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nov-dec 2001 S\$5.80



## Yo-Yo Ma one on one

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COVER STORY

# The Musician's Canvas Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Project celebrate the music of Central Asia

BY TODD COCHRAN

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Cellist Yo-Yo Ma performs at a Silk Road Project concert at the National Concert Hall in Taipei, Taiwan.

**For the musician,** there is much to be gained from reaching towards fresh artistic goals that stretch and challenge. The true artist understands the importance of moving freely between the differing dialects of music because it is at the intersecting lines that essential truth comes to life.

Yo-Yo Ma is a superstar cellist, communicator and intellectual; his body of work reveals the spirit of an adventurer pursuing new horizons and discovery. In performance he consistently captivates audiences with his grasp of a composition. He delivers a piece with the sense of aliveness and spontaneity we associate with improvisation; the listener, in turn, is convinced the cellist is experiencing the music for the very first time. Ma's pursuit of a transparent form of expression has enabled him to gather a wide audience; the informed—people who believe in the creative process—and also the curious who merely want to make a 'melodious' connection.

As an educator, Ma shares details. Cherish the process and the quality of your preparation. Give musical secrets a chance to reveal themselves. Of the lessons to be learned while pursuing an artistic objective, not all will pertain only to music. Maintain an openness to new ideas. Find ways to make a composition come alive. Discover connections that spark the imagination. Consider the context, and build the dynamics of a performance around that. Commit to something with honesty, and then trust your audience.

Motivated by a restless creative impulse, the matrix of Ma's accomplishments as a classical soloist—along with his involvements as the conceptual architect of intriguing musical collaborations—denotes a fascinating journey. His mellifluous interpretations of baroque, romantic, and contemporary classical cello repertoire are distinguished by phenomenal technique and accuracy, while his approach to a work remains at a rational level; that is, he is always true to a composition and does not distort a piece to tailor to his motives. Ma seems to connect intuitively with a composer's intention and convey the deeper emotion lingering beneath the surface qualities. We most directly encounter Ma's *sui generis* personality in the modern works he commissions and the multi-discipline/multi-influenced pairings he organises.

Glancing back, the line of 20th century master cellists proceeding him is relatively short: Pablo Casals, Gregor Piatigorsky,

Emanuel Feuermann, and the fabled Jacqueline du Pré, who left Yo-Yo Ma her Stradivarius (Davidoff 1712)—one of the two instruments he plays. It was Piatigorsky, who offered insight into the role of the concert performer when he said: "The greatest artists are those with the largest vocabulary of expression... it is they who express things between the notes on the page...".

Extending beyond his classical base, Yo-Yo Ma's collaborations include *Hush* with singer Bobby McFerrin; *Appalachia Waltz* and *Appalachian Journey* with fiddle player Mark O'Connor and bassist Edger Meyer; *Piazzolla: Soul of the Tango*; and *The Cello Suites Inspired by Bach*—a six-part film series. And consistently, Ma delivers much more than a wink and a smile. As an important musical communicator, we must again nod to Ma for his current venture, the Silk Road Project. Indeed, at this particular juncture Ma now stands poised to assume a pivotal role in the development of the 'voice' of his tenor and bass clef stringed instrument.

### THE HISTORICAL SILK ROAD

The term 'Silk Road' is a comparatively recent concept. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, when describing the trade routes between China, Central Asia and the West used the phrase *Seidenstrassen*. Since, then the Silk Road has come to embody a collection of trade routes, between China and the West, plied from around 100 to 1,000 AD. Today the name has come to be adopted by both the West, China, and Japan. Says Ted Levin, executive director of the Silk Road Project: "At its height, the Silk Road extended eastward from China to Japan and westward through the oasis cities of Central Asia—Kashgar, Samarkand, Bukhara—to Persia, Turkey, Greece, and Italy, serving as a crucible for cultural innovation..."

The major role the Silk Road has played in the cultural exchange between the East and West cannot be overemphasised as these ancient caravan and shipping routes were a significant occurrence in world history. Disseminated along these pathways were religious beliefs, artistic themes, spices, tea, incense, glass, paper, porcelain, cosmetics, alfalfa, grapes, and the coveted commodity of barter, silk. The ensuing cultural exchanges flowed freely in both directions. Eurasian ties are documented in historical archaeological fact, legend and fable and the many tales convey a prevailing sense of perilous adventure and exoticism.

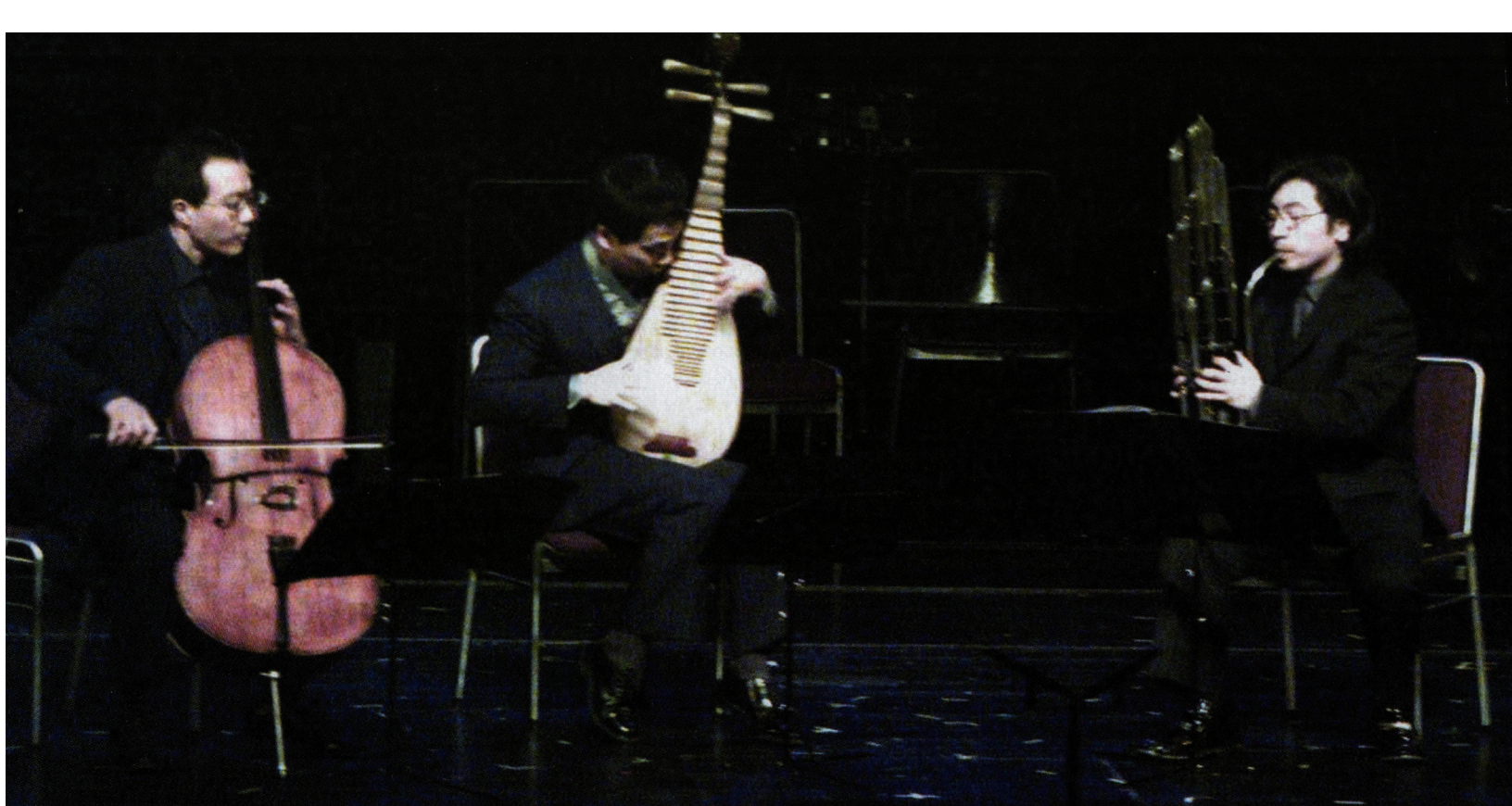
### THE PROJECT

Yo-Yo Ma performs in Washington with the Silk Road Ensemble, September 2001. In 1998 Yo-Yo Ma founded the Silk Road Project around a mission to celebrate the shared heritage of the Silk Road regions, and to encourage innovative collaborations among Eastern and Western artists. The compositions he commissioned for the ensuing Silk Road Ensemble are a contemporary amalgam of traditional musics. Ma has gone to the canvas of human expression and effectively provided the opportunity for some stimulating and refreshing musical dialog to occur.

Here the composers involved have been asked to do something entirely new; they've been asked to draw upon the resources of their own traditional musics, yet frame them in a musical language accessible to audiences all over the world. The overall mission of the venture is to bring attention to the ways our lives have been influenced by traditions originating in the East. While bringing an unquestionable largess to this undertaking, Ma, as a highly celebrated Asian seeking a traditional Asian root experience, may very well be undergoing metamorphosis: the magical transition of a musical entity to cultural figure. For mostly untold reasons, the act of reaching back and accessing one's ancestral pool, while stretching forward, activates a particularly powerful creative response.

Ma is passionate about the requirement of sincerity in creating this music. His take is very straightforward. "All present [composers and musicians participating in the project] are like travellers on the Silk Road. My passion for trying to understand 'root traditions' has actually come fairly late in life. I'm interested in finding what is authentic and leads to someone's inner-life."

So what sounds may we expect to hear? To bridge the range of Ma's experiences, from those of the Western classical tradition to the Silk Road Project, a reference comes to mind—the Italian musical term *colla voce*, which literally translates to 'with the voice'. Emotionally interpreted, however, *colla voce* suggests another, deeper instruction; that the performer speak in the voice of the heart. Listening to the Silk Road Ensemble, the music has an insistent inner voice quality stemming from much older traditions. The instrumentation varies and there are vocals, but what we feel from this music results from Ma's artistic commitment to connect directly with cultural lines. In an instant, we are taken by the timbre of the male or female human voice and combinations of exotic and



Western instrumentation. The sound is seamless and fluid. There is motion. The pipa (Chinese lute); the sheng, a traditional Chinese wind instrument; the yatga, a Mongolian zither; the kamancheh, the traditional classical bowed lute; and the tutek (flute) are featured.

Ma is no stranger to multiple geographical experiences—parents from China, born in Paris and presently living in the USA, he knows three cultures. Says Ma: “This project is a form of cultural activity—we’re all trying to look at music that is alive from living, breathing communities. We’re trying to bring together people who are great advocates of the traditions they come from. And if we make them ‘meet’ what happens?”

At the *Tanglewood Festival* (2000) in Massachusetts, musicians and composers commissioned by Ma gathered in workshops to refine the musical scores. Now, after nearly three years of project development, the music is ready. The first of over a dozen Silk Road Project concerts opened in Germany this summer (2001) at the *Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival*. During the course of four evenings, Ma and about two dozen gifted Eastern and Western musicians introduced the body of music on the world stage. In October 2001, the Silk Road Ensemble are due to appear in Chicago. Come December, it’s off to Japan for concerts in Tokyo, Nagoya, Fukuoka City, and Osaka. January 2002 sees performances across the USA and Europe.

## IN PERSON

The arch of Ma’s musical path suggests ‘*kaizen*’—the inspiring Japanese philosophy

of continuous improvement in one’s personal and professional life. He draws from the ordinary—simple things, ordinary lives, everyday occurrences—and his extraordinary ‘accidental tourist’ observations as a travelling concert musician. Mixed with his sensitivity, this awareness translates to the big picture of high art. Writers/poets/artists generally agree that in their work they have one central theme from which, over time, they develop many variations, each leading to an increased perception of that ‘something’. Here, Ma discusses that ‘something’ from several viewpoints.

**Cochran:** There is a dimension of mystery connected to the Silk Road that is much more pronounced than in most contemporary classical musical settings. How do you respond to, and greet, the varying expectations people will have?

**Ma:** I think that part of any musical experience is to find a balance between the known and the unknown, so that the experience is a journey. With a good journey, you know where you’re going, but there are always unknowns along the way, and those unknowns create opportunities for discovery. When I create any programme one of my goals is to create an interesting journey for the audience, and I hope that we do that with the Silk Road programmes.

**Cochran:** In your current project, are you reaching back to antiquity with a sense of obligation, or is this journey following a new trail of curiosity? Is this period of creative focus forging forward into new compositions based upon traditions?

**Ma:** I think that as people we are always trying to understand who we are, where we

are right now in life, and where we’re going. A lot of our education involves learning the right answers. I think it’s also incredibly important to ask questions we don’t know the answers to. We do that at the Silk Road Project, and we also ask questions that invite many different answers. We discover these answers together, and then from these different answers we come to a version of truth based on multiple points of view.

**Cochran:** You’ve talked about music allowing “inner life communication”. Many are learning about the history of the Silk Road for the first time. Along with this nascent historical awareness, we also are experiencing the emergence of a spiritual voice. What is this voice?

**Ma:** If you and I know each other’s music, we know something important about each other, and that kind of knowledge leads to a short-hand. Another way to say that is to say that people who know the same treasure have a kind of short-hand. If you hoard a treasure it dies, but if you share a treasure it is renewed. Through the work of the Silk Road Ensemble, all the different musicians are sharing the treasures of what they have learned throughout their lives. By reaching outside their own traditions, the musicians are enriching their own knowledge.

**Cochran:** The act of remembering is very powerful. Through reflection, we re-connect learned ideas and weave new concepts. To encounter the Silk Road through music is to receive a gift from antiquity. While listening to the music, during a given performance an audience might easily imagine a thousand scenarios!

**Ma:** It’s funny, because I think that from all

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pipa player Yang Wei, sheng player Wu Tong, and tabla player Shane Shanahan perform *Moon Over Guan Mountains*, by Chinese composer Zhao Jiping, at the National Concert Hall in Taipei, Taiwan.



the things that you do, my question always is, 'what is your knowledge base?' That is, if you do several different things, you actually know several different perspectives on things; from a musician's perspective, a composer's perspective, jazz, fine arts, whatever. And what I think is important [for artists] to do is kind of a paradox. Because on one hand, in order to really do something well, you need to go deeply into something, you need to compartmentalise. But on the other hand, I think it's so important to use all of your 'knowledge bases' to work on something. And the contradiction of course is that because I've literally travelled over the last 25 years, for a total of 13 years on the road, I've been able to put together unbelievable experiences and different 'knowledge bases' where I can draw from other people's expertise. I see things, and when I go home, it doesn't make any sense unless I do something [with these experiences], or think them through. I'm trying to utilise everything that's from education or travelling or whatever, and say 'OK, what makes sense in terms of the present world that we live in? And how did that all come about?'

**Cochran:** I believe most creative boundaries are largely subjective and merely suggest the 'symbols' or 'code' of a distinct style of expression. You've talked about remembering the "sounds" you experience in one setting so that you might possibly apply them in another. How does 'musical memory' impact as a conceptualiser?

**Ma:** Well in the way you talk about 'code' and 'symbols', I think what's interesting is that just as with living things, you can try to

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find the DNA for anything. With different art forms or with different forms of expression, you can try and find that 'code'. You actually gain access into how it's made—the symbolic significance—and empathy for it. Because once you look at something from the inside to the outside, you really do know something. And ultimately it's sort of figuring out how something like that—for a lot of nature or sacred elements in music—are very important to people. Knowing those symbols means that you can sort of get inside the inner life of someone from another culture. And this means you also develop a respect for what they respect.

**Cochran:** Surely there have been times when you've referenced a 'cultural memory' and tapped into a hidden reservoir of expression that you previously might not have thought was there.

**Ma:** I've had somewhat of an expatriate experience. I was born in France, my parents are Chinese, and by the time I moved to New York, it was my third culture. And then, of course, being a musician, and trying to advocate for different composers, and the whole college experience of: 'Who is this guy Beethoven?' [laughing], 'What have you done for him today—it's not about you! It's about Beethoven!'. And then: 'What are you doing for Shostakovich...?'. So you're constantly going into an advocacy role for somebody else, and that's my classical experience.

You're constantly accessing, 'are you on the inside or are you on the outside?'. If you're on the inside of one thing, can you get on the inside of something else? Whether you're interacting with a mailman, a cab driver, a student, whatever, you're just trying to say: 'OK, you're nine years old, what are you thinking about?'. If you can understand that [other viewpoints], it makes for communication to be that much easier.

**Cochran:** Back to what you said about "what have you done for Beethoven or Shostakovich", it brings to mind the work you did with the *Bach Cello Suites* and the accompanying film of collaborations with artists of different disciplines. Here the images are fascinating and speak elegantly of things that people intuitively feel about the common-thread reaching people of all cultures. I'm reminded about something Gustav Holst said that "it should be a requirement to play through a masterpiece every day".

**Ma:** That's very interesting. The reason I love Bach, I think, is for the reason of that persona being someone's that is both unbelievably objective and unbelievably subjective at the same time. So with the whole idea of 'a masterpiece', you enter into something that is much bigger than yourself and then suddenly the creative gates open because you're just very little! There are so

many big things you can actually try and deal with or access inside. Ideas should be big. What you do with them should be very considerate.

**Cochran:** For the communicator the ways we impart concepts is very important.

**Ma:** Everyone has to consider at some point what one has that is valuable to pass on; maybe it's sports, or jazz, a way of thinking, a way of dealing with the world, or appreciating the world. We're all constantly doing this kind of interpreting, distilling and passing on with everything. My way is obviously with music.

**Cochran:** Since the 1980s the genre of 'world music' has been increasing in popularity. This occurrence has cultivated a growing audience, and for the most part the music receiving the greatest amount of exposure is 'middle brow'. It's refreshing to learn that with the Silk Road Project you've made a substantial commitment to developing music on a 'fine art' level. It artfully represents multi-national collaboration—which is a current reality at this time where everything of value is essentially global. This is a huge 21st century statement.

**Ma:** It's a kind of 21st century music that I think is a kind of world classical music that is not about 'commodity' [commodity art]. It's the opposite of the 'Mac Donaldisation' of the world. It's really about celebrating something that is local or many locals, but if you go deeply enough into anything that is local, you actually find the global. And especially after what happened last Tuesday [the terrorist attacks in the USA] I say, my gosh—what is our way of life? What is culture neutral?

### CODA

It's been said that music is in a continual state of becoming. Similarly, the creative musician is never completely formed. Following the tragic events on 11 September, 2001, the world is witnessing the extremely painful implications of geo-political dissonance. In the aftermath certain freedoms will be approached in a different light, people's perspectives will have been transformed; we can expect new thoughts, new ideas, new hungers. Any complacency is now replaced with an urgency. Indeed what we learn from the language of music is that the heart of the matter is not the truth, but the courage to speak it. Yo-Yo Ma is a man of imagination, and as his journey continues, listeners will be taken by the fascinating touchstones he uncovers along the way.

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