

Chevalier

This picture is inspired by the incredible true story of the 18thC. black freedman composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799) who was the illegitimate son of an African slave and a French plantation owner named Bologne in Guadeloupe. The boy studies in a French music academy as a young man, and, from there, he rises to improbable heights in French society as a celebrated violinist-composer and fencer.

Played as an adult by Kelvin Harrison, Jr. Bologne's capabilities are shown immediately when, in a pre-credit sequence, he offers a violin challenge to Mozart in the middle of the latter's concert. In a flurry of dueling violins, with both playing riffs on a passage from one of Mozart's violin concerti, he bests Wolfgang to the roars of the crowd.

Bologne also became accepted at aristocratic soirées and a regular in Paris café society. He inevitably comes to the attention of Queen Marie Antoinette (Lucy Boynton), and she grants him the title of "Chevalier" for his accomplishments. He then yearns to become director of the Paris Opera, the highest musical title in the land, for which he must contend with the newly arrived Austrian master Christoph Gluck (Henry Lloyd-Hughes). To win the post, the two must enter a competition: whoever writes the best opera according to a royal committee will win.

During this time, Bologne has discovered both the beauty and the sublime soprano voice of Maria-Josephine (Samara Weaving) and promises her she will star in his first opera, "Ernestine." The two have eyes for each other but standing in the way is Maria-Josephine's sourpuss husband, the Marquis of Montalembert (Marton Csokas). When the latter leaves Paris for an extended sojourn abroad, the two become fervent lovers.

One of the movie's best moments is a clever montage sequence wherein Joseph and Maria-Josephine's blissful affair blossoms among bedrooms of satin and gold intercut with the continuing progress of the composer's opera and the singer's performance. Their bliss cannot be sustained, however, because the Marquis returns, learns of the lovers' trysts, and assaults Joseph and threatens to mutilate his hands. All Paris hears of the affair, the Queen's committee rejects his opera in favor of Gluck's, and the Queen herself disowns the Chevalier, placing him outside of royal society.

A new wrinkle comes into Bologne's life when his mother Nanon (Ronke Adekoluejo) comes to Paris to live with him after her owner (and his father) has died. She brings with her the customs, and especially, the rhythms of her Caribbean music, which Joseph comes to absorb with delight. Meanwhile,

Parisian political life is heating up with protests and revolutionary talk, and Bologne is brought into its fervor and turmoil through his friendship with the aristocratic Philippe (Alex Fozzalan), an enemy of the crown. Whatever Bologne has achieved as an artist, most of it is destroyed during the Napoleonic era.

The director, Samuel Williams, is a veteran TV producer/director who is perhaps best known for his long-time television series “Lost” on ABC from 2005. How he came to direct this lush, high-toned period piece (filming was done in the Czech Republic) after years of standard series television I cannot guess, but I’m delighted he did! The vivid script, by Stephani Robinson, takes substantial liberties with the real story of the Chevalier but also incorporates a considerable amount of historical material (as well as the music) from Bologne’s biography.

Kelvin Harrison, Jr. (“Cyrano” and “Elvis”) was a sound choice here as the titular Chevalier. He exudes the requisite flair and super-confidence as a rising paragon but also shows convincing pique and buried rage when he suffers racial slurs, taunts, and exclusion, both hidden and open. It is a magnetic performance.

I was surprised that the period music forming much of the lavish score was handled with such taste and decorum (I expected a studio film to be more garish in its selections). While Michael Abel arranged and orchestrated Bologne’s music for the film, Kris Bowers provided the overall score. The surprise, if you stay for the credits, is that so many of the violin and orchestral excerpts are rediscovered from the Chevalier’s own works and sound worthy of comparison with other classical composers of his era. Depending on how well it is received, “Chevalier” might spark a new interest in Bologne’s forgotten creations. *(The film, now in theaters, is rated “PG-13” and runs 107 minutes.)*

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