



CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN—SILK ROAD PROJECT

YO-YO MA | MUSICIAN

## Crossing Cultures by Making Melodies

By Chris Wilson

**O**n cue, the children's orchestra starts huffing and wailing on makeshift *shengs*, Chinese instruments fashioned from plastic bottles and straws. The professional musicians take a breather, and Yo-Yo Ma gets to enjoy another of his dreams come true. The renowned cellist founded the Silk Road Project, which put together the children's workshop, for this very purpose: to bring the sounds and instruments from the historic Asia-Europe trade route to the international scene.

"No one knew whether this would work," says Dartmouth music Prof. Theodore Levin, the program's first executive director. "We all relied on the kind of inherent flexibility of musicians to find a way to communicate with each other." But almost

10 years later, the Silk Road Project is widely admired for both its music and its cultural ambassadorship as it performs around the world. "What we try to do is make music in all the ways music has ever been made," Ma says. Silk Road is not a fusion of disparate styles, he says, but a homage to living traditions. "The usual buzzword is 'cultural appropriation,' and I say, 'No!' We want to honor [the tradition]. We want to respect it."

Ma, 52, himself is a product of cultural plurality. Born in Paris to Chinese parents, he took up the cello at age 4 and was performing publicly at 5. His family later moved to New York, and his career has been soaring ever since. Today, he is one of the most recognized classical musicians in America.

Yet as accomplished an artist as he is, Ma is increas-

ingly celebrated for his generosity and talents as a communicator. Unlike the case with many virtuosos, the warmth of Ma's music extends to his personality. Using his star power as a springboard, Ma wanted a project that would expand knowledge of common heritages and celebrate local cultures. It was, Levin says, "the culmination of years of unrequited curiosity."

**Conduit.** When a friend suggested the Silk Road theme, Ma was sold. The 5,000-mile trade artery was the major conduit of culture and information between Europe and Asia from before the Roman Empire through the 17th century, and it allowed musical traditions to mingle along the way. Ma's orchestra is retracing that route and more, performing original music and classical pieces based

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on cross-cultural traditions, as well as establishing museum residencies and festivals. Musical favorites include Dmitri Shostakovich's second piano trio, which is heavily influenced by traditional Jewish wedding music, and works by French composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, who both incorporated eastern sounds in their works.

The project has had its challenges. Before they could perform a note, the musicians Ma had recruited from China to Canada to Iran had to overcome technical differences in pitch and notation. While western music traditionally has 12 intervals in an octave, for example, many eastern traditions have more. Crossing these barriers requires enormous flexibility, Ma says, and a great deal of improvisation. "It's not enough to be incredibly well grounded in a tradition. You really have to want to share it," he says. "In a way, part of what joins this group of musicians is virtuosity and generosity."

The Silk Road experience has changed the way these musicians approach popular pieces, he says. "I feel I'm a better musician playing Bach and Beethoven after doing what I've done, and I think every member of the ensemble also feels that they're better at their own tradition after they've opened up into something else." Indeed, since the project got started, critics have noted subtle changes in Ma's choice of tuning as he plays old standbys like the Dvorak cello concerto.

Says collaborator John Bertles, who leads the instrument-making sessions at the workshops: "The sounds are strange, but they're only strange initially. If you look at the cultural connections, they're not so strange anymore. And that's where Yo-Yo's genius really lies." ●