

**ANNA REGUERO**  
STAFF WRITER

Only Yo-Yo Ma could get away with something like this. The world famous cellist was playing a Bach *Brandenburg Concerto* in a workshop with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All of a sudden, Ma made an unusual request, says Sandeep Das, an Indian musician and frequent collaborator with Ma who was in the audience.

"I'm sitting just enjoying," Das says. "Suddenly he looks at me. 'Sandeep, will you join me for the *Brandenburg Concerto*?'"

Das wondered: "Is he crazy? Is he going nuts?" It turns out Ma wasn't joking.

Right there, with the Chicago Symphony waiting, Das unpacked his tabla — a two-piece traditional Indian drum — and climbed on stage. Baroque symphonic music and odd metered Indian beats joined together that day in an impromptu world music session, backed by one of the top orchestras in the United States.

"This is how (Ma) surprises you and pushes you beyond the limit," says Das.

Das is a member of the Silk Road Project, a nonprofit organization Ma began roughly 10 years ago. The name is derived from the historical trading routes spanning Europe and Asia, which contributed to cultural, as well as commercial, development. Ma's Silk Road Project tries to recreate the cultural growth with a collective of the best traditional musicians from all over the world sharing and creating music.

This summer is the project's 10th anniversary, and to celebrate Ma is touring with the ensemble for eight concerts. It started at Tanglewood in the Berkshires, where the group first joined together a decade ago. And on Thursday, in somewhat of a coup for Constellation Brands-Marvin Sands Performing Arts Center in Hopewell, the group is playing a benefit there for Lifetime Assistance Foundation. It's the first time Silk Road has played in the Rochester area.

"Rochester is just one of the treasures of the states in terms of the incredibly interesting people that live there, who have come from there, the history, and its place in the arts and invention," Ma says. "We think of Rochester as a very big place."

The Silk Road Project's success is in large part to Ma's position as a world-



Sandeep Das plays his tabla with world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Provided photo

## Connections worldwide

### Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Road Project celebrate bringing cultures together

wide classical music icon. But the project is one of Ma's most profound ventures, sending the positive message that music is truly a universal language. Because the messages are so strong, the creativity so unrestrained and the production level so high, the Silk Road Project has enjoyed a wide appeal that has surpassed any stigmas of world music.

Ma says the project began with a simple question: "Who are we and how do we fit in the world?"

"It's sort of a way of finding connections — the six degrees of separation between you and anyone else in the world," he says.

Embarking on his mission to close the musical gap between world cultures, he spent two years scouring the world for musicians and commissioning new works for the ensemble. Since the Silk Road Project's first

meeting in 2000, the ensemble has recorded five CDs and performed all over the world.

In his ongoing search for cultural connections, Ma has even tried his hand at instruments other than the cello, such as the stringed Mongolian morin khuur. His talent successfully crosses over. Though for this tour, he says he'll only be playing "a crazy instrument called the cello." Yet he promises that it won't always sound like what you expect it to.

"There's one crazy movement that's just for percussion and cello, and that's going to sound crazy," he says about *The Taranta Project*. "We're all asked to do crazy things. The percussionist is beating his body, using sounds from his mouth. The cello is tuned in a

#### If you go

**What:** Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Project.  
**When:** 7 p.m. Thursday.  
**Where:** Constellation Brands-Marvin Sands Performing Arts Center, 3355 Marvin Sands Drive, Hopewell.  
**Cost:** \$20 to \$79 (with some proceeds going to Lifetime Assistance Foundation). Lawn tickets are buy one-get one free starting Monday.  
**For tickets:** Available at [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com).

different way. It will not sound like a cello, but it's also part of the kind of dance and festivals that you would experience in a place like Sicily."

The program will be as diverse as the ensemble. Despite an inability to read and write Western music notation, Ma's tabla player Das wrote a work on the program called *Shristi* that includes elements of planned improvisation over a series of traditional Indian rhythm patterns. Also on the program is a work commissioned by Carnegie Hall in 2006, by contemporary composer Osvaldo Golijov, called *Air to Air*, which is based on a Christian Arab chorale traditionally sung for Easter.

In a coincidental moment of connectivity, Ma remembers hearing the melody recently in a New York City cab, "because the driver happens to be from Damascus, and being a Christian Arab he listens to this music around Lent. It's not too far removed."

That kind of familiarity with world cultures is what Ma hopes the audience will gain from the concert.

"The most important thing is that I want people to feel joyous and connected to all this," says Ma. "You can bring all the distances closer and it's totally viscerally, melodically enjoyable. You can get entry into any of these worlds."

The message has certainly worn off on his ensemble members, including his *Brandenburg Concerto* partner Das.

"It's been a life-changing experience," says Das, who spent his young life studying the tabla with a guru in India. "It's taught me so much more than music; it's taught me about the world." □

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