

Lifestyle



Chineke! Orchestra with conductor Andrew Grams perform with members of the New York Philharmonic during a rehearsal at David Geffen Hall in New York City. — AFP photos



Chi-Chi Nwanoku, founder of Chineke! Foundation poses after a rehearsal with Chineke! Orchestra at David Geffen Hall in New York City.



Principal clarinetist Anthony McGill of the New York Philharmonic and conductor Andrew Grams perform with Chineke! Orchestra during a rehearsal at David Geffen Hall in New York City.



Chi-Chi Nwanoku (right), founder of Chineke! Foundation performs with Chineke! Orchestra during a rehearsal at David Geffen Hall in New York City.

EUROPE'S FIRST MAJORITY BLACK ORCHESTRA DEBUTS STATESIDE



Members of the Chineke! Orchestra perform during a rehearsal at David Geffen Hall in New York City.

After more than three decades in the classical music industry, British double bassist Chi-chi Nwanoku began grappling with the question that had troubled her for years: Why was she consistently the only Black musician onstage? "Why did I never ask anyone about it? Why did we never talk about it?" she describes wondering. "Was I being tolerated, or were people just completely unaware?" "Or were people okay with the status quo?" In 2015 Nwanoku took a leading role in creating a more diverse future for classical music, which, from musicians to conductors to repertoire, traditionally skews heavily white. She founded Chineke!, Europe's first majority Black and ethnically diverse professional orchestra, which this week played at the prestigious New York Philharmonic's David Geffen Hall in Manhattan's Lincoln Center.

The performance was part of their long-awaited North American debut tour—it was among the many performances the pandemic pushed back—which included stops in New York, Ottawa, Toronto, Boston, Worcester and Ann Arbor. The New York show featured the pioneering composer Florence Price's Symphony No. 1, along with a rendition of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto featuring the New York Phil's principal clarinet Anthony McGill.

'Door-opener'

The London-headquartered Chineke! echoes similar efforts in the United States, including the Detroit-based Sphinx organization that promotes representation of Black and Latino artists in classical music. Yet the League of American Orchestras, which represents professional and

amateur symphonies across the United States, found in a 2014 study on diversity that just 1.4 percent of orchestra musicians were Black—and there's little reason to believe much has changed.

"Because the great majority of American orchestras are not individually transparent with racial and ethnic data on their artists, we do not know the percentage of Black orchestral artists in our orchestras today," writes the Black Orchestral Network, a collective of Black musicians from more than 40 orchestras launched in 2022. "From our vantage point, however, we have seen little meaningful progress."

It's mind-boggling to Nwanoku, who told AFP during a rehearsal break that "it seems to me that the only colleagues of color that I see who have a job in an orchestra in this country are

those who are exceptional." "We have to be that much better to actually be given a job," Nwanoku believes that especially for young people, seeing more diverse faces onstage is "an immediate door-opener."

"It's the most incredibly winning thing to feel represented on a stage," she said. "Even if when you walk through the front of house to buy a ticket, if you don't see anyone who looks like you, that is immediately uncomfortable." "But when you see people that look like you in any place—in the supermarket, at the train station, at the concert hall, at the cinema—you immediately feel that is a place that I can walk into with confidence," Nwanoku continued. "You can be what you can see." —AFP

'Man on Wire' Philippe Petit still risks it all at 73

Almost 50 years after his famed tight-rope walk between the Twin Towers in New York, Philippe Petit still has his head in the clouds. Clad in an orange shirt and red suspenders, the 73-year-old French native peers across the vast lobby of a Washington museum, the site of his next exploit. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a short red string. "Sometimes I stop and say, 'It would be nice to put a wire there,'" he told AFP, showing how he holds it out at arm's length to get a sense of the set up.

"This little rope, for me, it helps me to dream of crossings." Even at his advanced age, Petit still plans to make the walk without safety net or harness. At 50 feet (15 meters), his high-wire act in Washington will be at a much lower height than the 1,350-foot World Trade Center skyscrapers—but the risk of death certainly remains.

He'll step out onto the wire Thursday evening—this time with permission—above a watchful gala audience in the National Building Museum's voluminous central hall. He began prepping for the event years in advance.



French high-wire artist Philippe Petit makes preparations ahead of his performance in the Great Hall of the National Building Museum in Washington, DC. — AFP photos

Next to where the cable is anchored to a wall, lies a thick notebook containing hundreds of detailed sketches and calculations. "I will never retire," says the energetic septuagenarian. "I have a lot of projects up my sleeve."

'Life of passion'

Petit says he keeps plans for possible tight-rope locations—"extraordinary places... canyons, icebergs and incredible buildings"—stored in a box at his home in New York state, where he has lived for decades. From childhood, "I started not following the lead of authority," he said, describing how he climbed everywhere—on kitchen chairs, in the trees. "And then one fine day, quite naturally, I put a rope between two trees."



A feature film, "The Walk" starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, and the Oscar-winning documentary "Man on Wire" tell the historic story of his 1974 crossing, under the wide eyes of New York pedestrians and police. Tired of being reduced to those few minutes, he prefers to bring up other moments from his "life of passion."

"Two performances are never the same... each time is an adventure where I learn, where I discover," he says in front of the wooden beams, pulleys and measurement tools that will support his aerial stroll Thursday night. "With my 50-55 years of experience, I am more in control," says the veteran daredevil. —AFP



Plans and cables are pictured ahead of French high-wire artist Philippe Petit's performance in the Great Hall of the National Building Museum in Washington, DC.



French high-wire artist Philippe Petit makes preparations ahead of his performance in the Great Hall of the National Building Museum in Washington, DC.

DNA analysis of Beethoven's hair provides clues to his death

Ludwig van Beethoven died in Vienna nearly 200 years ago after a lifetime of composing some of the most influential works in classical music. Ever since, biographers have sought to explain the causes of the German composer's death at the age of 56, his progressive hearing loss and his struggles with chronic illness. An international team of researchers who sequenced Beethoven's genome using authenticated locks of his hair may now have some answers. Liver failure, or cirrhosis, was the likely cause of Beethoven's death brought about by a number of factors, including his alcohol consumption, they said.

"We looked at possible genetic causes of his three main symptom complexes—the progressive hearing loss, the gastrointestinal symptoms and the liver disease ultimately leading to his death due to liver failure," said Markus Nothen of the Institute of Human Genetics at the University Hospital of Bonn, one of the co-authors. Beethoven, Nothen said, had "a strong genetic disposition to liver disease" and sequences of the hepatitis B virus were detected in his hair. "We believe the disease arose from an interplay of genetic disposition, well documented chronic alcohol consumption and hepatitis B infection," Nothen said.

No explanation for deafness

Johannes Krause of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology said hepatitis B "was probably quite common at that time in the early 19th century." "At least in the last few months before his death he was infected with hepatitis B virus," Krause said. The authors of the study, published in the Cell Press journal Current Biology on Wednesday, were unable to determine any genetic causes for the progressive hearing loss that eventually left Beethoven completely deaf by 1818.

The researchers analyzed eight locks of hair said to be from Beethoven and determined that five of them were "almost certainly authentic," said Tristan Begg, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge and the lead author of the study. "Because we recon-



In this file photo a life mask (left) and a death mask of composer Ludwig Van Beethoven are on display at the Funeral Museum in Vienna, Austria.

structed the genome from ultra-short DNA fragments, we only confidently mapped about two-thirds of it," he said. One of the most-famous strands of hair, known as the "Hiller Lock," which has been the subject of previous research and found to contain high levels of lead, was revealed not to be from Beethoven at all but from a woman.

Family secret

Beethoven, who was born in Bonn in 1770 and died in 1827, battled gastrointestinal problems at various times of his life as well as jaundice. "There were periods of acute illness where he was unable to work, for example, his month-long period of acute illness in the spring of 1825," Begg said. The researchers, by studying Beethoven's DNA data and archival documents, also uncovered a discrepancy in his legal and biological genealogy.

They found an "extra-pair paternity event"—a child resulting from an extra-marital relationship—in Beethoven's direct paternal line, said Toomas Kivisild of the Institute of Genomics at the University of Tartu. Kivisild said it occurred sometime within seven generations that separate a common ancestor, Aert van Beethoven, at the end of the 16th century and Beethoven's birth in 1770. Begg said it was no surprise it was not recorded. "You wouldn't necessarily expect an extra-pair paternity event to be documented," he said, it being "probably clandestine in nature." "You cannot rule out that Beethoven himself may have been illegitimate," Begg said. "I'm not advocating that," he stressed. —AFP