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Six quatuors

à deux violons,  
alto et violoncelle



LE CHEVALIER DE

**SAINT-GEORGES** v. 1739-1799

QUATUOR À CORDES  
JEAN-NOËL MOLARD

# Les quatuors à cordes du chevalier de Saint-Georges

Un aperçu, même très succinct, de l'évolution de la musique de chambre en France durant le dernier tiers du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, ne saurait se priver d'accorder une place de choix à Joseph Boulogne, chevalier de Saint-Georges<sup>(1)</sup>. Né vers 1739 à la Guadeloupe, le «brillant mulâtre» eut bien des titres à la reconnaissance de son temps qu'il sut, par la pratique de talents aussi divers qu'exceptionnels, divertir et charmer. Directeur du Concert des Amateurs puis de la Loge Olympique, violoniste, chef d'orchestre, compositeur, le sémillant gendarme et écuyer de la Garde du roi fut également un bretteur intrépide, un joueur impénitent, un galant homme, un agent politique habile et, au lendemain de 1789, un révolutionnaire convaincu et actif, levant dans le nord de la France une légion pour voler au secours de la jeune République. Accusé à tort d'avoir dilapidé les fonds affectés à son corps de troupe, Saint-Georges fut destitué, puis emprisonné. À peine était-il réhabilité qu'il s'embarquait pour aller prêter main forte aux insurgés de Saint-Domingue. De retour à Paris, Saint-Georges prenait

en 1797 la direction des concerts du Cercle de l'Harmonie. Il mourut le 9 juin 1799, presque dans l'indigence, ayant consacré tout son bien à soulager ceux qu'il savait dans la misère.

C'est ainsi, trop vite résumée, une existence extraordinairement remplie dans laquelle la musique a tenu la première place. Saint-Georges s'impose comme l'un des plus grands violonistes après Jean-Marie Leclair et en même temps que Pierre Gaviniès. Le chevalier était pourvu d'une technique hardie qu'il utilisait moins pour briller que pour rendre plus vibrant et plus timbré un jeu que ses contemporains décrivent comme étant «sensible et expressif». La facilité du compositeur était secondée par la discipline du métier à laquelle il s'était parfaitement soumis, contrairement à ce que laissent entendre les légendes qui ont fleuri autour de ce personnage certes légendaire. La postérité a surtout retenu le compositeur, et le disque<sup>(2)</sup> qu'Arion a consacré à quatre des douze très beaux concertos pour violon qu'il a écrits, montre que cette attention est pleinement justifiée.

Saint-Georges a fait subir à la forme du concerto de soliste une amplification en rapport avec ses possibilités de virtuose qui cèdent toujours à l'abondance et au charme d'une veine mélodique particulièrement sensible, discrète, piquante et souvent imprégnée de mélancolie créole. Ces qualités se rencontrent également dans sa musique de chambre, sonates et quatuors à cordes. Le rôle que Saint-Georges tient dans l'essor du quatuor en France n'est pas moins éminent puisque aussi bien c'est avec ses *Six quatuors à cordes opus I*, enregistrés en première mondiale par Arion, qu'il s'est révélé à ses contemporains en tant que compositeur. Nous sommes en 1773. Saint-Georges figure donc incontestablement aux côtés de François Joseph Gossec, son maître de composition, et de Pierre Vachon (1731-1803) comme un des promoteurs du genre en France. Une rapide esquisse du contexte esthétique et historique aidera à situer cet *opus I* dans la production de l'époque, sans alourdir, pensons-nous, le réel plaisir musical qu'il procure.

L'écriture en quatuor forme la base équilibrée de l'écriture harmonique et contrapunctique occidentale. Au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le groupe des cordes, qui comprend deux parties de violon, une partie d'alto et une partie de violoncelle (la contrebasse doublant celle-ci), forme le noyau de l'orchestre symphonique naissant tel qu'on peut l'entendre à Mannheim ou à Paris, chez le fermier général mécène Alexandre Joseph Le Riche de La Pouplinière. Le quatuor ne conservera que durant peu de temps la trace de ses diverses origines symphoniques ou divertissantes tant il s'avère que cette forme instrumentale correspond véritablement aux aspirations

expressives de l'époque. Entre 1765 et 1800, à Paris, vont être publiés plus de cent cinquante recueils de trois à six quatuors à cordes chacun, non seulement d'auteurs français mais également de musiciens étrangers, émigrés ou non. Ainsi, en 1765, paraît l'*opus III* de Joseph Haydn. Les nombreux *quatuors concertants* qui vont naître, ceux de Giuseppe Cambini (1746 ?-1811 ?) et de Saint-Georges lui-même (1777) sont porteurs d'un qualificatif indiquant que la partie de premier violon est particulièrement mise en valeur dans l'esprit du concerto de soliste.

Les quatre années qui vont de 1769 à 1773 sont importantes pour la musique en général et pour Saint-Georges en particulier. En effet, en 1769, à Paris, sont édités les quatuors de musiciens féconds comme Jan Křitel Wanhall ou Vanhall (1739-1813), Florian Leopold Gassmann (1729-1774), et l'*opus IV* de Boccherini. Gossec fonde le Concert des Amateurs. L'année suivante est celle où, selon Lionel de La Laurencie, Saint-Georges décide de cultiver sérieusement la musique. Son maître Gossec publie ses *Quatuors op. XIV* et Carl Stamitz son *opus I* (Stamitz essaiera la formule d'un violon, deux altos et violoncelle). Mozart, âgé de quatorze ans, écrit son premier quatuor à cordes sur le modèle de ceux de Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1700-1775), précurseur italien du genre. En 1772, Gossec livre à l'éditeur son *opus XV* dont Saint-Georges s'inspirera pour composer son *opus I*, mais en coulant dans la forme binaire Allegro-Rondeau, une pensée plus souple et plus variée que celle de son maître, peut-être aussi sous l'influence des tout récents *Quatuors opus VIII* de Jean-Christien Bach.

<sup>(1)</sup> Le chevalier, rappelons-le, signalait *Saint-George* et *George* tout court sous la Révolution.

<sup>(2)</sup> ARN 68093

## JEAN-NOËL MOLARD

Jean-Noël Molard a fait ses études au Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris où il obtint un premier prix de violon et de musique de chambre. Sa passion pour la musique de chambre l'amène à fonder le Quatuor à Cordes Jean-Noël Molard, dont il fut le premier violon pendant dix ans, et continue de la transmettre au sein du Trio Florilège (violon-piano-violoncelle) depuis 1990. Il mène en parallèle une carrière de pédagogue au Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris (CNR) et au Conservatoire National de Musique de Meudon.

## JEAN-PIERRE LACOUR

Après des études au Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, couronnées par un premier prix de violon en 1972, Jean-Pierre Lacour se perfectionne à l'Académie Chigiana de Sienne. Il se consacre alors à la musique de chambre et fait partie successivement de l'Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen et du Quatuor à cordes Jean-Noël Molard. Il entre en 1980 à l'Orchestre de Paris, alors sous la direction de Daniel Barenboïm. Son parcours musical s'étoffe avec sa participation à la création de l'ensemble Mosaïques, sous la direction de Christophe Coin, avec lequel il collabore toujours au sein de l'Ensemble Baroque de Limoges. Philippe Herreweghe l'appelle lorsqu'il fonde l'Orchestre des Champs-Élysées. Il est membre du Trio Euterpe depuis 1982.

## JACQUES WATELLE

Jacques Watelle a poursuivi ses études musicales au Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris dans la classe d'alto de Léon Pascal. Sa carrière l'a amené à jouer aux Concerts Colonne, ainsi qu'à l'Orchestre Pasdeloup. Soliste à l'Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen, alto solo au Théâtre des Arts de Rouen, il a été membre du Quatuor à Cordes Jean-Noël Molard pendant dix ans. Puis il intégra l'Orchestre Régional Bayonne-Côte Basque comme alto solo. Il a donné de nombreux concerts en soliste en France et en Espagne avec cet orchestre. Son activité pédagogique s'est exercée au C.N.R. de Rouen, puis au C.N.R. de Bayonne - Côte Basque.

## ROBERT DUVAL

Après avoir obtenu trois premiers prix au Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris (violoncelle, musique de chambre, formation professionnelle de musique de chambre dans la classe de Joseph Calvet), il devient soliste de l'Orchestre de l'ORTF. Il a conduit simultanément une double carrière d'interprète et de pédagogue. La première le mène à l'Orchestre Lamoureux, à l'Orchestre de l'ORTF de Lille, à l'Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen dès sa création.

# The string quartets of Monsieur le chevalier de Saint-Georges

It would be impossible to make even a brief survey of the development of chamber music in France during the last thirty years of the 18th century without including the name of Joseph Boulogne, chevalier de Saint-Georges<sup>(1)</sup>. Born about 1739 in Guadalupe, the 'brilliant mulatto' earned many titles of recognition during his lifetime, and his many-sided talents that were as varied as they were exceptional enabled him to entertain and charm the society of his times. Director of the *Concert des Amateurs* and subsequently the *Loge Olympique*, violinist, conductor, composer, the lively man-at-arms and horseman of the King's guard was also an intrepid duellist, a persistent gambler, a gallant man, a skilful political agent and after, 1789, a convinced and active revolutionary, raising a legion in Northern France in order to help the young republic. Wrongly accused of having squandered the funds at the disposal of his troops, Saint-Georges was relieved of his post and subsequently imprisoned. He had scarcely regained his freedom before embarking for Saint Domingo in order to lend a hand to the uprising. On his return to Paris (1797), Saint-Georges was in charge of the *Cercle d'Harmonie*

concerts. He died on 9 June 1799, almost penniless, having given so much away to those in desperate need.

Thus we have all too quickly resumed the events of an extremely occupied existence in which music played the most important part. After Jean-Marie Leclair, Saint-Georges must be remembered as one of the greatest violinists alongside his contemporary Pierre Gaviniès. The chevalier had acquired a formidable technique which he used not so much to demonstrate his ability as to render his playing more moving and sonorous. His playing was described by his contemporaries as being 'sensitive and expressive'. As well as being extremely gifted, the composer was also perfectly aware of the self-discipline necessary in his profession, although a certain amount of legend which has flourished around his personality would lead us to believe the opposite. Posterity has certainly remembered Saint-Georges, and the recording<sup>(2)</sup> which Arion has devoted to four of the twelve extremely fine violin concertos, show that our attention to him is fully justified.

<sup>(1)</sup> The Chevalier, it must be remembered, signed his name *Saint-George* and simply *George* during the Revolution.

<sup>(2)</sup> ARN 68093

Saint-Georges developed the concerto form according to his own technical possibilities, but they always give way to the abundance and charm of his particularly sensitive, eloquent and pungent melodic gifts, often mingled with a touch of Creole melancholy. These qualities are also to be found to the same extent in his chamber music, sonatas and string quartets. The part played by Saint-Georges in the development of the quartet in France is no less eminent since it was with these *Six string quartets* here recorded for the first time by Arion, that Saint-Georges revealed himself to his contemporaries as a composer. That was in 1773. Saint-Georges can undoubtedly be placed alongside François Joseph Gossec, his teacher of composition, and Pierre Vachon (1731-1803) as one of the first exponents of this form. A rapid sketch of the stylistic and historical context will help to situate these *Opus 1 Quartets* in the music of the period, without, we hope, spoiling the actual musical pleasure which they provide.

Four-part writing constitutes the basis of Western harmony and counterpoint. In the 18th century, the string quartet, consisting of two violins, one viola and one cello (with the double-bass at the octave), was in the beginning the basis of the symphony orchestra such as could be heard in Mannheim, or in Paris at the home of the general farmer Alexandre Joseph Le Riche de la Pouplinière. The string quartet form was only to conserve its divertimento and symphonic origins for a short time, so much did it truly correspond to the expressive aspirations of the period. Between 1765 and 1800 in Paris, more than 150 sets of string quartets were published, ranging from three to six quartets in each

set. They came not only from French composers, but also foreigners, whether emigrants or not. Thus, in 1765 Joseph Haydn's *Opus 3* was published. The *quatuors concertants* that appeared by Giuseppe Cambini (1746?-1811?), and by Saint-Georges himself (1777), bearing the qualification that the first violin part was particularly developed in the manner of the solo concerto.

The four years from 1769-1773 are important for the history of music in general and for Saint-Georges in particular. In fact in 1769 the quartets by such fertile composers as Jan Křitel Wanhall ou Vanhall (1739-1813), Florian Leopold Gassmann (1729-1774), and Boccherini's *Opus 4* were published in Paris. Gossec founded the *Concert des Amateurs*. According to Lionel de La Laurencie, it was in the following year that Saint-Georges decided to take up music seriously. Gossec, his teacher, published his *Quartets Opus 14* and Stamitz his *Opus 1* (Stamitz was to try the formula of 1 violin, 2 violas and cello). Mozart, aged 14, wrote his first string quartet using those by Sammartini (1700-1775), the Italian forerunner of the form, as a model. In 1772, Gossec sent his *Opus 15* to be published, and it was there that Saint-Georges found inspiration for his *Opus 1*, but he poured a more supple and varied mixture into the mould of the binary Allegro-Rondeau form than his teacher; this was perhaps also due to the influence of J. C. Bach's *Opus 8 Quartets* which had just appeared. At the end of 1772, Mozart set out on his second journey to Italy. The profits of the journey are to be found in the *Six 'Milanese' quartets, K. 155-160*, completed at the beginning of 1773.

Saint-Georges replied in a similar fashion by composing the *Opus 1 Quartets*, and by playing the first two violin concertos himself during the winter of 1772-1773 at the *Concert des Amateurs* with great success. He made himself ready for taking over the control of this concert society after Gossec had been called away to direct the *Concert Spirituel* together with Garnier and Le Duc. The appearance of the *Quatuors à cordes Opus 1* by Saint-Georges, in between the *Opus 10* and *11* of Boccherini and Haydn's *Opus 20*, can only have enhanced his growing reputation.

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## THE WORKS

The chevalier de Saint-Georges wrote three sets of six quartets each: the *Opus 1* was published by Sieber in Paris and dedicated to the prince of Robecq (Montmorency), an amateur musician; the *Quatuors concertants* without an opus number (1777), and the *Opus 14* set of 1785. Copies of the last two sets are extremely rare. The Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal both possess an engraving of the original edition of the *Opus 1*. There is also an anonymous manuscript of these quartets in the Bibliothèque nationale which has been compared to the original edition used for this recording. Saint-Georges's indications in the engraved edition are very precise: dynamic markings P and F, accents, ornaments, and carefully marked phrasing.



It has already been stated that these six quartets were all conceived in the binary Allegro-Rondeau form. The *rondeau à la française* can be a *tempo di minuetto*, as is the case with the first quartet. All the rondeaux of Saint-Georges's quartets contain a section in the minor mode. The Allegros, divided into two sections with repeats, here respected, are constructed in the classical manner, with two themes in different keys, and a cadence in the dominant at the double bar; there is a Development section and a Recapitulation. The music is clearly and airily written. Just as in his concertos, Saint-Georges likes to give fine, low, singing phrases to the violin. It can be noticed in

these quartets that the melodic phrase is not only the privilege of the first violin. It passes freely to the second violin, just as Rousseau desired, while the viola and cello weave a delicate accompaniment, sometimes relieved by pizzicati (e.g. the *Rondeau* of *Quartet No. 5*).

**Quartet No. 6.** D Major. *Allegro assai*. Development in A minor then major. The 6/8 *Rondeau* is a *chasse*, a sport much in fashion in those times as regards instrumental compositions. This movement is very attractive thematically, and well stylized with its successive entries and two varied *couplets*, the first in D minor.

**Quartet No. 4.** C minor. Highly representative of Saint-Georges's sensibility, being both energetic and sad. The tone is clearly pre-romantic here. *Allegro moderato*, with a second theme in E flat, underlined with discreet chromaticism. *Rondeau* in 2/4 time with strong rhythm and a repetitive structure.

**Quartet No. 3.** G minor. *Allegro*. ♯. The first descending theme possesses a slightly rough energy, thus associating it with some of the ideas from Haydn's *Opus 20*. The dotted rhythm of the second theme in B flat accentuates the strange sound of this movement. The *Rondeau*, full of warmth and good nature, whirls around in the manner of Haydn. La Laurencie notes the 'almost faubourg-like' flavour of the theme. One of the two episodes is in G major.

**Quartet No. 2.** E flat major. The tender mood of the *Allegro* overflows with a smiling gravity, as in Mozart, and these intentions are accentuated in the

Development section. The thematic material of the *Rondeau* in triple time bears a relationship to the preceding movement.

**Quartet No. 1.** C Major. *Allegro assai*. Saint-Georges begins his set of quartets with a movement full of brightness and poetic liveliness. The *Rondeau*, *tempo di minuetto gratoso*, is a delicious piece. La Laurencie, who gives an example, describes it as 'charming and tender... delicately wrapped in caressing and soothing sounds from the accompanying instruments'<sup>59</sup>.

**Quartet No. 5.** G minor. C. The most introspective of the six *Opus 1 quartets*. The character of the *Allegro* announces the promise of a longer Development section, more adventurous and tormented in its modulations. The second theme is exposed in the relative major. The *Rondeau* (2/4 time) is both sparkling and sad, its refrain finely woven, and here again the movement is more developed, with a long variation in the major.

Concision and clarity are the main features of these six little masterpieces.

JOËL-MARIE FAUQUET  
translated by CHARLES WHITFIELD

<sup>59</sup> Lionel de La Laurencie, *L'École française de violon de Lully à Viotly*, tome II, p. 498.



## JEAN-NOËL MOLARD

Jean-Noël Molard studied at the Paris Conservatoire (C.N.S.M.) graduating with a first prize for violin and chamber music. His passion for the latter led him to found the Quatuor à Cordes Jean-Noël Molard, with which he was first violin for ten years. He continues to perform chamber music with the Trio Florilège (violin, piano, cello), which he joined in 1990. He also teaches at the Paris Conservatoire (C.N.R.) and at the Conservatoire National de Musique in Meudon.

## JEAN-PIERRE LACOUR

After studying at the Paris Conservatoire (C.N.S.M.), graduating with a first prize for violin in 1972, Jean-Pierre Lacour went on to study at the Accademia Chigiana in Siena. He then devoted himself to chamber music, belonging in turn to the Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen and the Quatuor à cordes Jean-Noël Molard. In 1980 he joined the Orchestre de Paris, then conducted by Daniel Barenboim. He was an early member of the Mosaïques Ensemble, conducted by Christophe Coin, with whom he continues to work as a member of the Ensemble Baroque de Limoges. Philippe Herreweghe invited him to join the newly-formed Orchestre des Champs-Élysées. He has been a member of the Trio Euterpe since 1982.

## JACQUES WATELLE

Jacques Wattle studied the viola in Léon Pascal's class at the Paris Conservatoire (C.N.S.M.). He went on to play with the Concerts Colonne and the Orchestre Pasdeloup, before joining two ensembles in Rouen — the Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen and the Théâtre des Arts— as solo viola-player and spending ten years as a member of the Quatuor à cordes Jean-Noël Molard. He then joined the Orchestre Régional Bayonne-Côte Basque as solo violist. With this orchestra he has given many concerts in France and Spain. His activities as a teacher have taken him to the Regional Conservatoires (C.N.R.) of Rouen, then of Bayonne - Côte Basque.

## ROBERT DUVAL

After obtaining three first prizes at the Paris Conservatoire (C.N.S.M.) in Joseph Calvet's class (cello, chamber music and vocational training in chamber music), Robert Duval joined the Orchestre de l'ORTF as soloist. Since then he has led a double career as an instrumentalist and teacher. As a performer, he has been a member of the Orchestre Lamoureux, the Orchestre de l'ORTF in Lille, and the Orchestre de Chambre de Rouen since its foundation.