

Yo-Yo Ma

A Reading A-Z Level T Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,158

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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Yo-Yo Ma



Written by Mike Vago
Illustrated by Brock Nicol

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Glossary

classical (<i>adj.</i>)	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 (<i>v.</i>)	to work with others on a project (p. 14)
composers (<i>n.</i>)	people who write music (p. 14)
conductor (<i>n.</i>)	a person who directs or leads an orchestra, choir, or other ensemble (p. 7)
culture (<i>n.</i>)	the ideas and customs of a certain group of people; a particular society with its own ideas and customs (p. 11)
ensemble (<i>n.</i>)	a group of people, such as actors or musicians, who perform together (p. 14)
heritage (<i>n.</i>)	a way of life, tradition, or characteristic that is passed down from generation to generation (p. 12)
inauguration (<i>n.</i>)	a ceremony in which a person is sworn into office (p. 11)
orchestra (<i>n.</i>)	a large group of musicians who play together, often performing classical music on stringed instruments (p. 4)

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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

classical	ensemble
collaborate	heritage
composers	inauguration
conductor	orchestra
culture	

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

“I’m an Accident”

Many famous musicians credit hard work or natural talent for their success. Yo-Yo Ma says he has no idea why he became one of the world’s most popular musicians. “I’m an accident,” he once said. He claims his success is a combination of many things. His parents, teachers, sister, wife, and kids have all helped him. Living in Paris and New York and performing at a young age were all experiences that shaped him. 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 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. It united people across the entire continent.

Silk Road isn’t just a musical group. It’s also a nonprofit organization that uses music and art to connect people from different parts of the world. When Ma isn’t playing with the group, he helps plan its programs to teach and play music.



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An Early Start

Yo-Yo Ma was born in 1955 in Paris, France, into a musical family. His mother, Marina Lu, was a singer. His father, Hiao-Tsiun (HYOW-SHUN) Ma, was a violinist and music professor. Both of his parents were born in China. They moved to France so Hiao-Tsiun could teach at a music school there. Then the family moved to New York City when Yo-Yo was seven. Once there, his father founded the Children's **Orchestra** Society to teach **classical** music to children.

On most of Ma's albums, he performs classical music, but he has performed in many other styles as well. He recorded his own versions of songs from Cole Porter's 1930s Broadway musicals. Ma has also recorded John Williams's themes to *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and *Jurassic Park* as well as several movie soundtracks of his own. He has recorded with bluegrass and jazz musicians and 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 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. While he began by playing European classical music, he soon branched out to other kinds of music. Ma has played bluegrass, jazz, South American tango, and traditional music from China, Japan, and Brazil. He says that being open to new cultures is important to better understand both music and people.

Yo-Yo's parents wanted him to play music from a very young age. They gave him a violin when he was only three. Ma says he sounded terrible and thought he had no talent. His older sister, Yeou-Cheng (YOO-CHANG), says he smashed more than one violin in frustration. He quickly quit playing.

Growing up surrounded by music, though, he didn't stay away from it for long. A year later, his parents took him to a concert in Paris. Young Yo-Yo saw a double bass and decided he wanted to play it. A double bass is about 6 feet (1.8 m) tall. Yo-Yo's parents thought it



was much too large for a small child. Instead, they agreed to let Yo-Yo play the second-biggest stringed instrument—the cello (CHEL-oh).

Yeou-Cheng was already a talented violinist when Yo-Yo took up the cello. Their parents pushed both children to play challenging music. Yeou-Cheng said 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 learn the notes so well that they wouldn't have to think about them. That way, they could think about the emotion behind the music instead.



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

Ma is now widely seen as one of the best musicians in the world. He has performed at many historic events. He performed for the Statue of Liberty's hundredth birthday, the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the opening 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**.



President Barack Obama awarded Yo-Yo Ma the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. The award is the highest civilian honor in the United States.

However, as soon as the cast came off, Ma was in great demand as a cellist. He began playing all over the world. He often booked concerts years in advance. He started recording albums at age twenty-three and by his early sixties had released more than seventy-five. He has won fifteen Grammy Awards and is one of the best-selling classical artists alive. The cello Ma usually plays was made in 1733 and is worth \$2.5 million. In 1999, he left it in a taxicab by accident. After the driver returned it, Ma recorded a message that played in every taxi in New York. It reminded people not to leave things behind at the end of their ride.



Yo-Yo Ma was happy to get back to performing after his successful back surgery.



A Young Star

In 1962, seven-year-old Yo-Yo performed with Leonard Bernstein, America's most famous **conductor**. In the audience was President John F. Kennedy. The following year, Yo-Yo and Yeou-Cheng played together on TV for millions of people. At seven years old, many children are just learning to play their first notes on the recorder. Ma was already one of the most famous cellists in the world, and his sister was a gifted violinist. However, she stopped her music career once 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.

At fifteen, Ma graduated early from high school. For college, he chose Juilliard, one of the best music schools in the world. He soon dropped out, however, and switched to Harvard University. Harvard is one of the best colleges in the United States, but it doesn't focus on just music. Ma didn't want the cello to be the only thing in his life.

Before starting at Harvard, Ma played at a summer music festival. There, he met and fell in love with Jill Hornor, a college student who ran the festival. For the rest of his time in college, he returned to that festival every summer, playing and spending time with Jill. They later married and had two children.



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



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

Back Problems

As soon as Ma graduated, he had to stop playing cello. He had back surgery to correct scoliosis, a condition that makes the spine curve the wrong way. The surgery was risky. If it went wrong, he might never be able to play the cello again. To play well, Ma had to be able to sit very straight. Without the surgery, he could have a lifetime of back pain. He thought it was worth the risk and had the surgery after graduation. It was a success, but Ma was in a body cast for six months. He was unable to move around, much less play the cello. It was a very frustrating time.