

Chineke! Europe's first professional orchestra of black and minority ethnic musicians launches

Its founder double-bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku talks to Jessica Duchen

TUESDAY 01 SEPTEMBER 2015

When the Chineke! Orchestra steps on to the Queen Elizabeth Hall platform on 13 September, the audience should notice something unusual. One of those uncomfortable truths about classical music is that most symphony orchestras in Europe still consist mostly of white and white-Asian people. Chineke, the brainchild of the double-bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku, is Europe's first professional orchestra made up entirely of black and minority ethnic musicians.

The idea is to bring together and showcase the wealth of talent among these under-represented performers. "It is about raising awareness, trying to level the playing field, altering the status quo a little bit and changing perceptions," says Nwanoku.

Born in London to a Nigerian father and Irish mother, Nwanoku has been mulling over these issues for years, from her vantage point as a founder member of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, a popular media commentator and broadcaster, and a professor at the Royal Academy of Music. Her recent programmes for BBC Radio 4, *In Search of the Black Mozart*, about the 18th-century violin virtuoso and composer the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, sparked wide interest in historical musicians of colour.

A major example to follow was the Sphinx Organisation, set up by the violinist Aaron Dworkin to help young black and Latino musicians in the US. But the ultimate inspiration struck Nwanoku at the performance last year by the Kinshasa Symphony Orchestra at the Southbank Centre. "One thing I noticed at that concert," she says, "was the incredulity on the faces of the philanthropists and politicians in the audience, looking at a stage filled primarily with black people." It was with the idea of changing this response that the Chineke! Foundation and Orchestra was born.

She found immediate support around the classical music industry for the idea, with plenty of offers of rehearsal space, collaboration and concerts; and, though having never fundraised before, she sourced £100,000 towards the costs. Choosing the right name took a while, but one night, says Nwanoku, "I literally sat bolt upright in bed. Chineke! The name chose the project."

The word is an exclamation used in the Igbo language, roughly equivalent to "Wonderful!" in English, she explains. "'Chi' means the god of creation of all good things and this word hit the nail on the head."

Nwanoku has personally recruited her performers from around the UK and Europe.

"I wrote to lots of people, looking for suggestions," she says. "If I've had two or three recommendations for someone then I'd look them up, check them on YouTube, speak to their old teachers. Some of the players are just amazing." Most are in their twenties and thirties; some are older; a few are still teenagers. "Bangladeshi, Indian, Sri Lankan, Mauritian, Iranian, Caribbean, African, you name it, they're in my 60-piece orchestra. They've come from everywhere."

No British orchestra today has a black principal conductor, but taking the baton for this first concert is Wayne Marshall, who was born in Oldham to parents from Barbados; he is currently principal conductor of the WDR Funkhausorchester Cologne. The violinist Tai Murray leads the orchestra and among other players, to name but a few, are Samson Diamond, who started on the violin as a child with Buskaid in Soweto; Margaret Cookhorn, the principal contrabassoonist of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; and Charlotte Barbour-Condini, a finalist in BBC Young Musician of the Year as a recorder player, but here is playing the violin.

Not all musicians Nwanoku approached were quite as keen. She cites the case of a musician who had turned down a trial for a post in a leading orchestra, anxious about being the only person of colour and fearing the offer might have been made primarily to tick a box. "That's one job Chineke! has to do, because there are barriers in black people's minds as well," says Nwanoku. "They've got low self-esteem and because everyone's talking about diversity, they think 'Oh, do they want me only because I'm black?'"

"I would love to change the expressions on people's faces, black and white," she says. "I would love people to look at an orchestra of any colour and not see it as a novelty. I'd like to see all orchestras that don't have members of diversity begin to have them. That needs work on both sides. Once it begins to happen it means we're making progress – all of us.

Sir Simon Rattle has written a ringing endorsement. "Chineke! is not only an exciting idea but a profoundly necessary one," he has declared.

"The kind of idea which is so obvious that you wonder why it is not already in place. The kind of idea which could deepen and enrich classical music in the UK for generations. What a thrilling prospect."

Chineke! Orchestra's launch concert is on 13 September, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 (0844 875 0073)