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COVER STORY

SILK ROAD TO SUCCESS

As Yo-Yo Ma turns 50 this year, the cellist – whom many see as the finest of his generation – still continues his quest across world cultures for inspiration

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA LARGE

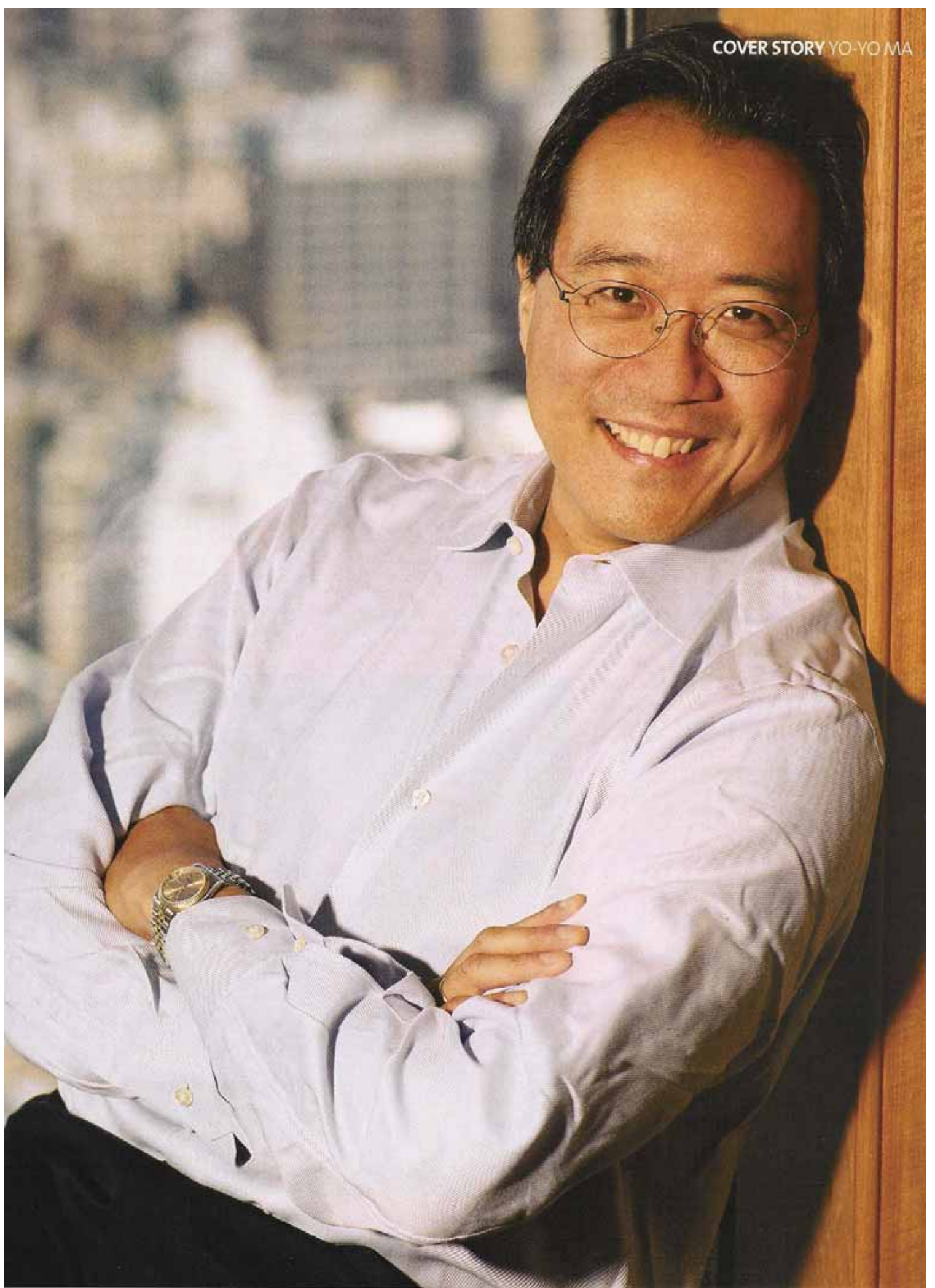
Never did a musician mean so many different things to different people as Yo-Yo Ma. For some his name is synonymous with the Bach Cello Suites; for others the cross-cultural tapestry of the *Silk Road Project*; others again may associate him with anything from Argentine tangos to Tan Dun's film score for *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*. Ma turns 50 this year and for over 40 of those years he has been devouring music of every kind, captivating diverse fans with the warmth of his burnished tone as much as his character.

So what drives him to all these different musical landscapes? Does he find limits to the core classical repertoire? Or is it that he wants to appeal to that elusive beast – the mass audience? In fact, it is neither. You see, the thing with Ma is that he is simply curious. Very, very curious, as it happens. When we chat at the Sony Offices in New York City he peppers his speech with words like 'learn' and 'information' with an almost obsessive insistence. 'Today nobody grows up listening to only one kind of music,' he says. 'Keeping your learning curve steep is essential to being alive. These days we have the possibility to research and understand all sorts of things in a way that has not been available before. I feel most alive when I can turn that information into knowledge and then into a passionate moment when I perform.'

This has long since been Ma's approach to his work, but it is perhaps his *Silk Road Project*, started in 1998, which is the ultimate example. After years of international touring Ma became intrigued by the relationship between musical cultures across the world. The Silk Road Project is his way of exploring them, in particular those which flourished along that ancient merchants' route through Europe and Asia – 'the internet of antiquity' as Ma calls it. By undertaking extensive ▶

YO-YO MA:
'Today nobody grows up listening to only one kind of music. Keeping your learning curve steep is essential to being alive'





field work with the project's chief executive and ethnomusicologist Ted Levin, Ma located composers and performers across the region and also instigated a composition project which encourages collaboration and exchange among Western and Eastern composers and performers. The title of the project's first disc, *When Strangers Meet*, reflects Ma's typical willingness to embrace such diversity and has seen him collaborate with performers such as Persian composer Kayhan Kalhor and pipa player Wu-Man, playing both cello and the Mongolian fiddle, the *morin khuur*. Whether the music gets you or not, the project has undoubtedly been a success, with continuing world tours and its latest CD staying at Number One in the US chart for 12 weeks.

TRADITION OF INVENTION

Ma delights in discovering connections, and is quick to talk about how interlinked everything is: how this instrument descended from that country and ended up there, and so on. But it's not information for information's sake. Ma's quest for knowledge is part of his deeply philosophical approach to life, as he explains: 'Enlarging our view of the world means enlarging our view of our own lives and culture.' His Silk Road mission statement sums it up: 'Music is an expressive art that can reach to the very core of one's identity. I believe



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that music can act as a magnet to draw people together. As we interact with unfamiliar musical traditions we encounter voices that are not exclusive to one community. We discover trans-national voices that belong to one world.'

If you consider the history and pathways of musical development you realise how all art forms are in flux, with each new idea adding to the whole of evolution of music. Ma's very part in exploring everything from jazz and bluegrass (with bassist Edgar Meyer and fiddler Mark O'Connor), to last year's recording of concertos and new transcriptions of music by Vivaldi

(with Ton Koopman and the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra), means he is absolutely a part of that development happening right now. Ma is loathe to pigeon-hole different genres: 'If we get stuck on categorisation then we end up destroying the very thing that is valuable,' he says. 'There is no tradition which is not the result of sustained invention.'

Even Ma himself can't be pigeon-holed. He was born in Paris, to where his parents had escaped from cultural and political oppression in China, and his family moved to New York when he was seven. His father was a musician and a traditionally strict Chinese pedagogue who versed Ma and his elder sister Yeou-Cheng in Chinese, French and music. The Ma kids were gifted from the start, and together with the sights and sounds of different countries and the influence of Dr Ma (whose PhD was on 'the fusion of musical styles') it's not hard to see how the young Ma was inspired. At the age of nine he made his Carnegie debut alongside his sister on the piano and he reputedly impressed all the musicians he met, Isaac Stern and Leonard Rose among them. 'Everybody noticed that extraordinary talent,' Stern has said. 'Conductors would engage him on the spot.'

Never content to devote himself solely to performing, the 17-year-old Ma decided to go Harvard to study archaeology and

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NEW RECORDING



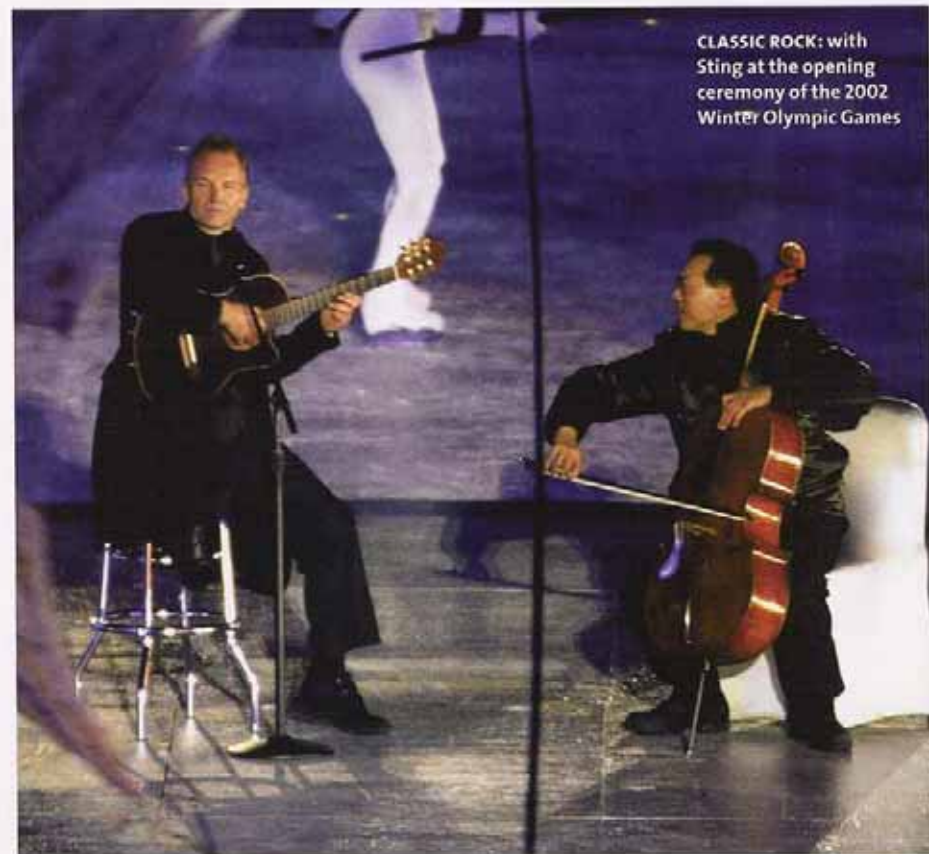
SILK ROAD JOURNEYS: BEYOND THE HORIZON
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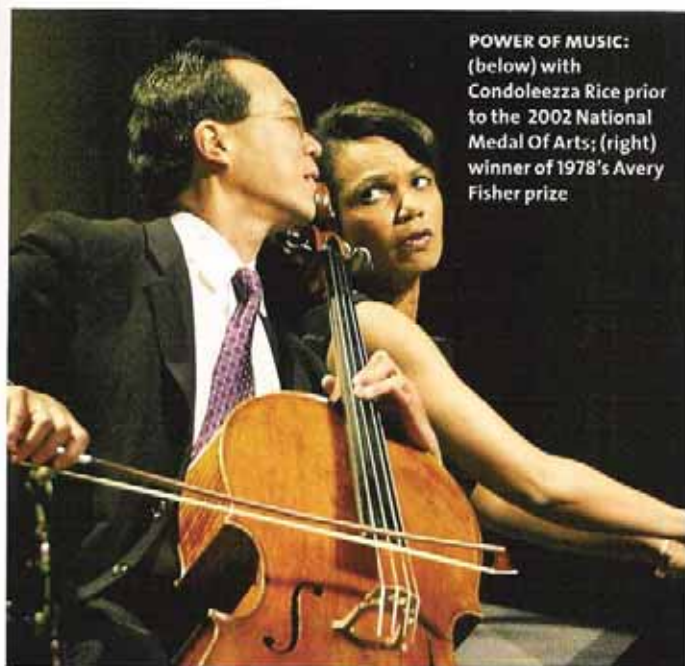
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ceremony of the 2002
Winter Olympic Games



POWER OF MUSIC: (below) with Condoleezza Rice prior to the 2002 National Medal of Arts; (right) winner of 1978's Avery Fisher prize

BORN: Paris 1955. **BEGINNINGS:** Aged four, starts lessons with his father. Moves to New York aged seven and, alongside his sister, performs for President Kennedy. Makes his Carnegie Hall debut at nine. He goes on to study at the Juilliard with Leonard Rose. Aged 17, he goes to Harvard to read anthropology and archaeology. At 23 he marries a Harvard instructor, Jill Horner. **SILKEN SOUNDS:** After years of travelling, which arouses Ma's curiosity to global musical trends and phenomena, he forms the Silk Road project in 1998. The project explores music with musicians from the region of the Silk Road across Asia and Europe, such as Persian composer Kayhan Kalhor and pipa



player Wu-Man. He explores musical dialogue with varied musicians such as: Baroque music with specialist Ton Koopman with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra; classic South American sounds with music by Piazzolla and Antonio Carlos Jobim; and US jazz and bluegrass with Mark O'Connor and Edgar Meyer.

MULTI-FACETED: Ma has recorded over 50 albums covering core classical repertoire, new and world music.

WHAT THEY'VE SAID: 'Ma is a chameleon who seems to approach each musical form by going straight to its essence.' *Seattle Times* 'Yo-Yo Ma is the greatest cellist today. Everything he touches turns to gold.' *Boston Herald*

'The idea of trying to express something that is meaningful is the basis of living'

anthropology. A contemporary once described how Ma 'felt it his mission to bring music to everybody' at college and his compulsion to communicate still remains. Ma says: 'Understanding something is one thing, but to be able to actually communicate that to someone else so that they understand it – that is what it's all about. The idea of trying to express something that is meaningful is the basis of living.' The student master-classes which he makes a point of fitting in to his schedule are testament to this, as was his participation in the first West-Eastern Divan workshop bringing together young Arab and Jewish musicians. But as well as performers, Ma also cherishes his communication with the audience – whether it's at Carnegie Hall or on *Sesame Street*, where he has twice been a visitor. Audiences trust him, and he in turn trusts that they will join him on his journeys. (Over 50 albums and 16 Grammy Award-winning CDs also can't be wrong.)

Classical music is never side-lined; rather, Ma finds that after exploring other avenues, his approach to the core classics is invigorated. 'From the Silk Road we see incredible masters who work in multiple different ways, in improvisation and composition,' he says. 'How freeing is that when you go back to playing a Beethoven sonata?'

Ma has become associated with Bach's Cello Suites and returns to them again and again in performance. He learnt them two bars at a

time at the age of four, under the instruction of his father. But true to form, seven years ago, he decided to explore the works beyond the manuscript. He wondered what these iconic notes would mean to artists from different disciplines. And so the *Inspired by Bach* project was born. 'The idea was to ask: what is a piece of music? I think its materiality is much more than just the notes,' he has said. To that end he engaged a garden designer, a choreographer, a kabuki actor, ice skaters and a film-maker to interpret the work in their own way.

PAUSE AND REST

The word 'Yo' means friendship in Chinese, and Ma is very friendly and down-to-earth. Underneath, you get the sense that it is important for him to please people. The second you meet him he wants to put you at ease. And I find myself wondering, with all this constant need to explore and learn and a never-ending search for the 'connectivity' of everything, whether Ma has enough time to absorb it all. Doesn't artistic genius require time to reflect? Perhaps it's a needless concern – at any rate it is one he is aware of. 'I've learnt about time and space, that there has to be a gestation period,' he says. 'Perhaps I've learnt it the hard way but I know it's essential.'

Ma appears to be studiously optimistic. 'It's harder, but it is a philosophical decision I take,' he says. 'I can't bear cynicism – or arrogance. Nobody ever built anything on cynicism. To

believe in something and go forward with it is hard. I see it in all the creators I know who are struggling. It's so easy to criticise things and destroy them. We have to be optimistic: I don't think we have a choice.'

His attitude has stood him in good stead, particularly back in the 1980s when it looked like his career might be cut short. A curvature in Ma's spine was diagnosed as severe scoliosis and he was told that the operation he needed could stop him playing. With the support of his wife he escaped unscathed – and two inches taller. 'Part of being 50 is that I've seen so much, and lived so intensely for so long now,' he says. 'One of the good things about having a limited life span is that you have a very clear idea of what you care about.' Family life (he has a son, Nicholas, and daughter, Emily) is important to him and when considering his career he thanks them for their support in his life-long musical mission.

But our brief time is up and Ma must be whisked away to the next in a long line of interviews and radio shows. As he takes his leave he is briefly introduced to a Sony employee, about to take over the reins in the Berlin office. Ma immediately plunges into a bevy of questions about where this chap would live, and what a fine city Berlin is. It is all Ma's personal manager can do to put a guiding hand on his back and steer him out of the room.

That questing energy and interest in the world around him is unstoppable. Even 50 years from now you get the feeling that it will still be just as strong. ■

Yo-Yo Ma is performing Bach's Cello Suites at the Barbican on 4 December (barbican.org.uk)