

SONATA MULATTICA

NARRATIVE

A. Program Description:

This proposal requests NEH funds for the development phase of a highly original feature-length documentary and outreach initiative called *Sonata Mulattica*. The filmmakers seek \$75,000 of a total budget of \$880,000 to cover music and archive research, consultation with advisors, writing of a treatment, outreach development and pre-production.

The documentary will open eyes to the story of George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower, an Afro-Polish-born violinist whose astounding virtuosity enthralled late 18th- and early 19th-century European nobility. Bridgetower's playing inspired a Ludwig van Beethoven sonata but his remarkable legacy as a mixed-race artist in a stratified white society is virtually unknown today. Drawing on new scholarship and shaped by former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove's 2009 book-length lyric narrative of the same name, *Sonata Mulattica*, the film weighs the real events behind the drama of Bridgetower's journey and looks ahead into the 21st century to his story's ongoing significance. From life as a child prodigy to sudden disfavor and obscurity, it's a fascinating tale of fickle fortune, compelling personalities, race and artistic triumph that has been practically erased from historical record. More important, while Bridgetower galvanized upper-crust audiences with his talent and earned attention for his exotic heritage, revolutions raged, antislavery sentiment swelled and Romantic culture blossomed in both the Old and New Worlds. Bridgetower's transcendence—and sometimes exploitation—of racial and class concerns uniquely intersect with the sociopolitical and artistic upheavals that shook the globe during his lifetime.

Black and white within, while seen as black by whites without, George Bridgetower the musician embodies the cultural melding that energizes a nation's art and soul. Through his story, the documentary will encourage in American viewers an understanding and appreciation of the momentous global events of his period, their historic import and their impact then and now on individual achievements and struggles, particularly for minorities in the arts. During an interview with *The Independent* about his own Bridgetower opera, globally acclaimed composer and jazz pianist Julian Joseph stated, "The message is that if you're black you don't have to be a rapper, and if you're white you don't have to believe in exclusive cultures. Everyone offers us such a restricted view. They don't say 'Here's culture'; they say 'Here's your culture,' and you don't get respect for playing the violin." George Bridgetower's story—one of unrecognized achievement regardless of heritage—offers, as Joseph said, "a real corrective to the racist nonsense on both sides." It demonstrates how artistic accomplishments molded by different backgrounds are, in the end, connected through the universal ideals of human expression.

B. Content and Creative Approach:

Through the story of George Polgreen Bridgetower, *Sonata Mulattica* presents the conflicting effects of culture: the creation of timeless art by individuals who are both elevated and thwarted by their racial and social backgrounds. With his early, sharply honed musical gifts, stunning solo performances before nobility and widespread acclaim by the time he had turned 10, Bridgetower was an archetypal prodigy during Europe's classical music heyday of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. But unlike those Austrian and German luminaries, he was overlooked by history—and he was half-black. The connections between his destiny and the massive shifts in class structure, politics, geography, culture and the trans-Atlantic perceptions and fortunes of non-Europeans in his time are rich in contemporary relevance. The film will explore these issues as it reintroduces Bridgetower's story and his music to an international audience.

Rita Dove has filled history's gaps through *Sonata Mulattica*'s various poetic styles and a short play. She extrapolates from known realities to reanimate Bridgetower, Beethoven, their peers, their place and their time. With her own imaginings and interpretations, she gives voice once again to the long-dead and long-forgotten. Building on the interpretive quality and comprehensive research of the book, the documentary will deepen the story's historical context, basing the film's narrative on rigorous scholarship and expert commentary. Piecing together the historical record, the film will revive Bridgetower, a mixed-race man whose legacy Beethoven erased through rededication, whose identity the public distilled to "mulatto" and whose contributions appear nowhere on most musical timelines. Braiding together scholarship and art, the documentary will explore resonating global questions about racial and cultural identity, prejudice and discrimination: how a mixed heritage might or might not enrich an individual's artistic development, enhance his appeal to and success in the dominant society and/or ultimate displacement.

"I step out, to take my place: my place is silence." Rita Dove

The film's multilayered visual approach will return Bridgetower from the margins of history. Two rehearsal storylines will frame the film. One will feature a pair of modern-day musicians struggling to master Beethoven's difficult but beautiful Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 9 in A Major, Op. 47. This piece, known as the "Kreutzer" Sonata, was originally dedicated by Beethoven to George Bridgetower. Throughout this creative process, the violinist and pianist will engage in impassioned discussions about classical music and its historical and social backstory which will serve as a transition to and from the main biographical storyline. Musical passages lifted from these sessions will act as sound bridges contributing to mood and pacing. In a parallel rehearsal narrative, actors will read the script for the play *Georgie Porgie or A Moor In Vienna* from Dove's *Sonata Mulattica*. The actors' explorations of characterization, cultural mores and historical context will provide additional insights into Bridgetower's life and times, thereby launching viewers into the world of European high culture in the Romantic Era.

With poetic readings by the actors and Dove's readings as bridges, the documentary will present key elements of Bridgetower's life and relationship to Beethoven in three acts mirroring Violin Sonata No. 9's three movements. Stylized, impressionistic reenactments will be interwoven alongside archival materials and interviews with musicologists, historians, classical musicians and biographers. All this will illustrate the phases, highlighting Bridgetower's years as a child prodigy (1780-1800), his professional peak and its abrupt end following the fallout with

Beethoven (1801-1828) and finally his declining years and significance in the world of classical music (1829-1860). The biographical and historical sequences in the film will present a clear and concise overview of key cultural and political events that unfolded in tandem with Bridgetower's vibrant life.

This structure weaving traditional, historical documentary filmmaking with performative style and contemporary perspective will enhance the tale's accessibility to viewers, particularly those who lack an immediate connection to these unfamiliar times, places and styles or would normally balk at "educational" content. It will bridge the gap between past and present, "over there" and "home," and "serious" music and popular entertainment through relatable, modern-day faces and voices. Thematically, it will play with the issue of representation underlying Bridgetower's identity and legacy, the fact that he—as a person of mixed race and a forgotten man—was and will now be portrayed in ways that will enrich the historical record and context of the times.

As Allison Blakely, Professor of African American Studies and European and Comparative History at Boston University and a member of the film's Advisory Board, observes, this project "can highlight for a broader audience the ways in which the contributions of people of Black African descent [and other minorities] to world culture have often been overlooked."

All of the themes will vibrate through three strings: the history, the poetry and the music. From rehearsals to the film's final act, the three art forms will harmonize to create one dramatic, scholarly, dense yet melodious statement about the creative process and the intersection of art and cultural history.

Introduction to the Subject

George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower was born around 1780 in Biala, Poland, the son of a Polish-German domestic servant and a self-proclaimed African prince who was probably an escaped slave from Barbados. With his mother Maria Anna and his father Friedrich Augustus (among other names), the personal page of Austro-Hungarian Prince Nikolai Esterházy, Bridgetower and his younger brother spent their earliest years in poverty. But it didn't take long for father to find another escape route from undesirable circumstances. When his older son was about age 5, he recognized George's intelligence, his fascination by sounds and the potential for amazing musicianship and hopefully financial prosperity.

Thus began the life-changing partnership between young Bridgetower and the violin. The Esterházy's longtime court composer, classical music giant Franz Joseph Haydn, provided instruction to the boy. And not unlike Leopold and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who first astonished Europe on tour two decades earlier, the Bridgetowers represented another famous pairing of father and son, single-minded teacher and brilliant student, shameless promoter and rising phenom.

As a result, at age 9, George Bridgetower made his smashing debut as a professional soloist at Paris's celebrated Concert Spirituel in April 1789. A review in *Le mercure de France* proclaimed, "His talent is one of the best replies one can give to philosophers who wish to

deprive people of his nation and his colour of the opportunity to distinguish themselves in the arts." Despite the supportive opinion, the hyperawareness of Bridgetower's darker skin tone was emblematic of white Europeans' deeply ingrained racial prejudices. Per British critic, novelist and broadcaster Adam Lively in his 1998 book *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination*, pre-18th-century perspectives of blackness linked it to the hideous, the filthy and the evil. Meanwhile, radical but rising polygenist beliefs of the period claimed that different races were essentially different species. As Lively says, "In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the single most dominant image of the Negro . . . for Europeans, was by definition a slave, or at least a potential slave." Whether Bridgetower's virtuosity blinded his Parisian audience to his color or the unexpected combination intrigued them all the more—a question the film will examine—it wondrously elevated him to a superior status, at least in the music world.

Bridgetower could not bask in the Concert Spirituel acclaim for long. The performance turned out to be one of the last given by a foreigner before an infinitely more momentous event: the French Revolution. While the Bastille toppled under the force of middle- and lower-class discontent and decentralized local governments replaced royal authority across France, Bridgetower and his father departed for Great Britain. It had only been six years since Great Britain had endured and lost the nearly decade-long American Revolution in 1783 against its rebellious, now independent U.S. colonies. In fact, as musicologist and former Yale Department of Music chair Leon Plantinga states in his 1984 book *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, "One noted historian has called the last four decades of the eighteenth century the 'Age of Democratic Revolution.' Struggles for a more democratic form of governance—i.e., one that recognizes a general equality among citizens and professes to operate by the consent of the governed—gathered momentum during this period and came to a climax with the French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars of 1790-1800. Europe had watched in fascination as the American colonies declared their freedom from the British crown in 1776. And as revolutionary France vowed to lay claim to her 'natural frontiers' and to assist 'all peoples who rise against their rulers,' the tremors of rebellion against constituted government were felt from Naples to Norway, from Amsterdam to Athens."

The "general equality" so desired by these revolutionaries didn't quite extend to those of color. Nonetheless, England provided the Bridgetowers a fortuitous social, political and cultural climate for the young biracial violinist. The 1780s had heralded abolitionist campaigns in that country, which also started to restrict trans-Atlantic slave trafficking in 1787 by ordering its slave ships to decrease their slave-per-ton ratios. Later, it would outlaw the practice altogether in 1807 with the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. The British Parliament would eventually free slaves in the West Indies in the 1820s and within 10 years would pass a law for gradually releasing all its colonial slaves that led to similar measures by France and Denmark in the 1840s. British motives weren't exclusively humanitarian or idealogical; slavery just became less economically necessary. But their policies embodied a relatively benevolent view of Africans that undoubtedly facilitated George Bridgetower's journey toward success.

His kind wasn't just accepted but welcomed in England, particularly in the commercial hub of London. The Industrial Revolution of previous decades resulted in a richer middle class of businessmen and industrialists who could lately afford to spend more on leisure. Reflecting this boom in self-made wealth versus inherited, aristocratic wealth was a patronage system that was

less hierarchical and less necessary for musicians' survival than in other artistic havens like Vienna. When it came to music, London's profit-making priorities favored the novel and the broadly appealing, public shows that gave much bang for one's buck such as virtuoso performances. At the same time, the Romantic movement—which spanned Europe from the start of the French Revolution through the political turbulence following the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* in 1848—endorsed the exotic, the foreign, the primitive and the natural. As an unusually young, outstanding onstage soloist with a peculiar mixed-race background and an "African prince" for a father, Bridgetower was apt to earn much public interest, as this documentary will illustrate.

Following well-received concerts at Windsor Castle, he debuted in London on October 13, 1789 at a private concert hosted by Christopher and Charlotte Papendiek. Charlotte Papendiek was a servant whose journals chronicled much of her life—and some of the Bridgetowers'—in the court of King George III. At Bath in early December, 550 people including the King attended what the *Bath Chronicle* deemed "the exquisite performance of Master Bridgetower, whose taste and execution on the violin is equal, perhaps superior, to the best professor of the present or any former day. Those who had that happiness were enraptured with the astonishing abilities of this wonderful child—for he is but ten years old. He is a mulatto, the grandson, it is said, of an African Prince." Sold-out concerts in Bristol, his introduction to the English public at London's Drury Lane Theatre on February 19, 1790 and a benefit concert at Hanover Square Rooms on June 2 with Austrian child prodigy and violinist Franz Clement solidified Bridgetower's growing repute.

His father made sure the momentum continued. Flamboyant and fluently multilingual, Friedrich Bridgetower cleverly flaunted himself and his son's racial novelty amid that white sea, sauntering outside wearing attention-grabbing "Turkish" wardrobe when such "oriental" flourishes were the fad, as evidenced by Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782). He also reinvented himself several times through names like Rev. John Augustus Polygreen Bridgetower and Friedrich de August Bridgewater and charmed nobility through an ingratiating, appreciative letter to "that wonderful City—Bath" following the concert there. Still married, he indulged his taste for the ladies while on tour with his prodigy son, who was forced to hide during such awkward "entertainments." Despite these distractions, Friedrich remained the key supporter of George's talent.

That is, until another paternal figure entered the boy's life in 1791. The Prince of Wales was a carefree man with a messy private life and extravagant architectural tastes made incarnate by the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. But he also possessed an abiding love of classical music and violin. Friedrich Bridgetower, whose interactions with nobility had been perceived as increasingly presumptuous, was paid 25 pounds by the Prince and exiled from England for immoral behavior. The Prince now became not only George Bridgetower's musical patron but also his official guardian. Symbolically, it was a bisection of the boy's biracial identity: The father of supposed African lineage and Turkish stylings was gone from his life, replaced by a powerful white protector who assured his acceptance in society by dressing him like an English gentleman and housing him among English royalty. The resonance of such mixed-culture issues will merit special consideration in this film.

The Prince's interest in his musical development was genuine and the opportunities provided were invaluable. Royal Opera concertmaster François-Hippolyte Barthélémon and Italian-born Croatian composer and virtuoso Giovanni Mane Giornovichi (aka Ivan Jarnovic) honed Bridgetower's violin skills. St. Paul's Cathedral organist and former Mozart student Thomas Attwood provided keyboard-based lessons in composition that Bridgetower mastered by about age 15. He would also hold the post of First Violinist in the Prince's private orchestra for 14 years.

Beyond the royal court, Bridgetower's musical engagements exploded with the premieres of Haydn's symphonies commissioned by concert promoter Johann Peter Salomon and performances at the Hanover Square Rooms; King's Theatre; the King's Arms in Cornhill; a benefit concert for the weavers of Spitalfields; and a concerto in Salisbury played in the style of his idol, classical innovator Giovanni Battista Viotti. And all these events occurred by 1794 when he was no more than 15 years of age.

Though Bridgetower could make time stop for his enthralled audiences, the world outside tumbled into chaos. In Vienna, Mozart had died poor and shockingly young at age 35 on December 5, 1791. In France, after years of revolutionary reforms and violence, Louis XVI was executed on January 21, 1793, his widow Marie Antoinette on October 26. In between, on February 1, Great Britain had declared war on its neighbor across the channel. But a few years later, rising military star Napoleon Bonaparte became Commander of the French Army and, through what came to be known as the Napoleonic Wars, would help France demolish its rivals across the continent and reshape Europe's sociopolitical landscape for the next two decades as First Consul and—to the anger of many passionate supporters—Emperor.

On another stage, Bridgetower sustained his own conquest, performing about 50 concerts throughout the 1790s from Covent Garden to the Drury Lane Theatre to the Haymarket Theatre. He finally took leave of the Prince of Wales's service in 1802, visiting his mother and brother in Dresden, Germany, performing Beethoven's First Symphony, concertos by Mozart and Viotti and other works in Teplitz and Carlsbad.

Austria had declared war on France on March 12, 1799. But with an extension of leave from his patron in the spring of 1803, Bridgetower entered Vienna, Europe's most vibrant musical capital. Unlike London, the patronage system remained strong within the traditional class hierarchy. Even with his royal referrals, an ally from the inside would be fantastically helpful for breaking into these rigid circles.

That ally was none other than Ludwig van Beethoven, German composer and musical titan of the Classical and Romantic Eras.