

The Remarkable Life of Yo-Yo Ma

The World's Greatest Cellist Reflects On The Silk Road – And How It Inspires His Music

BY MARIA BANKS

“Who am I and how do I fit into the world?”

Yo-Yo Ma, the world's greatest living cellist, began asking himself this question at the age of seven – long before he embarked on his remarkable career.

He's been searching for the answer ever since.

Recently, Mr. Ma discussed his incredible life in a series of lectures – part of the Distinguished Speakers Series of Southern California – in which he regaled the audience with stories and lessons from his life.

Listening to Mr. Ma discuss the most important moments in his life is revelatory. He imparts wisdom honestly and openly. The experience is profound.

Leading the rapt audience on a journey back to where he began his musical career, from his memories as a precocious seven-year-old performing before the nation's dignitaries at the White House and continuing through to his present exploits, Mr. Ma expresses himself magnificently. He comes across as unpretentious yet eloquent; funny and generous; entertaining and inspired. He draws an audience into his sphere with the rich vivacity of a genuine storyteller. Perhaps more than anything his delivery seems to come from the heart.

Listening to him is reminiscent of stepping back to a time when bards traveled the world sharing poetry, songs and rousing tales.



He begins by reading a passage from T.S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

The poem sets the tone for the rest of the evening. The event will be spiritual; philosophical; meaningful.

Mr. Ma reminisces about playing Bach's *Prelude Suite for Presidents Kennedy and Eisenhower* as a young child. He recalls how his father taught him that everything has a pattern. On day one, he learned the first 16 notes; on the second day, he learned an additional two.

“Look at the difficulty and divide into easily remembered patterns,” he explains.

It is at this moment in his life, in this lesson, that he learned to recognize what is going on in one's mind while playing. From then on, playing music was like “magic.”

ORIGINAL ART BY LANCE MASAI

When Yo-Yo Ma played for Steve Jobs in his living room, the visionary told him: “Your playing is the best argument I've heard for the existence of God, because I don't really believe a human alone can do this.”

Hearing Mr. Ma tell the story is like being present at the moment when the apple first fell on Sir Isaac Newton's head.

As a young boy he recalls meeting versatile entertainer Danny Kaye. It made a lasting impression on the youth "that he met me at eye level and got into my heart."

Eventually Mr. Ma got the chance to meet his lifelong musical hero: the legendary Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. Excited, he played a well-known piece for his hero: The Swan.

Mr. Casals told him to "go play baseball."

That day, he learned a valuable lesson from the great master cellist that he would carry with him throughout the rest of his life: to be a human being first, a musician second and a cellist third.



Mr. Ma began studying at the prestigious Juilliard School conservatory at the age of nine.

By the time he graduated at the age of 16, he was once again asking himself:

"Who am I and how do I fit into the world?"

He began his search for answers by attending Harvard. College broadened his horizons. It taught him that there is more to the world than just being a musician.

He recalls the experience fondly. "You haven't found your voice as a musician," his eminent teacher Leon Kirchner told him. "Create a galaxy."

Says Mr. Ma: "He started me to thinking: How do I express the universe in sound?"

He discusses learning about music from his peers, who "taught me to trust colleagues, collaborate and make something to believe in."

When he began practicing frenzied concertos, he wondered where the primal passion came from; he learned that the composer Dmitri Shostakovich had friends who disappeared in the Stalin era.

"I got in touch with music representing the voices of people who went unnoticed," says Mr. Ma. "It became a physical, emotional and mental adventure."



"After college I began exploring the world," says Mr. Ma. "I met my wife and had children, which changed my life."

Mr. Ma wound up collaborating with Elmo and the Sesame Street Gang – "which was a delightful moment for my young son to see on television" – and appearing on Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, a particular favorite of his because Rogers guides his young audience to be good, honest, considerate people without talking down to them.

"My son loved Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," Mr. Ma beams. "I was invited for the father and son episode. It was amazing how Mr. Rogers went into the child's world."

But after having discovered his "new friends" he faced a big problem.

"It was no fun going on the road and I couldn't hold a day job," explains Mr. Ma. "I was no longer immortal, selfishly doing what I wanted to. It was awful to leave family, with this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach."

"I couldn't stay at home because I didn't have a day job. My son thought I worked at the airport."

Mr. Ma became convinced. If he was going to be away from home – if he was going to be away from his family – then one thing was for certain.

"I needed to make sure what I did had great meaning."



How Petunia Got Her Name

Yo Yo Ma's open and often eclectic approach to life is shown in the story of the naming of "Petunia," his cello.

A female student who took classes with him in Salt Lake City approached him after class one day. She asked him if his cello had a nickname.

He answered with genuine interest: "No, but if I play for you, will you name it?"

Afterwards Petunia was her choice – so Petunia it is.

Petunia seems to have traveled her own path, too. His cello is a very special instrument built by

Domenico Montagnana in 1733 and valued at \$2.5 million.

In the fall of 1999 he accidentally left her in a taxicab in New York City. Petunia was later returned to him undamaged.

Mr. Ma admits he was surprised when he found out what went into the making of his cello: yellow varnish from India; ebony from Africa; red dragon-blood from Indonesia; the bow, made from wood grown in Brazil; and bow strings made of horse-hairs from either Mongolia or Canada (they had to be from horses living in a cold climate).

Mr. Ma jokes. His cello is proof that even 300 years ago there was globalization. He continues to contemplate the interconnectivity of the world.



Thanks to his cello Petunia, Mr. Ma begins to think on a global scale.

"My music helped me to get through trials," he recalls, particularly noting Bach's Suite No. 1 in G Major.

"Bach seems to have this healing effect," he says. "It's phenomenal, a medicine."

He finds Bach especially empathetic to the human condition.

"I then asked myself: How can I find a place to share with people when they need it?"

This inspiration led him to collaborate with landscape designers and architects from the city of Toronto to create a nature park based on Bach's music. Thus was born the Toronto Music Garden, a three-acre preserve that physically represents all the movements of the Bach Suite through its rivers, forest groves and trails.

"From this piece of music came a physical space," explains Mr. Ma. To him, the park gives the music added dimension, like a painting done using the natural environment as the canvas.

Then: "The Berlin Wall falls, the Soviet Union is no more. I began to recall the Silk Road trade route – how religion travelled. Buddhism. Christianity. Goods. Ideas."

Mr. Ma is on to something. His thinking will become the genesis for an ensemble of international musicians that would come to be known as The Silk Road Ensemble.



The Silk Road Ensemble

When Mr. Ma first met bluegrass musician Edgar Meyer and fiddler Mark O'Conner in the late 1990s, the trio collaborated on the chart-topping Appalachia Waltz. The success of the fortuitous combination leads to an extensive tour, an appearance on The David Letterman Show, and a gig at the 1997 Inaugural Gala. Further performances lead to the Grammy Award-winning Appalachian Journey collection and an international tour.

It is then that Mr. Ma realizes the power and importance of collaborating with different musical ears – and first conceives of putting together an international ensemble to promote and encourage global cooperation.

Composed of more than 60 international musicians, The Silk Road Ensemble started up in the year 2000 under the artistic direction of Mr. Ma. The artists play a wide-range of traditional instruments and incorporate many of the long-ago sounds of the original Silk Road into their repertoire and live performances. The multicultural musicians hail from Iran, Japan, Korea, Azerbaijan, Spain, China, Switzerland, the United States, Syria, Lebanon, Canada, and more.

Together, the whole is clearly greater than the sum of its parts. Since its inception, the collective has been praised by numerous publications.

"All of the musicians feel that we're more connected to our community and feel better as musicians, happier," Mr. Ma says proudly. "I love music even more."



The Silk Road Project

This musical hodgepodge eventually led to the creation of the Silk Road Project, a "nonprofit arts, cultural and educational organization that promotes innovation and learning through the arts," according to its website.

The Silk Road Project, Mr. Ma's umbrella organization, further incorporates The Silk Road



“Culture opens our hearts to one another – not money,” says Mr. Ma

Ensemble into a vast network of socially-conscious programs designed to make the world a better place by encouraging international community. Per its website, the Project relies on the original Silk Road route as a “modern metaphor for sharing and learning across cultures, art forms and disciplines.”

“First thing I learned was that nobody knows everything and we need to share information,” says Mr. Ma. “And if you’re really good and know your traditions well, you get better at what you do.”

He adds: “You don’t necessarily get better by practicing, but by trying to make things count more.”

The founding of The Silk Road Project is a shining example of this philosophy. Closely affiliated with Harvard since 2005, the Project commissions new musical works, encourages education, and acts as a “laboratory” to promote international creativity.

By using the actual Silk Road trade route as the starting point for exploring music as a “cross cultural voice,” the project is able to engage people worldwide using their own artistic and cultural traditions as a starting point.

“Culture opens our hearts to one another – not money,” says Mr. Ma, adding: “We must build trust.”



Silk Road Connect

Mr. Ma became distressed when a friend showed him a newspaper headline noting that of 100 Chicago public school freshmen, only six will get degrees.

He viewed the headline as a call to action – and created Silk Road Connect, an educational program encouraging students to think globally. Silk Road Connect targets communities that may not have the greatest access to resources, and hopes to reach a wide range of students at the crucial middle school age.

Silk Road Connect encourages students to gather together in the name of creativity and music. Recent performances have included a magnificent concert performance held in New York’s Central Park in June 2011 incorporating several hundred youngsters.

Mr. Ma says that Silk Road Connect “encourages passionate learning and engages global citizens, combining arts, awakening all the senses to create, inspire and motivate.”

He explains that “with seven billion people in the world, 184 countries, 6,000 languages,” he wants to implement a mechanism for “building trust” and “civic engagement.” He wants to have a positive effect on the community.

Clearly, with the Silk Road Project, the Silk Road Ensemble, and Silk Road Connect he is well on his way.



Mr. Ma’s deep caring and appreciation for all societies and cultures resounds long after he has finished speaking.

By the time the evening draws to a close, the audience is left feeling they have shared precious time with a dear, old friend. Once again, he has kept people enrapt, this time by recounting the valuable life lessons that have encouraged his growth as an artist, musician, individual, and part of the global community.

But he’s not done yet.

Carefully he grabs hold of Petunia. “I’ll close with the first piece I learned at the age of four,” he says with a smile. “The piece that started me to thinking: Who am I and who do I want to be.”

Long before the first melodic strains of the Bach Suite hit their ears, the audience is won over by a true American original, a devoted humanitarian, and a truly great citizen of the world. *