



Friday | November 21, 2025 | 8pm
Symphony Hall

We The People: Celebrating Our Shared Humanity **Yo-Yo Ma plays Bach's Cello Suites**

J.S. Bach Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello

Suite No. 1 In G Major, BWV 1007

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Menuets I and II

Gigue

Suite No. 2 In D minor, BWV 1008

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Menuets I and II

Gigue

Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Bourrées I and II

Gigue

Suite No. 4 in E-flat Major, BWV 1010

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Bourrées I and II

Gigue

Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavottes I and II

Gigue

Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavottes I and II

Gigue

Tonight's program will be performed without an intermission and will run approximately two hours and thirty minutes in duration. Audience members are welcome to enter and exit the hall quietly as needed for restroom or refreshment breaks.

We The People is made possible by **Barbara & Amos Hostetter** and the **Barr Foundation** with additional support provided by the **Richard K. Lubin Family Foundation**.

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Greetings to my Commonwealth friends and neighbors,

Welcome and thank you all for making the effort to join me in tonight's musical adventure.

In this time of turmoil and divisiveness, I've come to appreciate and cherish even more our communal spaces, places where we all feel safe and welcome. Music is one of the best ways to bring people together, allowing us moments of shared reflection. Tonight, I am thrilled that the experience taking place in Symphony Hall in Boston is being shared in real time with more than 16 communities across the state. So, welcome, all!

And now to the music I've been living with for the past sixty-five years: this music has helped me, a little more with each succeeding decade, to appreciate the miracle of life, the complexity of human nature, the infinitude of nature itself. People have told me how this music has helped them get through rough life transitions, and I've played this music both for friends' weddings and for their memorial services, for national tragedies and global celebrations. When Fred Rogers from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was asked how to talk to children in times of tragedy, he quoted his mother, who used to say: "always look for the helpers. There will always be helpers." I see Bach's cello suites as helpers.

I believe strongly that we are a community of helpers. You know what is needed and all of you have found a way to help. As you come together tonight, community by community, I hope you will talk, listen, and share thoughts with your neighbors. I hope you will learn more about how each one of you is helping and, in doing so, find new ways to collaborate and build the society we all wish to live in.

In fifty years of touring life, I have been away from my family and my community for three decades. Despite the pain of being absent from loved ones, I am immensely grateful for the perspective my travels have given me and I thank the countless people who have generously shared their stories with me. Tonight, I share with you not only the notes that Bach composed more than 300 years ago—in between the notes is an amalgam of all the people I've met, the stories I've been told, the experiences I've had for the last half century.

I am now 70 years old. I have four grandchildren. My youngest grandchild will be 76 years old in the year 2100. She will experience a world I won't see. I ask myself what the world will be like for her, and what part we will have played in creating it.

My dream for tonight is twofold. First, I hope you will enjoy this adventure with me. And second, whether you are at your local library, theater, or community center, or at Symphony Hall, I hope you will experience a moment of clarity. Whether it's from listening to the music, talking to your neighbor, looking at a photograph, or meeting a friend, I hope you will feel that the purpose of this music and this gathering is to keep the flame of our humanity alive. Its purpose is to get us to a state of mind where our imagination can take flight, where we can recognize that the seeds of destruction and creativity live within each of us, and where we can choose the better angels of our nature. To me, this kind of communal gathering and reflection is an essential part of a vibrant democracy. Long live our Commonwealth!

For more about the Bach Project, visit bach.yo-yoma.com and explore how [#cultureconnectsus](https://twitter.com/cultureconnectsus).

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A REFLECTION ON THE MUSIC

This reflection from Michael Stern at the start of the Bach Project in August, 2018, is adapted from the liner notes to Six Evolutions, Yo-Yo Ma's latest recording of the suites, available now from Sony Classical.

Why do Bach's iconic cello suites, written three centuries ago, remain so enduring today? That Bach's brilliance is timeless, while true, seems to me a bit facile, and not specific enough. These pieces present enigmatic contradictions, posing special challenges for a performer and requiring unusual attention and immersion for a listener. The core of Bach's musical world, as would be expected in the cultural and social climate of his time and place, was his deep religious devotion and service to the church; and yet, these works, among other equally secular masterpieces that he composed during an especially fruitful period in Köthen between 1717 and 1723, achieve a profound intimacy exceptional even for his genius. There is no dramatic ecclesiastical narrative in these stylized dances—this is Bach at his most abstract, which might account for why the music seems to demand such focus from the listener. Bach's mastery of complex counterpoint, on virtuosic display in so much of his music, from large-scale choruses to his solo organ works, does not seem at first hearing to be at the heart of these suites. And there is no question that there is the appearance of less polyphony in the cello suites than in his solo sonatas and partitas for violin, which date from the same period. In the cello suites, there is less that is explicit, more that is internalized. Nevertheless, the counterpoint in this music, the backbone of everything that Bach wrote, is in no way less sophisticated or developed.

Therein lies, perhaps, one of the secrets of these works' power, and why it strikes me as essential music for us in the 21st century. Much of the counterpoint is implied, left for the performer to make those suggested connections clear and for the listener to fill in the longer line. There is a very practical reason for this, a challenge that Bach must have embraced intentionally when he chose to write such soloistic and difficult music for the cello, which had been until then used only as an accompanying instrument to support a melody or reinforce a realized figured bass. It is difficult enough to produce three or four tones simultaneously on a violin. On a cello's longer strings, the distance between the notes requires a greater stretch of the hand to move between them, and the gaps between the strings require more time to make those connections. Furthermore, Bach left little by way of direction for interpreting the phrasing and dynamics, or even the speed or pulse of the music. Outside of the dance titles, there are no indications even of tempo. The contrapuntal direction,

the harmonic motion, and the form in the purely melodic movements like the Gigue in the E-flat Major Suite, or the Sarabande in the C minor Suite, are all clear, but not fully spelled out. The implied connections, hidden polyphony, and artless expression require exceptional creativity from the performer and engagement from the listener, establishing an unusual relationship between cellist and audience.

Transcending even Bach's profound devoutness, these works are statements of faith pared down to their purest essence. When Yo-Yo Ma asked me to write these few sentences, it gave me the opportunity to reconsider both the music and his approach to it. It is sometimes difficult to be objective about a friend with whom one has been close since earliest childhood, as is the case with Yo-Yo and me. It has always been clear to me that his generosity of spirit as a musician has been fueled by the two impulses essential to understanding these works: boundless curiosity, and a fervent need to communicate.

Yo-Yo could play every note of the suites from memory even before he and I met, 55 years ago. Since then, he has continually searched for the music that happens between the notes, and the mysterious and private nature of these works now fuels his fertile creativity with even deeper breath, with even more disciplined freedom and unhurried insight. The stylized dances that animate the pulse of these movements were not meant to accompany actual dancing—and similarly, and to a large degree, they seem not really meant for public performance. Even at their most joyous, the music seems ill-suited to extroverted or public display; and at their most meditative, the suspension of breath and time is so intimate that listening to them can feel akin to eavesdropping. And still—their communicative power and touching humanity can bring thousands of silent and rapt listeners together into a mesmerized communion with Bach. This is private music; but, amidst the noise of our time, I am convinced that the private conversation has never been more urgent and vital.

— Michael Stern

Michael Stern is Yo-Yo Ma's life-long friend and colleague.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Yo-Yo Ma's multi-faceted career is testament to his belief in culture's power to generate trust and understanding. Whether performing new or familiar works for cello, bringing communities together to explore culture's role in society, or engaging unexpected musical forms, Yo-Yo strives to foster connections that stimulate the imagination and reinforce our humanity.

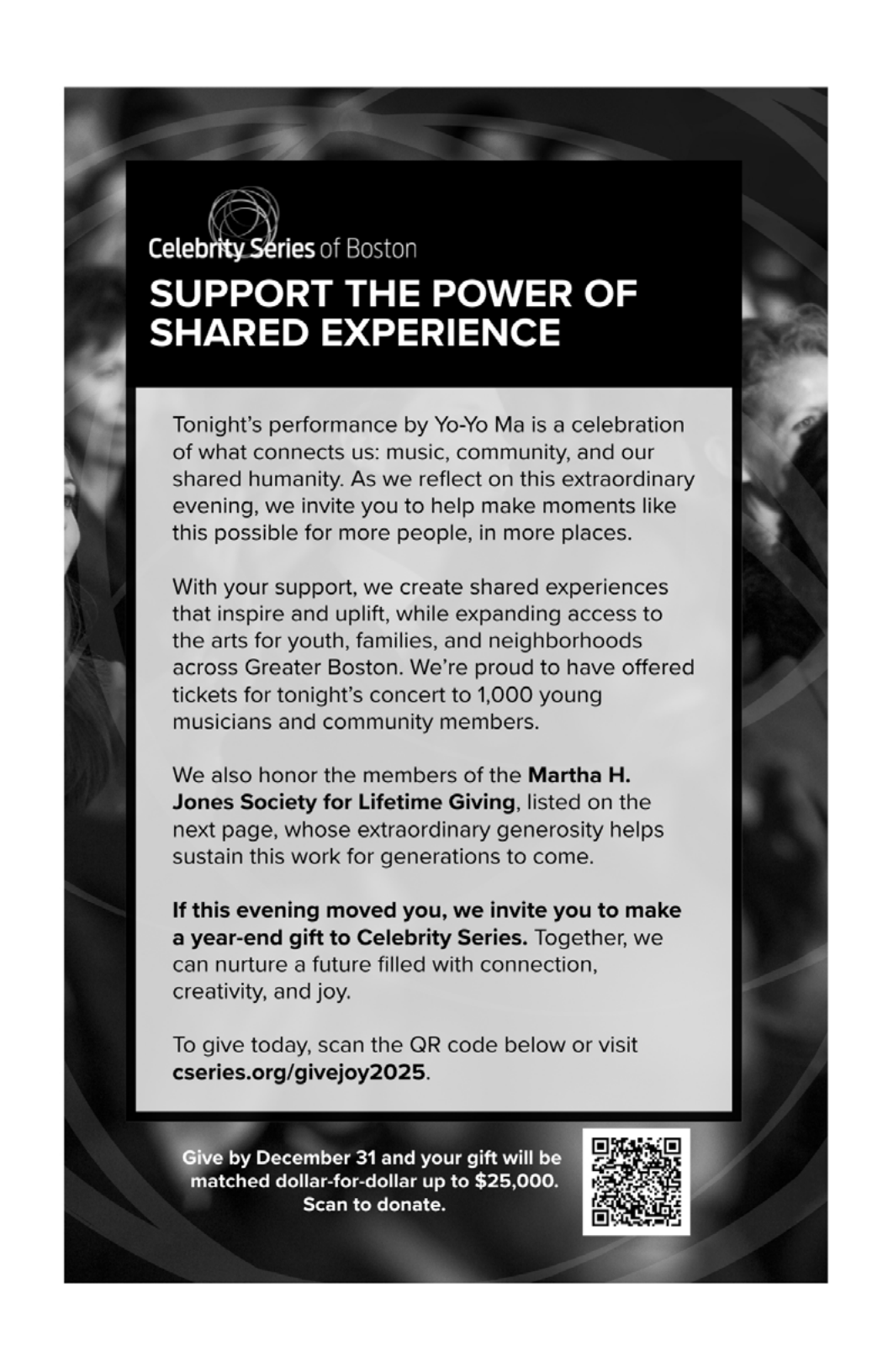
Most recently, Yo-Yo began *Our Common Nature*, a cultural journey to celebrate the ways that nature can reunite us in pursuit of a shared future. *Our Common Nature* follows the Bach Project, a 36-community, six-continent tour of J. S. Bach's cello suites paired with local cultural programming. Both endeavors reflect Yo-Yo's lifelong commitment to stretching the boundaries of genre and tradition to understand how music helps us to imagine and build a stronger society.

Yo-Yo is an advocate for a future guided by humanity, trust, and understanding. Among his many roles, Yo-Yo is a United Nations Messenger of Peace, the first artist ever appointed to the World Economic Forum's board of trustees, a member of the board of Nia Tero, the US-based nonprofit working in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and movements worldwide, and the founder of the global music collective Silkroad.

His discography of more than 120 albums (including 19 Grammy Award winners) ranges from iconic renditions of the Western classical canon to recordings that defy categorization, such as *Hush* with Bobby McFerrin and the *Goat Rodeo Sessions* with Stuart Duncan, Edgar Meyer, and Chris Thile. Yo-Yo's recent releases include *Six Evolutions*, his third recording of Bach's cello suites, and *Beethoven for Three: Symphony No. 1 / Op. 70, No. 1 'Ghost' / Op. 11 'Gassenhauer,'* the fourth in a series of Beethoven recordings with pianist Emanuel Ax and violinist Leonidas Kavakos.

Yo-Yo was born in 1955 to Chinese parents living in Paris. He began to study the cello with his father at age four and three years later moved with his family to New York City, where he continued his cello studies at the Juilliard School before pursuing a liberal arts education at Harvard. He has received numerous awards, including the Avery Fisher Prize (1978), the National Medal of the Arts (2001), the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2010), Kennedy Center Honors (2011), the Polar Music Prize (2012), and the Birgit Nilsson Prize (2022). He has performed for nine American presidents, most recently on the occasion of President Biden's inauguration.

Yo-Yo and his wife have two children. He plays four cellos: two modern instruments made by Moes & Moes, a 1733 Montagnana from Venice, and the 1712 Davidoff Stradivarius.




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Tonight's performance by Yo-Yo Ma is a celebration of what connects us: music, community, and our shared humanity. As we reflect on this extraordinary evening, we invite you to help make moments like this possible for more people, in more places.

With your support, we create shared experiences that inspire and uplift, while expanding access to the arts for youth, families, and neighborhoods across Greater Boston. We're proud to have offered tickets for tonight's concert to 1,000 young musicians and community members.

We also honor the members of the **Martha H. Jones Society for Lifetime Giving**, listed on the next page, whose extraordinary generosity helps sustain this work for generations to come.

If this evening moved you, we invite you to make a year-end gift to Celebrity Series. Together, we can nurture a future filled with connection, creativity, and joy.

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