

George Bridgetower

'The young African Prince...the boy wonder'

There are many fascinating things about George Bridgetower, and one of them is that we barely remember him at all.

This would be a great surprise to music lovers in 1800. At that time, Bridgetower was a superstar, selling out concert halls across Europe due to his astonishing talents on the violin. He counted Beethoven and the Prince Regent among his fans, and looked set to become a famous composer in his own right. Even more incredibly, Bridgetower achieved all of this before his 25th birthday.

Perhaps fame came too early for George. By the time he was 30 his star had waned, and he lived out the second half of his life in obscurity, forgotten by the public and making a living by teaching music from his home in Peckham. This is his story.

The Rise to Fame

There are no clear historical records to prove it, but many historians think it is likely that George Bridgetower's father was a freed African slave. His mother was a Polish servant. Despite being poor, John Bridgetower was an ambitious and charismatic man, who was determined to make something of his life.

Soon after George was born in 1778, John realised that he was a gifted child, with a special talent for music. By luck, when he was working as a servant in the palace of Prince Esterházy of Hungary, John found that he was living under the same roof as the great composer Haydn. It is believed he persuaded Haydn to give George music lessons. George was only seven years old.

At the age of nine, George gave his first public performance in Paris. The audience were astounded by his talents; one member commented, 'his playing is perfect, with a clear good tone, spirit, pathos and good taste.' Soon, George was playing all over Europe, attracting the attention of the rich and famous and selling out venues as audiences crowded to see this amazing

boy. After he played in Bath in 1789, the *Bath Morning Post* wrote, 'The young African Prince, whose musical talents have been so much celebrated, had a more crowded and splendid concert on Sunday morning than has ever been known in this place. There were upwards of 550 persons present, and they were gratified by such skills on the violin as created general astonishment, as well as pleasure from the boy wonder. The father was in the gallery, and so affected by the applause bestowed on his son, that tears of pleasure and gratitude flowed in profusion.'

As you can see from this quote, one of the things that fascinated audiences was the fact that George was black. White Europeans of the time were more used to seeing black people in the role of slaves or servants, and so would have been surprised to see George playing with such skill and refinement.

Never one to miss an opportunity, John Bridgetower played up to this, drumming up interest before George's concerts by dressing up in strange and exotic clothes, and parading through the streets. He told anyone who asked that he was an African Prince.

The Prince of Wales

As George's fame spread far and wide, he attracted the attention of some very powerful people.

In 1791, when George was 12, John Bridgetower was approached by the Prince of Wales, who wanted George to come and live in his Pavilion in Brighton. The Prince of Wales was a spoilt and extravagant man, who enjoyed parties, drinking and gambling, and ran up enormous debts by doing exactly as he pleased. He offered John Bridgetower £25 to become George's guardian, which would mean removing George from his family. John agreed.

We can only guess at the sadness that George felt at being separated from his mother, brother and father like this. However, it is likely that John



saw too good an opportunity to miss. Not only was George set up for life, but £25 was an enormous sum of money at the time, enough to make the Bridgetowers comfortable for the rest of their lives.

George Becomes a Superstar

Under the patronage of the Prince of Wales, George became even more successful. We know few details of his life, but it is clear that he played regularly for the Prince in Brighton and London, enjoying audiences made up of the most rich and powerful people in Europe.

He was not reunited with his mother until 1802 – a gap of 11 years – and even then, he barely got to see her due to his heavy performing commitments.

By now, George was a young man of 24, and was a very accomplished performer. Around this time, he attracted the attention of Beethoven, who was so impressed by George's skills on the violin that he began to compose some music that would showcase them.

Bridgetower and Beethoven gave the first performance of the Sonata for Pianoforte and Violin in A in 1803. After the performance, the Maestro dedicated the music to Bridgetower. This is the act that should have made Bridgetower's name in history; however, just a few days later, Bridgetower made a terrible mistake. We can't be sure but it is thought that Bridgetower made some rude comments about a woman with whom Beethoven was in love, which caused a huge row between the two men.

Beethoven never spoke to Bridgetower again. Later, he changed the dedication of the Sonata to another violinist, Rudolphe Kreutzer, and it continues to be known as the Kreutzer Sonata to this day.

The Fading Star

After this point, Bridgetower continued to be thought of very highly in musical circles. He impressed his tutors a great deal when he studied at Cambridge, and was later given permanent membership of the prestigious Philharmonic Society.

However, he became gradually less famous, and after this point, history records very little of his life. We know that he died in 1860, at the age of 81, and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery. He was thought to be poor by then, although he left £1000 in a will to the sister of his wife.

It is only now that the story of George Bridgetower is being told again. We will never know for sure, but if perhaps his life had been slightly different, he could still have been one of the most famous names in musical history.

Glossary

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| Pavilion | The Prince of Wales had a very luxurious second home built in Brighton, where he kept a band of the most talented musicians to entertain his guests. |
| Pianoforte | The full name for a piano, meaning 'soft-loud' in Italian. |
| Maestro | 'Master': the title given to a great composer or musician. |
| Sonata | A piece of music composed for the piano, sometimes accompanied by another instrument. |

• • • George Bridgetower Activity Sheet

George Bridgetower Timeline



You can use the set of sorting-cards included in this pack as a starter activity to explore the life of George Bridgetower. Each card is based on a contemporary source, although may not be a direct quote. Put together, the cards offer an impression of how Bridgetower was seen by the outside world. Download spare copies of the sorting-cards at www.bridgetowerproject.org.

1. Shuffle the cards, divide the class into pairs, and give out a card to each pair.
2. The pairs should briefly discuss what clues they can pick up about Bridgetower from their card.
3. Appoint a class 'scribe', and hold a whole-group discussion about Bridgetower's identity, with the scribe building up a profile on the board.
4. Students should now lay their cards out in date order, to form a time-line. This can be done across desks, on the floor, on a peg-line or pinned to the wall. Make sure the time-line is to scale.

Bridgetower Tableaux

Create tableaux of the key moments in Bridgetower's life.

You can introduce the idea of making tableaux by asking individual pupils to portray an emotion using just their faces. Other pupils can guess the emotion, or everyone could portray the same emotion at once, so that the class can compare their ideas.

Then put pupils into groups of 4-6, allocate each group a moment from Bridgetower's life (see below), and ask them to make a tableau to represent that moment.

- Discovering his musical talent
- Playing his first concert, aged 9
- Being separated from his father, aged 12
- Performing the Sonata for Pianoforte and Violin in A with Beethoven
- Falling out with Beethoven

Pupils should then present their tableau to the class. It may help if the class can close their eyes as the performers get into position. What title could you give for each tableau? If you like, you can photograph the tableaux and display them.

Note: Tableux is plural. Tableau is singular.

Why don't we remember George Bridgetower?



It seems incredible now that someone as famous as George Bridgetower could be forgotten. What reasons can we find for this?

1. Photocopy the cue-cards included on the back of this lesson card. Each card suggests a reason why George Bridgetower might have been forgotten.
2. Give them out to groups of 2-3.
3. The groups should discuss the ideas on the cards and decide whether they think they are correct. They must be able to give a reason for their decision.
4. The blank cards are for groups to use to fill in their own ideas. Try to think of three reasons.
5. Get together as a class and discuss your reasons for and against each view. What other ideas did groups come up with?
6. After the discussion return to your groups and decide on a conclusion to the group discussion. What do you think is the reason we don't remember Bridgetower?

Any Questions?

Sometimes, when we are dealing with historical figures we end up with questions we cannot answer. Write a postcard to George Bridgetower, which contains one question that you would most like to ask him. You could make a display of these. Who knows, perhaps one day your question will be answered!