

Yo-Yo Ma reveals his journey through images and music

By Karen Lindell

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Cellist Yo-Yo Ma likes baguettes and sliced white bread, Danny Kaye made a bigger impression on him than two U.S. presidents and Leonard Bernstein, and he's still just trying to fit in.

Oh, and his cello is a girl.

A Thousand Oaks audience learned that and more about Ma on Tuesday night at the Civic Arts Plaza, where he spoke as part of the Distinguished Speaker Series. The presentation featured two "speakers," because Ma played his cello three times, including all six movements of Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suite No. 1 at the end.

Throughout the evening, Ma, with the aid of video, slides and his cello, chronicled the milestones and people who have influenced his music and views of the world — two things that in his mind are very much connected.

As audience member Dick Hyde of Santa Paula, 74, said afterward, Ma "showed that there's so much more to music than the playing of music."

Ma's exploration started with not enough sky in New York.

At age 7, in the 1960s, Ma moved with his parents from Paris to New York, and suddenly everything was "irregular," he said. He saw more buildings and less sky. The language was unfamiliar. Even the food groups were different.

"In France, you get up and eat baguettes, and the cheese is round," he said. In America: "The bread was square, white and sliced. And the cheese was square and sliced, with a piece of plastic between the slices. And you ask me, 'What do you prefer?' I loved both ... and the irregular in many ways became my new regular."

And so began the constant quest to shape himself in a world that's always in flux. He has never stopped asking, "Who am I, and how do I fit in the world?"

The answer keeps changing, and so does his relationship with music.

Ma has won 16 Grammy Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, the Glenn Gould Prize, the National Medal of the Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom; performed for eight presidents, including at Barack Obama's inauguration; and recorded more than 75 albums in traditional and nontraditional repertoire from West, East and points above and below — anything by Bach, Piazzolla's tango, bluegrass ditties, Appalachian waltzes, Japanese folk songs, Uzbek concertos, Chinese film

soundtracks.

His most recent album is "The Goat Rodeo Sessions," a genre-defying collaboration with bassist Edgar Meyer, mandolinist Chris Thile and bassist Stuart Duncan. It's no surprise that his most recent four Grammy wins were in the "best classical crossover album" category.

Ma talked about three key people who influenced him early on, in ways related more to humanity than musicality.

The first was famed Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. Ma, who started playing cello at 4, said he was taken to perform for Casals, and what stuck with him most is that Casals told him, "You should go play baseball."

Casals, Ma recalled, was known for saying: "I am a human being first. I am a musician second. I am a cellist third." Casals' words confirmed for Ma that, "Cello was something I did, but that was not who I was."

Second, at age 7, Ma performed with the National Symphony Orchestra. Leonard Bernstein and Presidents John F. Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower were in the audience. But who does he remember meeting that night? Entertainer Danny Kaye, who squatted down to talk with him at eye level.

"That magic of getting inside a little boy's heart was, to me, absolutely amazing," said Ma, who's made his way into a few hearts himself through his many educational projects and master classes with people of all ages around the world.

The third person was Leonard Rose, the cello teacher he studied with from age 9 to 16, when he graduated from high school.

"He had the most gorgeous cello sound in the world," Ma said. "But what really touched me was that he was so kind to me."

During college at Juilliard, his sense of music deepened. He learned that, "Music is about expressing ideas and emotions," and became a "non-neurotic musician" when he realized he "didn't have to worry about being perfect but whether I was expressing what the composer intended."

For example, when he first heard Dmitri Shostakovich's cello concerto, composed in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era, he wasn't sure whether he could play it.

"It was so frenzied, so dark, so furious, so relentless. I had never experienced that," said Ma, who then played an excerpt for the audience. Ma studied the Soviet Union and realized that Shostakovich was "perhaps writing music that was the voices of people no longer alive."

Marriage and having children was the next milestone.

"Boy, does that change who I am and how I fit in the world," Ma said, to knowing laughter from the audience. "From being a parent, I learned to collaborate." He also "got to meet some new friends," Ma said as he played clips of himself on "Sesame Street" and "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

As the Berlin Wall fell and Ma started playing Appalachian folk music with Meyer and fiddler Mark O'Connor, he began to make connections to the larger world. In 1998, he created the Silk Road Project, a nonprofit whose mission is to "connect the world's neighborhoods by bringing together artists and audiences around the globe," in particular the cultures along the ancient Silk Road trade route from the Mediterranean to the Pacific Ocean. The Silk Road Ensemble, consisting of Ma and other musicians, tours annually.

Recently, Ma said, he's been exploring civic engagement by artists and "culture and its role in public discourse." Culture, he said, "opens our hearts toward one another. And the currency in culture is not money, but trust."

Ma acknowledged at the end that: "At age 56, I'm a slow learner. I keep asking myself, 'Do I know any more about the world?'"

Ma is scheduled to perform Aug. 7 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl. For more information, visit <http://www.hollywoodbowl.com>. Ma's website is <http://www.yo-yoma.com>.