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ENVIRONMENT

Why Yo-Yo Ma thinks culture and music can help protect the planet

The cello virtuoso has been playing Bach concerts on six continents. At every stop, he joins activities to support social justice and environmental causes.

BY CLAUDIA KALB
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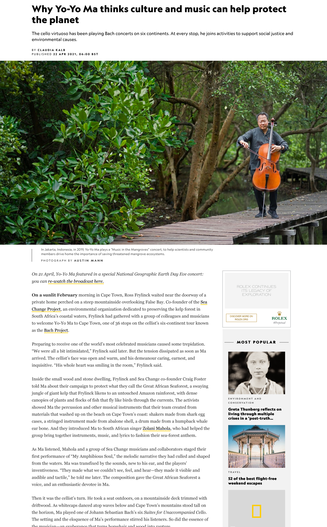


In Ushuaia, Argentina, in 2019, for his project, "Music in the Parks/Bach," cellist and environmental ambassador Yo-Yo Ma joins members of the Yaghan Nation in performing Ethnobotanical Harangue accompaniments.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN HUNT

On 22 April, Yo-Yo Ma featured in a special National Geographic Earth Day Live concert: you can re-watch the broadcast here.

On a sunlit February morning in Cape Town, Ross Frylinck waited near the doorway of a private home perched on a steep mountainside overlooking False Bay. Co-founder of the **Sea Change Project**, an environmental organization dedicated to preserving the kelp forest in South Africa's coastal waters, Frylinck had gathered with a group of colleagues and musicians to welcome Yo-Yo Ma to Cape Town, one of 36 stops on the cellist's six-continent tour known as the **Bach Project**.

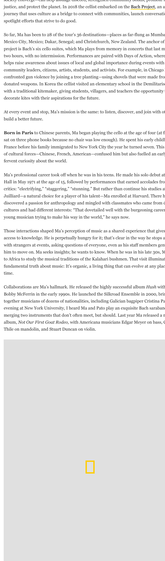
Preparing to receive one of the world's most celebrated musicians caused some trepidation. "We were all a bit intimidated," Frylinck said later. But the tension dissipated as soon as Ma arrived. The cellist's face was open and warm, and his demeanor caring, earnest, and inquisitive. "His whole heart was smiling in the room," Frylinck said.

Inside the small wood and stone dwelling, Frylinck and Sea Change co-founder Craig Foster told Ma about their campaign to protect what they call the Great African Seafront, a swaying jungle of giant kelp that Frylinck likens to an untouched Amazon rainforest, with dense canopies of plants and flocks of fish that hide from predators in its shadows. The activists showed Ma the percussion and other musical instruments that their team created from materials that washed up on the beach on Sea Change's nearby island. Made from shark egg cases, a stringed instrument made from abalone shell, a drum made from a humpback whale ear bone. And they introduced Ma to South African singer **Zolani Mahola**, who had helped the group bring together instruments, music, and lyrics to fashion their sea-forest anthem.

As Ma listened, Mahola and a group of Sea Change musicians and collaborators staged their first performance of "My Amphibious Soul," the melodic narrative they had collect and shaped from the waters. Ma was transfixed by the sounds, now his to his ear, and the players' intentions. "They made what we couldn't see, feel, and hear—their music is audible and tactile," he told us later. The composition gave the Great African Seafront a voice, and an enthusiastic devotee in Ma.

Then it was the cellist's turn. He took a seat outdoors, on a mountainside deck trimmed with driftwood. As otherworldly dancer sting waves below and Cape Town's mountains stood tall on the horizon, Ma played one of Johann Sebastian Bach's six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello. The setting and the eloquence of Ma's performance stirred his listeners. So did the essence of the musician as a endeavor that turns horsehair and wood into sweet music.

Frylinck told me later that in the course of his lifetime, he had encountered only two other people who struck him as Ma did: a monk at a temple in Japan and legendary leader **Nelson Mandela**. "For me, Yo-Yo Ma had that quality of basic goodness," Frylinck said. "I just had this feeling that this man is a bodhisattva"—a compassionate figure who helps others attain enlightenment.



Ma believes that culture—which he defines broadly as the place where the arts, sciences, and society converge—can help assuage discord, strengthen community bonds, promote social justice, and protect the planet. In 2018 the cellist embarked on the **Bach Project**, an ambitious journey that uses culture as a bridge to connect with communities, launch conversations, and spotlight efforts that strive to do good.

Ma's ability to bring people together was staggering. A child prodigy who **performed for President John F. Kennedy at the age of seven**, the cellist has since recorded more than 100 albums, received 18 Grammy Awards, and played for nine U.S. presidents. Yet at 65, Ma remains a self-deprecating, tireless, and psychedelically optimistic human being who shares his music as a means of connecting with people and the world.

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So far, Ma has been to 28 of the tour's 36 destinations—places as far-flung as Mumbai, India; Mexico City, Mexico; Dakar, Senegal; and Christchurch, New Zealand. The anchor of the project is Bach's six cello suites, which Ma plays from memory in concerts that last more than two hours, with no intermission. Performances are paired with Days of Action, where Ma helps raise awareness about issues of local and global importance during events with community leaders, citizens, artists, students, and activists. For example, in Chicago Ma confronted gun violence by joining a tree planting—using shovel that were made from donated weapons. In Korea the cellist visited an elementary school in the Demilitarized Zone with a traditional kitemaker, giving students, villagers, and teachers the opportunity to decorate kites with their aspirations for the future.

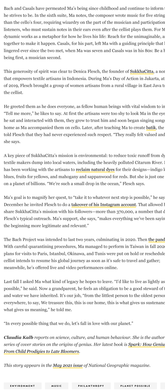
At every event and stop, Ma's mission is the same: to listen, discover, and join with others to build a better future.

Born in Paris to Chinese parents, Ma began playing the cello at the age of four (at first, he sat on three phone books because no chair was low enough). He spent his early childhood in France before his family immigrated to New York City the year he turned seven. This exchange of cultural forces—Chinese, French, American—combined him but also fuelled an early and fervent curiosity about the world.

Ma's professional career took off when he was in his teens. He made his solo debut at Carnegie Hall in May 1971 at the age of 15, followed by performances that earned accolades from the critics: "electrifying," "staggering," "stunning." But rather than continue his studies at Juilliard—a national choice for a player of his talent—Ma enrolled at Harvard. There he discovered a passion for anthropology and mingled with classmates who came from diverse cultures and had different interests: "That dovetailed well with the burgeoning career of a young musician trying to make his way in the world," he says now.

These interactions shaped Ma's perception of music as a shared experience that gives him access to knowledge. He is perpetually hungry for it; that's clear in the way he stops and chats with strangers at events, asking questions of everyone, even as his cellist's schedule gently tug at him to move on. Ma seeks insights; he wants to know. When he was in his late 30s, Ma went to Africa to study the musical traditions of the Kalahari bushmen. That visit illuminated a fundamental truth about music: It's organic, a living thing that can evolve at any place at any time.

Collaborations are Ma's hallmark. He released the highly successful album Hush with vocalist Bobby McFerrin in the early 1990s. He launched the Silkroad Ensemble in 2000, bringing together musicians of dozens of nationalities, including Lebanese singer Cristina Pato. One evening at New York University, I heard Ma and Pato play an exquisite Bach saraband, merging two instruments that don't often meet, but should. Last year Ma released a new album, *Not Our First Great Rodeo*, with American musicians Edgar Meyer on bass, Chris Thile on mandolin, and Stuart Duncan on violin.



From National Geographic, "Sound" explores form and where inspiration strikes among high achievers: Yo-Yo Ma, Ethan Hawke, Ziggy Marley, Ashley Judd, Jeremy Bergman, Cristina Pato, Bassem Youssef, Bassem Sabry and Leslie Odom Jr.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Ma likens these cross-cultural alliances to the "edge effect" in ecology, which occurs at the border where two different habitats intersect, like the forest and the savanna. There, certain kinds of biological diversity and life-forms thrive. In Ma's world, edges are where creativity flourishes—and the Bach Project seeks them out.

Ma equates the Bach Project with the classic children's tale about villagers who contribute cabbages, carrots, potatoes, and herbs to a pot filled with boiling water—and a stone. "It's my version of those Stone," Ma told me. "I play the cello. This is the best of what I can bring to you. What would you like to add to the pot? How would you like to start a conversation? What are things you're thinking about? What are your needs—what is it that you're struggling with?"

Bach's *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*, composed in the early 18th century, are the pinnacle of the instrument's repertoire. In 1890 a young Pablo Casals unearthed the suites in a musty shop near the harbour of Barcelona, Spain. Casals studied the suites for 12 years before playing one in public at the age of 36.

Ma learned the suites as a child in Paris (his violinist father taught him to memorise two bars at a time). He has recorded them three times, in his 20s, 40s, and early 60s. Each of his performances—whether a World War I commemoration at the Arc de Triomphe or a soulful rendering at his father's bedside—is unique to that moment. "He comes as close as any musician I've ever known to contemporary music, to breathe life into it," says pianist Richard Kogan, a friend of Ma's who played with him in a trio at Harvard.

Bach and Casals have permeated Ma's being since childhood and continue to inform the man he strives to be. In the sixth suite, Ma notes, the composer wrote music for the strings rather than the cello's four, requiring wizardry on the part of the musician and participation from listeners, who must sustain notes in their ears even after the cellist plays them. For Ma, this dynamic works as a metaphor for how he lives his life: Reach for the unimaginable, and work together to make it happen. Casals, for his part, left Ma with a guiding principle that has lingered ever since the two met, when Ma was seven and Casals was in his 80s: Be a human being first, a musician second.

This generosity of spirit was close to Denise Plesch, the founder of SoldiaCitta, a nonprofit that empowers textile artisans in Indonesia. During Ma's Day of Action in Jakarta, at the end of 2019, Plesch brought a group of women artisans from a rural village in East Java to meet the cellist.

He greeted them as he does everyone, as fellow human beings with vital wisdom to impart. "Tell me more," he likes to say. At first the artisans were too shy to look Ma in the eye. But as he sat and interacted with them, they grew to trust him and soon began singing songs from home as Ma accompanied them on cello. Later, after teaching Ma to create **batik**, the women told Plesch that they had never experienced such respect. "They really felt valued and seen," she says.

A key piece of SoldiaCitta's mission is environmental: to reduce toxic runoff from dyes that textile makers dump into local waters, including the heavily polluted Citarum River. Plesch has been working with the artisans to replace **natural dyes** for their designs—indigo leaves for blues, fruits for yellows, and mahogany and sapanwood for reds. But she is just one woman on a planet of billions. "We're such a small drop in the ocean," Plesch says.

Ma's goal is to magnify her quest, to "take it to whatever next step is possible," he says. Last December he invited Plesch to do a takeover of his Instagram account. That allowed her to share SoldiaCitta's mission with his followers—more than 37 million, a number that dwarfs Plesch's typical outreach. Ma's support, she says, "makes everything we've been going since the beginning more legitimate and relevant."

The Bach Project was intended to last two years, culminating in 2020. Then the pandemic hit. With careful quarantining procedures, Ma managed to perform in Taiwan in fall 2020. But plans for visits to Paris, Istanbul, Okinawa, and Tunis were put on hold or rescheduled. The cellist intends to resume his global journey as soon as it's safe to travel and gather; meanwhile, he's offered live and video performances online.

Last fall I asked Ma what kind of legacy he hopes to leave. "I'd like to live as lightly as possible," he said. Now a grandparent, he feels an obligation to be a good steward of the land and water we have inherited. It's our job, "from the littlest person to the oldest person everywhere, to say, We treasure this, this is our home, this is what gives us sustenance, this is what gives us meaning," he told me.

"In every possible thing that we do, let's fall in love with our planet."

Claudia Kalb reports on science, culture, and human behaviour. She is the author of a series of essay stories on the origins of genius. Her latest book is Spark: How Genius Ignites, From Child Prodigies to Late Bloomers.

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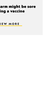

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