

Transcript: Winds of Change Podcast

Hannah De Priest: Welcome to this special episode of the SalonEra podcast. SalonEra is a series from Les Délices that brings together musicians from around the world to share music, stories, and scholarship. In this episode, we'll hear excerpts from Les Délices' concert program *Winds of Change* along with insights from Artistic Director Debra Nagy, scholar Jean Bernard Cerin, and featured composer Sydney Guillaume. I'm your host, Hannah De Priest. Thanks for listening!

Les Délices' *Winds of Change* was first recorded as a filmed concert for our digital twenty twenty-one-twenty-twenty-two concert series. This season, a reimagined version of the program opens our in-person series October twenty-first thru twenty-third, with performances in Akron, Cleveland, and Rocky River, Ohio. Inspired by the philosophies that sparked the French and Haitian revolutions, *Winds of Change* features music from the late 18th-century that challenged societal and aesthetic norms in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. At the heart of the program is a newly-commissioned work by living Haitian composer Sydney Guillaume. Sydney's *A Journey to Freedom*, which you'll hear in its entirety later in this podcast, is a meditation on Haiti's turbulent history that's deeply personal and yet universal.

First, we'll hear music by Joseph Boulogne, the Chevalier de St. Georges, who lived from seventeen-forty-five to seventeen-ninety-nine. Born the mixed-race son of a Black enslaved woman known as *Nanon* and a white plantation owner in the then-French colony of Guadeloupe, Boulogne was taken to France by his father to be educated in 1755, when he was ten years old. Educated at elite institutions, Boulogne distinguished himself as a champion fencer and virtuosic violinist. Though France's Code Noir, (the decree passed in 1685 that defined slavery in Colonial France and restricted the activities of free people of color), meant that Boulogne could not inherit his father's title; Louis the Fifteenth personally bestowed his title Chevalier de St. Georges in recognition of his fencing expertise.

Joseph Boulogne occupied an unusual space in late-eighteenth century French society. Though he was a celebrity throughout Europe and beyond, praised for his skills in music performance, composition, shooting, riding, and fencing, racism had a profound impact on his career and personal life. Scholar Jean-Bernard Cerin discussed Boulogne's place in history with us in this excerpt from the Winds of Change pre-concert conversation, recorded in 2021:

Jean Bernard Cerin: "I really admire and when I talk about him in my music history classes it's an exciting time for me to introduce kids to an early example of a black, mixed-race musician/athlete/celebrity within a predominantly white society. This is a phenomenon we are used to even today and his life is full of these wild juxtapositions of great privilege and all of the racial barriers, including jobs that he should've gotten but didn't get; he never married because he was the son of a nobleman, educated as such... I think that Joseph Boulogne is also special in that his life exemplifies the difference between how mixed-race people were treated in the colonies (in the French colonies in particular) compared to the United States. Joseph Boulogne was a contemporary of Sally Hemmings. Sally Hemmings was *owned* by Thomas Jefferson; her children were *owned* by Thomas Jefferson. Joseph Boulogne's father, (whose name was also Joseph Boulogne), had a child with this woman named Nanon, who was born in Senegal and whom Joseph Boulogne owned, but the child was raised as the son of a nobleman. He went to the most elite schools in Paris and while he certainly encountered unspeakable prejudice, he was still

educated and allowed to flourish and lead all these wonderful ensembles. So the disparity between his social trajectory and that of people born in the United States in similar situations is really telling.

HD: Indeed, Joseph Boulogne rose to a place of prestige in the music world, despite the racism he encountered. In addition to composing operas, symphonies, string quartets and other chamber music, Boulogne directed the prestigious Concert des Amateurs, one of the best-regarded orchestras in Europe. And while Boulogne's works are enjoying something of a recent renaissance, it is too often true that our visions of the past have excluded composers and performers of color. In the course of my own years-long music education, I never learned about Boulogne or studied his music. One way to bring additional works by historical Black composers into the repertoire is by creating historically-inspired arrangements that allow more players - and audiences - to experience their music. In this first clip from *Winds of Change*, you'll hear the first movement of Boulogne's sonata for harp and flute rearranged by Debra Nagy as a quartet for flute and strings

MUSIC: Flute Quartet, Mvmt 1 [3:03]

HD: Hi Debra, thanks so much for joining us! We've just heard the first movement of your arrangement of Joseph Boulogne's sonata for flute and harp, which you reimagined for flute and strings. Can you tell us a little bit about the challenges of arranging a work like this?

Debra Nagy: Well I think there were some interesting challenges in arranging a work like this. But one of the things that I really wanted to do was make it less challenging to play. I know that sounds funny but E flat Major, which is the key of the original, is a terrible key for the flute. It's a really acoustically compromised key for the flute and I think that has everything to do with the original scoring, which is to say that the harp is a really soft instrument and since this was really a sonata for the harp *with flute*, the issue was creating a balance between those two instruments. So the result was that it put the flute in a pretty crappy key so that it would be soft and acoustically disadvantaged relative to the harp. So one thing that I wanted to do was put it into a key that was great for the flute so we popped it up a third and put it in G Major. And then the question was: how do you take a harp part, which is for two hands, and turn it into something for three strings and that feels natural to everybody involved.

A harp has no sustain, right? Like a harpsichord, they have to keep their hands moving to keep making a lot of sound and a lot of rhythm. And of course being classical music, there's a lot of Alberti, triadic filling-out of the texture. A lot of that "fitting under the hand," Alberti bass part went into the viola part. What the harp part didn't really have was a true bass line, so actually a lot of that was intuited or inferred based on the harmony and I made a simple cello part as it would've been in that period. And then a lot of what would've been the right hand or the melody for the harp became the violin part. That said, I also wanted to create interest and fun for these players, I wanted to take advantage of the fact that strings *do* sustain by their very nature in a way that a harp cannot. So there was one passage in the first movement where in the harp part it's just a pile of four different arpeggios up and down and what is that? That's just a cloud of sound and how are you going to make that work on strings? And I was just like, this is just a chordal transition for instruments that can sustain so let's embrace that. So in terms of what's challenging, it's really thinking about like, what did these instruments do that the original instruments for which it was written don't, so that I can create a piece that feels good and in a way as informed historically and otherwise, as possible.

HD: It's such an incredible project, from a technical perspective – fitting these pieces of music to a different set of instruments – and the creativity, and the historical context required. I can see why it's a really fun challenge for you and I know this wasn't the first arrangement you've done for LD or at all and I was wondering how did you get started making these kinds of historical arrangements?

DN: I think it is really important to think about ourselves as practitioners, influenced by historical composers, to consider that in the past, pieces were tailor made for the humans, the performers at hand. Whether that was Rameau taking his *Les Indes Galantes* opera-ballet that called for an orchestra of fifty and dancers and stage machinery and whatever and publishing that as chamber music, (which he did), to be performed inside the home or perhaps as it was heard at the salon of his patron La Pouplinière, I think that is elemental to what we do. I am not a huge fan of the idea of “The Great, Immutable Work.” First of all, if we're really living in a democratic society, then this music belongs to all of us, in which case, we have the desire and the right to make it our own in some way. And if that means that it can be enjoyed by more or other people who wouldn't otherwise have access to it, and by that I mean not just the audience but also the performers, that feels like a compelling reason to keep doing what we're doing in terms of arrangements.

HD: That's wonderful. So it's both independently a creative flexing of your muscles and it's also you participating in this historical practice of re-arranging, and it's also great for us as modern audiences because we get to hear LD perform everything from opera to new works by this historical Black composer, it's a thrill for all of us. And so that flute quartet arrangement is what we have been listening to and we'll hear a little more of it in a few minutes but I understand that you also created another new work for the live performances of *Winds of Change* that are coming up Oct. 21-23, so what can you tell us about this new, new piece?

DN: This new old piece, right. I'm super excited to essentially give the premiere of an oboe quartet which is to say, a quartet for oboe, violin, viola, and cello also by Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges. The oboe quartet was really the primary solo genre for the oboe when you get into the Classical period. And there are oboe quartets by Mozart, lots of oboe quartets published in Paris and also in London at this time, and in Vienna by myriad Classical composers. But there were no historical oboe quartets by a Black composer. And I thought, well wouldn't it be great if there was an oboe quartet that not just me but oboists anywhere could perform that was by Joseph Boulogne? So I began searching through the rest of his chamber music works like I did with the flute and harp piece, and I looked at string quartets, accompanied violin sonatas, and different things like this and actually, I found there is actually a so-called “harpsichord quartet” (it's really a harpsichord sonata with three strings) and I thought well that's interesting, and it's in G Minor, which is a great key for the oboe. And then the further I looked I realized *that* was an arrangement of a string quartet that St-Georges had written before. And it's a bit of a light-weird piece to be honest. The first movement is great, then there's a second movement that's a small rondo, but I wanted something more substantial so I kept looking. And I found in a different string quartet a beautiful G minor adagio, so I've actually created a three movement oboe quartet which is drawn from two different string quartets, of which one is already arranged by St-Georges into another piece. And I think it's going to be really compelling and wonderful and I elaborate a little bit and again, try to create parts that really bring out the personalities of the different instruments involved so it can be conversational. (Of course the “conversational quartet” style was a really big thing in Paris in the 1770's.) So yes, I'm really excited about it! I'm excited for other people to hear it and particularly for people to start playing this new oboe quartet by St-Georges.

HD: How wonderful that looking through the archive, you can understand that not only were composers actively re-arranging their music for different things but St-Georges literally took a string quartet and translated it into different configurations, so you've extended this idea that he had. What a wonderful way to participate with him or the spirit of him. It's a wonderful idea and we're looking forward to hearing it. But now we're going to listen to the third movement of that Boulogne sonata and is there anything in particular you want audiences to listen out for?

DN: I think what I'd love for our audience to listen out for is the refinement and delicacy and imagination that our performers, in particular Emi Ferguson, Shelby Yamin, Allison Monroe, and Rebecca Reed bring to this performance and to this new work that nobody had heard before we recorded it.

MUSIC: Flute Quartet, Mvmt 4 [2:20]

Embracing a two-pronged approach to expanding the early music canon, Les Délices invited Haitian composer Sydney Guillaume to contribute an instrumental work to *Winds of Change*. The work he created, *A Journey to Freedom*, is scored for violin, viola, cello, flute, and oboe. Using these historical instruments, Sydney's piece introduces initial neoclassical themes that are transformed by traditional yanvalou rhythms from his native Haiti, creating a work that reflects on Haitians' 200-plus year struggle for freedom from oppression. Before we listen to the full recording of Sydney's magnificent piece, let's hear from the composer himself introducing *A Journey to Freedom*:

Sydney Guillaume: Hello I'm Sydney Guillaume and I'm the composer of *A Journey to Freedom*. When I was composing this piece, I had to ask myself what being free means to me. How do I experience freedom and the lack of it? I thought about my ancestors from Haiti and what they had to endure and what my people there are currently enduring. Their journey to freedom is a constant struggle. Even though Haiti won its independence in 1804, more than 200 years ago, the country as a whole is still searching and fighting for its freedom. I wrote a melody that is very present and persistent, almost mesmerizing at times, to express a strong yearning to be free. Freedom is a continuous journey for so many of us. Which is one of the reasons why the piece does not have a full resolve. I included a yanvalou rhythm, a traditional Haitian rhythm that always gives me a feeling of perseverance and strength. It was an emotional journey to write this piece and I'm grateful to Debra and Les Délices for this wonderful collaboration.

MUSIC: *A Journey to Freedom*, complete [9:24]

SalonEra: Harmonie Trailer

Playing Classical-era woodwinds like clarinet, oboe, and horn is akin to a high-wire act. Gorgeous and awe-inspiring when everything goes right but - with few keys, no valves, and jaw-dropping virtuosity – it can also be downright treacherous! Thankfully, we're in great hands as guest clarinetist Marie Ross, flutist Stephen Schultz, horn player Todd Williams, and bassoonist Marc Vallon join host Debra Nagy for "Harmonie," in which they demystify their instruments and celebrate chamber music for winds by Reicha, Mozart, Krommer, and others.

HD: We're so looking forward to Harmonie, the second episode of SalonEra's third season. During the pandemic, Les Délices worked hard to expand its digital offerings and we are eager to continue what we started in 2020! We hope you'll subscribe to this podcast and support us with donations at salonera.org. Now, back to *Winds of*

Change and our final highlighted composer: Luigi Boccherini.

Though Boccherini's biography follows a familiar arc of the successful eighteenth-century court musician, he was an original thinker who cultivated an idiosyncratic style that set him apart from his contemporaries. Born into a musical family in Lucca, Italy, Luigi—a virtuosic cellist—trained first with Italian masters, then found work in Vienna as a musician with the Burgtheater. During his life, he spent significant time in Rome, Madrid, and Paris, where his music was especially beloved. So while Boccherini cannot be said to have played a part in the French or Haitian revolutions, his music – which embodied unique values – was *in the air*.. To listen to Boccherini is to inhabit an alternative musical universe that privileges repetition over development, that revels in moments of harmonic friction, and that explores new ways to be expressive within an intimate, almost-whispered palette of soft dynamics.

Boccherini's idiosyncratic style is clearly identifiable even when unattributed – which is the case for the Quintet in C major; the meditative last movement, which we will soon hear in its entirety, explores a kaleidoscope of pastel colors. With dynamics rarely rising above *piano*, Boccherini redefines virtuosity across twelve successive variations that are built on the simplest of structures: a simple C major scale going up and down. Deceptively simple but utterly sublime, the 19th century violinist Jean-Baptiste Cartier commented, “If God wanted to *speak* to men through music, he would do it with the works of Haydn, but if He himself wished to *listen* to music, He would choose Boccherini.”

MUSIC: Boccherini final movement

Closing Credits

HD: Thanks so much for listening to this special episode of SalonEra! Support for SalonEra is provided by Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, the Ohio Arts Council, and audience members like you. This episode was created by Executive Producer Debra Nagy, Associate Producer Shelby Yamin, and Hannah De Priest, our script writer, episode host, and Les Délices special projects manager.

This episode featured selections from the concert film version of *Winds of Change*, recorded by Les Délices in August of 2021. A reimagined, in-person *Winds of Change* will be performed in Akron, Cleveland, and Rocky River this October twenty-first thru twenty-third.

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