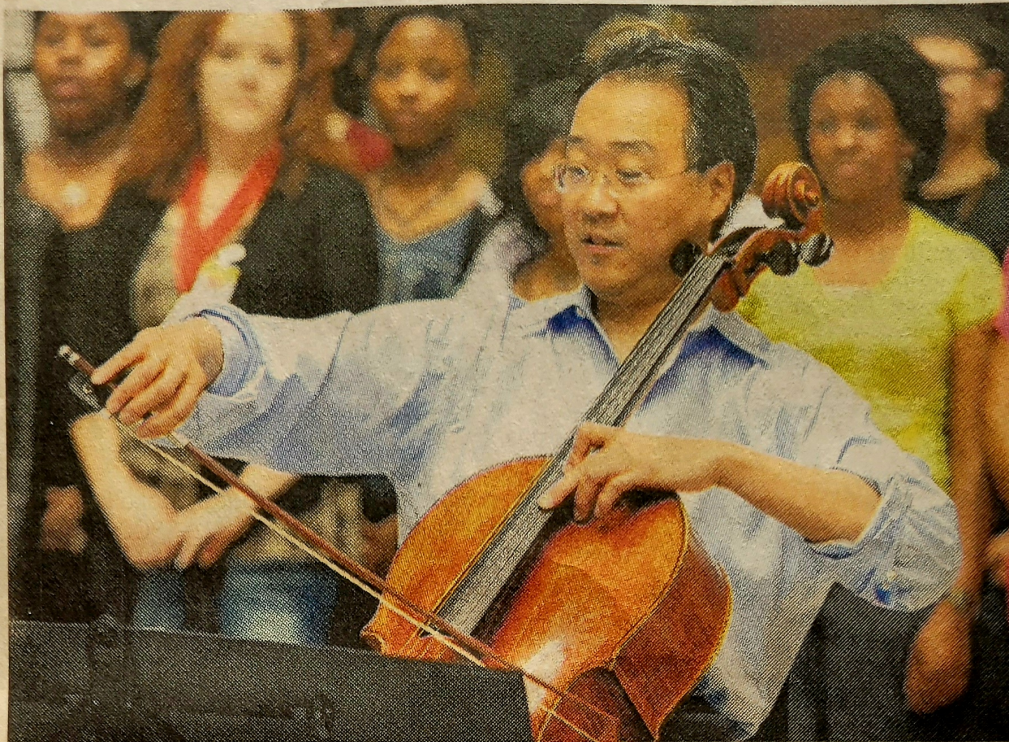




Cellist Yo-Yo Ma plays in Chicago in this 2012 photo.

AP FILE PHOTO

Famed cellist gives transcendent performance with philharmonic

In November 1962, John F. Kennedy predicted that "after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we, too, will be remembered not for victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit."

Few artists have contributed so significantly to that ideal as Yo-Yo Ma, a rare performer whose musical artistry can only be described as transcendent. For this 25th anniversary concert, Ma and the Oklahoma City Philharmonic joined forces for an extraordinary performance of Schumann's "Cello Concerto in A Minor."

Drawing a perfect blend of warmth and intensity from his 1712 Stradivarius, Ma left no doubt that he was fully invested in the proceedings. During one exchange, he looked approvingly at the first violins. Later, he nodded rhythmically to a group of musicians, a visual cue to underscore a series of accents.

This 1850 concerto is filled with musical moments that conveyed

Schumann's love for his wife, Clara, one of which is a gorgeous conversation between the soloist and a single orchestral cellist. Ma kept associate principal Tomasz Zieba in his sight throughout, a shared moment that elevated the music's touching emotion.

Ma then immersed himself in the jaunty finale, much like an eager kid who was experiencing this joyous movement for the first time. That kind of spontaneity is all the more remarkable when one considers the hundreds of performances he's given of this concerto. As a friend noted at the conclusion, no one had a better time during this performance than Ma himself.

After a standing ovation and several curtain calls, Ma obliged the appreciative audience with an exquisite performance of the Prelude from Bach's "Cello Suite No. 1." In a charming gesture, Ma dedicated his performance to the newborn daughter of principal cellist Jonathan Ruck.

Music director Joel Levine, who offered a

beautifully rendered accompaniment for the cellist throughout, also programmed a perfect vehicle to show off the orchestra's talents, the dazzling "Scheherazade" by Rimsky-Korsakov.

From the bold brass opening to the numerous woodwind flourishes, this symphonic suite based on the tales of the Arabian nights is the epitome of musical storytelling. Rimsky-Korsakov's masterful orchestration emerged in countless ways, from a series of undulating solos by concertmaster Gregory Lee (representing Scheherazade) to the electrifying finale with the philharmonic operating at full throttle.

Levine's approach was one of judicious pliability, much like a potter carefully shapes a mound of clay. Kudos to principal clarinetist Brad Behn, principal bassoonist Rod Ackmann, the trombone section led by John Allen and brilliant piccolo solos by Nancy Stizza-Ortega. Their efforts made revisiting this orchestral classic a distinct pleasure.

— Rick Rogers