

# GURU NANAK'S MESSAGE OF PEACE THROUGH MUSIC

## PROGRAMME

Barbican Centre, London  
Sunday, 6 April 2025 | 17:00-22:00

# WELCOME

**A very warm welcome to this very special evening of celebration, reflection and musical devotion at the renowned Barbican Centre. We gather to honour the profound legacy of Guru Nanak, a sage who taught liberation through the universal language of music - a medium that transcends boundaries and speaks directly to the soul.**

As we commemorate 20 years of the Darbar Festival - one of the foremost platforms for Indian classical music in the world - we dedicate this evening to exploring how Guru Nanak's timeless message of equality, compassion and spiritual awakening continues to resonate through musical traditions that he himself helped to establish.

Music was integral to Guru Nanak's mission. He travelled extensively with his faithful companion Bhai Mardana, a Muslim rababi (rabab player) and together they used music to convey profound spiritual truths in a form accessible to all, regardless of caste, creed, or social standing. Tonight's concert honours that tradition of inclusivity and spiritual elevation through music.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our Indian classical sufi, bhajan and kirtania's, whose dedication to preserving these musical traditions allows us to experience something of the transcendence that Guru Nanak envisioned. I also thank you, our audience, for your presence and support in keeping these sacred traditions alive in our modern world.

This is the first of what I hope will be a series of events celebrating Eastern spiritual personalities such as Amir Khusro (d 1350), Namdev (d 1350), Kabir (d 1518), Bulleh Shah (d 1757) and Tyagaraja (d 1847) to name a few.

**May tonight's music open our hearts to Guru Nanak's message of peace, unity, and divine love.**

**Sandeep Virdee OBE**  
**Artistic Director**

## What's in your bag?

**We have included some materials alongside tonight's performance to ensure that we adhere to all religious guidelines. Below is a brief overview of the contents of your bag.**

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### Cotton Pouch:

To keep your items secure, please ensure they remain enclosed and do not fall to the ground. If you prefer not to keep your items, kindly return them to one of the volunteers at the doors or to the Darbar information desks.



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### Mala (rosary beads):

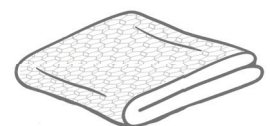
These are used for chanting. While commonly associated with Catholicism, rosary beads are also used in by people of other religions - Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims for example. Please ensure your hands are clean before using them.



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### Head Covering:

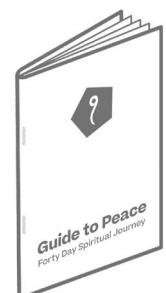
Given the religious nature of the event, we have provided head coverings for the audience. Please use this to cover your head when the performance is underway.



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### Guide Book:

The 40-Day Spiritual Journey Challenge booklet serves as a practical guide to Guru Nanak's spiritual teachings. A small gift to you on behalf of Darbar that stays with you both physically and spiritually. (Further details can be found inside the booklet).



# THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF GURU NANAK (1469-1539)

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh dharam, was born in 1469 in Rai Bhoi di Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib, Pakistan) at a time of significant religious and political upheaval in the Indian subcontinent. His birth coincided with a period when the region was witnessing growing tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, alongside social inequality perpetuated through the caste system. Into this divided world, Guru Nanak's arrival would herald a revolutionary spiritual movement that transcended religious boundaries.

From an early age, Nanak displayed extraordinary spiritual awareness. Traditional accounts relay how, even as a child, he engaged learned scholars in deep philosophical discussions. After a transformative spiritual experience at the age of thirty while bathing in the Kali Bein river, Guru Nanak emerged with a divine message, proclaiming: **“There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.”** This profound statement encapsulated his vision of spiritual oneness that would form the cornerstone of his teachings.

Following this awakening, Guru Nanak embarked on four extensive journeys, known as Udasis, spanning approximately twenty-five years. These travels took him across the Indian subcontinent and beyond to Tibet, Sri Lanka, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad and various parts of present-day Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China and Pakistan. Unlike typical pilgrimages of his time, these journeys were purposeful missions to spread his message of humanity equality and truth. Throughout these journeys, Guru Nanak engaged in dialogues with spiritual leaders from diverse traditions, challenging orthodoxies and ritualism where he found them empty of genuine spiritual substance.



He advocated for three core principles that would define Sikh practice: **Naam Japo** (meditation on God's name), **Kirat Karo** (honest living through hard work), and **Wand Shako** (sharing with others). In every location, he established sangats (congregations) that provided spaces for communal worship and the practice of these principles.

After his extensive travels, Guru Nanak settled in Kartarpur (in present-day Pakistan), where he established a unique spiritual community. Here, he demonstrated the practical application of his teachings through the institutions of Langar (community kitchen) and Sangat (congregational worship), both of which dismantled social barriers by bringing people together regardless of caste, creed, or gender identity. At Kartarpur, Guru Nanak composed many of his sacred hymns, which were later incorporated into the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scriptures believed to be the eternal living Guru of the Sikhs.

# Bhai Mardana: The Musical Companion

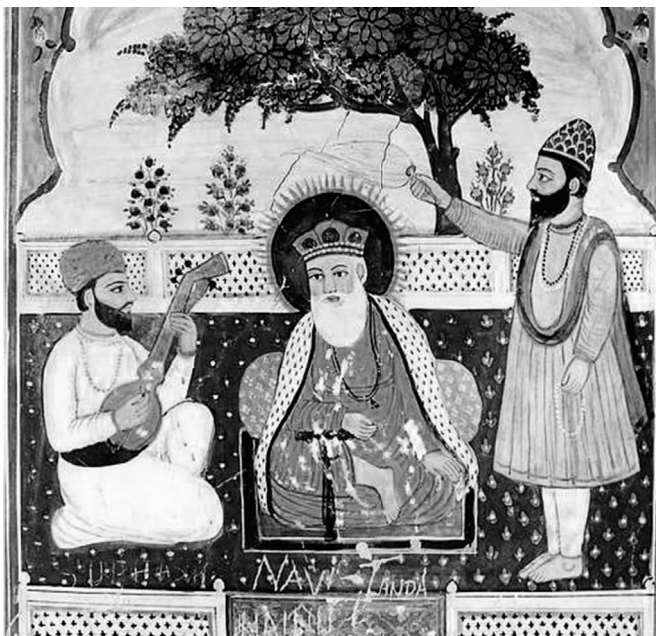
Accompanying Guru Nanak on his travels was Bhai Mardana, a Muslim rababi (rabab player) who would become integral to the musical expression of Guru Nanak's teachings. Born approximately twelve years before Guru Nanak in the same village, Mardana came from a family of hereditary musicians belonging to the Mirasi community.

The relationship between Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana transcended the conventional bonds of spiritual leader and disciple. Their companionship exemplified the pluralistic vision that Guru Nanak advocated, with a Muslim musician becoming the first and closest companion of the Sikh Guru. This partnership between a Hindu-born spiritual leader and a Muslim musician in itself embodied the message of interfaith harmony that permeated Guru Nanak's teachings.

Bhai Mardana's contribution to the development of the Sikh musical tradition cannot be overstated. When Guru Nanak would receive divine inspiration, he would often call upon Mardana to play his rabab, creating the melodic foundation upon which Guru Nanak would sing his mystical compositions. This practice established a precedent for Sikh devotional music that continues to this day, where sacred texts and classical music are inextricably linked.

The janam sakhis (traditional biographies) recount numerous instances where the music of Bhai Mardana's rabab served as a prelude to Guru Nanak's spiritual discourses. In one notable account, when Guru Nanak visited the court of the Emperor Babur, it was the divine music of Mardana's rabab and Guru Nanak's hymns that moved the Emperor to seek spiritual guidance.

Throughout their travels, Bhai Mardana experienced the same hardships and challenges as Guru Nanak, from traversing difficult terrain to facing hostile receptions in some places.



Yet, the janam sakhis also reveal moments of human weakness in Mardana, such as his occasional complaints about hunger or discomfort. Rather than being portrayed as flaws, these instances humanise Bhai Mardana and illustrate Guru Nanak's warmth and friendship towards him.

Bhai Mardana passed away during their final journey in Baghdad. His legacy lives on through the continued tradition of rababis and the central place of music in Sikh worship. More importantly, the harmonious partnership between him and Guru Nanak stands as a timeless testament to the power of music to transcend religious differences and the possibility of interfaith collaboration in pursuit of spiritual truth.

## The Musical Framework: Ragas in Guru Nanak's Compositions

Recognising the profound emotional and spiritual impact of music, he employed the sophisticated system of Indian classical ragas to convey his message with greater resonance and accessibility.

A raga in Indian classical music is a complex melodic framework with specific ascending and descending patterns, emphasised notes and characteristic phrases. Each raga is traditionally associated with a particular

time of day, season and emotion. By setting his compositions to specific ragas, Guru Nanak created a multidimensional spiritual experience that engaged not only the intellect but also the emotions.

The Guru Granth Sahib, or Sikh scriptures, contain 974 hymns composed by Guru Nanak. These compositions are not arranged chronologically or thematically, but according to the raga in which they are meant to be sung. This musical organisation underscores the importance of melody in experiencing the sacred texts as they were intended.

Guru Nanak's use of ragas demonstrates a deep understanding of how different melodic structures can evoke specific emotional states conducive to spiritual contemplation. The ragas serve as emotional pathways that guide the listener toward the essence of the message.

For instance, when addressing the transience of worldly attachments, Guru Nanak might employ Raga Vadans, which carries undertones of separation and detachment. When celebrating divine union, Raga Suhi might provide the joyful melodic canvas. Raga Asa, compiled in the Asa Ki Var or morning prayer, exemplify how the serene quality of the morning complements teachings about spiritual awakening and daily ethical living.

This intentional alignment between message and melody made spiritual teachings accessible to ordinary people regardless of their background or status. In a society where religious texts were often locked behind barriers of language, caste and ritual, Guru Nanak's musical compositions democratised spiritual wisdom by presenting them in popular musical forms that resonated with everyday experiences.

The performance tradition that evolved from these compositions, known as kirtan, became central to Sikh worship. Unlike the solo performance traditions prevalent in classical Indian music of the time, Sikh kirtan emphasised communal participation, reflecting Guru Nanak's vision of spiritual practice as a collective journey rather than an individual pursuit.

## The Legacy of Musical Devotion in Sikh Dharam



The musical tradition established by Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana continues to be a defining feature of Sikh worship and identity. The Guru Granth Sahib, organised into 31 main ragas and their variants, stands as perhaps the world's most comprehensive sacred text structured according to musical principles.

Kirtan as communal musical worship remains central to Sikh religious practice. Every day in gurdwaras (Sikh temples) around the world, sacred hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib are sung according to the prescribed ragas. Professional ragis (musicians) maintain the classical traditions, while congregations participate in singing simpler compositions.

This musical legacy transcends artistic expression; it embodies Guru Nanak's revolutionary approach to spirituality emphasising direct experience over ritualism and inclusivity over exclusivity.

In contemporary times, Guru Nanak's musical approach to spirituality offers a powerful model for interfaith dialogue and peace-building. The partnership between Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana demonstrates how music can transcend religious boundaries and create spaces for mutual respect and collaboration. The continued recital of Guru Nanak's compositions in the prescribed ragas connects present-day listeners to a 555-year tradition of spirituality expressed through the universal language of music.

# GURU NANAK'S AARTI: A COSMIC VISION OF DEVOTION

## Historical Context

When Guru Nanak visited the famous Jagannath Temple in Puri around 1506, he witnessed the evening aarti ceremony - a Hindu ritual involving lamps, flowers and incense for the deities, accompanied by bells and the sound of the conch. Instead of joining in with the congregation, Guru Nanak contemplated the aarti from a distance. When asked why he wasn't taking part, he recited his own version, which was expanded to include the whole cosmos in continual divine worship:

*The sky is the platter (thaal)*

*The sun and moon are the lamps*

*The stars are the scattered pearls*

*The wind is the incense*

*The flora is the flower offering*

*And the entire cosmos becomes a living action of devotion*

## Raag Dhanasri

Tonight's performance features aarti in the original Raag Dhanasri composition. Dhanasri creates an atmosphere of deep devotion and contemplative peace through its distinctive melodic structure. Traditionally performed during the early evening, this raag is characterised by its somewhat serious mood, the prominent use of komal ni (flat seventh) and komal ga (flat third) and its ability to evoke spiritual sentiment. Guru Nanak's choice of this raag perfectly complements the philosophical depth of his message.

## Historical Significance

Guru Nanak, through this aarti, challenged orthodox ritualism and presented a revolutionary vision of worship. The composition embodies core Sikh principles: the unity of God, equality of all beings and the rejection of ritualism in favour of genuine spiritual connection.

Tonight's performance will conclude with a new composition of the aarti in Raag Dhanasri sung by Aruna Sairam, one of India's most celebrated vocalists.

# The Text and Translation

## “Gagan Mein Thaal” (The Cosmic Aarti)

### Phonetic Text

*Gagan mein thaal rav chand deepak banay  
Taarikaa mandal janak motee  
Dhoop malaanlo pavan chavro karay  
Sagal banrai phoolant jotee*

*Kaisee aartee hoay bhav khandanaa  
Teree aartee anhataa shabd vaajant bhayree*

*Sahas tav nain nan nain hai tohi kau  
Sahas moorat nanaa ek tohi  
Sahas pad bimal nan ek pad  
Gandh bin sahas tav gandh  
Iv chalat mohi  
Sabh meh jot jot hai soay  
Tis kai chaanan sabh meh chaanan hoay  
Gur saakhee jot pargat hoay*

### Translation

The sky is the platter, the sun and moon are the lamps  
The stars in the heavens are the pearls  
The fragrant winds are the incense, all forests the flowers  
What a beautiful aarti this is, O Destroyer of fear!

The unstruck melody resounds like the sound of temple drums  
You have thousands of eyes, yet no eyes  
Thousands of forms, yet no form  
Thousands of feet, yet no feet  
Thousands of fragrances, yet no fragrance  
In all creation, Your divine light shines  
By this illumination, everything is illuminated  
Through the Guru’s teachings, this divine light is revealed

# SPECIAL ADDRESS

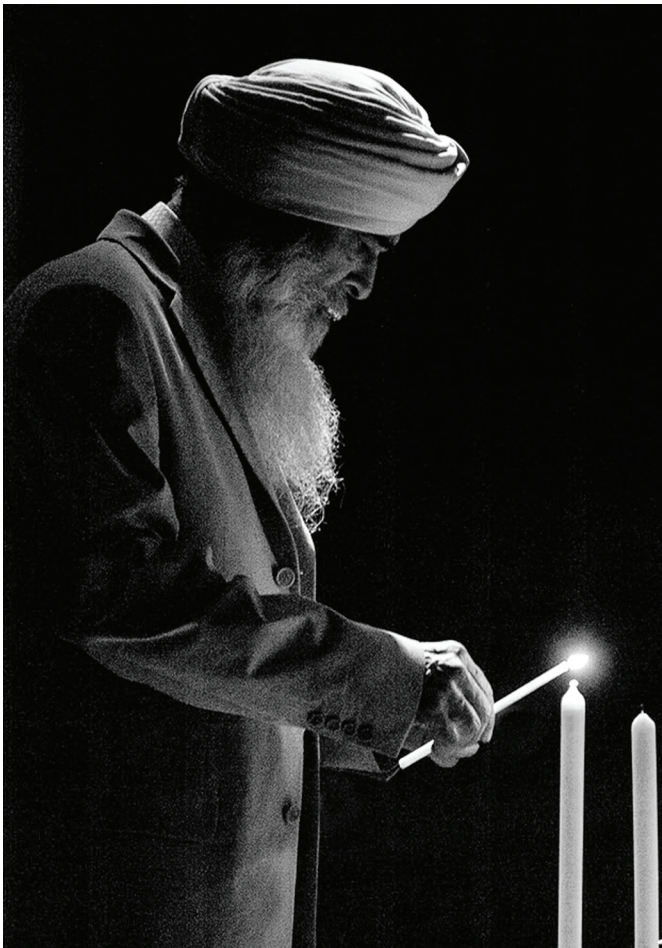
By Bhai Sahib Mohinder  
Singh Ji Ahluwalia OBE,  
KSG

Bhai Sahib Ji will deliver a special address on the relevance of Guru Nanak's teachings in our contemporary world, with particular focus on the role of music in fostering peace, understanding and spiritual awakening across cultural and religious boundaries.



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## REMEMBERING BHAJ GURMIT SINGH JI VIRDEE



Bhai Gurmit Singh Ji Virdee (1937-2005) was a visionary whose dedication to preserving and promoting Indian classical music has left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the United Kingdom and beyond. A man of profound faith and exceptional generosity, he embodied the Sikh virtues of service (*sewa*), humility (*nimrata*), spiritual discipline (*simran*) and *kirtan* (hymn singing) throughout his remarkable life.

Born in Punjab, India, Gurmit Singh Ji migrated to England in 1975, bringing with him a deep love for the classical traditions of his homeland. Despite the demands of establishing himself in a new country, he never wavered in his commitment to maintaining his spiritual practice and cultural heritage. His home became a sanctuary where he taught tabla and gathered with musicians, spiritual seekers, and community members.

Gurmit Singh Ji spent some 30 years accompanying stalwart kirtania, Giani Amolak Singh Ji (1928-2004) and many others, often for many hours at a time. He recognised that Indian classical music went beyond an artistic tradition to a transformative spiritual discipline capable of elevating the human spirit.

Gurmit Singh Ji generously supported up-and-coming musicians, creating platforms for Indian classical music to flourish in England through his organisation, Taal - Rhythms of India. He strongly believed that these traditions contained wisdom vital for our contemporary world.

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## ABOUT DARBAR FESTIVAL

Darbar Arts Culture & Heritage Trust was established in 2006. Our landmark event, the Darbar Festival, has grown from a heartfelt tribute to a cultural institution known the world over. Held in London every year, we invite you to experience visionary curation of the finest musicians across a range of classical genres - Hindustani and Carnatic vocals and percussion and India's oldest form of music, dhrupad. This is Indian classical music at its most authentic and unapologetic. As well as performances, we create spaces for you to learn more about this genre, engage directly with artists through talks and demonstrations and explore wellbeing practices linked to sound and movement.

Through our festivals and concerts in London and other major UK cities, we strive to create a platform for the huge creativity of Indian classical artists. To help us reach a global audience, much of our content is available digitally. We offer music education programmes to help nurture the next generation of artists.

As a charity, we are reliant on grants and donations, using our resources as diligently as possible to raise awareness of this highly evolved art form.

Central to Darbar's mission is the belief that Indian classical music represents not only an artistic tradition but a philosophy and spiritual practice with universal relevance. The ragas that form the backbone of this genre offer pathways to emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being that transcend cultural boundaries.

We see our work not simply as cultural preservation but as a vital contribution to fostering understanding, peace, and spiritual awakening in our complex global society.

As we mark our 20th anniversary, we remain committed to Gurmit Singh Ji's vision of sharing the transformative power of Indian classical arts with the widest possible audience.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the artists, audiences, partners and supporters who have made this journey possible. With your support we look forward to continuing our work for decades to come.

For more information see [darbar.org](http://darbar.org)

# CREDITS

## Musicians

**Aruna Sairam** *carnatic vocal*  
**Zeeshan Ali** *sufi vocal*  
**Bhai Anantvir Singh** *kirtania*  
**Amrita Kaur** *kirtania*  
**Momin Khan** *sarang*  
**Patri Satish Kumar** *mridangam*  
**Giridhar Udupa** *ghatam*  
**Surdarshan Chana** *tabla & jori*  
**Gurdain Rayatt** *tabla*  
**Beibei Wang** *da ga drum*

## Darbar Governance

**Nishant Bhaskar** Co-Chair  
**Harmeet Virdee** Co-Chair  
**Sandeep Virdee OBE** Founder Trustee  
**Sabine Kindel** Trustee  
**Narmada Guruswamy** Trustee  
**Deepak Paramanand** Trustee  
**Diane Rivaud** Trustee  
**Freya Salway** Trustee  
**Kanwal Ahluwalia** Governance Officer

## Darbar Events Team

**Sandeep Virdee OBE** Artistic Director  
**Simrat Lall** Darbar Festival Manager  
**Depesh Patel** Events Manager

## Darbar Team

**Esther Trienekens** Head of Programmes & Partnerships  
**Dolly Sheth** HR Manager  
**Priyanka Godinho** Administrator and Accounts  
**Harpal Manku** Academy Manager  
**Divya Kulkarni** Academy Administrator  
**Jamie Craven** Head of Design  
**Rahul Ravindran** Creative Video Editor  
**Sana Ejaz** Marketing Executive  
**Zahabiya Patharia** Marketing Executive  
**Christoph Bracher** Head of Sound

## Technical Team

**Phil Jones** Front of House Sound  
**John Duckett** Sound Monitors  
**Mark Gardner** Lighting Designer

## Filming Crew

**Arnhel de Serra** Photographer  
**Rehmat Rayatt** Photographer  
**Pritpal Sagoo** Digital Consultant  
**Gurwinder Soor** Content Creator and Platform Manager  
**Tom Grancia** Technical Production  
**Carl Owen** Camera Operator  
**Chris Connel** Camera Operator  
**Anup Parmar** Camera Operator  
**Nick Morchang** Camera Operator

## Barbican Team

**David Farnsworth** CEO  
**Helen Wallace** Head of Music  
**Chris Sharp** Contemporary Music Programmer  
**Adam Davison** Planning and Partnerships Manager

## Barbican Hall

**Martin Shaw** Technical Supervisor/AV  
**Joleigh Saunders** Sound 1  
**Stella Pavoni** Sound 2  
**Olly Nendick** Monitor Support  
**Max Thompson** LX1  
**Nick Thomas** LX2

We at Darbar believes Indian classical music has the power to stir, thrill and inspire its audiences. We celebrate this evolving artform through our live events, education and entertainment. Our team is dedicated to upholding our work through our ethics and values to ensure that everyone is treated equally

## **Darbar Arts Culture Heritage Trust**

LCB Depot, 31 Rutland Street, Leicester, LE1 1RE  
Charity No: 1123009

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