

**C**hampion sprinter to double-bass player is an unusual career progression, but as Chi-Chi Nwanoku says, 'When one starts anything it's the passion that drives you rather than the end'. A tiny, striking woman of Irish and Nigerian descent (her father is of the Ibo ethnic group and her mother from Tipperary) with a shock of curly dark hair and clear blue eyes, Nwanoku radiates energy and becomes palpably excited when discussing her both her athletic and musical careers.

Now principal bass with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and professor of double bass at Trinity College of Music, Nwanoku entered the musical profession by default. At the age of eight, she was spotted by a respected athletics coach. He trained her intensively, and she entered and won her first competition at age 11, even though she hadn't even learnt the proper sprint start. She laughs that even then, 'losing was not in my vocabulary.'

The young star would almost certainly have had a place at the Montreal Olympics, but a serious knee injury incurred at the age of 17 playing football tragically shattered her hopes. Nwanoku was unsurprisingly 'devastated' at this abrupt end to her athletic career and sighs that she 'felt like her life was over'. As she was already an excellent pianist, her school encouraged her to channel her fierce energy and ambition in a musical direction, speculating that if she took up a really unpopular instrument she could pursue a successful career in music.

Nwanoku followed their advice, studying the neglected double bass at Cambridge Tech then the Royal Academy of Music, after which she launched into a successful professional career. Besides her work with Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Nwanoku also plays with some of London's other period-instrument ensembles and recently released her first solo recording: Dittersdorf and Vanhal double bass concertos with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, a collaboration which arose when artistic director Gregor Zubicky invited her to make a solo recording. While she made the recording on her 17th-century Amati, the orchestra itself does not specialise in period instruments. But Nwanoku points out that its members are keen to pursue a stylistic approach to music and to interpret music in a historically appropriate manner.

A correct approach is important for Nwanoku, who says that 'I love vibrato, but the minute one vibrates, one is effectively distorting a note, and you have to have a jolly good reason to do it. I encourage my students to learn how to make every single note sound like an open string, with purity, clarity and precision.' She is adamant that regardless of the instrument's daunting dimensions, 'the size of the player doesn't matter, as it's the technique that counts.'

This is clearly true, as a physically delicate pianist can produce an impressive sound out of a grand piano. But people still marvel at seeing a woman playing the double bass. 'I have had to yawn and listen to comments for the past 24 years, as like the trombone, the double bass has a stigma attached to it,' she says. 'A few of us have managed to convince people that you can have huge power and strength on an instrument with fine sensitivity and making a huge sound has nothing to do with how heavy or how tall or what sex you are.'

Nwanoku claims that 'the joy of being a double-bass player is the amazingly empowering feeling of being at the bottom musically. You not only provide the bass, but are also an intrinsic part rhythmically of what's going on. When orches-

tras don't have drums or trumpets the bass becomes vital. I think a lot of conductors are wising up to bass players, as music begins from the bottom, as far as I'm concerned, and not with the tune. I believe that the orchestra dances above our line. If we play a stodgy bass line it pulls everything down'. A fiery challenge to any violinists under the impression that double bassists are merely resigned to their lot being the musical world's wallflowers.

But apart from orchestral music there is significant bass solo repertoire, much of it dating from the 18th century, and written by bass virtuosi and composers including Johann Matthias Sperger (1750-1812), Friedrich Pischelberger (1741-1805), Joseph Kampfer (1735-1796), Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-1799) and Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739-1813). However until Adolf Meier unearthed 19 baroque basses in Vienna and discovered that they were writing for an instrument very different than its modern counterpart, much of their music had been considered virtually unplayable. Meier's vital discovery was that the Viennese basses were originally built as five stringed instruments, and that the most common tuning at the end of the 18th century was a combination of 3rds and 4ths with only the A and D similar to contemporary orchestral tuning.

Nwanoku marvels at the difference between the two tunings, saying that 'I always wondered why people played the

Dittersdorf second concerto with huge chunks cut out: after relearning the piece with the Viennese tuning it just opened up. Sperger wrote about 15 bass concertos, which I would like to learn now, as they are almost impossible to play well with conventional tuning.'

However this fertile period was followed by a 100-year silence. The modern double bass does not lend itself to the sort of virtuosic writing favoured by romantic composers and Nwanoku points out that 'there are all sorts of techni-

cal problems, as rushing around and playing fast things is difficult. There is also the question of projection. High instruments are the most obvious solo instruments as you can hear them easily because they project over an orchestra, but the lower instruments travel less well and are not as agile.' So with the end of court and chapel orchestras and the advent of the modern orchestra, and as 19th-century composers explored different sonorities, the double bass was abandoned in favour of its higher pitched cousins.

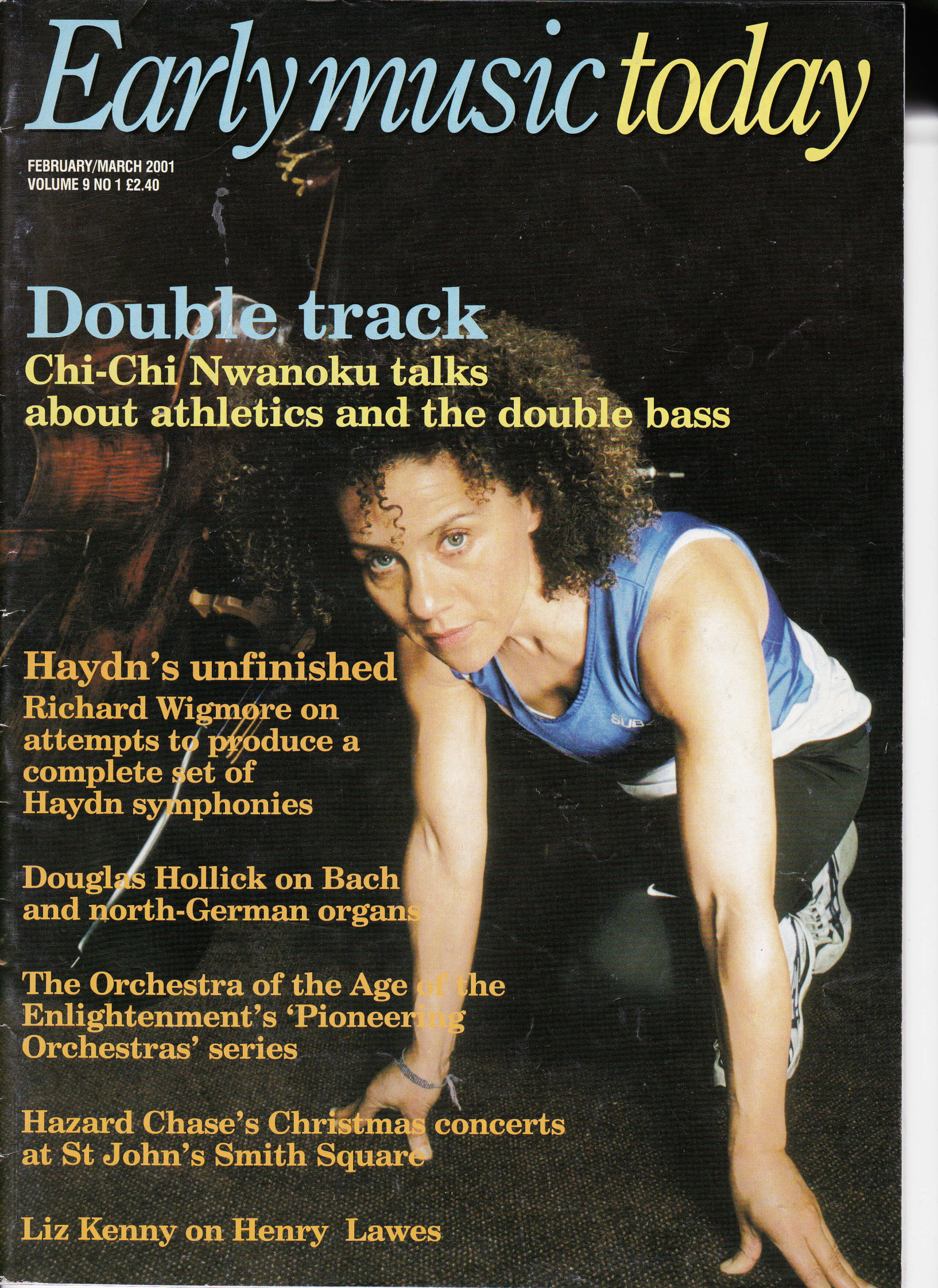
Russian virtuoso Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951) made the first solo bass recordings in the early 1920s, awakening new interest in the instrument, which has made a brave recovery in recent years. Nwanoku remarks that ten years ago she knew all the bassists, as there were so few of them, but now often discovers CDs with unfamiliar names. And how does her musical career compare to her original athletic dream? She says that 'the double bass and sprinting are linked by a similar discipline. I look down on to my strings and they look like a track to me. When I walk out on to the stage it's like walking out into the stadium. The psychology of the build up, before the gun goes off or before the conductor arrives is very similar. As when I was eight years old and couldn't wait for the race to start, now I get an incredible high from performing.'

*Chi-Chi Nwanoku is the soloist with the Swedish National Orchestra, conducted by Paul Goodwin in: Johann Baptist Vanhal, Double Bass Concerto in D major; Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Double Bass Concerto No 1 in D major and No 2 in D major. Hyperion CDA67179*

*'I always wondered why people played the Dittersdorf second concerto with huge chunks cut out'*



# Early music today

A woman with curly hair, wearing a blue and white athletic tank top and black leggings, is in a starting crouch on a dark surface. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

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## Double track

**Chi-Chi Nwanoku talks about athletics and the double bass**

**Haydn's unfinished  
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Enlightenment's 'Pioneering  
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**Liz Kenny on Henry Lawes**



# Double vision

*Chi-Chi Nwanoku set out to be an athlete and found herself a double-bass player. Vivien Schweitzer went to find out about one of early music's more unusual career paths*

*Chi-Chi Nwanoku: 'I believe that the orchestra dances above our line. If we play a stodgy bass line it pulls everything down'*

