

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

FORTY-SIXTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*

*A Citation*

**Dr Yo-Yo Ma, Hon PhD (Music)**

In 1955 in Paris Mrs. Ma Hiao-Tsiun gave birth to a son who is destined to become the most famous Chinese name in the world of Western classical music. She named him Yo-Yo, not in the English sense of bobbing up and down in rapid motion, but in the Chinese sense of being very friendly, by which one might deduce that Ma junior must have been born with a grin on his face, which he has carried to this day, laughing all the way to the leading concert halls of the world.

The Mas are a musical family. Father Ma Hiao-Tsiun is a musicologist, violinist and composer, mother Mrs. Ma a mezzo-soprano, and elder sister Ma Yeou-Cheng plays the violin. The violin was young Yo-Yo's first musical instrument too, but at the age of four, he wanted to play something bigger, maybe to compensate for the fact that his sister was bigger than he was. So his father made him a makeshift cello and started him on the voyage of musical exploration and discovery which has enriched Yo-Yo Ma and delighted music lovers all over the world.

Success came early to the child prodigy. At the age of six and hardly out of kindergarten, he gave a public performance of one of Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suites at the University of Paris. Two years later, in 1963, at about the time this University was established by the late Choh-ming Li, Yo-Yo Ma was playing at the American Pageant of the Arts with Leonard Bernstein. The man who recommended him to Bernstein was Pablo Casals, then 88-years-old and without doubt the greatest cellist of his time. The following year, at the age of nine, Ma made his debut at Carnegie Hall.

From the ages of nine to sixteen, Yo-Yo Ma studied at the Juilliard School with Janos Scholz and the famous cellist Leonard Rose who once said of the young virtuoso, "He may have one of the greatest techniques of all time." But the teenage years were not easy ones for Yo-Yo Ma as he tried to come to grips with his enormous talent and equally enormous expectations. Then Harvard beckoned and offered him the intellectual stimulation and broadening experience which he sought and needed, although, later in life, he would claim

he went to Harvard for the co-ed dorms. At Harvard, in addition to his cello playing, young Ma was able to delve deep into music history, theory, and appreciation. His intuitive instinct did not diminish, his analytical mind sharpened and his interpretative power matured. In his own words, Ma said of the education he received at Harvard,

"It makes me more precise.  
Rather than making sweeping statements,  
I have to support my argument."

Ma, whose technical mastery of the cello was accomplished early in his teens, has now brought his intellectual gifts to bear on his artistic impulse.

This rare, creative and exciting synthesis of analytical, artistic and technical skills burst upon the world stage when Yo-Yo Ma won the Avery Fisher Prize in 1978 and, with it, the opportunity to perform with the major orchestras in North America. The result was electric. He lit up the classical music world like a comet. Unlike a comet, Yo-Yo Ma has stayed in the firmament. His playing has been compared to Orpheus taming the wild animals with his lyre, to a romantic poet wooing the ladies with his muse. Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, paid him the supreme tribute when he said the orchestra "played better for three months" after performing Dvorak's Cello Concerto with Yo-Yo Ma. It is no wonder, therefore, that Ma gets many eager invitations for return visits.

The cellist's mastery of his instrument is so complete that it seems there is nothing he cannot play, nothing he cannot do. One moment, with hair flying and perspiration dripping, he can attack the cello with savage gusto. Another moment, with eye-lids drooping, he can go into trance-like meditation and convey to his audience the lyricism of anticipation in the silence between two waves. He can be animal and poet; he can be savagely poetic and make faces at Emanuel Ax at the same time. The master cellist conveys, through his person and his playing, warmth, humour, élan, elegance, good grace and profundity. He exudes, above all, exuberance. At a time when classical musicians seldom smile to camera, let alone laugh - for some reason they have the habit of staring into the distance from record covers - Yo-Yo Ma has charmed his way into the hearts of millions by appearing to enjoy himself and the music he is making. The publication *Current Biography* makes a special point of describing Ma as having "a highly mobile face", mobile as opposed to inscrutable, which, one has to assume, is an important point to Americans.

Whatever music he is playing, Yo-Yo Ma has the knack of making it sound fresh. This is the synthesis of incredible technique with the most careful thought process, for Ma's intellect and virtuosity inform every piece of music he plays. It is this creative fusion which makes his cello playing both touching and exciting for his admirers, although his matinee idol good looks also help. This means his performance can be enjoyed at two levels instead of

one, the audio as well as the visual. Ma plays dangerously but never loses control. The *New York Times* music critic Donal Henahan once said of his performance of Schubert's "Arpeggione" that he had stretched each musical strand to "just the right tautness, drawing full excitement from its rhythmic impulse without bruising the lovely melodies."

Ma cannot bear to repeat himself. Referring to his own playing, Ma has said,

"You have to rediscover the music night after night, to create an organic whole, to realize an inner logic. The danger comes when you try to repeat last night's good performance. As soon as you try that, you're going to fall flat on your face."

Yo-Yo Ma is a cellist and musician of this generation. He implicitly understands the ethos of our time, that is, that an audience today wants to be moved, enthralled, challenged and surprised. He epitomizes the spirit of the age when he said he did not like to be bored, hence his performance should not and could not be boring.

Ma wants to extend the cello repertoire. He has transcribed for the cello music which was written for other instruments. He wants to try new compositions. These include Gruber's Cello Concerto which is so full of pain, anguish and hurt that it sounds more like a gladiatorial contest than a piece of music. Yo-Yo Ma premiered it at Tanglewood. The artist played like a man possessed, sweat streaming down his face and falling all over his cello, the strings of his bow breaking in several places and flying in all directions; unbowed, undaunted, he kept at it for a full twenty five minutes and emerged, at the end, triumphant. The composer went up to the stage, kissed the cellist and proclaimed that that was how he had always envisaged the piece being played. If that were the case, one suspects it would be a long time before any other cellist would want to attempt that concerto again.

In only 37 years, Yo-Yo Ma, cellist extraordinaire, has played with the best orchestras of the world, has taught many master classes, has been universally acclaimed by fellow musicians and the severest music critics, has won six Grammy Awards, a rarity for classical musicians, and has received an honorary doctorate in music from his *alma mater* Harvard University. In *Portrait of a Lady*, T.S. Eliot wrote about attending a concert at which he heard "the latest Pole transmit the Preludes". The pianist in question, being Polish, might perhaps be expected to have an innate affinity with the composer Chopin. But such a cultural advantage is not available to an ethnic Chinese cellist who has to come to grips with the music of Bach and Schubert. All the more impressive, therefore, are Yo-Yo Ma's achievements.

Mr. Chancellor, on this very special occasion, the Thirtieth Anniversary of The

Chinese University of Hong Kong, it is my pleasure and honour to present Yo-Yo Ma, cellist, artist, innovationist, educationist, exhibitionist on the stage, contortionist with a magic bow, for the award of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

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