

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 5 May 2022 7.30pm

**Ayanna Witter-Johnson** voice, cello, piano, composition

**Héloïse Werner** soprano

**Andrea Baker** mezzo-soprano

**Jess Gillam** saxophone

**Nitin Sawhney** piano

**Thea Sayer** double bass

**Marianne Schofield** double bass

**Solem Quartet**

**Ligeti Quartet**

**Darren Bloom** conductor

**Amy Tress** violin

**Christopher Jones** violin

**William Newell** violin

**Patrick Dawkins** violin

**Stephen Upshaw** viola

**Richard Jones** viola

**Stephanie Tress** cello

**Val Welbanks** cello

CLASSIC *f*M

Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

**Ayanna Witter-Johnson**

Earth (2018)

Mento Mood (2018)

Ain't I A Woman? (2008)

Draw the Line (2020)

Brown Sounds (2021)

Lumina Rhythm (2021)

*Interval*

**Nitin Sawhney** (b.1964)

Movement – Variation II (2020)

& **Ayanna Witter-Johnson**

**Ayanna Witter-Johnson**

Island Suite (2022) *world première*

Commissioned by the Solem Quartet

Wooden Woman (2019)

DreamCity (2021)

Equinox (2022)

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'For me, storytelling is so much a part of the performance', says acclaimed British cellist, pianist, singer-songwriter and composer **Ayanna Witter-Johnson**. Over more than a decade, her music has formed a captivating narrative, flowing through multi-genre contrasts and connecting with global collaborators from the London Symphony Orchestra to Kronos Quartet, Anoushka Shankar, Nitin Sawhney, jazz hero Courtney Pine and hip-hop wordsmith Akala. Tonight marks her debut live concert at Wigmore Hall, with an exciting array of guests.

'My starting point was to hear my recorded and composed works live in one space', she explains. 'It's like curating my own mini-festival, spanning almost the earliest point of my composition career to the latest. My material has been consistent in wanting to explore my Jamaican heritage, musically, culturally, thematically; it's been a constant sense of inspiration.'

Having excelled at piano and cello while at school, Witter-Johnson studied Classical Composition at Trinity Laban. 'My creative life developed and exploded during those years. I was making friends with different musicians, playing cello with different people; I was singing and playing in the evenings at a local Jamaican restaurant; I became an artist-in-residence at the Southbank Centre...'

Some of the original compositions in tonight's programme stem from Witter-Johnson's time at Trinity Laban; others relate to her successive creative breakthroughs: from Manhattan (where she continued her studies, and also became the only non-American to win the Apollo Theatre's legendary Amateur Night in 2010) to music festivals and projects around the world. She adds that she still regards herself as a student: 'I have a strong spiritual practice, and I always see myself as having the beginner's mind', she says. 'I want to be on an adventure; each piece has a process that reveals itself to me'.

Witter-Johnson also describes the fluidity of her style as 'an organic unfolding' sparked by her formative musical experience. 'My classical piano playing was quite a solitary journey; you're sort of in your own world without any restrictions: why *wouldn't* you play all kinds of music?' she says. 'I've always listened to classical, jazz, folk, pop, R&B, soul. I've just naturally embraced that sort of eclecticism without judgement'.

Tonight's recital commences with a series of pieces featuring British contemporary string ensemble Ligeti Quartet. The beautifully stirring first work *Earth* was composed through Witter-Johnson's participation in a 2018 project creating new music inspired by the planets; for this, she was paired with Professor Sanjeev Gupta at London's Imperial College, and considered the department's geology artefacts. 'My composition was born out of these conversations and experiences', she says. 'This piece is a personalization of earth through a series of different textures, like a sonic landscape'.

The next piece, *Mento Mood*, is a meditation both on global roots and family heritage; Witter-Johnson's paternal great-grandfather had also been a musician, playing in a Jamaican mento band: an influential form of folk music that predated ska and reggae styles. 'I thought it would be good to have a string quartet feel like a mento band, and explore that connection between them as kindred souls'.

Witter-Johnson originally composed *Ain't I A Woman?* while in her final year at Trinity Laban, working with a youth arts group on a

project about the 19th-century African-American activist and author Sojourner Truth (whose unforgettable 1851 speech forms its lyrics). This expression feels both like a timeless spiritual and a mighty statement of intent; Witter-Johnson channels Sojourner Truth's words with elegance and righteous fury. The song travelled with Witter-Johnson to NYC, and led her victorious performance at the Apollo Theatre's Amateur Night. 'I ended up floating through Manhattan for the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade with Gladys Knight', she recalls. 'I recorded my first EP, *Truthfully* (2011), with the winnings from that performance'.

The tense, incisive *Draw The Line* is performed by Heloise Werner and Marianne Schofield of chamber group The Hermes Experiment. Witter-Johnson composed this piece in the wake of the US police killing of George Floyd in 2020; she evokes the dialogues that ensued from the horrifying event, and the necessity of creating a personal boundary to feel balanced. In contrast, there is a rich exhilaration to *Brown Sounds*, based on a poem by African-American writer Henry Dumas (who was killed by a New York cop in 1968), and originally composed for Raehann Bryce-Davis in a celebrated LA Opera Digital Shorts video. For this live recital, mezzo-soprano Andrea Baker performs vocals. 'The work really highlights the themes of black love and relationship to self. Andrea is incredible, and I can't wait to hear her bring it to life', says Witter-Johnson.

*Lumina Rhythm* initially emerged as a piece for solo soprano saxophonist Jess Gillam at Cheltenham Music Festival 2021. 'I wanted to write something that embodied the breadth of Jess's musical tastes', says Witter-Johnson. 'It's an invocation of the spirit of adventure, curiosity, admiration for sound, and joy'.

The second half of the concert opens with *Movement - Variation II*, which she co-wrote with Nitin Sawhney for his widely praised 2021 album *Immigrants*, using a 'Chopin-esque' piano piece as her departure point: 'I kind of chopped it up and created a song looking at the legacy of the Windrush generation – my grandparents' generation – and a reflection on how we treat each other'.

*Island Suite*, premièred live here, was commissioned for the Solem Quartet's *Beethoven Bartók Now* series, responding to the historic composers' classical experiments: in this case, Bartók's Third Quartet (1927) and Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* Op. 133 (1825-6). 'What I took from those pieces was particularly Bartók's affinity to Eastern European folk music. I took that to explore my relationship to Jamaican folk legacy. I don't think I've written a piece like it; there's references to Queen Nanny, folksongs, my childhood, all sorts of influences on me as an artist'.

*Wooden Woman*, a sweetly poignant highlight from Witter-Johnson's debut album *Road Runner* (2019), is followed by newer pieces *DreamCity* (originally a digital commission for LSO East London Academy) and *Equinox*. These works summon international folklore and the spirit of the post-Lockdown metropolis ('something energetic and vibey; also something to give hope'), as well as the promise of intrepid new chapters, extending ahead without limits.

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