphonies” (No. 82-87). As conductor, Saint Georges also promoted the work of both styles throughout the Western Europe finding himself as a “pitomitan” (central figure) of theoretical debates about social space for music. With baroque instruments undergoing massive reconstruction or play longer and louder, the economy of the musician also drastically changed because better musicians were needed to play the new compositions.

In 1773, he became conductor of “Le Concert des Amateurs”, which, according to the Musical Almanac, became “the best orchestra for symphonies in Paris and perhaps Europe.” He conducted the concert Spirituel and Concert des Amateurs. In 1776 he almost ascended to being named director of the Paris Royal Opera. In the only written and archived notion of the type of discrimination, the Baron Von Grimm notes that : “No sooner were Mesdemoiselles Arnould, Guimard, Rosalie, and others informed about the news, they presented a *placet* or petition to the Queen, assuring her majesty that ‘their honor and their delicate conscience could never allow them to submit to the orders of a mulatto.’ Nevertheless, he continues to give private lessons to the Queen Marie-Antoinette herself—he is even featured in the background in the most recent

Hollywood rendition of that classically revolutionary story. Most importantly is the fact that the economy of music favored technique, therefore the amateur sponsors who had the means could no longer find that ways to the stage. His role as conductor provided “a platform for strengthening intercultural relations at the regional, national, and local levels.” The orchestra of Saint-Georges resounded when debates about class, race, and citizenship even took its toll on orchestral writing. As a transnational musician he functioned as both a informal and formal ambassador bringing different styles of music in Paris.

The historical records shows that he produced at least 79 unique works for a variety of ensembles: 5 Comic Operas, 12 pieces for voice, 2 concertos (bassoon and clarinet; both lost), 14 Violin Concerti, 8 Symphony Concertants, 2 Symphonies, 12 Sonatas, 18 String Quartets, and a set of Trios. Sadly, here have been people who have actually written pieces in the names of Saint Georges.

At the moment of the French Revolution (1789), Saint-Georges was located in England, and he returned to Lille to serve under the estranged prince Duke of Orleans, Phillippe D’Orleans, one of his most faithful companions with whom he had taken numerous trips to London not only regarding is violin play, but also matters of national security. One literary figure whose was also involved in this matter is the author of “The Marriage of Figaro” and “The Barber of Seville,” Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Nevertheless, by 1792 “fencing demonstrations and organizing concerts” according to the website of Mr. Zick. The most important development is the Saint-George Legion allowing soldiers of color to fight on the side of the Revolution where “... the assembly approved a corps compromised mainly of men of color, with 800 infantry and 200 cavalry personnel.” They called themselves “La Légion Franche des Américains” or simply “Le Légion de Saint-Georges.” Saint George was the Colonel with General Alexandre Dumas (père) whose son is Alexandre Dumas the son. The most infamous if not historically perplexing moment during the revolution involved Saint-Georges role in what is historically referred to the “Treason of Dumouriez,’ in April, 1793:

“General Charles François Dumouriez [French military General] had been defeated at Neerwinden, Belgium in March and had subsequently made a secret armistice with Austria. He intended to capture Lille, crown the son of the dead King as Louis XVII, and use the city as a base for regaining control of France for the monarchy. Dumouriez sent General Miaczinski to a town near Lille with 4,000 troops. Miaczinski told Saint-Georges and Alexandre Dumas of the plan in person. They let him believe they would allow his soldiers to seize Lille. When the time came for him to take control of Lille, Miaczinski brought only a small escort. Saint-Georges and Dumas arrested him and sent him to Paris, where he was executed. His troops did not try to take the city; Dumouriez took refuge outside France; and the young French Republic was saved.”

Due to whatever circumstances, Saint-Georges survived the revolution after the deaths of Louis XVI January 21st, 1793), Marie-Antoinette(October 16th, 1793), and the Duke of Orleans (November 6th, 1793) , only later become a political prisoner from November 4th, 1793 to October

25th, 1795, where February 4th, 1794 marks the abolition of slavery in the French Colonies. Upon his release from prison, one can only imagine this new world social order with only his body intact having survived the massive uprising, carnage, civil war, and transoceanic travels. There are some accounts of a voyage to Haiti from April 1796 to 1797. He would later die in a small apartment June 10th, 1799 in Paris, France.

In retrospect, it is surprising that Saint-Georges is not as well known as one might think him to be in certain circles, but the point of this presentation is to also show that a recent resurgence of his work has begun in the form of story stories, comic books, university presses, and he is slowly finding his way not only into Black Anthologies, but also into New Historical accounts of history which, I believe, is crucial because his presence therein supports a historical record with where “Artistic expression” can be seen “as a means of social engagement and education where young children should not worry of the politics of the world when decided to how best to express themselves. This record shows us that previous conceptions of art being determined by race or class should no longer be functional.

First, I share a personal story of my own, in December, 2009, I travelled to Haiti for my doctoral research and while there I met a family of musicians a bassist, cellist, and two violinists. I was invited by an Haitian Artist whom I had met in Guadeloupe, French West Indies. I had been eager to share with them my interests in the works of the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. I brought his scores with me. The youngest daughter was an excellent violinist and had played a rather proficient version of a Gigue from a Bach Sonata. As I sat down to show the Saint-George scores, and I began to compare them to Mozart. The violinist, then, proceeded to recite to me year by year the life of young Wolfgang from his first compositions on. I was so shocked not because she was so proficient in the life of this great composer, but also because her biographical knowledge was far more detailed than my knowledge of both composers -- Mozart and Saint-Georges. She knew the dates of this very first operas, concertos, symphonies, and even played an aria on her violin. I, then realized, that the gesture was not to downgrade or despise Mozart because of his fame, but rather to help complete a story of universal music history where through innovative scholarship we can unearth the archives of academic discourse to show the profound impact of African peoples.

As fate or destiny would have, I departed Haiti on four hours before the devastating earthquake January 12th, 2010. After learning that my hosts were in good health, but that even my house had not withstood the event, I learned that the bassist was practicing Saint-George at the moment of the shock. His family was fine. As soon I arrived to school, I was asked to co-teach a Haitian Creole class to medical technicians, graduate students, volunteers, missionaries, and whoever else wanted to learn to speak Haitian Creole for professional or for personal reasons. Since I had been preparing a concert after my return, I dedicated one song to those who lost their lives in the event. The piece is entitled *Mas a Sent Jôj*. It is a popular carnival melody from

Guadeloupe, French West Indies. It speaks of a voyage of Saint Eloi, who protects children during the passage of the Carnival parade. Carnival in the Caribbean represents a change of social space where people can gather together and own themselves. The influences are Guadeloupean *gwoka*, American Folk and Blues, Saint-Georges.

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