

**Theater + Music:  
The Cleveland Orchestra  
explores “The Chevalier”**

by Jarrett Hoffman



Concluding this season’s Family Concert Series, The Cleveland Orchestra will use both theater and music to shine a spotlight on the singular figure of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges — composer, violinist, conductor, fencer, colonel, and abolitionist.

On Saturday, May 7 at 11:00 am at Mandel Hall, conductor Vinay Parameswaran and the Orchestra will be joined by guest violinist

Brendon Elliott and four actors in a play-turned-concert-production titled “The Chevalier.” Written and directed by Bill Barclay, the show examines Bologne’s friendships with Mozart, Marie Antoinette, and Alexander Dumas, as well as his little-known contributions to the anti-slavery movement in France. Tickets are available [here](#).

“Joseph Bologne is a tremendously important figure,” Parameswaran said during a recent telephone conversation, while also noting that the composer’s music is not particularly well known. “When people say that he was brilliant, that certainly comes through in these pieces that we’re playing.”



The all-Bologne program includes music from two symphonies (Nos. 1 and 2), a violin sonata (No. 2), three violin concertos (Nos. 1, 2, and 9), a ballet (*L'amant anonyme*), a string quartet (No. 4), and a symphony concertante (G Major).

The music may be unfamiliar to The Cleveland Orchestra, but Parameswaran noted that they know the style well. “This orchestra plays a lot of Mozart and Haydn, better than any other orchestra,” he said. “It’s interesting because we certainly have context from those composers, but it’s still a unique language and new music for us.”

New discoveries have been a bit of a pattern with Family and Education Concerts this season, including [“Music’s Many Voices”](#) from this past March. “A lot of those pieces were being played by this orchestra for the first time, and that’s certainly the case with this Chevalier program, so we’re really excited to have something both fresh and brilliant.”

Commissioned by the Boston Symphony in 2018 and a finalist for the Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, “The Chevalier” is currently touring the U.S. and U.K. to raise money for the National Alliance for Audition Support. Spearheaded by the Sphinx Organization, that initiative is aimed at increasing racial diversity in American orchestras.

The touring production generally involves a chamber ensemble of seven players, but The Cleveland Orchestra will retain a healthy complement of strings in addition to two oboes and two horns. “It’s a big stage and a big hall,” Parameswaran noted, “and the point of

these types of concerts is to introduce students to the orchestra. We won't have the full group, but it is what you would find in an early Haydn or early Mozart symphony."



Not only is the conductor excited to perform this music in the first place, but to do so alongside a former classmate from the Curtis Institute of Music: violinist Brendon Elliott (*left*). "It's been a very long time, so it'll be great to reconnect with him. It's going to be a lot of fun."

The writer and director of the production, Bill Barclay, is also the artistic director of Concert Theatre Works, an organization devoted to interdisciplinary projects in which music and theater are equal partners. That combination is nothing new to Parameswaran. You only have to look back a couple of months to a Family Concert featuring Magic Circle Mime, a company that brings together the arts of mime and orchestral music.

"It's always fun and always something new," the conductor said of working in these musical, theatrical settings — not that the projects are necessarily similar. Where Magic Circle gets the whole room laughing, musicians and conductor included, this program has a historical and moral weight to it.

"Obviously this is different," Parameswaran said. "I'm really excited to bring this play here because it will be a great way for people to get more insight into who this person was, the time he lived in, and what he went through. I think it's going to be quite an experience for all of us."

*As with all Family Concerts, children are invited to the hands-on Instrument Discovery Zone an hour before the performance.*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 4, 2022.*

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