



The **Chineke! Orchestra** burst onto the music scene in 2015 with a mission to “champion change and celebrate diversity in classical music”. *The Horn Player* editor, **Richard Steggall**, met up with four of Chineke!’s horn players to try to find out why we need this orchestra in the British musical landscape.

“During a school tour, aged 15, I had a lesson with the then Principal Horn of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. I played William Mathias’s *Horn Concerto* and in the following chat one of the first things he said to me was, ‘It’s such a shame you’re Asian because you’ll have such an incredible career ahead of you, just not in Vienna.’ I think he meant it in a very kind way. I don’t know if he intended it, but he made me realise that there are more than just musical obstacles that I’ll have to face.”

I’m chatting to Isaac Shieh, a natural horn virtuoso of minority ethnic Chinese background, currently studying for a doctorate at the Royal Academy of Music.

“I started playing the horn aged 7 in Hong Kong. I remember from very early personal observation thinking that Asians are not meant to be good at brass instruments. Even in the Asian orchestras you see a sea of whiteness in the brass section. It was ingrained early, and when I moved to Australia aged 10, I was aware of not seeing anyone that looked like me playing at a professional level. All these things slowly built up in my mind to thinking, well, maybe we’re just not cut out for it.”

“At school I developed severe performance anxiety, so I basically stopped practising for two years. It was caused by a few things. It’s certainly engrained in me that I have to be exceptional just to be on par with my colleagues and friends, and I think because I set the bar so high, any time I don’t quite reach there, I see myself as a failure. Just before I started at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (where I was assigned a performance psychologist as soon as I arrived!) I started playing in some of Australia’s professional orchestras. I would be sitting in the section knowing that the person next to me wanted me to screw



Isaac Shieh (photo: Dan Nubian)

up; the young Asian kid trying to mess up the ecosystem of the industry. I started getting very stressed about it but also thrived off it at the same time. It was a very hostile environment – that’s partly why I got into the natural horn and early music, because I hated the orchestral environment so much. When I left in 2017 to study with Anneke Scott at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, I actually sold my double horn.”

“Nowadays the Chineke! Orchestra is the only symphonic-size modern orchestra that I work for regularly – it’s an environment I feel comfortable in.”

Ben Garalnick grew up on three different council estates in North East London; his mother’s from the Philippines and his father from Mexico. He started playing the horn aged 13 when Redbridge Music Service visited his school with a brass quintet.

“They did a little show and asked if anyone wanted to play these instruments, so I said yes and they gave me a short lesson on horn. From then on I couldn’t put it down and got my Grade 8 just in time to go to music college, the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. I was amazed when I found some students had been to boarding schools for music – I’d never heard of the Purcell School, or Wells, or even the National Youth Orchestra!

“I worked really hard at Birmingham for four years and then met a conductor from a new orchestra in Beijing. He auditioned me, offered me a job on the spot and I moved to Beijing. Shortly after I started in China, however, the pandemic happened so I moved back to London, and thankfully started working with Chineke!”

“If I had Chineke! growing up it would have felt much more comfortable being a minority in classical music. It’s an open and safe space for everyone. The first time that I didn’t feel like an outsider in an orchestra was working in Beijing, and the first time that I felt accepted in an orchestra was in Chineke!”

The Chineke! Foundation was established in 2015 by the double bass player Chi-chi Nwanoku OBE, to provide career opportunities for Black and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe. The Chineke! Orchestra, the Foundation’s flagship ensemble, was appointed as an Associate Orchestra of the Southbank Centre after its launch concert in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Over the last six years, the orchestra has performed across the UK and Europe, making its Proms debut at the Royal Albert Hall in 2017.

The Chineke! Orchestra works closely with its sister ensemble, the Chineke! Junior Orchestra, a youth orchestra of Black and ethnically diverse players aged 11-22, with senior players acting as mentors, teachers and role models to the young musicians.

Francisco Gomez, a successful freelancer based in London, started working with Chineke! in 2017. After growing up in the north of Spain, he moved to the UK to study for a Master’s degree at the Royal Academy of Music.

“I see the potential and reach of the orchestra – seeing people that would never usually go to a concert. There’s a huge percentage of the British population that have never previously set foot in a concert hall. It’s exciting to play and then see the amazing reaction from new-comers as well as the more regular audience – that’s the great joy of the orchestra. It’s not about competing with other orchestras playing the same repertoire, it’s about trying to widen the reach of classical music.

“This isn’t trying to force that, but trying to build a bridge to societies that have less access to classical music and also to

build a bridge between different types of music. There might be African folk music in a classical work – people may recognise these tunes and that warms their heart. It’s not just about visually recognising people like you but hearing music, maybe from your past, your country. That will hook you in, and it will make you want to return to the concert hall.

“From where I sit as a newcomer in English society, I find it hard to see how a lot of kids, or their parents, could think this was a career for them. Chineke! provides a wider level of accessibility for kids of backgrounds that would never have considered classical music before; for parents who wouldn’t have considered going to a concert. Usually, if someone from a diverse background sees an orchestra in their tails on the TV, then they’ll think that’s for someone else, but Chineke! allows different communities to approach classical music. It’s showing kids that people from any community can play.”

One horn player who has been playing with Chineke! from the very start is Derryck Nasib:

“When I first heard about the Chineke! Orchestra and was invited to join, the idea of it being Europe’s first majority Black and multi-ethnic orchestra was not the key factor in my thinking at the time. I was in my fourth year of undergraduate studies at Trinity Laban and what was uppermost in my mind, was that here was this golden opportunity to be part of a high-level orchestra of professional musicians. So, there was nothing more surprising to me than my own initial reaction on arriving at the first rehearsal of this groundbreaking orchestra, taking a look around me and thinking, ‘OK, this is weird’.

“Prior to that first rehearsal, I can honestly say that in all my experiences of attending classical concerts, I don’t remember ever thinking that I wasn’t being represented on stage. I was always so caught up in the music. Call me colour-blind or naive, I can’t explain it – it just simply never crossed my mind.”



Derryck Nasib

“But these past six and a half years of being with Chineke! have presented so many opportunities, not only to perform works by Black and ethnically diverse composers, which I may not necessarily have had the opportunity to perform otherwise, but also being able to participate in workshops in which children as young as primary school age can be introduced to such works. Being a member of Chineke! has also opened doors for me to perform with other established orchestras, such as the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, with whom I made my debut as an extra last summer and also in the autumn on their European tour.”

“I, and many others like me, have been very fortunate with the timing of the emergence of this phenomenal orchestra. Without Chineke! I could not say with any degree of certainty that I would have had the immense pleasure and privilege of having the opportunities to perform at a high professional level.”

Even someone like Derryck, with his “colour-blind” personal experiences in the music business, appreciates the assistance Chineke! gives in opening professional doors, so what barriers are Black and ethnically diverse musicians facing?

Ben tells me, “If you walk into an audition as a white musician, you turn up and do your best. A female musician will do their best and hope the panel’s not sexist. A minority musician, will do their best and hope they’re not thinking “he plays well for a Black guy” or “he plays well for an Asian kid”. That’s not saying anyone on the panel is racist; it’s just a societal thing that transcends every employment field in Western culture.

“Then there’s the wealth issue. How do I get work in the UK? The only way for me is to pay for a Master’s, which I can’t afford, or start paying for consultation lessons. I don’t have the financial cushion to freelance and just wait for work to pick up.” [This is something that Chineke! are already trying to address with the Chineke! Alliance for Audition Support.]



Ben Garalnick

“Music is expensive,” Isaac points out. “There’s the culture of traditional white working-class music in brass bands, so brass players have a pathway into the profession (although this is less common with horn players). Minority musicians don’t have that pathway.

“In Spain there is a tradition of wind bands,” Francisco tells me. “My village is very small and it has a ‘Banda’. You could do football or Banda, that was about it. They had old instruments that got recycled when people retired or died; there’d be an old horn or clarinet. The horn was not thought of as some sort of grand instrument, it was just something to do in social leisure time in the village.”

I ask Isaac if we have a problem in this country with getting musicians from lower socio-economic backgrounds (including a large percentage of minority musicians) on a pathway to the profession?

“Most ethnically diverse kids, even my age, are probably first- or second-generation immigrants. When you immigrate to a country it usually means you are financially worse off (there are exceptions). You need money to adapt your lifestyle. You need to buy or rent a house and furnish it, which doesn’t leave any extra for paying for your kids to have music lessons. And if you do want to have lessons, there are cheaper instruments than the horn.”

I’m wondering about my own experiences teaching state school kids. I’ve often found that maybe second and third generation immigrants are so keen to do the best for their kids, and value musical education, that they’ll start them on strings or piano at a very early age – opportunities that the parents themselves didn’t have. It’s then difficult to get the pupils onto a brass pathway at a later stage.

“And on those instruments [strings and piano] there are role models,” Isaac continues. “Who are you going to look up to on the horn? There aren’t many horn soloists to begin with and most of them are white males. As a kid, if you see someone that looks like you playing the piano and someone that doesn’t look like you playing the horn, you will naturally gravitate to the piano. Chineke! has thrown a spotlight on this but it’ll take time, and the culture will need to shift from a mostly organic, but also slightly manufactured, point of view.”

Manufactured how? Should we be engaging in positive discrimination?

“It’s about empowering people who have historically been marginalised and democratising the balance of the musical hierarchy,” Isaac continues. “I recently saw a cartoon from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century about the suffragette movement saying, “No!” to women wearing trousers – we’ll soon have a shortage of trousers!’ Well, that’s not how it works. In terms of racial equality it’s the same thing. In the short term the entitled may lose out but we’re just trying to share the privilege. No one is losing out in the long term.

“There’s a difference between equal opportunity and equal outcome, and certainly equal outcome is too manufactured as



Chineke! Orchestra L-R: Ben Garalnick, Derryck Nasib, Isaac Shieh and Francisco Gomez

an agenda. Ideally, you'd want your orchestra to represent your social demographic – you'd see certain percentages from certain ethnic backgrounds, but cultures are very different. I'm from a Chinese background where you're discouraged to be a musician. My parents were one of the weird ones that actively encouraged me to do music and not do medicine!

"We also don't want the negative perception that we only got that job because of our skin colour (which is ironic because that was always the case for white people!) – it doesn't help our cause. It's not anyone's problem explicitly; the system's just set up that way. Some do turn a blind eye to it on purpose – passive participants – but we need to acknowledge it's a systemic issue rather than blame it on individuals.

"The racism in Spain is a big issue," Francisco says, "mostly because of ignorance, and that's why institutions like Chineke! are essential today. They provide knowledge on how diversity and inclusion can enhance all communities and expand everyone's view."

"Racism in Australia is quite explicit," Isaac adds. "Nothing outrageous but it's not hidden. People are very up front about it and in a funny sense it's kind of better because there's not the sort of cloak and dagger stuff. It hides in the politeness of UK society – what some call 'aversive racism'.

"A lot of people are unaware of certain biases. In Australia people accept they are racist but here they have a lack of awareness, as well as a lack of acknowledgement, of certain biases. Can you call someone racist when they don't mean it?"

This is a question I've recently been asking about Philip Farkas and his 2/3 top lip: 1/3 bottom lip embouchure system detailed in *The Art of Horn Playing*. Has the fact that so many horn teachers have traditionally taken this as gospel (even with the

set-up of Dennis Brain and others in very recent memory) helped gate-keep the horn as an activity for white-European male faces? It's a question I put to Ben:

"I'm going to dumb this down a lot: the horn was invented by the white man for the white man. White men have thin lips; white men also have fat lips. In those from minority backgrounds, however, you do get a disproportionately large number of those with fat lips – and I've got right proper fat lips. Back in the day, if you had fat lips teachers would put you on the tuba or the trombone. I maintain that Beth Randall (my main teacher at RBC) was the best thing that happened to my horn playing. She saw my embouchure and said, "That's a bit weird, we'll keep an eye on that" and her mindset was, if it works, it works, and if it encounters any problems, we'll fix them then.

"I've got a very unconventional embouchure because of my unconventional lips for the French Horn, so my mouthpiece sits a bit left, very low (upside down) and a little dug into my lip. I'm very stubborn about my embouchure because it's tied to who I am. These are my lips and I know how they work. In every single masterclass except one, I've been told, 'You need to talk to your teacher about your embouchure.' That exception was Javier Bonet – if you see the way he plays it makes sense. He said to me, 'I like your embouchure,' and I nearly cried. It was about the only validation that I'd ever received from someone who really understood how different it is.

"The more diverse we find our pupils playing the horn, the more problems like this we're going to encounter, and we need to go into it with a more open mindset, seeing what works for them. You can't force the Farkas embouchure onto a kid that doesn't look like the Farkas diagrams."

I sincerely hope there are more teachers around now, like Beth Randall, who are more flexible in their thinking than those of

## CHINEKE!

previous generations. I ask Ben if more flexible teaching can help remove some of the barriers for ethnically diverse children.

“To some extent, yes, but the whole culture has to change. I do a lot of work with the Chineke! Junior Orchestra and was recently doing an outreach project for them. A girl came up to me afterwards and said, ‘I think I might try this music thing.’ I was so happy to have inspired her and demonstrated that people from a lower social-economic working-class background could be a musician. The sad thing was that, aged 13, she was already more than aware that she’s going to find it hard being a woman and from a minority background.”

To me it’s clear: professional black and ethnically diverse musicians need Chineke!; potential musicians and audiences from minority and lower socio-economic backgrounds need Chineke!. In fact, the British music business needs Chineke! to create a spark, not just in Black and ethnically diverse musicians, but in all of us. It’s time for us all to consider how we fit into this picture.

Talking to Isaac, Ben, Derryck and Francisco has been a joy and an education: they are horn players willing to share their experiences so that we can all understand life outside our privileged bubbles. As I reflect on my own good fortune in being a white, middle-class male in the professional horn world, I can’t help but wonder if the success, or otherwise, of minority musicians relies upon their own good fortune: the teachers, mentors and

supporters encountered at an early age. I need to ask Derryck if he can put his finger on why his outlook may be different from others:

“I have never felt discriminated against in the field of music education, from playing in the orchestras in my local music service right through music college. I use the term ‘colour-blind’ loosely, and not as a proponent of the ideology. Nor had I, whether rightly or wrongly, really thought of myself as being particularly colour-conscious, but rather see/saw people as neutral, which may have been a coping mechanism. However, since the emergence of Chineke! and that phenomenal inaugural concert, I immediately realised the value and the place for such an orchestra.

“I recognise the value of Chineke! as ‘championing change and celebrating diversity in classical music’. I count myself honoured and privileged to be involved in the nurturing and mentoring of new, talented, up and coming black and ethnically-diverse musicians and being a role model for them.”

In a perfect world, Chineke! doesn’t need to exist, but change is slow. I doubt that it’ll happen in my lifetime but surely the end point of the orchestra is when its success makes it obsolete: when British classical orchestras really reflect the ethnic diversity of our society. Until then, the fewer of us that are “passive participants”, the faster that change will happen. **RS**

For more information go to [www.chineke.org](http://www.chineke.org)



## WOODHEAD HORNS

Expert repair, sale & manufacture of horns

Woodhead Horns offers a professional and friendly horn repair and sales service with workshops in London and Ampthill, Bedfordshire. Woodhead Horns is for every horn player, whether you’re one of the country’s leading musicians, or a beginner just starting out on your journey. Run by professionally trained horn players and repairers, we offer a specialised service with expert knowledge of all major makes of French horn.

With many years of experience in the horn repair industry, we are regarded as the go-to place for French horn players needing advice, repairs, or a new instrument.

A horn player’s approach | Fast turnaround on repairs | New and second hand horn sales | Friendly service | Crook making  
Insurance re-laquers | Extensive problem solving experience | Custom made mouthpipes | Free quotations | Baroque horns

### Monday, Tuesday & Thursday

The Old Sorting Office, 17A Church Street,  
Ampthill, MK45 2PL

### Wednesday & Friday

236 Webheath Workshops, Netherwood Street,  
Kilburn, NW6 2JX

tel. **+44 (0) 7970 971520**

email. **info@woodheadhorns.co.uk** [www.woodheadhorns.co.uk](http://www.woodheadhorns.co.uk)



Photo © Chris Huning 2009