

Collaboration And Teams

Life's Work: An Interview with Yo-Yo Ma

by Alison Beard

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Yo-Yo Ma was by age 30 widely regarded as one of the world's finest classical cellists, both onstage and in the studio. Then he branched out—to bluegrass, tango, jazz, and other genres and also projects with filmmakers, artists, and designers. *The Music of Strangers*, a documentary on the Silk Road Ensemble, a group he formed in 2000 to showcase composers and performers from around the world, will be released this month.

What's the key to fruitful collaboration, especially across cultures or disciplines?

Ma: Two words: ego management. It's easy to get locked into "in my world" or "this is the way I see it," so you have to move your brain to a different time or structure. If you were nine years old and suddenly went to a new environment, yes, you would make comparisons, but your mind would still be in a somewhat spongelike state, as opposed to a judging one. It's absorption versus critical thinking. I've learned to say, "Maybe there are two opinions. If you think differently than I do, let me put myself in your shoes and see what's successful according to you, and then you do the same for me." Once we've done that, our minds are more open. We already know two solutions, and often we'll find a third, where two truths can live together.

How do you pick collaborators?

First I look for generosity; second, mutual respect and admiration. You might do something incredibly well, but if you're a schmuck, if I don't think we'd enjoy having dinner together, it's not a complicated decision. What I love about Silk Road is that we've never had an audition. The first time we got together, we put a call out for musicians to do a reading session for a week to 10 days at the Tanglewood Music Festival. We had no money, so the people who came were generous with their time and adventurous—willing to take a risk. Most are still members. It was a preselection of people with certain qualities.

Why do you take so many risks?

I'm not sure that what I do is abnormal for a musician. Bobby McFerrin, a one-man orchestra and improviser, once asked me, "What are you doing that's interesting?" Inherent in that question is the assumption that you can do a lot that *isn't* interesting. All great music is the result of successful invention. You're going toward something you think is valuable. There's risk involved, but you welcome it. Part of being a musician is reporting on what you experience. If you deliberately limit your experiences, your reporting will be limited.

You chose to study at Harvard instead of a music conservatory. Why?

I kind of did both, because I graduated from high school early and was at Julliard and Columbia for a while. But I needed to grow up someplace. I knew I was too young to go out in the world. I knew how little I knew. And those four years at Harvard were some of the most influential in terms of exposing me to many fields of knowledge and to people my own age who were at least as passionate about what they were doing as I was about what I was doing. Archaeology and anthropology were my favorite subjects. They helped me look at all the cultures I was experiencing through travel and put them in some context. Also, I learned academic discipline. Intuition might get you to really fast conclusions as a musician, but then you test them out. You're trying to use both sides of the brain at all times. I left college thinking, "I know one sliver of things about playing an instrument." So I had a hunger and a curiosity, and I still feel that way.

You were on national television at age five. How did you handle childhood fame?

It's great to have attention—but not all the time from everybody. When I talk to young people with extreme talent, I tell them, “When you're excellent at one thing, you want to keep doing it, but after a while, that just doesn't work. What is special when you're seven is no longer special when you're 30.” When I was a child, people said things to me I wish they hadn't: “Oh, you're such a talent, such a genius.” That's dangerous, because it can overwhelm the decisions you make about yourself. I wanted to determine who I was. The best approach is to have a healthy confidence but also the self-knowledge to ask, “What do I and don't I do well?” so that you can be the architect of your own life.

Did that involve a lot of practice on top of your natural talent?

What allowed me to practice very little was great early training. My father gave me an unbelievable grounding. I could read scores without going to the piano. I knew how to dissect problems into smaller and smaller increments, so I could systematically solve most technical ones and worry about other things. You know, there are several different ways to practice. One is just music going through your head. Another is to problem-solve away from the instrument. A third is to be tactilely engaged in engineering a solution, translating it to physical sound in physical space in the most efficient way, moving your fingers, arms, and body to elicit that which is in your head. That kind of practicing is deeply fulfilling. It's not emergency practicing. It's more like information becomes knowledge becomes love. The final achievement is to say, “I truly love this, and I have enough mastery to be able to share that love with someone else.”

How do you prep to go on stage?

With age, in many different ways. As a young person, when you find one way to do something, you try to repeat it. But we all know that nothing ever turns out the way you want it to, especially if you're a traveling person. So to be successful, you have to welcome the unexpected. You might have a routine and say, "I need quiet," but then 10 things happen and you don't have it. Do you panic or resent it and give a bad performance? Or do you say, "Well, this is unexpected, but I'm going to enjoy trying a new way"?

What do you think about when you perform?

You have a responsibility, one, to know what the narrative is and make sure you're telling the story and people are receiving it, and two, if anything impedes the narrative, to fix the problem. It's the biggest thing and the nanomoment, and you have to have both in your head at all times. The main goal is to be memorable. If the next day people in the audience say to one another, "What did we do last night?" that's utter failure.

Over decades of touring and 90 albums, how do you consistently perform at such a high level? How have you avoided burnout?

By retooling goals. In my twenties, going to new cities, countries, cultures for the first time was unbelievably exciting. Umbria, the Cotswolds, Lapland—it was very heady stuff. In my thirties, I had family, children. If I had to leave home, it couldn't just be to support them; there are other ways that don't involve being away 67% of the time. So you have to find meaning. I started teaching at Tanglewood, and that was a really big renewal. In my forties, after Bobby asked, "What are you doing that's interesting?" I wanted to figure that out. As an immigrant, I started thinking, "What is the

soul of the United States?” So I commissioned dozens of composers to write pieces, and made lots of recordings. I also went to the Kalahari and did a documentary on the Bushmen. And then I went back to the basics: Bach suites. I spent a number of years with six filmmakers and six artists going through each one, in the process deepening my relationship with the composer and learning about different art forms. Then came the Silk Road. We started in residence at RISD and Harvard, and now we’ve grown up and have a sense of what our values are. Now, at 60, with Harvard, HBS, and the Ford Foundation, I’m focused on cultural entrepreneurship. The great advantage of being 60 is that any time you don’t make sense, people say, “Well, it’s OK,” but if you say something that makes a little bit of sense, they say, “Wow, this is incredible.” So there’s a greater fearlessness. I can get away with saying that I think all cultural institutions should think about social impact.

Do you see yourself as a leader—either on the micro level, with the Silk Road Ensemble, or on a more macro level, in terms of the music industry?

I just see myself as a human being trying to play my part. I am happy to share what I know and to work with people and be part of a movement in the arts and sciences, humanities, and technology that uses great thinking and invention to solve intractable social problems. But I don’t see myself as much of a leader. I don’t like to make pronouncements.

You’re known for your sunny, optimistic attitude. Is that innate, or did you develop it?

It may be slightly innate, but optimism is definitely a choice, because it’s very easy to be pessimistic and cynical—just read the paper. At the beginning of every trip, leaving my wife and young

children at home, it was so pit-of-your-stomach awful. But either you're going to stay in that state the whole time or you're going to look for the good in things. The tendency is to feel incredibly guilty, but I try not to. Instead I acknowledge and appreciate what everybody's done to make this possible.

As someone who's been touring the world for decades, do you have any travel tips for our readers?

Don't worry about the things you can't control. When the inevitable delays happen, when something horrible goes on, just go into neutral and choose the high road. The other way never helps. Always go to the next time zone, and always carry on everything you need.

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