

Chi-chi Nwanoku

Kimon Daltas talks to the double bassist, radio presenter and Classical Star judge about the teachers who influenced her career

Chi-chi Nwanoku arrives at our mid-morning interview straight from training – or rather straight from the frustration of having her session interrupted by a false alarm at the gym, and subsequently getting stuck in traffic. Gym? Training? Shouldn't that be 'rehearsal'?

No, it shouldn't. Because the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's principal double bass, founding member of Endymion ensemble, Radio 3 presenter and Trinity College of Music professor Chi-chi Nwanoku MBE, is training to compete as a veteran in the 100m sprint. Which brings us to one of the most unlikely beginnings imaginable to an international performing career: an injury on the sports field.

Nwanoku was a keen and able pianist, but her main interest and, everyone believed, her future, lay in sport, specifically running. In her first year of A-levels she was already a sprinter for Berkshire, as well as being on the county's First XI hockey team. A serious knee injury, however, sustained during a one-off game of football for a women's team in Reading, put a stop to those ambitions and left Nwanoku suddenly short of a life plan.

'I had never considered music as a career,'

she admits. 'I had only ever been to two concerts in my life, because at weekends I went dancing with my brothers and sisters! I played the piano, but my life wasn't surrounded by the classical music world. But when the seriousness of her injury became obvious, the head of music at her girls' grammar school had a suggestion. 'She called me into a meeting with the headmistress and said: "We think you could have a career in music if you take up a really unpopular orchestral instrument." I had to make a quick decision.'

The school had a flourishing music department and orchestra, but no one played double bass. The department owned two basses that hadn't seen any use in years, so all that was left was arranging some lessons.

'I had just won a school music competition playing Chopin on the piano, for which the prize was free lessons at the school. I had my piano lessons outside anyway, so it meant I could have other lessons. It all just happened to fall into place. I needed a teacher, so they wheeled in this wonderful man called Reginald Holt, who was mainly a trumpet player!

'In the first lesson he put the bow in my hand and I just ground away at open strings, and

a week later I was in the school orchestra, waiting for open strings to come up.'

Nor could her progress afford to be any slower, since, all of three months later, Nwanoku was auditioning for a course at the Cambridge Tech, with a view to developing her bass playing so that she could apply for a place in a music college.

She was accepted basically on the strength of her piano playing. Once in the bustling student haven of Cambridge, however, like many double bassists before her, Nwanoku found that demand for her services was huge, and what she still lacked in technical ability, she made up in boundless enthusiasm.

'Within minutes of arriving in Cambridge I was snapped up by CUMS [Cambridge University Music Society]. As there was only one other bass player in Cambridge at the time, word got around, and soon I was playing in every orchestra. I was in the deep end all the time, but I did end up learning all the repertoire.' It was also at this time that she met most of the other founding members of Endymion, including Quentin Poole, Helen Keen, Jane Salmon and Krysia Osostowicz. In

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those two years, despite working with a teacher she was none too fond of, Nwanoku got up to Grade 7. The Royal Academy of Music, wise enough to see this speedy progress as true potential, offered her a place.

'I had a glorious teacher in my first two years at the academy, John Walton, who was the last bastion of the old English school. He was still playing on gut strings, and not because of any interest in period instruments!'

By anyone's standards, Nwanoku's progress at the academy was speedy. 'I was at the Royal Academy. I felt like I'd been given a second chance, and I became the world's biggest sponge. Having gone from feeling I was in by the skin of my teeth in my first year, by the fourth year I won the bass prize. I always idolised everyone else at the academy, and I was more surprised than anyone!'

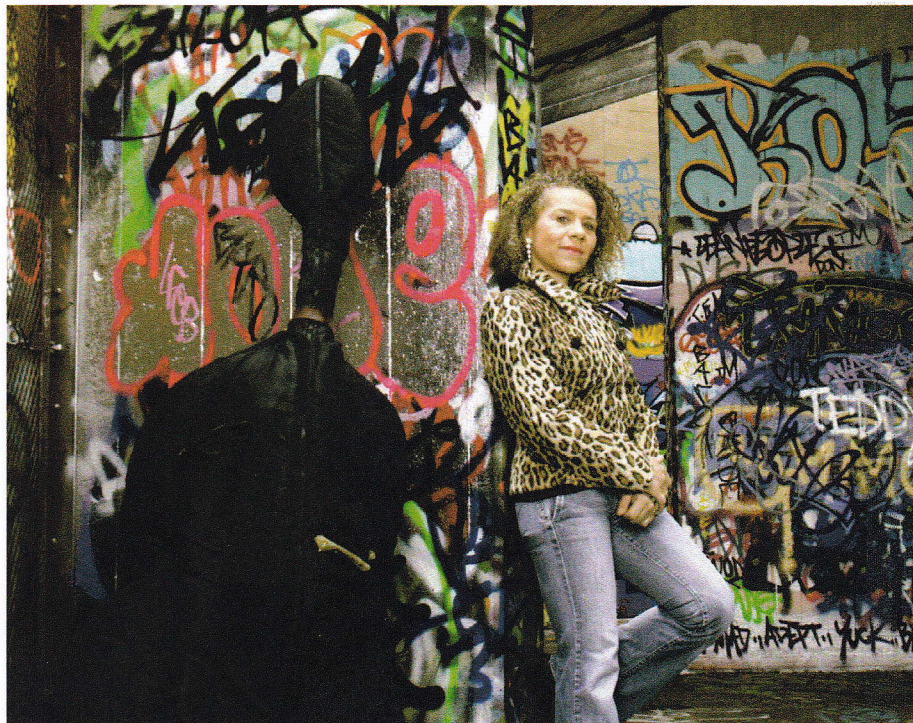
Her last two years were under Robin McGee – Nwanoku speaks of both Walton and McGee with great affection, but it is also clear that she felt frustrated. 'By that time, Endymion had already been formed, and we were playing new works. Suddenly I'd see the word "solo" written above my part, and it would go up into the treble clef, with harmonics and all these extraordinary things, and I'd think, well, where is that? I've never been shown that! I'd simply never been taught that area at all.

'Coming to the end of my four years at the academy, I had Robin McGee literally standing over me forcing me to write applications to the London orchestras. In four years, I only ever played in a symphony orchestra – only once in a chamber orchestra. But I wasn't happy just going through and becoming a rank-and-file bass player, it just didn't suit my personality. I was hungry for something else.'

For a performance of *Dumbarton Oaks*, Endymion had to be expanded, and in came Melissa Phelps and Peter Bucocke, both experienced chamber musicians, who had both been on chamber music courses in Italy and come across Franco Petracchi. They advised Nwanoku that he would be the one to inspire her, as well as sorting out any technical issues.

Nwanoku's first contact with Petracchi was at the course he ran in Sermoneta, in the summer after finishing at the Royal Academy. On arrival, all the participants were gathered together and asked to audition in front of the 'maestro', and each other. 'I thought I'd play the concerto for which I'd won the bass prize at the academy, thinking, "well I can definitely play that now". Except, beforehand in the practice rooms I could hear someone next door playing the same concerto even louder, even faster.'

When her turn came, she played the slow movement from Bottesini's second concerto. 'As I played, he started walking around me in a slow circle. At the end he screamed, and he was



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gesturing as if he was pulling his hair out. He said "Chi chi! Chi chi! Technica, terrible. Terrible! Musica...? Very good. You stay here, you study with me: technical. Technica, every day."

At the end of the three-week course, Nwanoku felt her playing had improved immeasurably, and she plucked up the courage to ask Petracchi if he would take her on as a proper student. His answer was firm: 'I take ten students. And I already have ten students.'

But Nwanoku, not one to give up so easily, had already signed up for the maestro's second course of the summer in Siena, where the standard was even higher. She recalls: 'At one point my thumb was bleeding, and I had lumps everywhere. You'd see grown men crying after their lessons. He reduced people to a pulp. He had me in tears several times, but not because he was nasty: all he was doing was pushing, and he knew how far he could push someone.'

At the end of the Siena course, Nwanoku again cornered Petracchi: 'I said, "come on Franco, you know I'm a hard worker and I want to learn with you". And he told me "some of the students here have come to show me what they can do, but you have improved so much. As I told you in Sermoneta, I only have ten students, but now I'm having 11."

There followed two years of going backwards and forwards from London to Rome, all the time balancing increasing work commitments. After this period, Nwanoku was ready to throw herself into professional work full time. However, she would never claim to be the finished article ('I'm still learning now!') and she believes very strongly that there are no teachers that can teach you everything, and one has to know when to let go. 'All my teachers

have given me something. There are times when I get a little flash; I could be in the middle of a rehearsal playing something completely unrelated, and I'll think, "Now, that's what Reginald Holt meant".

As for when to let go, there is no steadfast rule, but Nwanoku herself has never had a student for much longer than four years, and often before that she will urge them to move on to someone else. 'I think it's really important to keep as open a mind as possible. I don't think students should be clones of their teachers. I don't think I have all the answers, especially because of the way I learnt – there were large chunks of technique I didn't explore until my twenties, while most of my students now have started on the mini-bass as early as six years old.'

The 'mini-bass' scheme was set up 21 years ago by the Yorke Trust, under the inspired leadership of Rodney Slatford, to do what seems completely obvious: develop educational materials but also, crucially, down to $\frac{1}{8}$ size instruments, provided by the Stentor Music Company, to enable children to learn from an early age – just like most other instruments.

And on this subject, Nwanoku waxes lyrical. 'I've never taught anyone from such a young age, but I just see the results, and it's been an absolute godsend. It's been going for long enough now to really see the outcome. The whole persona of the double bass has completely changed.

'To have played the instrument from as young an age as people who play the violin or cello has obvious consequences. It is turning out instrumentalists who are not in any way intimidated by the size of the bass or anything like that, and it's completely changed the face and the performance level of the instrument today.'