

Change Agent

With the Chineke! Orchestra, **Chi-chi Nwanoku** is creating opportunities for classical musicians of color in the U.K. and Europe, with a year-round schedule of concerts, plus an orchestra of young musicians mentored by the professional musicians. Here, she speaks about the orchestra and her long-term goal: to create a future generation in which Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse classical musicians are no longer a rarity but are part of the norm.

founded the Chineke! Foundation in 2015. Chineke!'s motto is: "Championing change and celebrating diversity in classical music." The organization aims to be a catalyst for change in British and European orchestras. Our ethos is of inclusion and creating a safe space for under-represented musicians of color to flourish and know they belong in the classical music industry.

I'm a double-bass player—first and foremost. But I discovered I also had a knack for pushing doors open and creating a platform for my orchestra, Chineke!

In 2014, I attended the 20th-anniversary concert of the Kinshasa Orchestra, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, at the Royal Festival Hall in London. It was a fantastic evening. The Kinshasa musicians—all self-taught, and who had never had access to the quality of instruments or tuition that we take for granted in this country—were outstanding. That this orchestra was celebrating its 20th anniversary, having overcome so much adversity, was extraordinary. But even more interesting was the audience's reaction: they seemed surprised. Why was this, I wondered? Was it perhaps that they were *hearing* works they expected to hear in a concert hall, to a *standard* they expected to hear in a concert hall, but by an orchestra they did not expect to *see* in a



Chi-chi Nwanoku (foreground) with fellow Chineke! Orchestra musicians at London's Royal Festival Hall, November 2020.

concert hall? They were *hearing* one thing and *seeing* another!

This was the lightbulb moment for me. I came out of that concert determined to change how people viewed Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the U.K. I wanted to turn events like the Kinshasa Orchestra concert from a novelty into something entirely normal. Within 24 hours I had spoken to leading orchestras, venues, the government, the British Council, and conservatory heads. All were in agreement: something needed to be done.

I started thinking about the idea that would become Chineke!—that Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse musicians

like me have a place at the heart of our orchestras and concert halls. My idea was to form a fully professional orchestra of Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse musicians. The orchestra would stand on its own merits: it would be artistically excellent. For the first time, the orchestra would place Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse musicians in the public eye, performing in a professional environment where they were not the minority, where their ethnicity would not be a barrier or a curiosity, where every last one of them felt that they truly belonged, so they could concentrate on their performance, and nothing else.

Crucially, there would also be a junior orchestra, mentored by players from the professional orchestra, who would also act as natural role models for the younger musicians, developing the next generation. The challenge was in making these ambitions a reality with very limited resources, especially in the beginning.

In September 2015, Chineke! launched as Europe's first majority Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse orchestra. With musicians from over 40 nationalities, the group has a truly international flavor. The Chineke! Junior Orchestra launched on the same day. They represent the next generation, one in which Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse classical musicians are the norm. Our launch concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall was a moment I will never forget, the crowd rising to applaud us as we walked on stage. But launching Chineke! was just the beginning of my journey. **S**

Double bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku OBE (Order of the British Empire) studied at London's Royal Academy of Music, where she is a professor and fellow, and with Franco Petracchi in Rome. She is the founder and artistic and executive director of the Chineke! Foundation, which encourages diversity in the classical music industry through the Chineke! Orchestra and Chineke! Junior Orchestra and community engagement work.