

Yo-Yo Ma

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,301

Connections

Writing

Imagine you interviewed Yo-Yo Ma. Write a magazine article Q & A with the famous musician, using the text to generate both interview questions and Ma's answers.

Music

Research the parts of a cello and make a diagram labeling each part.

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Written by Mike Vago
Illustrated by Brock Nicol

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Focus Question

How is the Silk Road Ensemble a reflection of Yo-Yo Ma's background and music?

Words to Know

anthropology	culture
classical	ensemble
collaborate	heritage
compatriots	inauguration
composer	orchestra
conductor	suites

Front cover: Yo-Yo Ma holds his cello, Petunia, in 2004.

Page 3: Yo-Yo Ma performs with a choir of high school students in 2012 in Chicago, Illinois.

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Correlation

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An Early Start

Yo-Yo Ma was born in 1955 in Paris, France. His parents, who were both born in China, moved from France to the United States when Yo-Yo was seven. He got an early start to becoming one of the most talented and respected musicians in the world. His mother, Marina Lu, was a singer. His father, Hiao-Tsiun (HYOW-SHUN) Ma, was a violinist and music professor who taught at Nanjing University before moving to teach at the Paris Conservatory, a world-famous music school. After the family moved to New York City, Yo-Yo’s father founded the Children’s **Orchestra** Society to teach **classical** music to children.

Yo-Yo's parents encouraged him to play music from a very young age. They gave him a violin when he was only three, but Ma says he sounded terrible when he played it. He thought he had no talent. His older sister, Yeou-Cheng (YOO-CHANG), says he smashed more than one violin in frustration. Despite this rough start, he'd soon prove that he had plenty of talent.



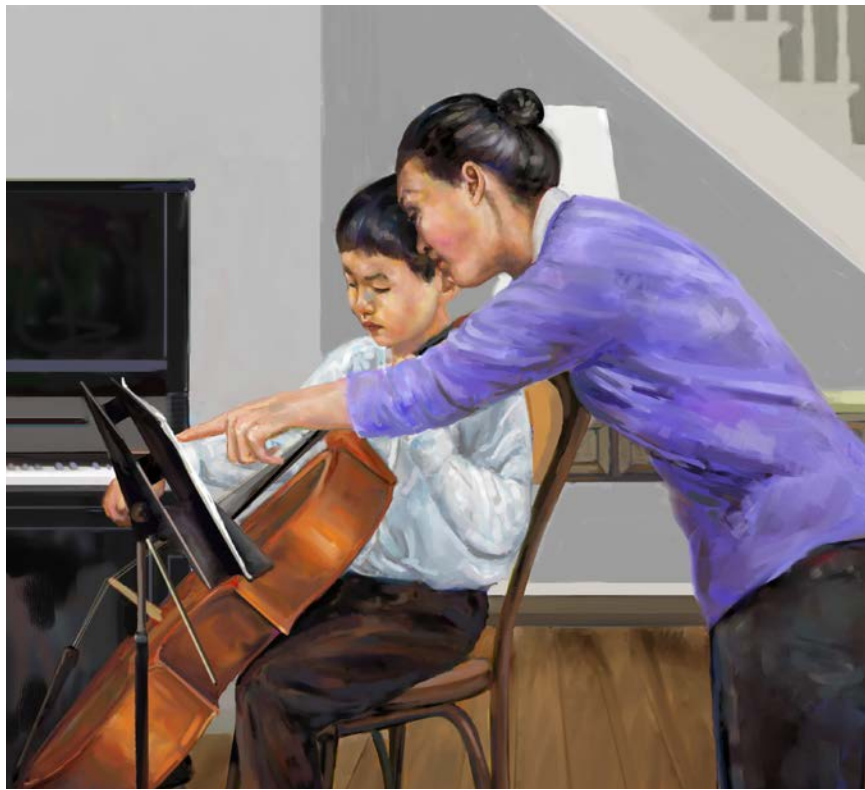
Yo-Yo quit the violin within a few months, but he didn't stay away from music for long. A year later, his parents took him to the Paris Conservatory, where Yo-Yo saw a huge instrument—a double bass. Yo-Yo decided he wanted to learn to play it. A double bass is about 6 feet (1.8 m) tall, which his parents thought was much too large for a small child. They compromised by agreeing to let Yo-Yo play the second-biggest stringed instrument—the cello (CHEL-oh).



Yo-Yo (age six) and Yeou-Cheng Ma (age ten) play for members of the Denver Symphony Orchestra during a practice break in 1961.

A Young Star

In 1962, Leonard Bernstein, America's most famous **conductor**, introduced an audience to "a seven-year-old Chinese cellist playing old French music for his new American **compatriots**." One of those compatriots in the audience was President John F. Kennedy. The following year, Yo-Yo and Yeou-Cheng played together on *The Tonight Show*. At an age when most children are playing their first notes on the recorder, Ma was already one of the most famous cellists in the world. His sister was also a gifted performer, but she ended her music career when it became clear that Yo-Yo was the star in the family. Yeou-Cheng is now a medical doctor who also runs the Children's Orchestra Society her father started.



Yeou-Cheng was already a talented violinist when Yo-Yo took up the cello. Their parents pushed them both to play challenging music with the Children's Orchestra Society and elsewhere. At age five, Yo-Yo had memorized three **suites** by Bach, a classical **composer** who wrote many difficult pieces of music. Yeou-Cheng says her father used to tell her that any difficult task could be broken up into smaller, easier parts. Yo-Yo says their mother taught them to master technique so they could focus on the emotion behind the music instead of worrying about hitting the right notes.





Jill Hornor, Emily Ma, and Nicholas Ma accompanied Yo-Yo to Sweden in 2012 when he was awarded a Polar Music Prize for his musical work.

At fifteen, Ma graduated early from high school and became a soloist with the Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra. He played his first wedding that same year and still loves playing them. He attended Juilliard, one of the best music schools in the world. Soon, however, he dropped out and switched to Harvard University, where he studied classics, **anthropology**, and German literature. Ma continued to study music and play cello in addition to his other studies. However, he didn't want the cello to be the only thing in his life. During his first summer break from college, he played at the Marlboro Music Festival, where he met and fell in love with Jill Hornor, a college sophomore who ran the festival. For the rest of his college career, he spent summer vacations playing at Marlboro and getting to know Jill. They eventually married and had two children.



Yo-Yo Ma struggled with back problems as a young man.

Back Problems

When Ma graduated, he had to immediately put his career on hold. Doctors told him he needed surgery to correct severe scoliosis, a condition that makes the spine curve the wrong way. The surgery was risky, and if it went wrong, he might never be able to play the cello again. Without the surgery, however, Ma could face a lifetime of back pain. He thought it was worth the risk and underwent surgery after graduation. The procedure was successful, but it left Ma in a body cast for six months. He was unable to move around, much less play the cello.

The recovery period was a very frustrating time, but as soon as the cast was off, Ma was immediately in demand again. He began playing all over the world, often booking concerts years in advance. He recorded his first album at age twenty-three and has recorded over seventy-five albums in the years since. He has won fifteen Grammy Awards and is one of the best-selling classical artists alive. The cello he usually plays, named Petunia, was made in 1733 and is worth \$2.5 million. In 1999, Ma left it in a taxicab by accident. After the driver returned it, Ma recorded a message that played in every taxi in New York. The message reminded people not to leave things behind at the end of their ride.

“There’s a part of me that’s always charging ahead. I’m the curious kid, always going to the edge.” —Yo-Yo Ma

Ma is recognized as one of the most talented musicians in the world and has performed at many historic events. These include performances for the Statue of Liberty’s hundredth birthday, the first anniversary memorial of the 9/11 attacks, the Opening Ceremonies of the 2002 Olympic Games, and President Obama’s **inauguration**. He has become a central figure not only to classical music but to all of American **culture**.



Yo-Yo Ma performs with the Silk Road Ensemble and dancer Charles “Lil Buck” Riley in 2011.

Three Different Points of View

Ma’s Chinese **heritage**, French childhood, and American adulthood are all important to him. All three cultures have shaped his music. He has spent his career looking to new cultures for inspiration. While he began by playing European classical music, he branched out into bluegrass, Argentine tango, jazz, and traditional music from China, Japan, and Brazil. He says that when people open themselves up to new cultures, they don’t just understand music better—they also understand people better. Ma can listen to his old recordings and understand how his music has changed as he has experienced and absorbed new styles of music.

On most of Ma's albums, he performs classical music, but he has also performed in many other styles. He recorded his own versions of songs from Cole Porter's 1930s Broadway musicals and John Williams's themes to *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and *Jurassic Park*. Ma has also created several movie soundtracks of his own. He has recorded with bluegrass and jazz musicians as well as with orchestras all over the world.



Yo-Yo Ma performs with pop musician Sting during the opening ceremonies of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Utah.



Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble perform in Central Park in New York City in 2011.

The Silk Road

Because Ma's blend of backgrounds has always been important to him and his music, he founded the Silk Road **Ensemble** in 1998. This group is made up of musicians and composers from twenty countries. They **collaborate** on music that draws from traditions all over the world. The Silk Road was a trade route that ran through Asia hundreds of years ago, uniting cultures across the entire continent.

Silk Road isn't just a musical ensemble. It's also a nonprofit group that uses music and art to connect people from different cultures. Even when Ma is not performing with the Silk Road Ensemble, he serves as the nonprofit's artistic director. He helps plan its programs to teach and perform music from around the world.

“I’m an Accident”

While many successful musicians credit hard work or natural talent, Yo-Yo Ma says he has no idea why he became one of the world’s most popular musicians or why other talented performers don’t reach the same level. “I’m an accident,” he once said. He claims his success is a combination of many things—his parents, his sister, various teachers, Paris, New York, his experience performing at a young age, meeting his wife, even raising his children. If any one of those things had been different, he feels as though he might not have become a world-famous musician. If he hadn’t seen that giant double bass as a four-year-old, his whole life would have been different.



Yo-Yo Ma prepares to perform in Germany in 2001.

“Every day I make an effort to go toward what I don’t understand. This wandering leads to the accidental learning that continually shapes my life.” —Yo-Yo Ma

Glossary

- anthropology** (n.) the study of human societies and cultures and their origins (p. 9)
- classical** (adj.) of or relating to European music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; of or relating to traditional Western music, such as symphonies and operas (p. 4)
- collaborate** (v.) to work with others on a project (p. 14)
- compatriots** (n.) people who live in or are citizens of the same country (p. 8)
- composer** (n.) a person who writes music (p. 7)
- conductor** (n.) a person who directs or leads an orchestra, choir, or other ensemble (p. 8)
- culture** (n.) the ideas and customs of a certain group of people; a particular society with its own ideas and customs (p. 11)
- ensemble** (n.) a group of people, such as actors or musicians, who perform together (p. 14)
- heritage** (n.) a way of life, tradition, or characteristic that is passed down from generation to generation (p. 12)
- inauguration** (n.) a ceremony in which a person is sworn into office (p. 11)
- orchestra** (n.) a large group of musicians who play together, often performing classical music on stringed instruments (p. 4)
- suites** (n.) collections of short pieces of classical music that have different forms, are often composed in the same key, and are meant to be played in a certain order (p. 7)