

Coleridge-Taylor, Grieg and Beethoven – Chineke! Orchestra Concert, Warwick Arts Centre

Curtis Leung, University of Warwick

Keywords: Chineke!, Coleridge-Taylor's *Petite Suite de Concert*, Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 in F*, decolonising classical music, interpreting Beethoven

The much-anticipated return of Chineke! to the Warwick Arts Centre after two years certainly lived up to expectations. The repertoire for the first half of the concert was Coleridge-Taylor's *Petite Suite de Concert*, followed by Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A Minor*. In conventional concert tradition, the symphony – Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 (Pastoral)* – was played by itself after the interval.

Warwick Arts Centre's location on the University of Warwick campus meant the concert attracted an audience of a diverse age range, with a notable number of students attending. While the hall was not quite full, this was easily disguised by the rapturous applause the orchestra received when entering the stage with conductor Anthony Parnter.

The performance started with a bang, both literally and figuratively, as the orchestra delivered an energetic interpretation of Coleridge-Taylor's *Petite Suite de Concert*. The opening [capriccio](#) was particularly engaging and set the scene for the rest of the piece. Equally enjoyable were the [sonnet](#) and [tarantella](#). While the sonnet was light, chirpy and loose, the tarantella danced ahead, matching the energy of the opening caprice due to the 6/8 feel of the movement and Parnter's [dynamic](#) conducting, which pushed the orchestra in a race-like manner that was sufficiently disciplined yet fittingly whimsical. A central aspect of the *Suite* is its easily memorable themes, all of which were executed engagingly by different sections of the orchestra throughout the piece.

Coleridge-Taylor's light music was juxtaposed with Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A Minor*. The musical contrast between the pieces was vast with their similarities ending after their introductory orchestral hits. The *Concerto* is structured in traditional form, with two fast [allegro](#) movements sandwiching the slower [adagio](#) movement. The opening of the first allegro was superb – performances of iconic themes can sometimes disappoint, but this was no such time. The balcony seats offered a complete view facing the young, up-and-coming soloist, Amiri Harewood (piano), whose poise and command were palpable from the opening timpani roll. My vantage point did not come without its disadvantages, however, as the sound of the piano sometimes blended in too much with the texture, such as in the closing sequence of the piece as the piano was lost amid the percussion and strings. Other than this minute criticism, the *Concerto* was a huge success, justifying the standing ovation that Harewood and the orchestra received.

The orchestra played Beethoven's sixth to end the show. The symphony was an interesting choice given its straightforward harmonies, which contrasted with the complex *Concerto*. Named 'Pastoral', the symphony represents nature; this was fitting considering the orchestra's name: Chineke! derives from the [Igbo](#) word 'Chi', which means 'the spirit of creation' (Church, 2015). The dainty opening allegro entitled 'Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande' ['Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the countryside'] was followed by a lyrical cover of the [andante](#). It was in the andante that the woodwind soloists

came into their own, delivering characteristic performances as the nightingale (flute), quail (oboe) and cuckoo (clarinet) (Barbour-Condini, 2022). The final three movements of the symphony were played *attacca*, although changes in expression kept them relatively distinct. One point to note was that the fourth movement, ‘Gewitter, Sturm’ [‘Thunder, Storm’], was less abrupt than other interpretations. Perhaps this was done to keep a level of consistency through the movements, as a foreshadowing that the storm would eventually blow over, with the ‘Shepherd’s Song’ [‘Hirtengesang’] prevailing.

Chineke!’s mission is to celebrate and promote diversity within classical music and provide opportunities for ethnically diverse classical musicians within Europe. Sometimes this is done through performances of music from lesser-known, ethnically diverse composers. In the first Chineke! concert I attended (in Salisbury, 2017), the orchestra performed a piece by Chevalier de Saint-Georges – one of the first-known classical composers of African ancestry. This time, the audience was treated to Coleridge-Taylor, who was born to an ‘African man and Englishwoman’ (Green, 2001). Coleridge-Taylor’s unique identity in the world of classical music was well-documented in the programme notes, which also mentioned that he was a crucial part of England’s cultural landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Barbour-Condini, 2022). However, as English light music fell out of fashion during the twentieth century, so did Coleridge-Taylor’s work. The *Petite Suite de Concert* was certainly the least-known piece of the concert but was an enjoyable and fitting start. The piece followed from Chineke!’s previous performance at the Arts Centre when they played Coleridge-Taylor’s *Othello Suite* in 2020. The consistent performance of important, ethnically diverse classical composers is part of Chineke!’s method of raising awareness of the problematic mainstream historical narratives of classical music.

The influence of Coleridge-Taylor’s mixed-race identity can be found within his work too. His fascination with his father’s heritage when initially touring the United States in the late nineteenth century led to him meeting leading Americans, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and W. E. B. Du Bois, at the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 (Green, 2009). These connections, especially with poets, inspired some of his music. Although the *Petite Suite de Concert* is not the clearest example of this, pieces such as *African Romances*, *African Suite* for piano, *Four African Dances* and *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* have African roots in name, style and performance techniques (Richards, 1987).

While not so overtly a statement about diversity, the selection of Beethoven’s sixth symphony had scope to be interpreted politically on several levels. The performance comes amid a revision of Ludwig van Beethoven’s heritage – specifically that his identity has been whitewashed in classical music history, and he had a significantly darker complexion than is portrayed. This was originally noted during the 1930s by African American journalists before the matter was reignited by civil rights activists such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (Broyles, 2011: 267–91). Beethoven’s popularity has never been questioned, yet there was something particularly apt and symbolic about an ethnically diverse orchestra playing his music.

Regarding his sixth symphony, Beethoven claimed that ‘the hearers should be allowed to discover the situations freely’, allowing room for multiple interpretations of the piece and its performance (Barbour-Condini, 2022). In a literal sense, the fourth and fifth movements of the symphony could be interpreted as a violent storm, followed by jubilations after the storm’s end. This is merely one interpretation, though. Entitled ‘Gewitter, Sturm’ [‘Thunder, Storm’] in German, the word *Gewitter* translates as storm or thunderstorm, but the word *Sturm* bears a more abstract meaning that can also imply emotion. The *Sturm und Drang* movement influenced elements of Beethoven’s music, and so it would make sense to interpret the fourth movement of the symphony in this more conceptual manner. The music of the movement is

characterised by suddenness in **tempo** and dynamic and unpredictable melodies, all of which can be found within the fourth movement of Beethoven's sixth, to convey emotional turmoil (Rudolf, 1994).

Chineke!'s previous outing at the Warwick Arts Centre represented a simpler, pre-pandemic time. The fourth movement's storm could be interpreted as the austerity of the pandemic, with the fifth movement representing the post-pandemic society that we are slowly rebuilding into. For Beethoven's own contemporary audiences, the symphony was an escape from the political chaos in Vienna during the early nineteenth century when Napoleon invaded in 1805 and 1809. Perhaps the performance of the symphony serves a similar purpose over 200 years later as the listener could relate the abstract storm to the international tensions over the Russia–Ukraine affair, which have resulted in deeply unsettling scenes coming out of Ukraine.

Chineke!'s concert successfully started Warwick Arts Centre's 2021–22 Orchestral Series, and the three following orchestras will need to match its strong interpretations of Coleridge-Taylor's *Petite Suite de Concert*, Grieg's *Piano Concerto* and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 in F*. While the *Concerto* was arguably the spectacle of the evening, with pianist Harewood delivering an impressive performance, the Coleridge-Taylor and Beethoven pieces provided more food for thought on a political level, and furthered Chineke!'s mission of diversifying classical music.

Coleridge-Taylor: *Petite Suite de Concert*

Grieg: *Piano Concerto in A Minor*

Beethoven: *Symphony No. 6 in F, The Pastoral Symphony*

Chineke! Orchestra – Anthony Parnter, Conductor

Amiri Harewood – Piano

Wednesday 23 February 2022, Warwick Arts Centre

Warwick Arts Centre Orchestral Series 2021–22

Bibliography

Barbour-Condini, C. (2022), 'Programme notes for *Chineke! Orchestra Concert*', Chineke!, Anthony Parnter, 23 February, 2022, Coventry: Warwick Arts Centre

Broyles, M. (2011), *Beethoven in America*, Indiana: Indiana University Press

Church, M. (2015), 'Review: Europe's first BME orchestra offers flashes of brilliance', *The Independent*, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/chineke-queen-elizabeth-hall-review-europe-s-first-professional-bme-orchestra-offers-freshness-energy-and-flashes-of-brilliance-10499952.html>, accessed 26 February 2022

Green, J. (2001), 'Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The early years', *Black Music Research Journal*, 21 (2), 133–58

Green, J. (2009), 'Do we really know Samuel Coleridge-Taylor?', *Black and Asian Studies (BASA) conference*, 27 June, 2009, London

Richards, P. (1987), 'Africa in the music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor', *Africa*, 57 (4), 566–71

Rudolf, M. (1994), 'Storm and stress in music', *Bach*, 25 (2), 6–35

Glossary

Adagio: At a slow speed.

Allegro: A brisk pace, fast and lively.

Andante: Walking pace.

Attacca: When movements are played without a break between them.

Caprice/Capriccio: Lively music, often loosely structured and humorous.

Dynamic: The scale of loudness and quietness.

Igbo: Language spoken by an ethnic group in the south-east Nigeria.

Sonnet: Poetic form for expressing love (of the courtship kind).

Sturm und Drang: Early Romantic movement in German literature and music (c.1760s–1800s).

Tarantella: fast music in a 6/8 time signature. Originally a dance from southern Italy.

Tempo: Speed of the music.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Leung, C. (2022), 'Coleridge-Taylor, Grieg and Beethoven – Chineke! Orchestra Concert, Warwick Arts Centre', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Volume 15, Issue 1, <https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/1159>. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.