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Hey there! Thanks for joining me for episode 31 of Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music loving families. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so happy that you're here with me.

When we think about African American music, we tend to think about spirituals, jazz and gospel genres. To be sure, these are genres that have been created and shaped by Black composers and musicians. However, something we often overlook is Black classical music and Black classical composers. In this episode, we are going to learn about the first noted classical composer of African descent -- Chevalier de Saint-George, who is also called Joseph Boulogne. You'll hear me refer to him interchangeably as either Saint-George or Boulogne throughout this episode.

Saint-George was the son of a wealthy French plantation owner and an enslaved African Guadeloupean woman, who was born at some point between 1739 and 1749 on an island of Guadeloupe. When the court convicted St. George's father of killing a man in a duel, his father fled Guadeloupe and took with him his wife, daughter, slave mistress -- who was Saint-George's mother -- and Saint-George himself, whom we think was around 10 years old at the time.

Because Joseph Boulogne was biracial, he was unable to claim nobility status. However, he was able to enjoy some of the benefits of having a wealthy father. He had access to excellent tutors, elite schools and received private lessons in music and fencing. He actually attended a boarding school run by a famous master swordsman, and Saint-George became a champion fencer himself. In fact, there is a painting depicting one of his matches that is on display at Buckingham palace. Because of his extraordinary talent as a fencer, Louis XV named him Chevalier de Saint-George after his father's noble title, even though French laws had originally

prohibited him from officially inheriting the title because of his African ancestry.

Not as much is known about Saint-George's musical training. He is thought to have studied the violin and harpsichord with excellent teachers, and was recruited by a famous symphony composer and conductor to join its orchestra as a violinist. His first public successes as a composer came with two violin concertos, which premiered in 1882 at a concert where he was also the featured soloist. It was shortly after this that he was named concertmaster of the Concert des Amateurs orchestra, which was regarded as the best orchestra in France and even all of Europe.

In 1775, he was encouraged to apply for the directorship of the Academie Royal de Musique, which was France's most prominent musical position. However, two lead sopranos petitioned the Queen to prevent his being considered further for the position, saying their reputations would be ruined if they had to take orders from a biracial person.

Nevertheless, Saint-George was a major star in Paris. He wrote concertos for violins and the orchestra, several symphonies and operas and music for the string quartet. The string quartet was a new musical form at the time, and was music that was played by a small quartet -- two violin players, a viola player and a cellist. His music isn't flashy or showy. He composes music in the highest reaches of the violin's range with a smooth, velvet tone. Saint-George's music was widely heard and known during his life. Mozart himself based a passage in a ballet score on one of Saint-George's melodies. As he gained celebrity in France, Saint-George had various nicknames. One was "Le Mozart Noir" or the Black Mozart, which would be the name used on concert posters where the music of both Saint-George and Mozart's was being played. You'll still sometimes hear Saint-George called "Black Mozart", but let's remember that his talents and achievements allow him to

stand on his own as a unique composer of Western classical music.

Lack of funding forced the Concert des Amateurs to end in 1781, and Bologne founded a new group called Concert de la Loge Olympique, which came to be known as the best orchestra in all of Europe. Boulogne conducted the first performances in 1787 of the six “Paris Symphonies” of Franz Joseph Haydn, which was a hugely important commission as Haydn was considered the greatest composer in Europe during the time.

Saint-George became involved with anti-slavery work and founded a French group called the Society of the Friends of Black People. His musical activities decreased as he grew more involved with the French Revolution and became a captain in the National Guard. Late in his life, he directed a new orchestra called the Circle of Harmony, where he still attracted large crowds.

He died in 1799 after contracting an infection. Restrictions on Black people began to appear across France’s empire following his death. Slavery, which was abolished in 1793, was reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte. Fighting in the Caribbean between enslaved people and French troops worsened. Saint-George’s music was removed from orchestra repertoires, not to be rediscovered until 200 years later.

I hope you’ve enjoyed learning a little bit about Bologne’s fascinating life and music today. Head over to my show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/31 where I’ve linked a curated list of his works on YouTube, which you can work your way through until our next episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs in 2 weeks. Again you’ll find that at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/31.

Thanks so much for joining me today, and I’ll see you soon for more musical discoveries on the Busy Kids Love Music podcast. Bye for now!