

“Yo-Yo Ma Premieres Concertos for Violoncello and Orchestra” (1996)

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Essay by Anthony Arnone (guest post)*



Yo-Yo Ma

Yo-Yo Ma-Three American Concerti

If there is one cellist in the world that is a household name in the United States, it is Yo-Yo Ma. Ever since being one of the first ever Avery Fisher prize recipients in 1978, Ma has been in the spotlight performing with virtually every major orchestra around the world. Equally impressive has been taking the cello to places where it had rarely been before. His collaboration with Marc O’Connor and Edgar Meyer took him from the classical genre to places that most classical cellists dare to explore including baroque music, American bluegrass and traditional Chinese music. With the formation of the Silkroad Project in 1998, Ma took cello playing into yet another direction and blazed the trail for other classically trained musicians to explore other cultures and instruments outside of the orchestra tradition.

Ma was born on October 7th, 1955, in Paris, France. His parents, both of Chinese descent, started him on the cello when he was just four years old. His father was his first teacher and it has been said that Ma had three of the Bach Suites memorized by the time he was five. When he was seven, he and his family moved to New York where Ma studied with the famous cellist Leonard Rose who was teaching at the Juilliard School. Ma went on to attend the Juilliard School but at 16 he attended Harvard where he explored life outside of music and took classes ranging from anthropology to German literature. He graduated in 1976.

Ma’s career took off after that with numerous engagements with major orchestras around the world as well as chamber music collaborations with many of the most famous string players and pianists in the world. His relationship with pianist Emanuel Ax started in 1973 at the Marlboro Music Festival and has continued to this day. They have recorded most of the cello literature together and continue to grace concert stages worldwide.

Yo-Yo Ma is still probably best known for his performances of the standard literature including a project in 2018 to perform all six suites in 36 locations around the world. However, experimentation and innovation have always driven Ma to new places. He, like Rostropovich, is responsible for dozens of commissions including American composers like Albert, Bolcom, Corigliano, Diamond, Harbison, and John Williams. In 1996, in an effort to expand the concerto repertoire, Yo-Yo Ma recorded three new Cello Concertos written by three prominent American composers. Richard Danielpour, Leon Kirchner, and Christopher Rouse came together with the help of three of the great American Orchestras: the San Francisco Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, to give new life to the American Cello Concerto.

Richard Danielpour was born in New York in 1956 and studied composition at the New England Conservatory and at the Juilliard School. A Grammy-Award winning composer, Danielpour's honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Rockefeller Grant, and two awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was composer in residence with the Seattle Symphony during the 1991-1992 season and went on to teach at the Manhattan School of Music from 1993-2017, and now currently teaches at UCLA and the Curtis Institute of Music. Danielpour has over 150 commissioned works and describes composing as "the closest thing to a sense of enlightenment."

Danielpour's Cello Concerto was inspired in 1993 when he had a dream in which he witnessed an oracle bringing ill news to a large assembly; the news brought angry accusations, and the oracle was sentenced to death. When waking up, he realized he had the "libretto" for his concerto. He drafted the concerto in less than two weeks, completing it in December of 1993. The commission came from the San Francisco Symphony, which premiered the work with Ma and Herbert Blomstedt on September 14, 1994. Just before the first of five performances, Ma told Danielpour, "I may not get it right tonight, and I may not get it right tomorrow, but once it's right, it won't be wrong again."

Composer Leon Kirchner (1919-2009) was born in Brooklyn, New York, and later moved to Los Angeles where he eventually went to UCLA and studied with Arnold Schoenberg. Shortly after he attended UC Berkeley and then went on to win the George Ladd Prix de Paris in 1942. Kirchner went on to teach at the University of Buffalo (succeeding Aaron Copland), University of Southern California, Yale, Juilliard, Harvard (succeeding Walter Piston) where he remained until 1989. Kirchner also won many prestigious prizes including a Guggenheim Fellowship, two New York Critics Circle Awards, a Naumburg Award, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for his Quartet #3.

Yo-Yo Ma had first encountered Kirchner at Harvard in the early 70's when he took Kirchner's "Performance and Analysis" class. But it was the request of Long Island philanthropist Lillian Barbash to have a cello concerto written for Yo-Yo Ma for her 40th Anniversary that led to the commission of the second work on this CD. The concerto, like Danielpour's, is in four movements that are connected. However the harmonic language is quite different and "progresses from turbulent dissonance to a final diatonic arrival."

Christopher Rouse (1949-2019) was an American composer who often integrated tonal and non-tonal worlds. All of his music was composed in his words, "to convey a sense of expressive Urgency." Rouse was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and went on to study composition at Oberlin Conservatory of Music (with Richard Hoffman) and Cornell University (with Karel Husa). In between degrees, he also had the good fortune to study with George Crumb. Rouse quickly became a notable composer winning numerous awards including the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award in 1988 for his Symphony #1, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for his Trombone Concerto. Rouse's teaching career took him to the University of Michigan where he taught from 1978-1981 and at the Eastman School of Music from 1981-2002.

Rouse's Cello Concerto was commissioned by Betty Freeman for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra's 75th anniversary and was first performed by Ma, conductor David Zinman and the Philharmonic on January 26, 1994. Like the cello concerto of Danielpour, there is a theme of death in the work. However, Rouse focuses on loss and mourning as during the time Rouse was composing the work, a number of famous musicians passed away including Messiaen, Cage, Panufnik, and William Schuman. The piece became "a meditation upon death-the struggle to deny it, and its ultimate inevitability."

"Without music my life would have had no meaning. It has not only informed my life or enriched my life; it has GIVEN me life and a reason for living. I'll never be able to explain why these

vibrating frequencies have the power to transport us to levels of consciousness that defy words--I simply accept the fact that music has this miraculous power for me and for a myriad of other people I have known."

--Christopher Rouse

Anthony Arnone, himself a cellist, has been called by "Gramophone," "a cellist with rich tonal resources, fine subtlety and a keen sense of phrasing." Arnone has enjoyed a varied career as a soloist, chamber musician, conductor, recording artist, composer, and teacher throughout the country and around the world. Mr. Arnone is associate professor of cello at the University of Iowa School of Music, and is also on the faculty of the Preucil School of Music in Iowa City, where he teaches and conducts.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.