

The Tobi Adeyemi Foundation Charity Lecture Series
An Overview of the 2017 Lecture delivered by Chi-Chi Nwanoku OBE

By

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Keeping faith with its nascent and admirable tradition of selecting an eclectic mix of guest speakers from a variety of professional backgrounds, to deliver its annual autumn lecture, this year, the Tobi Adeyemi Foundation presented as its keynote speaker, the accomplished classical musician and distinguished double bassist, Chi-Chi Nwanoku OBE.

Chi-Chi Nwanoku delivered a passionate, provocative, challenging and inspirational lecture. During which she delved into, and shared, aspects of her formative years and 35-year career as a professional classical musician. She spoke engagingly about her current endeavours as a champion for the increased inclusion of aspiring Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) musicians in the classical music industry. She also spoke passionately about her role as the pioneering visionary behind the formation of Europe's first Black and Ethnic minority orchestra.

Describing herself as someone with an inclination for music from childhood, she credited her parents (an Irish Mother and Nigerian Father) for setting her on the path to becoming an accomplished classical musician. From an early age, they admonished her to be industrious in her endeavours and to strive for excellence in whatever she did. Emphasising to her that as someone from a BME background, there would always be the expectation and requirement for her to work harder than her white peers did, in order to achieve recognition and success for her efforts.

Adhering to her parents' prescription for success, Chi-Chi said she worked hard to become a classically trained musician. Remaining true to this ethos, she forged a successful career in the classical music industry. As she progressed in her career, she began to achieve recognition as a double bassist for her versatility, dynamism and professionalism. Performing with notable distinction at numerous orchestral concerts. Due recognition and reward, for her musical talent and contributions were soon to come in the form of MBE and OBE awards from Queen Elizabeth II.

However, as successful as she had become in her career, Chi-Chi, revealed that it never quite occurred to her that she was often almost the only non-white face in the various orchestras in which she performed. She attributed this lack of awareness to an overwhelming preoccupation on her part with the sound of her music, rather than its colour. However, she said that this narrow focus was soon to change in an unexpected and eventful way.

In 2013, she had a meeting with the then Conservative Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey. He questioned her as to why she was the only BME face he ever saw performing at orchestral concerts. As the profundity of his observation sank into her, she began to think about this issue. However, it was not until the following year, after attending a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, where the Kinshasa Symphony Orchestra from the Democratic Republic of Congo performed with admirable distinction, that she felt the need to take steps to answer the 'Ed Vaizey' question. Spurred on by the brilliance of the Kinshasa Symphony Orchestra's performance, and the surprised reaction of the audience to it that night, as well as a misguided attempt by a certain stakeholder to take undue credit for it, she became convinced that she had to do something about it. Even though at this point, she was not sure what this would be. She said that she began to ask herself a series of probing questions. Some of which, centred upon the fact that the musicians in the Kinshasa Symphony Orchestra were self-taught and

had none of the opportunities available to British musicians (aspiring or established). She confessed that watching them distinguish themselves that night represented a 'light-bulb' moment for her.

Not long after this event, Chi-Chi said she had another meeting with Ed Vaizey. During which he encouraged her to form an all-black orchestra. She latched on to his suggestion, believing that the formation of such a group would help to create an environment in which BME musicians could concentrate solely on their music and not their colour.

One night, while at home and thinking about how to bring the idea to fruition, the name '*Chineke*' came to her by inspiration. The name '*Chineke*' derives from the Igbo language in Nigeria. It is a composite word, comprising '*Chi*' (meaning God) and '*Neke*' (meaning creation). A rather apt name, capturing the creative essence of what she was about to embark upon. At this point, she said she felt determined not only to create a BME orchestra, but also to raise its profile across the country.

Chi-Chi said the necessity of forming a BME orchestra became more compelling to her, when she realised that many cities across Britain today had large non-white populations. None of which, had any representation in orchestras, conservatories or in management within the classical music industry.

To her, this state of things represented a huge problem and was reflective of a profound lack of diversity in the classical music industry. She was careful to point out that she regarded the term 'diversity' as being much more than a buzzword or a politically correct gimmick. Diversity was much more important than that. In her mind, it meant the coming together of different ethnicities in collaborative partnerships to produce together what they could never produce on their own or by themselves. Such partnerships she believed would enrich the collective experience of the diverse ethnic communities in the country.

With great emphasis, she insisted that this 'diversity gap' required addressing in a decisive and definitive way. She cautioned against the temptation to 'tiptoe' around it in a politically correct manner. She advocated for a better understanding and framing of the issues involved. To her mind, one major problem militating against progress on this issue was the misuse and abuse of language. She cited the example of how the word 'black' is misused in certain instances. In its functional essence, it is nothing more than a descriptive word. Just like any other adjective is. In fact, it should be no different in conveying meaning and imagery in its descriptive function as words like 'white', 'tall' or 'short'. However, when the word 'black' is used in relation to a particular people group, it is often assumes pejorative connotations. Thereby, causing negative perceptions about the particular people group in question. Such negative perceptions then prevent a proper understanding of who these people really are and what their aspirations are. It also deprives wider society from being receptive to contributions from this particular people group. Continuing with this linguistic theme, she counselled against the tendency to generalise things by using inexact terminology. For example, she said that it was common to refer to Asia as if it were a country. When in fact it is a continent comprising many different countries. She went on to make the case that in the debate about a lack of diversity within her industry and beyond, there was a pressing need to use clearer language and terminology to identify and tackle the relevant issues at hand.

Chi-Chi than proceeded to identify a number of causes, which she believes contribute to a lack of diversity and BME representation in the field of classical music.

- At the pre-school stage, inadequate funding means that musical programmes are not supported. Thus, BME children miss opportunities to gain exposure to music at a crucial, formative period in their lives.

- Access to musical programmes in schools is increasingly becoming a matter of privilege, rather than a right, for children.
- Schools are increasingly treating music as less important to other traditional stem subjects.
- The erosion in Art education affects all communities, but BME communities tend to be hardest hit by this trend.
- Cuts to investments in Art education tend to affect BME communities more acutely than other communities.
- Many in BME communities do not see careers in classical music as financially rewarding.
- Too few BME role models exist in classical music; therefore, young BME people find it difficult to identify with the profession. To underscore this point, she cited the adage “*You cannot be what you cannot see*”.
- The absence of BME role models in the field of classical music means that it is difficult for those interested in it from BME communities, to see ways of career advancement in the profession.

Chi-Chi then argued that in her considered opinion, there is an urgent need for a radical rethink on how we value and evaluate classical music and music in general in this country. Whilst reiterating the importance for aspiring BME musicians, to have a portfolio of prized skills encompassing listening aptitudes, self-discipline, a good work ethic and attention to detail etc., she believed that affirmative action is required to redress long-standing inequalities. She was, however, careful to point out that what she meant by this is positive action and not positive discrimination. She said she was aware that the mere mention of the term ‘affirmative action’ would elicit charges of political correctness from those opposed to change. Prominent amongst such opposition, she said, was a vocal minority wholly resistant to change and determined to maintain the status quo. This minority is desirous of keeping music conservatories and orchestras rooted in the past. She encouraged the gathering not to fall subject to the influence or opinions of such people.

She was also careful to point out that she does not favour the introduction of quotas to solve the problem of the lack of diversity in her field of endeavour. Declaring that there are numerous talented musicians in BME communities who she is confident can thrive on their own merit without the need to resort to positive discrimination. Rather, she said, what we need is a level playing field upon which we can improve levels of diversity and inclusiveness for all.

She then went on to highlight the success story of Sheku Kanneh-Mason. A young BME classical musician who won the BBC Young Musician of the Year Award for 2016 at the age of 17. Sheku is a young BME musician of undoubted ability. A gifted cellist, who performed as a concerto soloist for *Chineke*, in its maiden appearance during the BBC Prom season this year. To Chi-Chi’s mind, Sheku’s success story validates the existence of an orchestral vehicle like *Chineke*. As it will serve as readymade platform to provide opportunities for other gifted BME young musicians to highlight their talents.

In her opinion, *Chineke* represents the way forward. She was careful to acknowledge, however, that its emergence represents only a beginning for now, but an important one nonetheless. She readily admits that there is much ground still to travel and that they are a long way away from their eventual destination. However, in order to facilitate their arrival at such a destination, existing dominant and limiting paradigms will need to shift place, in order for new and more inclusive ones to take root in their place.

On a more positive note, she acknowledged that there is now better recognition of the issues pertaining to the non-representation of BME musicians in classical music. What is now

required, she said, is action. However, for any such action to be meaningful, she said the following questions require answering:

- 1) Where are the BME musicians?
- 2) Where are their job applications?
- 3) How are their job applications treated and assessed?
- 4) When recruited, what are their retention rates within the industry?

She said she believes that providing answers to these questions will help to address and redress some of the problems faced by aspiring BME musicians in the field of classical music. Whilst she is confident that this process will be of immense help, she also felt that other approaches were required to deal with the issue, because in her opinion “*concrete problems require concrete action*”.

One such approach, which she favours and recommends, is the introduction of blind auditions as an integral part of classical music recruitment processes. Such blind auditions should mirror the approach seen on the BBC’s ‘Voice’ musical talent programme. On it, prospective contestants’ voices are listened to first, by judges who then choose or reject contestants on the particular merits of their voices. It is only after this happens that a revealing and unveiling of their respective racial hues to the judges, occurs. She said she was certain that prospective BME classical musicians would benefit immensely from such an enhancement to recruitment processes.

She said she believes that *Chineke* will foster whole generations of new BME musicians and will help to expose them to excellent classical musicians from all over the world. She emphasised that what young and aspiring BME musicians require was not a ‘*handout, but a hand up*’.

In concluding, Chi-Chi said that the last few years have been a period of awakening for her. They have led her to the realisation that there is a wealth of talent embedded within BME communities. She was convinced that we all share a love for the Arts and believes that it is imperative that a pipeline runs through all communities (privileged and deprived) to ensure that constant flows of talent pass through it to enrich our continued enjoyment of the Arts. She said that the industry should worry less about issues of political correctness and those resistant to the occurrence of positive change. Rather, she believed it should worry more about the fact it is excluding many talented people from it simply because of their particular ethnic origins. The industry, she said, should worry more about the loss of revenues to it, because of its exclusionary practices. Sounding more upbeat, she insisted that things do not have to remain the way they are. She advocated for the adoption of a united and consolidated approach to tackle the issue of a lack of diversity. She was confident, that with such a concerted approach, stakeholders and those interested in classical music, together could change perceptions, promote inclusiveness and improve diversity levels in the classical music industry. This way, everyone wins.

The lecture ended with a short video presentation showing *Chineke* performing at this year’s BBC Prom season. A sterling performance, which attracted high television viewing figures as well as an elicitation of positive reviews from critics, one of such being, Richard Fairman of the FT, who remarked:

“Its (Chineke) players from across the continent can feel that they have sailed through their debut at the Proms with their heads held high.”