

Chi-chi Nwanoku – a former student at Kendrick School



Chi-chi Nwanoku's biography:

Chinyere Adah Nwanoku OBE was born in London in June 1956.

She was a student at Kendrick School.

She is a double bass player and professor of Historical Double Bass Studies at the Royal Academy of Music.

She was a founder member and principal bassist of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, a position she held for 30 years.

Of Nigerian and Irish descent, she is the founder and Artistic Director of the Chineke! Orchestra.

The Chineke! Orchestra the first professional orchestra & junior orchestra in Europe to be made up of a majority of black and minority ethnic musicians.

Chi-chi Nwanoku



Chi-Chi Nwanoku, the founder of Europe's first black and minority ethnic orchestra talks to Ivan Hewett in *The Daily Telegraph* about the challenges of building an ensemble from scratch.

'Almost two years ago, on September 13 2015, something happened at London's Royal Festival Hall that was both ordinary and extraordinary. An orchestra dressed in sober black filed on stage, followed by the conductor, and gave a spirited and subtle performance. The critics were enraptured.

That's the ordinary part. The extraordinary part was that not a single face on the platform was white. This was the debut of Europe's first black and minority ethnic (BME) orchestra, Chineke! And just to make the point that this was a historic moment, the first piece on the programme was by a black composer: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who in his heyday rivalled Handel in popularity.

Now the orchestra is well on the way to being an established part of the musical scene. It has played several concerts at the Southbank, and St George's in Bristol, where it is a resident ensemble. It has a recording under its belt, with another soon to come, has made an overseas tour and has an office and a board of trustees. On August 30, it plays its first Prom.

"I can't believe we've got this far. I thought Chineke! might be just one concert and then nothing," says founder Chi-chi Nwanoku, 61. Born to an Irish mother and a Nigerian father, she's an unstoppable, fizzing, passionate bundle of energy. She's also one of London's best-known musicians. Anyone who goes regularly to concerts will have seen her in the double-bass section, where her vigorous style always gets noticed. She brought the eyes and ears of an expert to the job of creating an orchestra.

It began four years ago with a conversation with Ed Vaizey, who was Minister of Culture in David Cameron's government. "He said to me, 'Why is it only you we ever see on stage in orchestral concerts?' and at first I didn't know what he meant," says Nwanoku. "Then I realised he meant musicians of colour. I had never really thought of myself in that way. I spend my whole life surrounded by white people in orchestras, I defined myself by what I did, not the colour of my skin. But of course he's right. How often do you see a black person in an orchestra? Almost never."

To build her orchestra, Nwanoku had to call on players overseas, including Tai Murray, a violinist, and Wayne Marshall, an organist. She has also created the Chineke! Junior orchestra for players aged 11 to 18, which aims to bridge the gap between the gifted young BME musician and institutions of higher education. Here, just as with white players, it's parental encouragement and a supportive school environment that make the difference. Charlotte Barbour Condini, a 21-year-old violinist in Chineke! who is about to study at the Royal Academy of Music, says: "Gifted black kids... have to be exposed to classical music and if schools aren't doing it, and they don't hear it at home, that's not going to happen."

Another Chineke! member, Desmond Neysmith, a cellist, believes that the orchestra could have a profound effect on the art form. "There's a huge repertoire of music by BME composers out there already, and we are creating a new repertoire. My hope is that Chineke! will continue to grow long after its original purpose has been fulfilled."

