

## Cultural Counterpoint Along the Silk Road

BY KATHLEEN WATT

BY THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST century, fees generated by American exports of film and video were up to almost \$9 billion--at the same time that the U.S. government cut the State Department budget for cultural and educational programs by 33 percent, dismantled the U.S. Information Agency, and closed American libraries and cultural centers from Vienna to Ankara, Belgrade to Islamabad. Left to market forces, the export of U.S. popular culture by movie then skyrocketed.

Today, American DVD's fly off shelves in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Theaters are packed in Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon. This year's runaway hit? "Fahrenheit 9/11." Which makes director Michael Moore more than a lumpily relentless sociopolitical crusader. He has become, at least for the moment, America's most visible cultural ambassador, and not just on our collective national campaign trail, but in the territory of our most rancorous critics.

In bracing counterpoint is the multicultural enterprise of cellist Yo-Yo Ma, artistic director of The Silk Road Project, Inc.. Founded by Ma in 1998 and named for the ancient trade route that still binds three continents by a web of slender threads, the Silk Road Ensemble is SRPI's premier concert component, figuratively and literally criss-crossing the same region where "Fahrenheit 9/11" is packing 'em in. But this Road show is less in-your-face than up-close and personal with audiences along its way, collaborating with musicians, scholars, storytellers and archaeologists, says Ma, to "showcase the cultural legacy for which the Silk Road has become a symbol."

At 48, Ma has been the world's reigning cellist long enough to have looked up from the monuments of western classical repertoire for something more to do. He has found plenty. Once his "leap of faith, gathering musicians from all corners of the world—Azerbaijan to China, Iran to Uzbekistan..." SRPI now proudly offers two CD's, a book, twenty commissioned chamber works, and this year launched the Museums Initiative series, co-produced by museums around the world. Silk Road Encounters is an education kit now available to teachers at all levels, utilizing up-to-the minute

communications technology. And now, under the aegis of The Weill Music Institute, Carnegie Hall's \$75 million umbrella fund for education initiatives, SRPI's Innovators in Tradition program is coming to Carnegie Hall.

It probably takes a megastar of Yo-Yo Ma's international cachet to pull off this brand of shuttle diplomacy. What is astounding is that such a celebrity would continue to choose to travel the Silk Road. Not to put too fine a point on it--the Silk Road runs right through Baghdad.

But the Silk Road Project is all about communication and fusion--not imposed from without but coaxed from within--people teaming up to search for the starting points of tangled, ancient, culture-rich roads, and follow them wherever they lead. Curatorial Consultant Theodore Levin refers to its mandate as a "revitalization of transcultural links," that "nourishes global connections while maintaining the integrity of art rooted in an authentic tradition," and demonstrates how "performing arts exchanges can be a crucial vehicle for openness."

The Silk Road Project, Inc. is billed as a "common resource," and this month, The Weill Music Institute has tapped it for a Professional Training Workshop, expansively entitled, "Tradition and Innovation: A Workshop with Yo-Yo Ma on Mentoring, Creating, and Communicating." Carnegie has selected sixteen young professional musicians to join four master teachers--the Silk Road Ensemble Innovators, representing India, Iran, Azerbaijan, and China--and two protégé musicians from each Innovator's home country, for a week of intense workshops at Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox, MA.

Yo-Yo Ma, ebullient mentor and willing role model, will lead the workshops, to train "the next cultural generation" in the performance practices of the Silk Road region, on instruments both Eastern and Western, ancient, and modern, culminating in Carnegie Hall's "Festival Weekend" of seminars and performances in New York.

Multimedia presentations will blend live music, film, and narrative to recreate ancient Chinese and Kyrgyz oral traditions.

Hour-long panel discussions explore musical traditions in Central Asia, East/West approaches to learning, and the reality and reward of a life in music.

Concerts feature traditional repertory, and four world premieres by Silk Road Innovators. Finally, at Sunday's informal "jam" concert, the Silk Road Ensemble will make it all happen before our very eyes. The thing is, Yo-Yo Ma communicates with everyone the same way that he communicates with his multilingual musicians onstage--through eyes, ears, body language, smiles--and constantly.

After a week of 9/11 remembrances, this is potent cultural diplomacy indeed.

"Tradition and Innovation: A Festival Weekend on Mentoring, Creating, and Communicating," with Yo-Yo Ma and Musicians of the Silk Road Ensemble. Saturday and Sunday, September 18 and 19, at Carnegie Hall. Tickets priced by event (Free, \$15, and \$20). Discount package available. Call CarnegieCharge, at (212) 247-7800. Or visit [www.carnegiehall.org](http://www.carnegiehall.org).