

CONCERT

CHINEKE! ORCHESTRA

NJIOMA CHINYERE GREVIOUS
JOSEPH YOUNG



Wiener
Konzerthaus

FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

10 June
Wiener Konzerthaus

God, the creator of the universe and goodness: that and no less is the meaning of 'Chineke' in the Igbo language of Nigeria. The Chineke! Orchestra is Europe's first professional symphony orchestra with a majority of Black and ethnically diverse musicians. It was founded in 2015 and has taken international concert stages by storm. Now they are visiting Vienna for the first time. The evening begins with the liturgical and ecstatic sounds of the energetic *Four Black American Dances* by the young composer Carlos Simon. The core of the concert is *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor* by Florence B. Price, the first ever work by an African-American female composer to have been played by a large symphony orchestra. British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's violin concerto concludes the night. It is a programme like the Chineke! Orchestra itself, a celebration of the ideal of spirited diversity in classical music.

Duration
2 hrs,
incl. 1 intermission

Introduction
10 June, 6 pm,
introductory talk by
Marie Spaemann
and members of the
orchestra

PROGRAMME

Four Black American Dances (2023)
(Carlos Simon)

Violin Concerto in G Minor, op. 80 (1911)
(Samuel Coleridge-Taylor)

Symphony No. 1 (1932)
(Florence B. Price)

Musical Direction Joseph Young
Violin Njioma Chinyere Grevious

Violin 1 Julian Gil Rodriguez, Juan Gonzalez, Betania Johnny, Matt Oshida, Sarah Martin, Judith Choi-Castro, Sofia Yatsyuk, Aaliyah Booker, Lyrit Milgram, Imaan Kashim, Natalee Jeremic, Alfredo Reyes-Logounova **Violin 2** Julian Azkoul, Chelsea Sharpe, Steven Crichlow, Kourosh Ahmadi, Daniel Meyer, Doris Kuo, Sophia Kannathasan, Davinder Singh, Zagisha Kamil, Nadine Nagen **Viola** Deanna Said, Wei Wei Tan, Natalia Solis Paredes, Alison D'Souza, Beatrice Slocumbe, Jesse Francis, Manuel Camara, Nadia Eskandari **Cello** Adi Tal, Elliott Bailey, Laura Anstee, Marion Portelance, David Kadumukasa, Deni Teo, Mary Ann Ramos, Zara Hudson-Kozdoj **Double Bass** Roberto Carrillo-Garcia, Evangeline Tang, Aaron Barrera Reyes, Marcus de Oliveira, Thea Sayer, Fabian Galeana **Flute** Rowland Sutherland, Meera Maharaj, Daniel Shao (picc 1), Mina Middleton (picc 2) **Oboe** Lorraine Hart, Bernice Lee **Clarinet** Mebrakh Haughton-Johnson, Stephanie Yim **Bassoon** Andres Yauri, Daria Phillips **French Horn** Francisco Gomez, Derryck Nasib, Nivanthi Karunaratne, Isaac Shieh, Ping Wei Wu **Trumpet** Richard Kelley, Emily Mitchell, Rebecca Toal **Trombone** Chris Augustine, Jake Durham **Bass Trombone** Michaias Berlouis **Tuba** Hanna Mbuya **Timpani** Zubin Hathi **Percussion** Sacha Johnson, Jason Chowdhury, Kiyomi Seed
Harp Ruby Aspinall

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FREE REPUBLIC OF VIENNA AND WIENER KONZERTHAUS

ROOTS OF A NEW MUSICAL LANGUAGE

The Chineke! orchestra takes its name from the Igbo language exclamation *Chineke*, which refers to ‘God, creator of the universe and goodness’. The orchestra’s vision, which goes far beyond music, is thus etched even into its very name. As Europe’s first professional orchestra with a majority of Black and ethnically diverse musicians, Chineke! has symbolised the renewal of classical music since it was formed in 2015. Taking the motto ‘Championing change and celebrating diversity in classical music’, Chineke! considers itself not only an orchestra of the highest artistic quality, but also a social project: a space of visibility, belonging and cultural normalisation. The orchestra’s founder, double bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku, has said that ‘belonging is a basic human need – everyone deserves that’. She has equally pointed words for the orchestra’s central idea: ‘You can be what you can see.’ Participation needs visibility, and this is where music becomes a space to open new options in society.

The change delivered by the orchestra is thus even more profound than the people on the concert stage, altering the perception of music history itself. Chineke! grows the repertoire by reintroducing voices that have long been marginalised or forgotten, bringing to the fore how

diverse the classical music tradition has always been. This evening’s programme seems like a reappropriation of a history that had been rendered invisible: works by Afro-American and Afro-diasporic composers form the heart of the concert as a natural part of the canon.

This concert resonates particularly well in the context of this year’s Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) with its Republic of Gods programme. Many of the works focus on spirituality, ritual, memory and communal experiences. ‘Spirituality lives in the search’, as tonight’s conductor Joseph Young reflects, ‘in our longing to understand, to connect, and to move beyond ourselves. In the concert hall, music gives shape to that search. It becomes a shared ritual, where sound creates a bridge between the personal, the communal and the sacred.’

The concert opens with *Four Black American Dances* by American composer Carlos Simon – an orchestral treatment of four dances from Afro-American cultural history. Simon explicitly understands the work as an orchestral study of the music that is associated with ring shout, waltz, tap dance and holy dance. At the same time the composer notes that these dances are only a small extract

of the wide range of cultural and social differences in Black American communities.

The first movement, Ring Shout, picks up on an ecstatic religious ritual that was practised by enslaved Africans in the USA. Walking, clapping and stomping in a circle created a form of collective spiritual experience that perpetuated in African traditions despite repression. Simon's orchestral translation of this practice is striking: the use of a large wooden pole on a wooden floor board in the percussion section evokes the dancers' stomping while fast movements in the string and reed sections give a voice to the ritual's trance-like dynamics.

The subsequent Waltz references Afro-American communities' debutante balls from the 1930s. What had originally been a social ritual that was reserved exclusively for the white elites became a symbol of cultural autonomy and social participation within Black communities. Simon adopts the lithe elegance of the waltz but includes an echo of distance and fragility, allowing the traces of a history of social exclusion to remain audible beyond the surface.

Tap! focuses on tap dance, where the percussive rhythms are made by the

feet themselves. Simon transfers this idea straight into the orchestra. The characteristic clicking of tap dance shoes is imitated by tapping on the metal rim of the snare drum while short, sharply accentuated figures in the strings and jazz-inspired harmonies in the brass pick up the energy and virtuosity of this dance style.

Simon has created a powerful rendering of this spiritual ecstasy in music. Partly semi-improvised play by the orchestra evokes a community that is 'speaking in tongues' together.

The concluding Holy Dance takes us into the soundscape of Afro-American worship at services that still take place with boisterous celebratory energy in many churches today. Simon has created a powerful rendering of this spiritual ecstasy in music. Partly semi-improvised play by the orchestra evokes a community that is 'speaking in tongues' together: that murmuring speech in an unknown spiritual language that is an expression of religious rapture in Pentecostal churches. The music thus develops a rousing dynamic that turns

the concert hall itself into a space of communal experience.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Violin Concerto in G Minor, op. 80*, also takes on the theme of cultural transgression and struggling for visibility. The composer was born in London as the son of an English woman and a doctor from Sierra Leone. He was trained at the Royal College of Music in London under Charles Villiers Stanford and received Edward Elgar's support from a young age. Already around 1900, Coleridge-Taylor was one of the internationally best known and most successful Black composers. At the same time, he grappled intensely with his own origins as a descendant of enslaved people. He travelled to the USA several times, encountering there Afro-American spirituals and Indigenous music traditions.

'What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk music, Dvořák for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for these Negro Melodies.'

The violin concerto was written for the American violinist Maud Powell, who made a significant contribution to bringing his music to a wide audience. Coleridge-Taylor and Powell shared the

conviction that Afro-American spirituals and non-European music traditions can be a natural part of serious artistic music. In the programme notes for his *24 Negro Melodies, op. 59*, Coleridge-Taylor wrote: 'What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk music, Dvořák for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for these Negro Melodies.' In other words, he was seeking to develop an independent musical language in which European traditions and African roots blend into a new whole.

The soloist Njioma Chinyere Grievous has a special connection to this violin concerto, having been the first violinist to win the Sphinx Competition with Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's piece. The work combines the succulent sound of late romanticism with dancing rhythms and lyrical melodies. At the very start of the piece, the orchestra bursts into rich, fanfare-like sound from which the solo violin emerges. Virtuoso passages are interspersed with wide arcs of cantabile phrasing. Especially the long middle movement evokes an almost intimate soundscape with muted strings and delicately wistful melodies.

The early twentieth century premiere of the concerto initially had to be delayed when the orchestra score was lost at sea

on its way by ship across the Atlantic. It had to be copied out anew at speed. Eventually, Maud Powell premiered the piece in the USA at the Norfolk Music Festival in 1912. The European premiere followed a few months later, but Samuel Coleridge-Taylor did not live to see it, having only just succumbed to pneumonia at the young age of 37 years. It is all the more remarkable that the work has reappeared on concert stages in our day to be discovered again as a voice that had in the interim been repressed from musical memory.

The concert closes with Florence Price's *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor*, one of the most important works of twentieth-century American music history. Price entered the symphony to the national Rodman Wanamaker Composition Competition in 1932 and was awarded the first prize in the symphony category. This honour attracted the attention of conductor Frederick Stock, who premiered the work with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. It was the first symphony composed by an African-American woman to have ever been performed by a major US orchestra. Price was living as a divorced single mother in Chicago at the time and had not turned to large-format orchestra works until she was in her

forties. For her, this achievement spelled the beginning of her public recognition as a composer. Although she continued to compose until her death and was recognised throughout the USA, her orchestral works were only rarely performed. It is only recently that her works have increasingly found their way into the international concert repertoire.

Musically, Price combines European symphonic traditions with Afro-American musical traditions, spirituals and dances. The influence of Antonín Dvořák's understanding of an 'American' symphonic tradition that deliberately looks to spirituals and non-European music cultures comes to the fore with particular force. At the same time, Price continues on the path that Samuel Coleridge-Taylor had chosen before her: the development of a symphonic musical language that does not include Afro-diasporic influences as exotic additions, but places them at the musical heart of the piece. Recurrent pentatonic melodies, hymnal choral movements and references to spirituals shape the orchestral sound.

The third movement, the famous Juba Dance, is particularly notable. The Juba emerged among enslaved Afro-Americans as a rhythmical dance that uses

clapping, stomping and body percussion. This practice formed the basis for the development of a highly complex rhythmical culture that has also left traces in tap dance, jazz and pop music. Price integrates this tradition not as a folkloristic citation but as a natural part of the symphonic form. The music that emerges tightly binds together cultural memory, national identity and spiritual expression.

‘When composers draw from folk traditions, they are not only preserving culture; they are awakening spiritual histories and embedding them into the orchestral sound.

I hear that throughout this programme. From Florence Price to Carlos Simon, the music speaks through tradition and spirit – connecting ancestry, memory, struggle, joy and transcendence.’

The combination of tradition and awareness of own roots, the creation of an individual musical language together with a quest for spirituality is what joins the works performed this evening by Chineke! Orchestra conducted by Joseph Young: ‘When composers draw from folk traditions, they are not only preserving culture; they are awakening spiritual histories and embedding them into the orchestral sound. I hear that throughout this programme. From Florence Price to Carlos Simon, the music speaks through tradition and spirit – connecting ancestry, memory, struggle, joy and transcendence.’ In the context of the Republic of Gods the music aptly appears here as a space that allows new legends to rise: open, polyphonic and carried by the understanding that art belongs to everyone.

CHINEKE! ORCHESTRA

The Chineke! Foundation has become a pioneering force in classical music, reshaping the industry by championing Black and ethnically diverse talent while redefining what orchestral excellence looks like on today's global stage. Renowned for its artistic brilliance and powerful mission, Chineke! provides vital career opportunities for both established and emerging musicians across the globe. Founded in 2015 by visionary double bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku, CBE, Chineke!'s work is powered by a cohort of about 100 professional players in the Chineke! Orchestra. Alongside them is the Chineke! Junior Orchestra, for talented musicians aged 11–22 as well as a vibrant Learning & Participation programme. 2022 saw the launch of Chineke! Voices, Europe's first majority Black and ethnically diverse vocal ensemble.

Chineke! performs regularly across the UK and tours internationally throughout Europe and North America. As a Resident Orchestra at London's Southbank Centre, they perform throughout the year at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Royal Festival Hall and are proud to have close associations with Fairfield Halls in Croydon and venues across the UK.

Every Chineke! programme celebrates composers of Black and ethnically diverse heritage, spotlighting overlooked figures from the past while commissioning, performing and recording new works by living composers today. Beyond the stage, Chineke! is investing in the future of the industry through initiatives such as the Composer in Residence programme and newly launched Assistant Conductor scheme, offering hands-on, career-shaping opportunities for the next generation of orchestral talent.



The US-American conductor **Joseph Young** is regarded as one of the most exciting orchestral conductors of his generation and is celebrated for his expressive, innovative style. He has conducted, amongst others, the San Francisco Symphony and the Seattle Symphony, as well as the London Symphony Orchestra internationally, and has made guest appearances in Madrid and South Africa. In the opera sector he has worked with renowned companies such as the Lyric Opera of Chicago. A recording with the London Symphony Orchestra is due to be released in 2025/26, alongside productions in New York and Omaha. Until 2025, he had a significant influence on the Berkeley Symphony as its Music Director. Young also teaches at the Peabody Conservatory, is committed to supporting young talent and has received numerous awards, including from the Solti Foundation.

The violinist **Njioma Chinyere Grevious** captivates audiences with her expressive tone and stylistic elegance, and is celebrated internationally. She is the recipient of the 2024 Avery Fisher Career Grant and a multiple award-winning winner of the Sphinx Competition. She made her solo debut at the Concertgebouw, Carnegie Hall and Wigmore Hall and performs worldwide with leading orchestras. Performances in the USA and a European tour with Chineke! are planned for 2026. She is Artist in Residence with the Chicago Philharmonic and a member of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. A graduate of the Juilliard School, she is also deeply committed to music education and the promotion of young talent. Njioma plays a valuable historical violin made by the Italian violin maker Pietro Guarneri.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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