



# CHEVALIER



# *CHEVALIER*

## Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars



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# ***Educating for Global Understanding***

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# Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

# About the Film



Inspired by the incredible true story of composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, *Chevalier* tells the story of this 18th-century French-African musician who becomes one of the most influential classical composers during the era of the French Revolution, unfolding the vivid, timely story of the soaring rise and defiant spirit of this musical phenomenon. The Chevalier was what we would call today a superstar — a blinding multi-talent at the top of several games: he was a virtuoso violinist who gave packed concerts, a champion swordsman, an ingenious composer, and, for a time, one of the most alluring, unexpected members of Marie Antoinette’s glittering court.

Historians have long struggled to document Bologne’s life. With his papers and his music destroyed in Napoleonic times, little is known of his inner experiences moving in the sphere of the elites. Director Stephen Williams (*Watchmen*) and screenwriter Stefani Robinson (*Atlanta*) aimed to give Bologne a fresh, contemporary life on screen. With many of the details imagined based on extensive research of the period, *Chevalier* is a buoyant and aspiring vision of a man driven to create and to be who he truly was, no matter the expectations put upon him or the dreams forbidden to those like him.

Through the film, Robinson saw a chance to revive Bologne’s legend as she highlighted his life. She saw his as a story of identity, of someone who broke the frame and paid the price.

“The more I learned about him, the more I was frustrated that people don’t know who he is,” says Robinson. “It was not easy to get him to the screen, but the fact that it’s here and feels so alive is a very special thing.”

Williams, a celebrated television director/producer and Emmy Award-winner for the groundbreaking Tulsa Riots episode of the *Watchmen* series, was so drawn to the story that he chose *Chevalier* for his big-screen directing debut. He appreciated the opportunity to recreate one of the most sumptuous eras in human history, but from an unseen angle. Most importantly, he valued the opportunity of “redressing the imbalances of historical storytelling.” Williams explains, “I’m very interested in reclaiming the stories of people who led compelling, impactful lives yet have been ignored and dismissed in the larger narrative.”

While Bologne’s story is set in the 18th century, it also speaks strongly to this moment. From its high-voltage opening violin battle, the film lends Bologne a touch of rock-and-roll swagger. His fame and radiance echo the world of the modern pop star, but his tale is equally an exploration of something very relatable to our times as it focuses on how a person breaks out from the trap of what others expect or demand.

# Historical Context

Pre-revolutionary France was an ever-changing and often contradictory society for African Europeans. The sprawling French colonies relied on enslaved labor to work on sugar and coffee plantations. In France, slavery was illegal, and a diverse population of freedmen and dual-heritage progeny lived and worked. Enslaved servants, when traveling to France on short trips with their enslavers, would sometimes sue for their freedom and win. Identity and the attendant freedoms and restrictions were complicated and patchily enforced, depending on the political climate.

While in France, free Africans and those of dual-heritage had more freedoms and opportunities than those on the far-flung colonial plantations. For instance, most freemen were literate, could legally own land and businesses, and were seen as French citizens in many aspects. But they still lived in a system of entrenched structural racism. It was illegal to intermarry, illegal to own a gun, and the enslaved were required to be baptized in the Catholic faith.

This was the culture Joseph Bologne grew up in. On the one hand, he was the cherished son of a wealthy plantation owner who, unusually, lived with his enslaved lover (Joseph's mother). Not only did Joseph Bologne's father enroll him in a prestigious French boarding school, but he also sought out and supported additional studies in fencing and music. Through this training, Joseph Bologne became recognized as the best fencer in the country, and an enviable dancer, hunter, and ice skater. He was charming, handsome, and often in the tabloids, much like a heartthrob celebrity today. And he was a close friend of Marie Antoinette, the queen of France.

Laws and edicts like the Code Noir and the Black Police regulated African European bodies and autonomy, often fragmenting them based on factors like the type of enslavement, free status, and paternity, so that a person in Joseph Bologne's position might align with the white elite more easily until they turned on him, like in the film.

Despite his popularity and acclaim, he faced prejudice because of his mixed heritage. Mozart, a contemporary, refused to meet with him even though Joseph Bologne was at the forefront of composing and performing violin concertos in France. They even stayed at the same benefactor's home for a short while and did not cross paths. Joseph Bologne was favored to be named the director of the Paris Opera, a highly prestigious post, but a petition to deny him the job was circulated; the criterion used against him was his heritage. And to add to the dehumanization of the enslaved, free persons and those of mixed heritage were required to register with the authorities and carry paperwork proving their identity and status. There was a fear among the white French that there were too many people of African descent in France, and they would intermarry and assimilate. Not only would French blood be tainted, but the black Europeans, if exposed to the lofty French ideal *égalité*, would take ideas of equality and freedom back to the colonies and fuel rebellion.

Joseph Bologne's remarkable life shows a pursuit of excellence despite living in a stranglehold of racism. He overcame and excelled at all he set his hands to. His legacy is largely forgotten in part through the politics of Napoleon Bonaparte, who, after the revolution in the early 1800s, reinstituted slavery and banned Joseph Bologne's work in a commitment to erasing his story. His music lived on in the Caribbean and is fervently being recovered and celebrated today.





# Beginnings, Opportunity, and Excellence



Joseph Bologne (1745–1799) was born to Georges de Bologne Saint-Georges, a French plantation owner, and an enslaved Senegalese woman named Nanon, in Guadeloupe, a French colony in the Caribbean. He lived with his mother and father until he was twelve and enrolled in boarding school in France, where he excelled at music, fencing, dancing, horsemanship, and swimming. He quickly rose in the ranks of the music community, composing groundbreaking violin concertos, commissioning works by Haydn, and leading the Concert des Amateurs as its director by 1773.

1. The opening scene depicts an imagined violin battle between Mozart and Joseph Bologne. Although this did not actually happen, we know that Mozart was aware of Joseph Bologne, and there is evidence of his competitive jealousy. It is also speculated that Joseph Bologne's work was influential to Mozart's compositions. What do you think of the filmmaker's decision to condense these facts into a scene that captures the emotional truth of the situation? Was it a compelling and effective way to open the film?

2. When Joseph Bologne is dropped off at boarding school, his father tells him:

"You must be excellent. Always excellent. Do not give anyone reason to tear you down. Remember, no one may tear down an excellent Frenchman."

Imagine you are a young person, taken from your home to a country where your race or ethnicity makes you stand out. Discuss the challenges that young Joseph Bologne may have faced while at boarding school. How does his father's advice situate him as deserving and help him find belonging?

3. In the fencing tournament against Alexandre Picard, Joseph Bologne is called "a dark petulance," and his detractors proclaim that France "is under siege," and the purity of blood is at risk. How is Joseph Bologne's win symbolic for abolitionists? When Marie Antoinette calls him "a true son of France," do you believe her sentiment? Or do you think he is being used by the monarchy as a political pawn?

4. The notion of black excellence refers to the attainment of high achievement and talent that acts as an example of excellence and sometimes as a perfectionist trap that other groups of privilege can avoid. Late in the film, Joseph Bologne says, "The more I excelled, the more people loved me." Due to his tenuous circumstances, why might this love have been so important? Consider the weight of excellence for Bologne. Can you think of contemporary examples where the pressures of perfection have been borne by members of minority groups, especially those who are the first or significant in fields of politics, sports, entertainment, or business? What about in your personal experience?



# Women and the Patriarchy



Women in pre-revolutionary France lived by a complex set of social codes, not unlike those of freedmen and multi-ethnic citizens. The film explores the freedoms and limitations of various female characters, from the queen to Joseph Bologne's mother, a freed, formerly enslaved woman. As you consider each of these characters, it is worthwhile to consider if their privileges are simply material or more substantive.

1. Marie Antoinette, the young queen of France, plays a pivotal role as Joseph Bologne's champion. But there is a limit to what she is willing to do without affecting her own privilege. Analyze the continuum of power she wields, but also the ways her power is limited as demonstrated in the film.
2. When Marie-Josephine is offered a part in Joseph Bologne's upcoming opera, she must ask her husband, who compares performing in the theater to being a whore and denies her permission. She goes against his wishes when he is on extended military leave and tells Joseph Bologne that "she hates being spoken for." How does her choice to exercise autonomy help her to build trust and a strong relationship with Joseph Bologne?
3. Joseph Bologne's mother reunites with her son after his father dies. Her return to his life serves as a rich link to his African background. Recall and explore examples in the movie

where her character offers alternative perspectives to mainstream France and examples of resistance through culture.

4. The burgeoning revolution is seen as a backdrop in the film, with protestors in the streets. At a political rally attended by Joseph Bologne, Phillipe de Orleans, and Marie-Josephine, there was fiery rhetoric about social contracts, the universal rights of man, and *égalité*. Marie-Josephine asks the crowd, "What about women? Are we invited to join you? Are we to be freed?" Do you think her questions are answered in the film's plot? By the end of the movie, have women's rights changed or transformed in any substantial ways?
5. A pivotal moment in Joseph Bologne's development is when he discovers his baby with Marie-Joesphine was killed by her husband. Bologne has an emotional breakdown, and his mother hugs him, braids his hair, and tells him the world is full of wickedness and evil. But, she says the biggest evil is "convincing us we have no choice." "Choice comes from within," she continues. "There is always a choice to fight." How does this scene reconnect Bologne with his mother? Do you think that the shared experience of losing a child against one's will helped Bologne better understand his mother? How do her words affect his determination and actions moving forward?



# Race and Identity



It is important to note that race and identity were experienced somewhat differently in colonies than in the United States. Slavery was illegal in France and hotly debated. There was a vibrant community of free people and multi-ethnic citizens. Because the aristocratic courts and salons liked the “exotic,” an opening existed for those of the African diaspora to mingle, build wealth through property and businesses, and excel in gentlemanly pursuits.

However, in the French colonies, cruel punishments were meted out to the enslaved, and strict control was exerted. Many of these attitudes made it to France, creating a multifaceted existence. In an example of this dramatic irony, John Adams, future president of the U.S., called Joseph Bologne “the most accomplished man in Europe in riding, shooting, fencing, dancing, and music.” Yet, it was illegal for Bologne to marry within his class because of his race, and he was denied significant professional opportunities.

1. Nanon confronts Joseph Bologne and tells him, “These people have softened you.” What do you think she means by that? And how does her relationship throughout the film move him towards understanding and embracing his full identity? How did his rejection, and then acceptance, of his mother help in this journey?

2. In 1776, the queen put Joseph Bologne’s name forward to be the new director of the Paris Opera, the most prestigious position in music at the time. The king agreed until he received a few letters stating, “Their honor and the delicacy of their conscience would not permit them ever to be subjected to the orders of a mulatto.” Joseph Bologne lost the directorship

because of the color of his skin. Reflect on the ways racist ideology and societal pressure influences decision-making for those in power. Do you think the king and queen had less power than pervading social norms? If you think the king and queen had absolute power and were above social norms, why do you think they chose not to use their power to support Bologne?

3. There is evidence that Joseph Bologne incorporated musical phrases from the songs his mother hummed and sang to him into his classical work. Early in the film, his mother encourages him to “play something like that in your opera,” to which he retorts that there are “standards that need be honored.” His reluctance is eroded after the street party, where he rediscovered rhythms from the African diaspora. Why is it important to understand and preserve elements of one’s heritage? Consider not only the film but other instances where the celebration of culture can uplift spirits and realign one’s internal moral compass.

4. Joseph Bologne tells his lover Marie-Josephine, “It is illegal for someone of my complexion to marry someone of my class.” He is thus denied the fundamental experience of creating a family in the country he serves through his music and allegiance to the crown. Intersectional dissonance, the idea that the many aspects of one’s identity do not align, is a core obstacle to Joseph Bologne’s happiness and creates internal tension. In his case, the gulf between being born enslaved and his current positioning among the French aristocracy and Parisian elite is vast. Explore other instances in the film where the various aspects of his identity do not align. Consider your own life. Can you think of similar experiences?



# Revolution and Joseph Bologne's Legacy



Toward the final act of the film, viewers see Joseph Bologne's self-discovery and strength mirrored by the growing revolutionary tide. After Marie Antoinette refuses to support Bologne and his directorship of the Paris Opera is denied, he begins to fully understand his low place in French society. Joining his friend Philippe de Orleans, he composes music for a concert to raise money for the revolution. In a powerful culminating scene, Bologne finds his voice, resilience, and full identity. Not depicted in the film, Bologne went on to military service, commanding cavalry troops of black volunteer soldiers in support of the revolution.

1. Trace the factors that led Joseph Bologne to move from being an ally of the crown to a leader in the French Revolution.

2. In a final confrontation with Marie Antoinette, she implores Bologne to stand down, reminding him of "all the kindness [she has] offered him." He replies, "Not everything's about you people. That is the point." She goes on to berate him and threaten to take everything from him, ending with the ominous, "I will erase you." While her words are powerful, there seems to be a desperation in her stance. How do the angry protesters outside the theater signify the political environment, as well as Bologne's own growing fury? How does this mirroring create tension and drama in these closing scenes?

3. In a scene before the benefit concert, viewers see Joseph Bologne resting his hand on his formal, powdered wig as he prepares to take the stage. He decides to eschew the wig and plays in the braids his mother plaited earlier. Discuss the symbolism and power of this act. Explore the dichotomy between his natural hair and the powdered wig. Consider the character's development as he makes this decision.

4. When the Marquis de Montalembert arrives at the performance to arrest Joseph Bologne, he points a gun directly at Bologne, who stops playing, descends the stage, and stands directly in the line of fire, staring Montalembert in the eye. What does this defiant and brave move suggest about Bologne's character development by the end of the film?

5. Consider the impact of music and the arts on social and cultural revolutions. How do Chevalier's work and the music in the film push boundaries and demonstrate elements of freedom, equality, and progressiveness? How does that align with the rebellion of the revolution? What do you think it was about Joseph Bologne and the stories and emotions his musical compositions evoked that were so powerful that Napoleon Bonaparte, who also reinstituted slavery, felt he must ban and destroy Bologne's work?



## Additional Resources

Otele, Olivette. *African Europeans: An Untold History*. Basic Books, 2021.

Code Noir — With this primary source, one can read the code as it was written.

<https://worldhistorycommons.org/code-noir-black-code>

Listen to Joseph Bologne’s violin concertos —

[Joseph Bologne, Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges Violin Concertos - YouTube](#)

The most prestigious classical music festival in the Caribbean is dedicated to preserving and elevating the musical legacy of Joseph Bologne, Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges —

<https://festivalsaintgeorges.com/>

This in-depth article explores Alexandre Dumas’s classic *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which is based on the author’s father, Thomas-Alexandre Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie, the highest-ranking black military officer in Europe until Colin Powell. Dumas’ father experienced a similar childhood to Joseph Bologne, and they fought in the French Revolution together —

<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2020-08-12/french-revolution-and-black-liberation>

Explore the literature of **Maryse Condé**, a Guadeloupean author whose work acts as a cultural bridge between the Caribbean and Europe.

## Film Credits

Directed by: **Stephen Williams**

Written by: **Stefani Robinson**

Produced by: **Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe, Stefani Robinson, Dianne McGunigle**

Director of Photography: **Jess Hall**

Production Designer: **Karen Murphy**

Costume Designer: **Oliver García**

Composer of Original Score: **Kris Bowers**

Musical Performances Produced and Arranged by: **Michael Abels**

Editor: **John Axelrad**

Set Decorator: **Lotty Sanna**

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