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Yo-Yo Ma Wants Bach to Save the World

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By Zachary Woolfe

Yo-Yo Ma, performing at Stadtteilpark in Leipzig, Germany, earlier this month as part of his planned 36-city, six-continent tour that blends performances of Bach with community engagement.

LEIPZIG, Germany — While it's impossible not to think of Johann Sebastian Bach as you walk through this city, where he spent [the final decades of his life](#), what little remains of his world here has been altered almost beyond recognition.

The house where he and his family lived was demolished a century ago. Next door, St. Thomas Church, where Bach was a cantor from 1723 to 1750, was overhauled in Gothic Revival style in the 1880s. St. Nicholas Church, where the “St. John Passion” was first performed in 1724, got its current cupcake-pastel interior decades after Bach died.

And Bach certainly would never have heard Arabic being widely spoken, as it is now, in the bustling, largely immigrant neighborhood of Neustadt. It was here, on a

mild weekend afternoon recently, that Yo-Yo Ma bounded into a room in a community center, Stradivarius cello in hand, and moved swiftly around a seated circle of adults and children, grinning and giving one long high five.

25 “The most important thing is to bring all of yourself into a moment,” he said the next day. “If for even one second you’re like, ‘Oh, I have to go do this,’ people are really smart. They can see when someone is there, or just not quite there.”

30 *“Learning a new piece is like moving from one place to another,” Mr. Ma said to a small audience, including immigrants, at a community center in Leipzig.*

Mr. Ma, 62, was entirely there. He stayed in the community center only about half an hour, but without seeming rushed, he blended disarming generosity — he gave two budding cellists his instrument to try out in front of the group — with a kind of subtle social work.

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“Learning a new piece is like moving from one place to another,” he said in answer to someone’s question, connecting music-making to the lives of the migrants without making too big a deal of it.

If Mr. Ma seemed wholly at ease, a veteran politician delightedly working a town hall, it is because his visit, blending Bach and social responsibility, was nothing unusual in the career of *the* musician of our civic life. The one we call upon to play at [the funeral Mass of a senator](#) and [the inauguration of a president](#), [the anniversary of a terrorist attack](#) and [the commemoration of the victims of a bombing](#).

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And what Mr. Ma plays at moments like those, to make us cry and then soothe us, is, more often than not, a selection from the Bach cello suites. These six works are the Everest of his instrument’s repertory, offering a guide to nearly everything a cello can do — as well as, many believe, charting a remarkably complete anatomy of emotion and aspiration.

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55 Last month, Mr. Ma released his third and, in all likelihood, final recording of the suites, a relaxed, confident, deeply human interpretation during which, if you listen closely, you can sometimes hear him breathing as he plays. His trip to Leipzig was part of a sprawling project related to the album: Over the next two years, he will visit 36 cities — winking at the fact that each of the six suites has six sections — on six continents. ([His next stop is Washington, on Nov. 29.](#))

60 In each city, he will pair a performance of the full cycle — nearly two and a half hours of labyrinthine music, played with barely a pause — with what he’s calling a “day of action” that brings Bach into the community, as in his trip to Neustadt. It’s a small and glancing, but also deeply felt, attempt to suggest that this music, with its objectivity and empathy, its breathless energy and delicate grace, could, if heard closely by enough people, change the world.

65 And the world, Mr. Ma readily acknowledges, could use some changing. The day of his recital in Leipzig, he said, “I’m thinking of what happened in Chemnitz,” only 50 miles southeast, where anti-immigrant riots had raged a few days earlier. A week later, [asked by The Financial Times](#) about President Trump, Mr. Ma said: “Would I play for him on his deathbed? No.”

Composed around 1720, just before Bach moved to Leipzig, the cello suites, now musical and emotional touchstones, were little known until the early 1900s. It was thought, even by some who knew of them, that they were merely études, nothing you’d want to perform in public.

70 They may have remained a curiosity had it not been for the great cellist Pablo Casals, who happened on a used edition of the score in a Barcelona shop when he was 13. Decades later, in the 1930s, he made a classic recording of the set, the success of which put the suites on the path to ubiquity.

75 Their magic lies in a perfect balance of exploration and security. They move through harmonic progressions with scientific curiosity and patience, but also with an intensity of feeling that keeps excruciating and releasing, over and over. Simultaneously expansive and reassuring, they are, for many, the very definition of consolation. [...]

“It happened over time,” Ms. Buerkle said. “It wasn’t like there was a magic moment. Over a long period of time, incrementally, you become the go-to person. It’s such a strange thing in this business. You become, at some point, the household name.”

80 Mr. Ma took that status seriously and has used it to richer effect than the rest of the tiny handful of classical musicians at his level of renown. In 1998, he started the Silk Road Project, dedicated to genially exploring cross-cultural artistic connections, out of which emerged the constantly touring Silk Road Ensemble. Now a grandfather, he has aged easily into the role of global-citizen humanist, lecturing on the role of artists and culture in a fraying society. (The question is whether his “days of action” will have the substance, beyond photo ops, to match his good intentions.) [...]

85 One of the greatest tests yet of his vaunted abilities to communicate with audiences has come with his desire to perform the suites, as intimate as music gets, in spaces many times larger than Bach could have imagined. Mr. Ma did them in 2015 at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall in London, more often the site of grand symphonic performances.

90 Last September, he took on what seemed to be a folly: playing the suites outdoors, in front of more than 17,000 people in Los Angeles. [...]

Yo-Yo Ma wants to heal the world with Bach

By [Anne Quito](#) August 25, 2018

<https://qz.com/quartz/1368118/yo-yo-ma-wants-to-heal-the-world-with-bach/>

95 Celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma is on a crusade to prove that expressing culture is the key to fixing political divisions.

The 62-year-old musician believes that culture is inseparable from politics and his newest album, *Six Evolutions—Bach: Cello Suites*, has a political tenor. Ma is traveling to 36 cities in six continents and using Johann Sebastian Bach’s 18th century masterpiece, he says, as “a force for good.”

100 His world tour—hashtag #CultureinAction—is a call to action during a time “when the ties that bind us politically, economically, and socially are fraying,” as he put it during [a lecture at MIT](#) last April. After each concert, Ma will conduct a “day of action,” inviting people in the area to showcase their cultures through food, music, art, science, and conversations.

105 Ma says listening to people living in the margins of society is especially necessary, including those living in rural towns, inner cities, or places where industries have abandoned. “I think culture can do everything to dispel fear because fear makes us smaller and culture makes us larger,” he explains.

Why Bach in particular? Ma says the German baroque composer is a great teacher of empathy. “This is a state of mind, a type of thinking, that culture helps us train for. Nobody does this better than Bach,” he said at MIT, noting how the stirring Cello Suite No. 5 “combines total objectivity and total subjectivity, analysis and empathy, the conscious and subconscious.” Ma played the solemn second movement from the Suite No. 5 during the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks in New York City.

110 Born in Paris to Chinese musicians, Ma understands how music can build bridges between strangers and ideological opponents. Throughout his career, he has sought to defy the stuffy, “high culture” stereotype of western classical music, joyfully dabbling in [bluegrass](#), [Brazilian bossa nova](#), and [jazz](#). The superb [Silkroad ensemble](#) that he founded 1998 features artists from different musical genres jamming together to prove that “embracing difference leads to a more hopeful world.”

In an interview with Quartz, Ma elaborates on why culture is such a vital force today.

Quartz: When did you first come up with the notion that culture has a role to play in improving human relations?

120 Ma: Music, arts and sciences, and the humanities—culture—have always been fundamental. They meet a most basic need: to understand. Culture turns the “other” into “us.” And as a bridge between the sacred and secular, it helps us to understand nature and human nature, to explore wonder, and to turn darkness into light. The practice of these forms of thinking encourages understanding over domination, truth over ideology, and humility over egoism.

What do you hope will result from “Culture in Action”? What are tangible indicators that it’s working?

125 My hope for this project is to change how we think about culture and its role in society. In my own life, Bach’s music has reminded me again and again of culture’s power, its ability to speak to our shared humanity, to offer solace, to connect, to express meaning, to help.

130 We are all participants in creating a strong social fabric. And culture—everything that helps us to understand our environment, ourselves, and one another, from music to literature to science—helps us to do that. By sharing what I have learned over nearly 60 years as a cellist, and inviting others around the world to share what they know deeply, I hope that we, together, will discover just how powerful culture can be as an engine for growth, community, and collective hope.



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It is often said that culture should have a seat at the table with economics and politics. I believe we will find that culture is the table at which we all sit together, that it is the foundation for our most effective economic and political practices.

Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman and Anthony McGill at the inauguration of Barack Obama.

How would you characterize art’s relationship to politics?

I once met Mikhail Gorbachev at the Kennedy Library in Boston. I asked him what he thought about the connection

between art and politics, referring to the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich’s outspoken public support of his friend Solzhenitsyn, for which he was prevented from playing publicly for many years. Gorbachev’s reply was simply: “I think they should be kept separate.”

150 I believe that a strong society depends on the intersection of culture—including the arts—and politics. Both the art of expression and the art of governing were invented to serve our most basic need: to understand our environment, ourselves, and others. And both culture and politics seek equilibrium between order and chaos. When there’s no connection between the two, politics is raw power and culture is just an ivory tower talking to itself.

155 Society’s wellbeing depends on culture and politics (and economics) working together. It’s when politics and culture intersect that culture can truly create shared values and common understanding, that politics can be responsible governance rooted in trust, that we can work together to shape a better future.