

A UNIQUELY BRITISH INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Nitin Sawhney and Friends, BBC Prom 37. Royal Albert Hall, London, 10 August 2007

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By Rachit Buch
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This summer, British Indian artist Nitin Sawhney was granted the Royal Albert Hall for the occasion of BBC Prom 37, and gave an immensely accomplished performance. Sawhney, a veteran of seven studio albums and numerous live acts, represents the latest attempt by Prom director Nicholas Kenyon to reach a wider audience. The result was a multi-faceted musical evening, featuring orchestral film scores, Indian classical music instruments and dance. Although the addition of Zero Degrees' choreographed narratives seemed to be a somewhat unnecessary addition, and the acoustics were not well suited for some of the pieces, the event proved to be a resounding success for Sawhney and the Proms.

At first glance, Nitin Sawhney may seem to be a strange choice to perform at the BBC Proms. A British Indian artist at this bastion of Western classical music events? Would it work?

In short, yes. And how. Musically, the evening was a veritable feast of talent; varied as it was masterful, encouraging the audience to get involved physically and emotionally and then stand back and admire. For those new to Sawhney's work, his repertoire is an ever increasing mix of Indian, English and - that dreaded word - Fusion music spanning seven studio albums. The Indian elements of his work include classical instruments such as sitar, santoor and veena but generally used in a contemporary rather than traditional way. Lyrically, Bengali folk songs feature heavily, as does some work in Hindi. The influence of Sawhney's London upbringing is evident in the introduction of ballads and some overt English pop music into his work. But at the heart of his music lies an unwillingness to conform to musical genres - he is surely the only artist to use rap vocals and a Shakespearean sonnet respectively as the words to two of his songs. On top of this, he has recently provided the music for the play *Fallujah*, the silent film *A Throw of Dice*, the musical production of *Mahabharata*, the video game *Heavenly Sword* and Mira Nair's film *The Namesake*. Previously, he

has prepared music for Akram Khan's dance show *Kaash* (2002) as well as performing several DJ sets and writing for and performing with the Britten Sinfonia orchestra in 2004.¹ So he keeps himself quite busy.

Although he has established himself as one of Britain's leading artists, Sawhney was apparently "stunned" to be invited to give this Prom. Perhaps understandably, because for an artist who has performed at as varied venues as the London nightclubs Koko and Fabric, the Lowry theatre in Salford, Manchester, and the The Jazz Café in Camden (and that's just in England), the Royal Albert Hall Proms represented one of the few truly new and daunting live experiences left. However, any fears of a misjudgement were instantly dispelled as the opening bars of a classic live favourite, *Sunset*, began the night and instantly seemed at home in these grandiose surroundings. Following this was a programme chosen to showcase the variety of Sawhney's talent, both in performance and composition.²

Excerpts from Sawhney's recently devised film scores represented an exciting addition to the live set, as the audience was treated to samples from the score of the silent film, *A Throw of Dice*, and the not-so-silent film, *The Namesake*. These pieces, normally heard through a cinema sound system, benefited massively from the 60-piece London Under Sound Orchestra assembled specially for the night. Following the sweeping strings of the *Throw of Dice* pieces, and later the *Heavenly Sword* tracks, the title track of *The Namesake* was remarkably intimate. It allowed the listener to experience a whole range of emotions throughout the evening, perhaps vindicating the decision to include such diverse compositions.

The list of artists that have collaborated with Nitin Sawhney is a lengthy and eclectic one (Sting, Indian composer A. R. Rahman and Will Young to name three pertinent examples) and the evening was marked by numerous guest appearances. Of these, the vocalist Reena Bhardwaj used her lilting tones to provide an almost desperate quality to the words of *Nadia* and brought further delicacy to the usually male vocals of *The Boatman*. One of the stars of the evening had to be Ashwin Srinivasan, who managed to perform the Bansuri (Indian flute) sections of the music that are

¹ For more information on the artist and his works, visit www.nitinsawhney.com

² For further information on this Prom, visit <http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/2007/whatson/1008.shtml> for track listing and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/2007/aboutmusic/p37.shtml> for Sawhney's Programme Note

at times haunting and at others playful, as well as fulfil a considerable male vocal role.

Another famous partner was Anoushka Shankar. Established sitar player and daughter of the world renowned Ravi Shankar, Anoushka commanded the stage without being overbearing. Playing a classical musical instrument for just two tracks is difficult but being one of the new breed of versatile Indian performers, with a less stringent view of the traditions of Indian classical music than her forebears, Anoushka Shankar managed it exceptionally well. A new piece, that Sawhney had composed “a couple of weeks ago” featured the raga Charukeshi, made famous by the maestro father of Anoushka. Here, the sitar is deployed in conjunction with the orchestra to great effect: though the sitar is usually performed as a solo instrument, it did not overwhelm the violins that featured strongly in the piece, settling instead for forming just a component of the sound. It did prompt one to wonder whether the Western classical orchestra wasn’t secretly invented in India.

Once again showing his appetite for variety, Sawhney broke up the songs with four live pieces by choreographer duo Zero Degrees performing narrative ‘spoken word’ rather than music. Two voices speaking in tandem, accompanied by identical hand and face movements, the pair (Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui) told, in four parts, the story of someone running into trouble with immigration control at an airport. The act was visually impressive, and provided a change of pace from the music. But the combination suffered from the sense that, although entertaining, the pieces seemed to lack any real purpose. The words also echoed in the vastness of the Royal Albert Hall, and they weren’t the only ones. My first experience of this British institution of a concert hall left me thinking that the extravagant architecture made up for the acoustics, which weren’t designed for modern day music, as shown by the echoing drum sounds when the Spanish songs got going. However, this did not detract too much from the sound produced and the atmosphere generated in part by the surroundings did make up for the acoustic flaws.

Sawhney maintained a quiet and understated stage persona and aside from occasional remarks about tracks – “I normally dedicate this song to some dodgy politician, but tonight I dedicate it to my parents” (about *Immigrant*), he stuck to the music. This may have left some people wondering if Sawhney’s personality is as strong as his music but the overall effect was that the music took centre stage. It sometimes feels as if overly jovial stage personalities are making up for a lack of substance to the music, and so Sawhney’s demeanour

conveyed precisely the opposite feeling. The music, rather than any one individual, was the focus.

There was a real feel that the audience represented a mixture of tastes and musical backgrounds, possibly evident more at this sort of an occasion than at album promoting gigs. It was clear, from the yelping of the ‘Prommer’ ticket holders (unreserved tickets that can be queued for on the night of the performance) at old classics *Homelands* and *Herecica Latino*, that a number of veterans of Nitin Sawhney concerts had come to enjoy a different perspective on their usual live experience. For those people, the grand classical feel of the tracks from the Playstation 3 game *Heavenly Sword* were something they had never heard before. It was also clear from the growing atmosphere that reached a peak at the flamenco number *Noches En Vela*, that there were newcomers to the music, finding a growing sense of understanding with the musicians. These people may represent a number of Prom regulars who, presented with an unusual performance for the occasion, were gradually brought into the style of music and came to appreciate its appropriateness to the setting.

Overall, this was a great opportunity to reflect on the significance of Nitin Sawhney’s work. Viewed simply as a contemporary British artist, he has shown himself to possess considerable musical gifts. His studio albums have, with the exception of *Human* (2003), received widespread critical acclaim and have influenced the work of many British Indian musicians. However, his cultural impact cannot be overlooked. Sawhney’s music considers religion, immigration, culture, death and politics, and his measured interviews and newspaper contributions show a man with deeper thoughts than most in the music business^{3,4}. Sawhney himself remarked that he used to view the Proms as “a slightly antiquarian and jingoistic institution” when young and it is through artists such as himself that this view becomes a minority, and an incorrect, one. The current director of the BBC Proms, Nicholas Kenyon, has made it a policy to widen the scope of the annual event, with initiatives such as ‘Proms in the Park’ and the ‘Nation’s Favourite Prom’ (where music is chosen by a phone-in vote). This has generally been well received, although, as with Sawhney’s Prom, there may be purists who believe this to be a dilution of the Proms’ heritage. The fact is that this trend is increasingly pervasive – whether viewed as a good or

³http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,1071222,00.html

⁴http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,764293,00.html#article_continue

bad thing, other cultures are penetrating even the most traditionally British institutions. And it is a two way process whereby artists such as Nitin Sawhney become part of mainstream British culture, both helped by, and themselves then prompting, performances such as this one.

For producing music that effortlessly crosses boundaries of genre, Nitin Sawhney is an asset to music. By crossing barriers of culture, ethnicity and religion equally as effortlessly, he is an asset to modern Britain. And as the final pulses of *Prophesy*, which has begun to achieve a spiritual quality through its ritualistic performance at the end of Sawhney's live sets, emanated from his guitar, one was left with the feeling that here was a man who is the essence of London, the essence of modern Britain: diverse, passionate and quite brilliant.

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3rd Year BSc Student, Human Genetics (Life Sciences)