

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 23 July 2022 7.30pm

**Nitin Sawhney** guitar, keyboard

**Aref Durvesh** tabla

**YVA** vocalist

**Ian Burdge** cello

**Ayanna Witter-Johnson** cello, voice

CLASSIC *fm*

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Over nearly three decades, multi-award-winning multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer Nitin Sawhney's work has moved across numerous realms, from club culture and the comedy stage to concert recitals, with increasing forays into scores for screen, contemporary dance and theatre. Tonight, he returns to Wigmore Hall, following his recent live guest appearance here with cellist/singer-songwriter Ayanna Witter-Johnson.

'This is a much more intimate and conversational performance in contrast to some of the bigger venues I play – but it also expands out,' explains Sawhney. 'Because people are closer up, it feels like there's an opportunity to speak more freely and openly about the background to the music.'

An exploration of Sawhney's catalogue reveals a naturally far-reaching background and an array of relatable themes, from his earliest LPs *Spirit Dance* (his 1993 debut) and *Migration* (1995) to latest studio album *Immigrants* (2021). His material has regularly referenced his British Indian heritage, and contemporary issues (such as 2019's orchestral work *Brexit: A Rational Anthem for a National Tantrum*), as well as expressions of how human identities universally connect and intertwine.

The thread that runs through this vast range of compositions is Sawhney's eloquent delivery, and his own distinctly assured musicianship across piano, classical guitar and electronics. His insights draw from disparate experiences; he originally studied Law before focusing fully on music, becoming a key player in the '90s 'Asian underground' dance scene. His ability to handle heavy, emotive topics with a lightness of touch might also stem from his formative work as a stand-up performer (Sawhney and Sanjeev Bhaskar founded comedy collective The Secret Asians, which would evolve into the hugely influential BBC sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me*).

'Having a fixed set-list didn't feel like the right approach for this show,' he admits. 'I do take a loosely chronological approach; it's a kind of join-the-dots journey into lots of different aspects of my career, and my life. I speak about my dad passing away, but I don't end up taking that into a morose space; it relates back to the influences of my childhood, growing up as a musician but also my love of mathematics, and thinking about classical music from both Western and Indian perspectives.'

'I talk about the themes behind albums like *Beyond Skin* (1999), and why these things are important to me as a human being and a political animal. I do feel very passionately about a lot of issues, and that often means I write stronger music for it. I've also realised that I'm keen to dispel rigid "roles", whether you're seen as the DJ, or the musician on stage; it's quite liberating to move beyond that, and see where it takes us.'

This is a distinctly personal audience with Sawhney, but it isn't a one-man show; he will be joined by long-time collaborators and

friends Aref Durvesh (tabla), YVA (vocals), Ian Burdge (cello) and Ayanna Witter-Johnson (cello, voice), whose intuition and deep knowledge of this repertoire should also ensure a fluid, semi-improvised performance.

Sawhney's spoken word anecdotes will interplay with his musical narratives; landmark tracks will feature, but they're likely to emerge in new forms: 'Ayanna Witter-Johnson and I actually filmed a performance of our collaborative track *Movement Variation II* at Wigmore Hall during lockdown, so I'd like to show that. We'll also definitely do a version of *Homelands* (his elegantly poignant, multi-lingual epic, taken from the aforementioned *Beyond Skin*); it might be me just playing on piano, or showing film footage of a band performance and then talking about the groove and breaking it down, or it might be just a quick performance by the four of us on the night.'

The show is also an expression of collaborative spirit, and the journeys that can lead to brilliant creative encounters; having grown up with the work of the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, Sawhney would later get to know and work with his acclaimed musician daughter Anoushka, on his 2008 album *London Undersound*, and her Grammy-nominated work *Traces Of You* (which Sawhney produced in 2013). He will highlight his film scores, including adventure drama *Mowgli: Legend Of The Jungle* (2018), as well as his work with contemporary dance visionary Akram Khan and conceptual artist Anish Kapoor on *Kaash* (2002). There will be reference to renowned multi-genre names, and heartfelt testimonies to friendship; Sawhney also developed a close rapport with the legendary actor John Hurt, after they both worked on the soundtrack and narration for BBC nature documentary series *Human Planet*.

'John was just an incredible human being,' says Sawhney. 'He was someone who really inspired me as an actor, because he took on all of these roles that really highlighted the humanity of people who were viewed as being on the outside of society.'

Humanity, identity and empathy are the key notes of Sawhney's performance, and they're presented with particular candour here.

'I've always been fascinated by exploring the cathartic and spiritual power of music, and what that means in relation to who we are,' he says. 'I've thought about the amazing experiences and coincidences in my own life, and how I believe that music is a way of communing with the universe. For a long time, I've had the idea that you "discover" music; you don't create it necessarily, you're unearthing something that is actually already there. Certain things feel woven or entrenched in the fabric of the universe – and I think music is one of those things.'

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