

George Polgreen Bridgetower (1779-1860)

BLACK EUROPEANS: A British Library Online Gallery feature by guest curator Mike Phillips

George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower was probably born on 29 February 1780 (though some authorities give 11 October 1778) at Biała in Poland. His father, who went by the names John Frederick or Friedrich de August Bridgetower, worked in the household of Prince Esterházy, and gave several different stories about his background (the favourite being that he was an African prince. He was also "supposed by friends" to be the son of an Indian princess). The name Bridgetower favours the speculation that he was from Barbados (capital: Bridgetown). George's mother was a Polish woman referred to as Maria or Mary Ann.

Prince Esterházy's family seat was actually in the castle Esterháza in Hungary (now Austria), which possessed an opera house and a puppet theatre, and boasted the composer Joseph Haydn as *Kappelmeister*. If Bridgetower was a child prodigy, destiny also provided him with the best possible environment and training. He made his performing début as a violinist, aged nine or 10, at the Concert Spirituel in Paris in April 1789. The journal *Le Mercure de France* raved about his performance, concluding that "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".

After Paris, the Bridgetowers, father and son, turn up next in Windsor. According to Mrs Papendiek, Queen Charlotte's assistant keeper of the wardrobe - "In 1789 An African Prince of the name Bridgetower, came to Windsor with a view of introducing his son, a most possessing lad of ten years old, and a fine violin player. He was commanded by their Majesties to perform at the Lodge, where he played a concerto of Viotti's and a quartet of Haydn's, whose pupil he was; both father and son pleased greatly. The one for his talent and modest bearing, the other for his fascinating manner, elegance, expertness in all languages, beauty of person, and taste in dress. He seemed to win the good opinion of every one, and was courted by all." Source: *Court and private life in the time of Queen Charlotte: being the journals of Mrs Papendiek by Mrs Charlotte Louisa Henrietta Papendiek (Bentley and Son, London: 1887)*

Complete with the stamp of Royal approval, young Bridgetower arrived in Bath in November and took the city by storm. King George III and 550 guests attended his first concert at the Assembly Rooms in December. The local newspapers were fulsome in their praise: "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". *Bath Morning Post, December 1789*

"The amateurs of music in this city received on Saturday last at the New Rooms the highest treat imaginable from 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." *Bath Chronicle*, 3 December 1789

Bridgetower Senior seemed to be something of a genius in public relations. Before and after the performance he strolled along the promenade with his son dressed in 'Turkish' costume, attracting the maximum of attention. Afterwards he issued a lofty letter of appreciation addressed to the "Nobility, and Gentry, Visitors and of that wonderful City - Bath". His skills were clearly appreciated, and not only in terms of ticket sales. *The Bath Journal* notes that: "The greatest attention and respect was paid by the nobility and gentry to his elegant Father, who is one of the most accomplished men in Europe, conversing with fluency and charming address in several languages." Within the same month young Bridgetower sold out two more concerts in Bristol, on Christmas Eve and New Year's Day.

There is a certain irony in the effusiveness and the ostentatious tears of the "African Prince", in view of a report in *The Times* a month later - "Miss Cantelo's Benefit Concert at Bath was not equal to her friends' expectations, notwithstanding Harrison and Young Bridgetower both exhibited. The Black Prince, father of the Violonist, by being too officious, has lost the countenance of most of his benefactors, as his Concert showed last Saturday morning at the Lower Rooms - not fifty attended." Miss Cantelo had sung in support at young Bridgetower's debut, and one can only imagine her feelings.

George's first London appearance took place at one of the Lenten oratorio performances at Drury Lane Theatre on 19 February 1790, when he played a concerto between the first and second parts of Handel's *Messiah*. The next day the *Public Advertiser* and the *London Chronicle* praised young Bridgetower for having provided "utmost satisfaction", but both papers were eager to report on the African Prince and his delight in his son's success.

It is very likely that the success of the Drury Lane concerts attracted the attention of the Prince of Wales because a few months later, on 2 June, Bridgetower and the Austrian violinist Franz Clement, another child prodigy, gave a benefit concert at the Hanover Square Rooms under the Prince's patronage. The boys (with two slightly older musicians, "Ware and F. Attwood") played a quartet, and one of the audience, the Abbé Vogler (a famous German composer and teacher, subsequently immortalised in a poem by Browning) calculated that the aggregate age of the string quartet was under 40, since Bridgetower was 10 and Clement only eight and a half years old. It seems that from this point on Bridgetower enjoyed the patronage of the Prince.

Bridgetower's principal violin master, under the Prince's direction, was François-Hippolyte Barthélémon (long-term orchestra leader at the Royal Opera). Bridgetower is also said to have studied the violin under Giovanni Giornovich (Ivan Jarnovic), the Italian-born Croatian composer and virtuoso violinist. In addition, he studied composition with Thomas Attwood, organist at St Paul's and professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

After this initial year young Bridgetower was well and truly launched into his life as a professional musician. On 15 April 1791 he played in the violin section at the Haydn concerts in London, organised by the impresario Johann Peter Salomon. At the Handel commemoration at Westminster Abbey in the same year, he and Johann Nepomuk Hummel, a fellow child prodigy, dressed in scarlet coats, sat on each side of Joah Bates the organist, pulling out the stops. By coincidence there were to be interesting parallels in the two boys' lives. Hummel (1778-1837) had been a pianoforte pupil of Mozart's in Vienna, and in later life he succeeded Haydn as Prince Esterházy's *Kapellmeister*. He became an intimate of Beethoven's and also fell out with the great man, just as Bridgetower was to do later on.

In 1792 Bridgetower played in several of the oratorios at the King's Theatre under Thomas Linley's management (24 February to 30 March), and on 28 May he played a concerto by Viotti at a concert given by Barthélémon, at which Haydn also performed.

Although the Prince Regent is best remembered for his turbulent private life and his political conflicts, he was also central to much of the practice of artists and musicians in his time. The finest musicians of the time had his patronage or support, and many artists of the time came from all over Europe drawn by an atmosphere in which the arts flourished. His much lampooned Marine Pavilion at Brighton remains a sparkling monument to 18th-century creativity and style.

The violinist and composer Viotti, who found his way to London at the same time as Bridgetower, was the son of a blacksmith in Piedmont and reckoned to be the greatest classical player of his day - as well as the greatest innovator. Samuel Wesley (1766-1837) was a composer - son of Charles and nephew of John Wesley - who spent most of his career fighting for improvements in church music. His genius was such that the ruling circles in church and court overlooked the fact that he had been jailed for debt and spent a year in a lunatic asylum. These were among the individuals who now became young Bridgetower's friends and mentors.

Bridgetower was clearly determined to earn his living and, equally, was capable of doing so on the professional circuit. Regardless of the Prince's patronage he also took the sort of freelance jobs which were available. He is recorded as taking part in an evening's entertainment at the King's Arms in Cornhill, given by Charles Claggett, "Harmonizer of Musical Instruments". On this occasion (31 October 1793) the showpiece was Claggett's "Aiuton, or Ever Tuned Organ, an instrument without Pipes, Strings, Glasses or Bells, which will never require to be retuned in any Climate... To be had at the King's Arms, Cornhill and at the Musical Museum in Greek Street, Soho. Price One Shilling".

In the *Musical Directory* for 1794 his name and performances get a straightforward listing - "Bridgetower, George, Violin". He took part in a concert given by the Prince of Wales in aid of the distressed Spitalfields weavers in 1794. On 6 November 1794 he played a concerto in the style of Viotti for a benefit in Salisbury. As a member of the Prince's band he had to divide his activities between the Pavilion in Brighton and Carlton House in London, and his work and friendships clearly established the foundations for his future role in the development of professional musicianship.

In 1802 Bridgetower obtained leave to visit his mother, who lived in Dresden with another son (a cellist), and to go to the baths at Karlsbad and Teplitz. At Dresden he gave concerts on 24 July 1802 and 18 March 1803 which were so successful that, having obtained an extension of leave, he went to Vienna in April 1803.

In Vienna, supported by stylish performance and his Royal connections, he was welcomed into the "highest musical circles". Prince Lichnowsky, a Polish aristocrat and Beethoven's patron, introduced him to the composer, who had already begun sketching the first two movements of what was to become the *Sonata for Pianoforte and Violin in A* (Op.47), the 'Kreutzer' Sonata. This work was first performed at a concert given by Bridgetower at the Augarten-Halle in Vienna on 24 May 1803, Beethoven himself playing the piano. The sonata was copied out from Beethoven's original hurried notation, and was barely finished in time for the première. The piano part of the first movement was only sketched, and Bridgetower was required to read the violin part of the second movement from Beethoven's manuscript. He did this with aplomb, delighting an audience which included Prince Esterházy, Count Razumovsky (the Russian admiral turned diplomat and friend of Beethoven) and the British ambassador.

Bridgetower's own memorandum of the event, written on a copy of the manuscript, records an alteration he introduced in the violin part (imitating the passage-work of the piano in the first movement). This pleased Beethoven so much that "he jumped up exclaiming, 'Noch einmal, mein lieber Bursch!' ('Once more, my dear fellow!')". He also presented Bridgetower with his tuning fork, which is now housed in the British Library.

The story of the dedication to the *Kreutzer Sonata* is revealing about the cordial and open relations that Bridgetower enjoyed with his colleagues. The Violinist J.W. Thirlwell writing in the *Musical World* (December 1858) remembers that – "In respect to the Kreutzer Sonata, Beethoven told me, that when it was written, Beethoven and he were constant companions, and on the first copy was a dedication to his friend Bridgetower, but when it was first published, they had some silly quarrel about a girl, and in consequence Beethoven scratched out the name of Bridgetower and inserted that of Kreutzer, a man whom he had never met."

Sure enough, the original manuscript includes the inscription 'Sonata mulattica composta per il mulatto Brischdauer, gran pazzo e compositore mulattico' ('Mulatto sonata composed for the mulatto Bridgetower, great fool and mulatto composer').

Bridgetower's concert seems to have gained a reasonable profit (1140 florins), and even before it he seems to have been determined to cut a figure in Viennese society. Beethoven wrote a letter of introduction to a 'Baron Wezler', asking him to help Bridgetower meet people, and describing him as – "a very skilful virtuoso and master of his instrument". George seems to have inherited some of his father's shape-changing facility because, in his application to the authorities to hold the concert, he signs himself 'August Bridgetower'.

Back in London, Bridgetower gave a concert on 23 May 1805 under the patronage of the Prince of Wales, in the New Rooms, Hanover Square (the programme also refers to an F. Bridgetower, a cellist, possibly the violinist's brother. As a matter of interest, after the euphoria of the first year in England there had been no mention in any of the journals about his father, 'the African Prince', but a report in *The Times* for September 1805 seems to offer a clue. The report refers to 'impostures' detected in the neighbourhood of Exeter and brought before the magistrates, one of which was "the pretended Rev. John Augustus Polygreen Bridgetower, otherwise Lieutenant-General Mentor, lately serving under Toussaint L'Ouverture, otherwise the Black Prince, etc. This person speaks fluently the English, French, German, Italian, and Polish languages".

In the circumstances Bridgetower's career was notable for the friendship and respect he enjoyed amongst his peers. The composer Viotti addressed him as "My dear George". He was known to be close to such luminaries as Johann Cramer, the German-born pianist, composer and music publisher. He was a close friend of the organist Thomas Attwood. Dr Charles Hague, Professor of Music at Cambridge, frequently invited him to play at his concerts, and Samuel Wesley left an appreciation of him which began – "George Polgreen Bridgetower, whom they used to denominate the African Prince, is justly to be ranked with the very first masters of the violin".

Bridgetower was elected to the Royal Society of Musicians in London on 4 October 1807, and in June 1811 he took the degree of B.Mus. at Cambridge, where his name was entered at Trinity Hall. His exercise on the occasion was an anthem to words by the poet F.A. Rawdon, which was performed with full orchestra and chorus at Great St Mary's Church on 30 June 1811. *The Times* on 2 July commented that "the composition was elaborate – and rich and highly accredited to the talents of the Graduate".

During this period Bridgetower taught the piano, and in 1812 published a small piano work entitled *Diatonica Armonica*, which was dedicated to his pupils. Typically, a letter dated 1812 from Doctor Crotch refers to Bridgetower being "frequently in the company of the Prince Regent" and begs his favour in securing the Prince's patronage.

His name appears the Philharmonic Society's first season in 1813, in the fourth programme leading the performance of Beethoven's 'Quintett'. In the sixth programme he plays second violin in a quartet by Mozart. He was probably an Associate at that point, because he was recommended for membership in 1817 and re-admitted on 6 November 1819, when the notice he received also mentions that when attending concerts he is entitled to be accompanied by "Mrs Bridgetower".

Bridgetower's wife's maiden name was probably Drake, but little else is known about her, apart from the fact that she still seems to be travelling with him when he wrote to Madame Fouché in 1847. Up to this point he is mentioned from time to time in various letters and memoirs, Rome (1825 & 1827) in London (1843 & 1846) in Vienna and Paris (1848). A letter from Vincent Novello, the organist, publisher and composer who led the Bach revival in Britain, is signed "your much obliged old pupil and professional admirer".

The end of Bridgetower's life is shrouded in mystery. He probably inherited a sum of 800 Saxon dollars from his mother in 1832, in response to a public notice which was posted in *The Times* in 1832, asking for claimants to the property of "Mary Ann Bridgetower" who had died in Budissen, Saxony in 1807. He was rumoured to have died in 1850, but his death certificate shows that "George Polegreen Bridgetower, Gentleman", died at 8 Victory Cottages, a small back street in Peckham, on 29 February 1860, and was buried at Kensal Green cemetery. Victory Cottages was apparently also known as Norfolk Street, and the rate book records the inhabitant of No.8 as 'Bridge'. In September 1959, a few months before his death, Bridgetower made a will leaving his entire property, under £1000, to the sister of his wife, maiden name Drake.

Bridgetower's life was extraordinary in its talent, determination and faithfulness to his art. Like his great contemporary, the violinist Viotti, music was the medium which transformed his circumstances and sustained him. Like his father, Bridgetower learned everything there was to learn from his environment and turned it into a gem of performance, which he shared with his colleagues, his audiences and his pupils. To the generations which succeeded him Bridgetower's legacy was not only about music, it was also about the possibility of transforming and transcending one's circumstances, and about the contribution it was possible to make in shaping his environment, even under the most difficult circumstances. The final irony was that this 'African Prince' turned out to be – undeniably – a prince of European culture.