

A portrait of Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a French violinist and composer. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a blue coat and a white cravat. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the viewer. The background is a soft, out-of-focus brown and gold.

BOULOGNE: Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 5, No. 2

Notes on the Program

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, one of music history's most fascinating figures, was born on Christmas Day 1745 on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, where his father, a French civil servant, was stationed as comptroller-general; his mother was a Black islander. The family moved to Paris when the boy was ten. Joseph was enrolled in the academy of Nicolas Texier de La Boëssière, one of France's most renowned fencing masters, and there received a good general education as well as rigorous training in swimming, boxing, horse riding and other physical and social skills; he became one of the finest fencers in Europe. Boulogne's musical education was less well documented, though he apparently had shown talent as a violinist even before leaving Guadeloupe and seems to have been a student of the celebrated composer François Gossec for several years. He joined Gossec's orchestra at the *Concert des Amateurs* in 1769, made his debut there as a soloist three years later (in two of his own violin concertos), and became concertmaster and conductor of the group shortly thereafter.

In 1777, Boulogne entered the employ of the Duke of Orléans, and four years later took on the additional position of director and concertmaster of the *Concert de la Loge Olympique*, for which Claude-François-Marie Rigolet, Comte d'Ogny commissioned Haydn's "Paris" symphonies. Boulogne acted as intermediary in finalizing the arrangements with Haydn, and he presumably directed the premieres of the works. Following the death of the Duke of Orléans in 1785, Boulogne spent some time in London, where he gave exhibition fencing matches before the Prince of Wales and other aristocrats and posed for a portrait by the Boston-born painter Mather Brown that shows him to have cut an extremely handsome figure. Boulogne returned to Paris two years later and resumed his work with the *Loge Olympique*. That orchestra was disbanded following the upheavals of 1789, however, and he again went to England. He was back in France the next year to demonstrate his revolutionary sympathies and tour as violinist through the northern provinces, and in 1791 he settled in Lille, where he became a captain of the National Guard. The following year he was made a colonel in the *Légion des Américains et du Midi*, which comprised "citizens of color"

(one of whose mulatto officers was the father of the novelist Alexandre Dumas père), but he was accused of misappropriation of regimental funds and imprisoned at Houdainville for more than a year. He was eventually cleared of the charge and released, and made his way back to Paris, where he lived in considerable poverty. He briefly became director of a new musical organization, *Le Cercle de l'Harmonie*, but died of a stomach ulcer in 1799.

Boulogne's music, agreeable and polished without being profound, is in an early Classical idiom that shows the influence of the Mannheim composers and his French contemporaries. His seven operas met with little success, so his fame as a composer rested primarily on his instrumental works: two symphonies, more than a dozen solo violin concertos (constructed to show his own virtuoso technique on the instrument), several examples of the *sinfonia concertante* form popular in Paris in the 1770s, and several quartets, sonatas and chamber pieces.

Boulogne's dozen concertos for violin were all written during the 1770s for his own performances with the *Concert des Amateurs*, with whom he made his solo debut in 1772; most were published in Paris before 1779. They are exactly contemporary with the violin concertos Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was then writing for himself in Salzburg but exceed them in their technical demands, whose extreme high registers and flamboyant virtuosity give a foretaste of the great 19th-century virtuosos. (Nicoló Paganini was born in Genoa in 1782, just a few years after Boulogne introduced this Concerto in Paris.) The opening movement of the A major Concerto, Op. 5, No. 2, published around 1775, is in a melodically rich sonata form, with at least four distinct themes presented in the orchestral introduction before they are taken over with some elaboration by the soloist. Several of these ideas figure in altered form but without significant motivic development in the central episode and are returned in the recapitulation with some breathtaking figural additions. Boulogne's lyrical gifts are evident in the *Largo*, whose gently rocking rhythms and pervasive peacefulness make it almost an instrumental lullaby. The finale is a *Rondeau* based on the infectious theme whose returns are separated by moderately contrasting episodes.



MENDELSSOHN: Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90 “Italian”

Notes on the Program

By Phillip Huscher

We owe this music to Goethe. At his recommendation, Mendelssohn went to Italy, and there, struck by the landscape and a brilliance of sunlight, and the disposition of a people previously unknown to him, began his A major symphony—a product of the northern mind intoxicated by the Mediterranean spirit. It is the same journey, though with a different itinerary, that gave us Goethe’s own *Faust*, Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy*, and E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*. “The true Italy,” says Forster’s Miss Bartlett, discarding Baedeker, “is only to be found by patient observation.” Mendelssohn’s grand tour, lasting two years and undertaken with no guide other than Goethe’s comments, allowed him, like Forster’s characters, to see the whole of life in a new perspective. When Mendelssohn wrote home to his sister Fanny, he noted, with obvious surprise, that his new A major symphony was the “most cheerful piece I have yet composed.”

But first, back to Goethe. In 1821, when they met, Goethe and Mendelssohn made an unlikely pair—the great poet was 72 and famous, the composer a precocious 12-year-old. Nonetheless, they found mutual interests and formed a lasting friendship. Mendelssohn continued to visit Goethe in Weimar throughout the 1820s, as his fame grew nearly equal to his friend’s, the result of his astonishing early success—he wrote the lovely Octet at 16 and his masterpiece, the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, at 17. Still, like all the composers of his generation, Mendelssohn failed to win the poet’s appreciation. (In the end, and despite several qualified applicants including Berlioz, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn himself, Goethe admitted that Mozart was the only one who could have set *Faust* to music.) More than once, Mendelssohn tried to convert Goethe to Beethoven’s cause, without success. Music, it appeared, was not their common ground.

Mendelssohn stopped off to visit his colleague in May 1830, just before he began his Italian journey. He played the piano for Goethe every day, sometimes choosing his own music, or works by Bach and Weber; once he tried, with utter failure, to interest the 80-year-old master in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. They parted, not knowing it was the last time they would see each other. After stopping briefly in Munich, Salzburg, Linz, and Vienna, Mendelssohn landed in Venice on October 9. For months he wandered the Italian countryside, lingering in Florence and Rome. There, he met Berlioz for the first time, finding more to like in the man than in his music. Berlioz, knowing this, still wrote glowingly of Mendelssohn, “He has an enormous talent, extraordinary, prodigious, superb. And I can’t be suspected of comradely partiality in speaking like this, since he has frankly told me that he understood nothing of my music.”

In the meantime, music was beginning to take shape. On December 20, Mendelssohn wrote home, “After the new year I intend to resume instrumental music and to write several things for the piano, and probably a symphony of some kind, for the two have been haunting my brain.” By February, he reported to Fanny that “the Italian symphony makes rapid progress.” (The other, a Scottish symphony, went less well, perhaps because it was so far from home.) Mendelssohn stayed in Rome through Easter in order to hear the music at Saint Peter’s, and then left for Naples, where he expected to write the only remaining movement, the Adagio. “If I continue in my present mood,” he wrote shortly after arriving, “I shall finish my Italian symphony . . . in Italy.”

When Mendelssohn returned home, however, the A major symphony wasn’t done. Even after the score was completed, in chilly Berlin on March 13, 1833, Mendelssohn wasn’t satisfied. In May, he conducted the Italian Symphony in London, but afterward he put it back on the shelf, like a disappointing souvenir of his great journey. From time to time, he would take it down and tinker with it, but he never thought highly enough of the music to send it to his publisher. After Mendelssohn’s premature death in 1847, several his scores, including the Italian Symphony, were finally published, widely performed, and welcomed into the repertoire.

It’s hard to imagine what Mendelssohn found to fault in this nearly perfect symphony. Perhaps, as the English critic Donald Tovey suggested, “an instinct deeper than his conscious self-criticism may have prevented him from altering it.” The opening is one of but a handful in all music that is instantly recognizable simply by its sonority—rapid-fire, repeated wind chords set in motion by one giant pizzicato plucking of the strings—even before Mendelssohn’s famous, bustling melody gets going. The melody itself is one of the composer’s most natural and unforced, racing unstopped over the hills and valleys of the movement, slowing only to make way for a lovely clarinet solo.

Mendelssohn waited until he got to Naples to write the Adagio, a movement of grace and nobility. The composer and pianist Ignaz Moscheles said that Mendelssohn took his theme from Czech pilgrims; Tovey heard a religious procession passing through Naples. Mendelssohn himself didn’t comment, no doubt assuming that music of such obvious beauty didn’t require a setting. The third movement—more minuet than scherzo—is colored with the composer’s characteristic light touch, though the sober trio proves that one can still say serious things lightly. Mendelssohn called his finale a saltarello (the fast and jumpy Italian folk dance); some claim it’s more like the tarantella, once prescribed as a cure for the bite of the tarantula. Unlike either and going against the grain of virtually all symphonic finales known to Mendelssohn, this dance begins in the minor mode and stays there to the last chord. Despite its bitter cast, it makes a brilliant and decisive ending.