



# KINAN AZMEH AND YO-YO MA: ART IN A TIME OF CRISIS

*STUDY GUIDE*

Developed by Dr. Gary Mukai, Director,  
Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education,  
with contributions from Lukas Chao (Thacher School, Ojai, California), Danny Halawi, (Aragon  
High School, San Mateo, California), and Risako Yang (Castilleja School, Palo Alto, California)

Copyright © 2016  
By the Leland Stanford Junior University Board of Trustees

For further information contact:  
Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE)  
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI)  
Encina Hall, Stanford University  
Stanford, CA 94305-6060  
Tel: (800) 578-1114  
Fax: (650) 723-6784  
Email: [SPICE-sales@stanford.edu](mailto:SPICE-sales@stanford.edu)  
<http://spice.fsi.stanford.edu>  
[facebook.com/StanfordSPICE](https://www.facebook.com/StanfordSPICE)  
[twitter.com/StanfordSPICE](https://twitter.com/StanfordSPICE)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Laura Freid, CEO and Executive Director, and Lori Taylor, Education Specialist, Silk Road Project, Boston, Massachusetts, and Jon Felder, Aragon High School, San Mateo, California, for their kind support with the development of this guide. Many thanks to Rich Lee, Rich Lee Draws!!!, for formatting this guide, and Rylan Sekiguchi, Curriculum Designer, SPICE, for copyediting this guide.

## NOTE TO TEACHERS

The interview, *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*, and this accompanying study guide are recommended for use in courses such as music, social studies, and language arts at the high school level and above. Please note that neither the interview nor study guide delves into the specifics of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 (though it is mentioned by Kinan) and the Syrian Civil War. Rather, the interview and study guide focus on the theme “art in a time of crisis.” For educators who are teaching about the Syrian uprising in March 2011 and the Syrian Civil War, the interview and this study guide can be used as a supplement.

## KINAN AZMEH AND YO-YO MA: ART IN A TIME OF CRISIS

- Essential Questions**
- What is the meaning of “crisis”?
  - What are some examples of times of crisis?
  - What are some ways to deal with crisis?
  - What role can art play during times of crisis?
  - What can an individual do to help facilitate change?
- Materials**
- The interview, *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*, can be found online at:
- <http://www.silkroadproject.org>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Jz6XvALLDM>
- Sample Reflections, pp. 8–9  
Transcript, pp. 10–11
- Teacher Preparation**
- Before class, preview the interview, *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*, and review this study guide. A transcript of the interview is also included in this study guide.
- Procedures**
1. Begin this lesson by informing students that they will be watching an eight-minute interview between Yo-Yo Ma, Artistic Director of the Silk Road Project, and Kinan Azmeh, a clarinetist of the Silk Road Ensemble. Share the artists’ biographies and the description of the Silk Road Ensemble. Yo-Yo Ma was born in Paris and raised in the United States. Kinan Azmeh was born in Damascus, Syria.
    - Silk Road Ensemble—Made up of performers and composers from more than 20 countries, the Silk Road Ensemble was formed under the artistic direction of Yo-Yo Ma in 2000. Since then, audiences and critics in over 30 countries throughout Asia, Europe, and North America have embraced these artists passionate about cross-cultural understanding and innovation. The group has recorded six albums. (Source: <http://www.silkroadproject.org/ensemble>)

*Biography of Kinan Azmeh*

Trained in his native Damascus and a graduate of New York's Juilliard School and the City University of New York, clarinetist Kinan Azmeh has won international acclaim as a composer, performer, improviser, and recording artist in a wide range of musical genres. His discography includes three albums with his ensemble HEWAR; soundtracks for film and dance; a duo album with pianist Dinuk Wijeratne; and an album with his New York Arabic/Jazz quartet. Azmeh also champions the contemporary music of Syria as artistic director of the Damascus Festival Chamber Music Ensemble.



(Source: <http://www.silkroadproject.org>)

*Biography of Yo-Yo Ma*

The many-faceted career of cellist Yo-Yo Ma is testament to his continual search for new ways to communicate with audiences and to his personal desire for artistic growth and renewal. Mr. Ma maintains a balance between his engagements as soloist with orchestras worldwide and his recital and chamber music activities. His discography includes over 75 albums, including more than 15 Grammy Award winners.



In addition to founding and serving as Silk Road Project artistic director, Mr. Ma is the Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Negaunee Music Institute. He is a UN Messenger of Peace and a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. His work focuses on the transformative power music can have in individuals' lives, and on increasing the number and variety of opportunities audiences have to experience music in their communities.

(Source: <http://www.silkroadproject.org>)

2. Inform students that the interview they will watch is titled, *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*. Lead a classroom discussion using the suggested points below.
  - How would you define the word “crisis”? *Some definitions that you may want to introduce to students are (1) a time when a difficult or important decision must be made; and (2) a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger.*
  - What are some synonyms for “crisis”? *Some synonyms that students may mention are emergency, disaster, catastrophe, calamity, predicament, plight, trouble, dire straits, and extremity.*
  - What comes to mind when you hear the term “times of crisis”? *Crises may be personal (e.g., loss of a loved one), local (e.g., an earthquake), national (e.g., economic recession), or global (e.g., world war) in nature, or they can be a combination of these (e.g., a natural disaster may not only affect the local economy but all other countries with economic ties to the natural disaster-affected region).*
  - What are other examples of crises in these categories?
3. Ask students to discuss contemporary crises in the world. What are some ways they are being handled or addressed? How have they been managed or resolved, if at all? One or more students may mention the crisis in Syria, which is now a civil war. A brief description of the Syrian Civil War is provided below.
  - Syrian Civil War—an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict with international interventions taking place in Syria. The unrest began in the early spring of 2011 with nationwide protests against the Syrian government.
4. Mention that at the beginning of the video of the interview, they will see the Silk Road Ensemble recording the song, “Wedding,” which was composed by Kinan. Kinan dedicated “Wedding” to all the Syrians who have managed to fall in love in the past five years, that is, since the spring 2011 uprising. Assign one of the following questions to groups of 2–3 students. Ask each student to consider the question as he/she watches the interview.
  - How does the musical performance of “Wedding” (shown prior to the interview) help to set the context for the interview?
  - What significance does Kinan attach to discipline?
  - What comments does Yo-Yo make about existence and dignity?
  - What does it mean to be empowered?
  - What does it mean to be proactive?
  - What are some nonviolent ways of dealing with conflict?
  - What comments do Kinan and Yo-Yo make about the role of individuals and the facilitation of change?
5. Show the interview.

6. After showing the interview, ask each group of students to discuss its assigned question for five minutes and to select a spokesperson for the group to share a one-minute summary of its discussion.
7. Ask each group's spokesperson to share its summary and to respond to questions from other groups.
8. After each group has shared, introduce students to the notions of "hard power" and "soft power." Point out that the term "soft power"—the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion—was coined by Dr. Joseph Nye, Harvard University, in the late 1980s. Some examples may include diplomacy and the arts. "Hard power" is the use of often aggressive means (e.g., military force, economic sanctions) to influence behavior or interests. Ask students to identify the mission of the Silk Road Project on its website at <http://www.silkroadproject.org>. How is it an example of soft power? In what ways is it not?
9. During another class period or for homework, ask each student to write a 300-word reflection on the interview. Three sample reflections, written by high school students, are included on pages 8 and 9 of this guide.
10. The following are suggested extension activities for future class periods or for homework.
  - Write a poem about a time of crisis and the ways that you or others managed or resolved the crisis.
  - Use art of your choice to capture and/or symbolize some aspect of the interview between Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma.
  - Prepare interview questions to be asked of someone who experienced a crisis. Interview the person, record his/her responses, and write a reflection on the interview.
  - Research the Syrian Civil War and write a one-page supplement to your world history textbook. If you could choose two images to include, which images would you include and why?
  - Research the concept of "soft power," which was coined by Dr. Joseph Nye, Harvard University. Write an essay about your thoughts on "art during times of crisis" and soft power.
  - Yo-Yo Ma references a quote by Sigmund Freud. The exact quote is "Love and work are the cornerstones to our humanness." Write a reflection on this quote based on your personal experiences.
  - Examine the Silk Road Project website at <http://www.silkroadproject.org>. Write an essay based on the prompt, "Would you consider the Silk Road Ensemble's mission to be an example of soft power? Why or why not?"
  - Develop lyrics for a song based on one or more of the following quotes from the interview:
 

Kinan: "I am believing in the freedom that music-making is about."  
Kinan: "I'd like to think that what we do as artists can move people to be proactive."

Kinan: "A piece of music doesn't stop a bomb from falling. It doesn't feed somebody who is hungry. It does not free a political prisoner."

Yo-Yo: "It [the arts] keeps the windows open. It keeps [open] the windows of actually saying that 'I may not be able to do something, but I still care.'"

Kinan: "...culture might be the only survivor of violent times... Culture and art does preserve in the most positive sense—I'm not somebody who likes to keep things as they are—but it documents our times for future generations to learn from."

Yo-Yo: "You can't change certain realities, but you therefore don't deny someone's existence."

Yo-Yo: "You don't deny someone's dignity."

- In his work with students, Yo-Yo Ma has underscored the importance of fundamental concepts such as imagination, curiosity, empathy, hope, trust, openness, generosity, and collaboration. Choose two or more and write about how they can be pillars in your life, school, or community.
- Write a review of the interview for your school newspaper.

**SAMPLE REFLECTIONS****“Art in the Face of Violence”**

Reflection on *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*

By Lukas Chao, Thacher School, Ojai, California

How do I respond to violence? This has been a question I continue to ask myself as I grow up living in this day and age of constant violence. One day a terrorist attack takes place, and the next day there is yet another school shooting. Violence is always a discouraging thing, and I think that discouragement could cause people to turn a blind eye towards it. I sometimes feel inclined to ignore negativity and to focus on positive things, and the following words by Yo-Yo Ma resonated in me and helped me to consider this inclination: “To continually keep ourselves open doesn’t necessarily come naturally, but by doing that we actually become human. You don’t deny someone their dignity.” I believe that humans have an obligation to recognize the suffering of undeserving victims and do what we can in our own world to change that.

What does it mean to be empowered? Being empowered from my perspective is being respected and knowing that what you do every day is beneficial for the progression of the world. Knowing that your work—what may seem meaningless to some—is actually helping the world and as a result, is empowering. Kinan, an artist, understands that his work does not stop wars, nor does it prevent bombings, but it inspires people. This is the purpose of his work, and he recognizes his own limitations. Artists like Kinan are empowering people and helping them to feel more hopeful. Kinan’s work could be a motivating factor for people in Syria, for example, to demand change.

As an American high school student, I have personally experienced how schools sometimes discredit the value of art. However as I continue to listen to Kinan’s work, I realize that way of thinking is flat out wrong. Just by listening to his music, I already feel a wave of emotions, including desperation, uncertainty, and hope. Perhaps the purpose of Kinan’s work is to convey such emotions, which he himself has felt, in order to encourage people to empathize with others and to make the world a better place.

**“Melody of Hope”**

Reflection on *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*

By Danny Halawi, Aragon High School, San Mateo, California

I always keep a picture of the notorious castle in Damascus, which once was marked as one of Syria’s most famous landmarks. Now, fast forward a few years, and that castle doesn’t exist anymore; it was destroyed to pieces. Music is a very powerful tool. Sorrow, pain, grief and other emotions are so strong at times that only an instrument has the power to truly express these profound feelings. I really believe that the ability to produce art that creates a sense of understanding of and sympathy for the people whose lives were ruined in the revolution in Syria is really a remarkable thing.



As a musician and a proud Syrian American, I can actually relate a lot to Mr. Azmeh. I believe that Kinan Azmeh is truly brilliant. Kinan understands the influence music can have in affecting people's lives. He asserts the ability music has to "empower others and make them feel good." Kinan Azmeh admits that there's a limitation to his instrument and the problems it can solve; however, this realization only reaffirms his passion, because he still chooses to create music when knowing that his efforts might be useless. He says, "A piece of music doesn't stop a bomb from falling. It doesn't feed somebody who's hungry. It doesn't free a political prisoner. But it can motivate people to be proactive." Kinan's positive energy and sweet optimism drives people like myself to continue to fight and have hope for the people in Syria. Kinan Azmeh is a hero who fights not just for the people in Syria, but also for anyone who has lost something in this life. I believe he is worthy of the highest reverence.

### "The Pursuit of the Individual as a Force of Change"

Reflection on *Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma: Art in a Time of Crisis*

By Risako Yang, Castilleja School, Palo Alto, California

The interview focuses on Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma's fundamental belief in the individual as a force of change. While their discussion is contained in the scope of the current unrest in Syria, their argument that change is caused by the pursuit of individual artistry (Azmeh) and belief in the individual (Ma) can be extrapolated to a greater context.

Azmeh begins by recalling his year-long break from music that intensified his faith in music as a catalyst for change: "you work harder and you realize... you're a little piece of a much bigger puzzle. So might as well focus on what you can." Rather than indulging in the limitations of our artistry, he asks us to become proactive members of society by pursuing our individuality. No matter how small the impact, the intention will allow our actions to promote change on different scales. Contrastingly, Ma focuses on human instinct. He believes that fostering our passion for change will make "[us] more human." He claims that even the simple preservation of our initial motivation will induce a change. Their seemingly different but ultimately similar messages teach us that the pursuit of our personal artistry and maintenance of our original incentive will eventually promote change. In the end, these individual small steps can collectively become an incredibly strong force in the world. Both artists focus on the role of the individual in the entirety of society.

The interview, seemingly focused on the Syrian crisis, provides hope for us viewers who are overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems we face in our society today. In fact, the heartfelt performance at the start and end is a manifestation of their message. What could be interpreted as a meaningless song actually serves to reinforce the message of the interview itself, becoming a successful embodiment of proactivity and empowerment.

TRANSCRIPT

On-screen text:

Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma

Art in a time of crisis

The Silk Road Ensemble recording "Wedding"

New York, City, September 2015

Yo-Yo: So, Kinan, you run every morning?

Kinan: I do. I do run every morning.

Yo-Yo: And what's the exercise? Is it a form of discipline... what does it do for your mind?

Kinan: You know, different exercises... sometimes I run, sometimes I play. Anything that will postpone being engaged in... the heaviness of the world.

Yo-Yo: What enters your thought when you're making music? How do you... process your work and how does outside life enter into it?

Kinan: I notice actually that the way I work changed in the last four, five years. I didn't write music for a whole year. When the popular uprising started in March 2011 to March 2012, I did not write any piece of music. For me, I was maybe... wondering, "what can you do?"... all these questions. But then [in] March 2012, I felt that I owed it to myself to keep my voice loud. If the whole uprising was about people expressing themselves, then I thought that I owe it to myself actually to really speak up. You know, I am believing in the freedom that music-making is all about. You know, you see a tragic situation, what do you do? You play an instrument just because it's some kind of a haven... because it makes you feel better. It empowers you. If you think about the creation of art... art is not a medication. It's not because...there is violence, let's do something in response. I think the way human nature responds to violence is it just continues to produce beauty, right? That's what we do naturally. But also we are the same humans who are creating all the violence too.

Yo-Yo: I'm paraphrasing, but I think Bernstein was once asked, "What do you do in the face of violence?" I think his response was that you just continue to create even more passionately. Would you agree with that?

Kinan: Absolutely. But... the first thing on your mind is not "Let me create beauty." I think creating beauty or whatever moves people, that's the side effect of you being passionately involved in doing what you're doing.

Yo-Yo: And that seems to match what you were saying about keeping your voice loud, that you are fully engaged... You will run in the morning. You will do things that will keep you strong, your voice loud.

Kinan: You want to respond with something meaningful, not something beautiful in particular... If you see some kind of violent act in front of you, your first reaction is not to actually create something. You want to stop the violence. But then the moment where you realize "I am not able

to jump into that fight and stop the violence,” you try to find other ways... So the doctor will continue to be a doctor. The engineer will continue to be an engineer. You work harder... and you realize that it actually makes sense that you are doing this ... you are a little piece of a much bigger puzzle, so [you] might as well just focus on that as much as you can.

I'd like to think that what we do as artists can move people to be proactive. You know, when I play my clarinet or compose, I am being proactive. I am doing something. It might be very small. And sometimes I wonder if it will make any change. I realize the limitation of my instrument. I realize the limitation of the art, too. It doesn't offer the answer for everything. But it can offer one little answer. A piece of music doesn't stop a bomb from falling. It doesn't feed somebody who is hungry. It does not free a political prisoner. It doesn't do any of this stuff. But what it can do... it can motivate people to be proactive. I hope when I play that the music will make people think, “What can we do?” All of us, I think, are wondering, concerned humans. “What can we do, and how can we do that?” Art is one of the answers, pushing people to be more and more proactive.

Yo-Yo: As you were talking, I was thinking... what it prevents is people from shutting down.

Kinan: Of course.

Yo-Yo: It keeps the windows open. It keeps [open] the windows of actually saying that “I may not be able to do something, but I still care.” That's the humanity part of it.

Kinan: Yes.

Yo-Yo: You can't change certain realities, but you therefore don't deny someone's existence.

Kinan: Absolutely.

Yo-Yo: And that's a hard muscle to activate all the time, because in some ways we want to protect ourselves, and to continually keep ourselves open doesn't necessarily come naturally. But by doing that, we actually become human or more human.

Kinan: True.

Yo-Yo: You don't deny someone's dignity.

Kinan: Absolutely. You know also, culture might be the only survivor of violent times... Culture and art does preserve in the most positive sense—I'm not somebody who likes to keep things as they are—but it documents our times for future generations to learn from.

On-screen text:

“Wedding” was composed by Kinan Azmeh. It is dedicated to all the Syrians who have managed to fall in love in the past five years.