

Suites for Unaccompanied Cello

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

In 1717, Bach was appointed composer and music director to Prince Leopold, ruler of the tiny state of Anhalt-Cöthen. The prince was an accomplished musician with a great appetite for instrumental music, and it was at his court that Bach wrote most of his chamber music. We know that Bach was the greatest keyboard player of his time and that he liked to play the viola in ensembles, but he did not play the cello. Being Bach, however, he was the complete master of any musical medium for which he chose to compose. In 1774, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote to J. N. Forkel, the scholar who was collecting material for the first book-length study of his father, "He understood the capabilities of all the string instruments perfectly. This is shown by his solos for the violin and cello without bass [accompaniment]." These "Solos," six for violin and six for cello, are among the most extraordinary inventions of Bach's incomparable creative powers.

They are full of mysterious musical and mechanical problems. There is more music in them than can be played, more than is apparent on a simple reading of the notes. Bach was a supremely practical man, and what he put down on paper only told the performer where to put his fingers. Much of the rest of the music is really in the minds of the listener and of the player. It is implicit or only suggested in what is written; to apprehend it requires acts of memory over a short period of time, measured, in place in tiny fractions of a second, a mental process like "seeing" in a painting details that are in fact only hinted at by the artist. Forkel said in his book: "Bach went so far in his understanding of melody and harmony that he could exhaust their possibilities. He combines in a single line all the notes needed to make the harmony and counterpoint complete, so that another note is neither necessary nor possible. [Adapted]" Prince Leopold, who gave Bach a high position at his little court and paid him generously, must have been a man of elevated taste, for all of this remarkable music was written for his pleasure.

A suite, in Bach's time, consisted essentially of a formal opening movement that

was a kind of musical call-to-attention, and then a series of stylized adaptations of sixteenth-century dances that had moved from the ballroom to the concert-room in the seventeenth century. In Bach's six cello suites, the preludes vary considerably in character, but they are all designed to fix the home key firmly in mind. With few exceptions, all the movements of each suite are in the same key, and Bach uses the same sequence of dances in all the suites, except for the next-to-last movements. These "galantries" were then still-popular social dances: minuets, bourrées, and gavottes.

Suite for Unaccompanied Cello No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007

The character of the first cello suite's *Prelude* is derived from the kind of improvisation that was once expected of instrumentalists when they first sat down to play, sometimes called "preluding." The dance movements are a contemplative *Allemande*; a *Courante*, which was a running or jumping dance; a slow *Sarabande*; a contrasting pair of graceful *Minuets*; and a lively closing *Gigue* or jig.

Suite for Unaccompanied Cello No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1008

The second suite's *Prelude* is more ruminative than declamatory, and its distant wanderings from the home key give both freshness and emphasis to the return of D minor. The dances begin with a fresh and relaxed *Allemande*, a nimble *Courante*, and a poetic *Sarabande*. A pair of graceful *Minuets* follows, the first repeated after the second has been played, and a *Gigue* closes the suite.

Suite No. 3 for Unaccompanied Cello in C major, BWV 1009

The third cello suite is one of the longer works in the set of six, but it does not ramble as some of the others do. The music is taut and trim, and it makes its point with economy and clarity. There are few ways to set the home key more firmly than Bach does in just the first two measures of the *Prelude*, for example. He starts with a descending C-major scale, adds a broken chord of C major and a

held low C, and then goes on with a rising scale. The ear will never wonder where "home" is during this extended movement or during the rest of the work.

Although suite movements are generally entirely independent of one another, the *Allemande* and *Courante* here seem to resemble the *Prelude*, because they too are based on scales and triads. Next is a stately *Sarabande* with a long, complex theme. The *Bourrées* are in C major and C minor, the second played as a contrasting centerpiece between two performances of the first. The suite closes with an animated *Gigue*.

Sonata for Solo Cello (1955)

GEORGE CRUMB (b. 1929)

Since the early 1960s, George Crumb has created more than 20 long works in a highly idiosyncratic, advanced idiom of his own invention that have been widely performed and greatly admired by the general public as well as his fellow musicians. The composer is a recipient of Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, grants from the Rockefeller, Koussevitzky, and Coolidge Foundations, and was given the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1967. In 1968, he received the Pulitzer Prize in music for his orchestral work *Echoes of Time and the River*. Parallel to composing, he taught piano and composition at the University of Colorado from 1959 to 1964, and in 1965 he joined the music faculty of the University of



George Crumb

Pennsylvania, where he was named Annenberg Professor of the Humanities in 1983.

As a young man, Crumb studied at Mason College in his home town of Charleston, West Virginia. He took a master's degree at the University of Illinois, and in 1954 came to the University of Michigan as a doctoral candidate to study composition with Ross Lee Finney, receiving his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in 1959.

During the summer of 1955, Crumb worked at Tanglewood with the German composer Boris Blacher, who had developed a severe but brilliant style in which timbre and meter were among the important structural elements. At the end of the summer, Crumb used his Fulbright Fellowship to travel to Germany and continue his studies with Blacher in Berlin, where he was the director of the Hochschule für Musik.

The Sonata for Solo Cello dates from this earlier period in the composer's life, before he had found the way to his individual world of sound. The Sonata was completed in Berlin in October 1955 and is his earliest acknowledged work. The first public concert performance of the Sonata was given in Ann Arbor on March 15, 1957, by Camilla Heller Doppmann, who was a recipient of the Albert A. Stanley Medal, the highest undergraduate award given students at the University of Michigan School of Music.

The first movement of the Sonata is a Fantasia, *Andante espressivo e con molto rubato*, that seems improvisatory, almost like a long cadenza in a concerto. It is an intense development of the two ideas heard at the very outset; one, a group of plucked chords, the other, a bowed line with a dotted rhythm.

The second movement is headed *Tema pastorale con variazioni*. The theme, "gracious and delicate," consists of two phrases, the first repeated, and the second, a kind of "answer." The motion is accelerated in the first variation, and the second is to be played as fast as possible. The third variation is slow and expressive, and it omits the repetition of the first section. A coda recalls the first part of the theme.

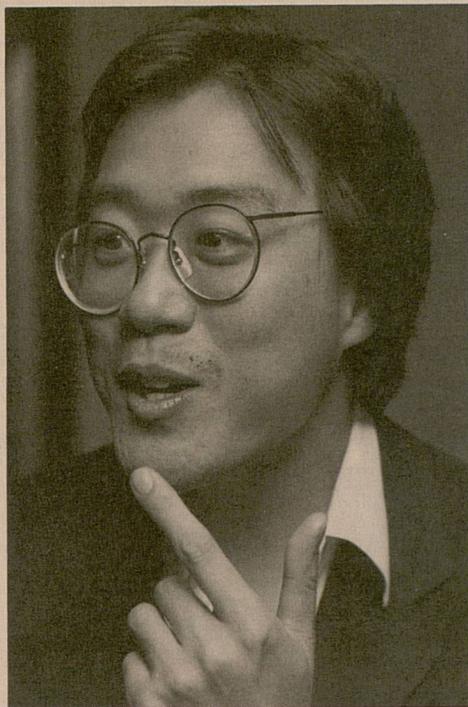
The last movement, a Toccata, begins with an introduction, a recitative *Largo e drammatico*, whose ideas are extended and developed in the body of the movement, *Allegro vivace*.

— Program Notes by Leonard Burkat

Yo-Yo Ma gave his first public recital at the age of five, and by the time he was 19 he was being compared with such masters as Rostropovich and Casals. One of the most sought-after cellists of our time, Mr. Ma has appeared with eminent conductors and orchestras in all the music capitals of the world.

Highly acclaimed for his ensemble playing, Mr. Ma is deeply committed to the vast chamber music literature. During the 1989-90 season, he joined several distinguished colleagues for performances and recordings, on both compact disc and high-definition videotape, of the Brahms Piano Quartets (with Emanuel Ax, Isaac Stern, and Jamie Laredo) and String Sextets (with Stern, Cho-Liang Lin, Laredo, Michael Tree, and Sharon Robinson). He regularly performs duo recitals with Emanuel Ax, a partnership that has produced many recordings, including the complete cello sonatas of Beethoven and Brahms and, most recently, the Strauss and Britten sonatas. The two artists also play in trio performances with Isaac Stern, with whom they have recorded the Shostakovich Piano Trio No. 2. Mr. Ma's collaboration with Isaac Stern has further resulted in a recording of the Brahms "Double" Concerto with the Chicago Symphony.

Highlighting the cellist's 1989-90 season, in addition to the aforementioned chamber music performances, were appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic, L'Orchestre de Paris, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, and Montreal Symphony, among others. Always a proponent of new music, Yo-Yo Ma gave world premières of works by Ezra Laderman (with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra), David Diamond (with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra), Stephen Albert (with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra), and William Bolcom, University of Michigan Professor of Music and Composition. Bolcom's Sonata for Cello and Piano, premièred in Boston on May 3, 1990, with Emanuel Ax, was the first in a series of new works emanating from a newly formed commissioning consortium of presenters that includes the University Musical Society. Plans are currently underway for the Sonata's performance in Ann Arbor.



In September 1990, Yo-Yo Ma gave a concert at Avery Fisher Hall that was broadcast nationwide on PBS's "Live From Lincoln Center," and in December 1990, he participated in a musical celebration on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's birth, with a concert in Leningrad for worldwide television viewing. His 1990-91 season also includes several appearances with Ax, Stern, and Laredo that will again culminate in a quartet recording, as well as several trio performances with Isaac Stern and Emanuel Ax to mark Mr. Stern's 70th birthday.

Yo-Yo Ma is playing a major role in the current celebration of Carnegie Hall's 100th anniversary season. On January 13 (three days after tonight's recital), he will perform the complete (six) Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Cello in a single evening (with a one-hour intermission between Parts I and II) and on May 5 will participate in the Hall's gala anniversary concert. Other orchestral engagements this season include performances with the Israel Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, and the Toronto Symphony.

An exclusive Sony Classical recording artist, Yo-Yo Ma earned his fifth Grammy Award in 1990 for his recording of the Barber Cello Concerto and the Britten Cello Symphony with David Zinman and the Baltimore Symphony. His other recent releases have included the Schumann Cello Concerto with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis; Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 15 with Gidon Kremer, Daniel Phillips, and Kim Kashkashian; a collaboration with jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli; and the first in a series of reissues entitled "Portrait of Yo-Yo Ma."

Along with his extensive performing and recording activities, Yo-Yo Ma devotes a considerable amount of his time to teaching. He spends part of each summer at Tanglewood, where, in addition to playing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and in chamber ensembles, he works closely with students at the Tanglewood Festival School. His experiences at Tanglewood during the summer of 1989, both as teacher and performer, were chronicled in a two-part documentary seen

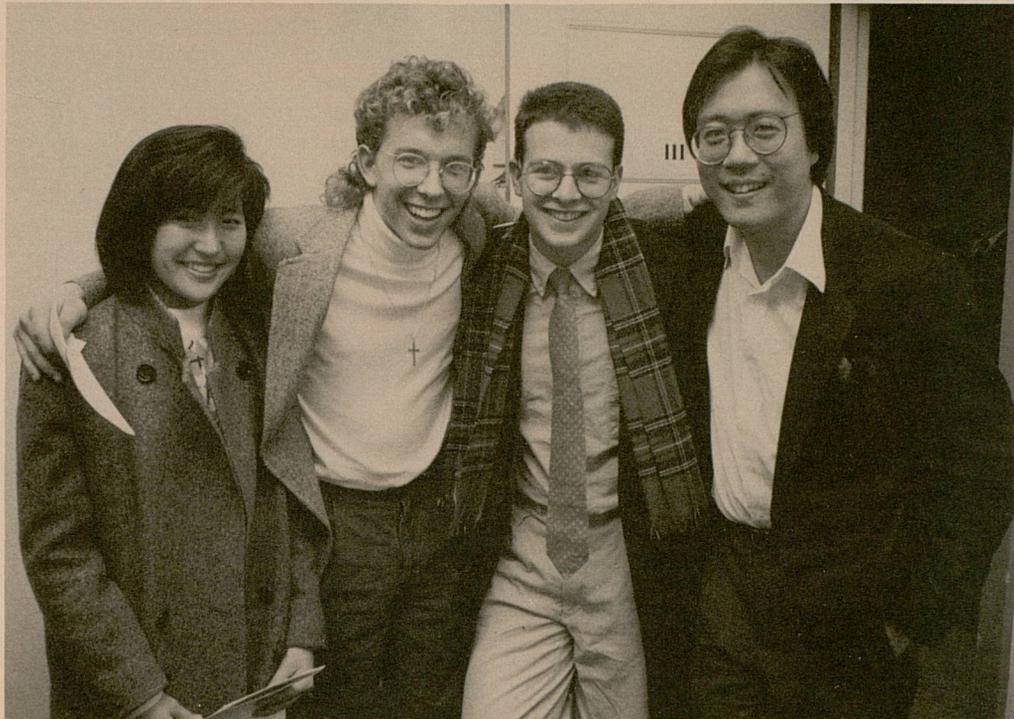
on the Arts and Entertainment Network and BBC Television.

The artist currently plays a Montagnana cello from Venice made in 1733 and a Davidoff Stradivarius made in 1712.

Yo-Yo Ma made his Ann Arbor debut at the 1982 May Festival, followed by a recital in 1984, an orchestral appearance with the Cracow Philharmonic in 1986, and another recital in 1988.

Born in Paris in 1955 of Chinese parents, Yo-Yo Ma began cello lessons with his father at the age of four. Later, he studied with Janos Scholz and, in 1962, began his studies with Leonard Rose at New York's Juilliard School of Music. A graduate of Harvard University as well as Juilliard, Mr. Ma reads, speaks, and writes French and Chinese, in addition to possessing a working knowledge of composition. He was awarded the coveted Avery Fisher Prize in 1978, and in May 1989, he was honored with an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, The Juilliard School.





Area high school students backstage with Yo-Yo Ma after his 1988 recital.

The following excerpts from Time magazine provide some insights into the spirit of this extraordinary musician:

The scene must have looked like something being staged for a Fassbinder movie. The whiz of Volkswagens streaming along the *Autobahn* slowed down as drivers ogled the spectacle at the side of the road. There sat a Peugeot with a blown-out tire, and perched on a suitcase nearby sat a bespectacled Chinese youth serenely playing Haydn on his cello.

"People couldn't believe what they were seeing," recalls Yo-Yo-Ma, but to him it was natural. He had a concert in Frankfurt that night, then a flight to a recording date in London, and while waiting for help, he decided to brush up on his Haydn. The dedication is typical for Ma; so is the hectic schedule and the cheerful indifference to adversity. The beauty of his playing awes not only critics but other musicians. Isaac Stern, the virtuoso of violin and musical politics, says: "Ma is one of the greatest instrumental talents alive."

Some are born great, some have greatness thrust upon them, and some have fathers like Hiao-tsiun Ma. A musical pedagogue who migrated from China to Paris in the 1930s, Papa Ma started teaching Yo-Yo (Yo means friendship in Chinese) at the age of four, with a one-sixteenth-size cello. Yo-Yo had to memorize two new measures for each daily lesson. "I had to play right," Yo-Yo recalls. "If I made a mistake, then I would have to play the passage right three consecutive times."

At age five, Yo-Yo played easily three of the Bach Suites that lesser mortals have grown gray practicing. At seven, he was brought to New York, where his father had been offered a job teaching at a school that Stern's children attended. Connections were made. Yo-Yo performed on the Johnny Carson show. He was taken to play for Pablo Casals. "What are you doing with this child?" demanded the patriarch. "You must let him go and play on the street."

Nobody gets to Carnegie Hall that way. Yo-Yo was taken to The Juilliard School and enrolled with Leonard Rose. "He was very small and already quite extraordinary," said

Rose. Yo-Yo's technique was impeccable, and then an inner quality, unteachable, began to develop. "When he was about 17," said Rose, "he gave a performance of Schubert's *Arpeggione*, which is a holy terror for cellists, and it was so gorgeous I was moved to tears."

At 15, when Yo-Yo first left home to go to a summer music camp, he ran into difficulties. "I became totally disorganized," he says. Even back at Juilliard and later at the Marlboro Music Festival, he "acted crazy and

silly," sleeping on tables, playing pranks. His solution was, of all things, to attend Harvard as a liberal arts major. There, he could meander in and out of Dostoyevsky, sociobiology, philosophy, German literature, in addition to studying music.

That eclecticism helps to differentiate Ma from other prodigies. He likes to do calligraphy; play chess; read *Don Quixote*; and brings the same sense of exploration to his cello repertoire.

Spiritual Exercises

by Robert Commanday

Bach can be a truth mirror. Cellists know this from their constant rejourneying through his six unaccompanied suites for their instrument. The set serves them as bible, book of prayer, constant companion, and much else. Pablo Casals used to begin each day playing them. They form the core of the cellist's musical existence.

As Yo-Yo Ma looks deeply into the inner worlds of these suites, the movements that Bach cast mostly in the form of dances take on the character of paintings, of which the frames and perspectives keep changing.

It is music conceived with repeated performing in mind, inviting, even provoking, the player to test a different way each time. Yo-Yo Ma probed the almost infinite options. Guided by a powerful intellect, he became a composing performer, taken over by the mind of the composer. In a word, he was possessed, not in the irrational sense, but in the way that intensity of concentration transformed him to another state of consciousness.

A slight tempo variance, whether hesitating or urging, would throw a familiar contour into a different relief. That, in turn, would affect the rhythmic stresses so that the melody unfolded new. In lively movements, such as the *Gigue* in the Third Suite, expected accents were moved to adjacent notes, yet the changed phrase and continuity would seem to come out perfectly right all the same. He would have been making all the minute internal adjustments necessary to that new reading.

In going back and observing the repeats, Mr. Ma heard it differently, and the new succession of causes and effects brought

it out as almost another sequence of musical thought.

The experience is partly, but not completely, an engagement of the intellect, as



when the listener will follow joyfully a fugue carried out in one melodic line, holding one passage in the parenthesis of memory, while going on to the next. However, musical design as such, no matter how fascinating intellectually, is not what Bach is about. The effect of being drawn into Yo-Yo Ma's engagement with Bach is that of a communion of spirit. The character of each movement, its influence on its successor, and the dramatic sum or expressive line of each single Suite, make up a profound, highly individual encounter.

The slow *Sarabande* movement is the expressive heart of each suite. In the First Suite, the *Sarabande* in Mr. Ma's philosophical reading had the quality of a contemplation. In the Third Suite, it was something mystical, a transport, a suspended state as Ma discovered it. In the Fifth Suite, the *Sarabande* was more personalized and engrossing, a meditation.

There was, of course, relief, change of pace, of many kinds. But such an impression of sequence and relationship was just one that was specific to his performance on that particular night. The very quality of creative performance that made the interpretations so distinctive carried with it the assurance that the next time he would do them in another way.

With Yo-Yo Ma as guide, we find in Bach's Suites for Unaccompanied Cello music that is the ideal metaphor for the dynamic of the life process, of human thought and feeling in constant change. It is not art as fixed creation that is viewed variously by different and changing individuals. The Suites themselves are in continual transformation, the composer's mind living actively in the thinking of the performer.

—*The San Francisco Chronicle*, 1988





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Programs

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Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 3, "Scottish"

Thursday, May 2

Brahms: "Double" Concerto in A minor for Violin,
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Brahms: Symphony No. 2 in D major

Friday, May 3

Prokofiev: Excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet*

Henze: *Seven Love Songs* for Cello and Orchestra
(Timm)

Strauss: *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*

Saturday, May 4

Glinka: *Ruslan and Lumila* Overture

Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major
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