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Music, power and joy

A 9/13 concert brings out the best in a young conductor, an acclaimed cellist and an inspired orchestra

One day last August I picked up the ringing telephone in our home. The voice on the other end was that of the general manager of the Phoenix Symphony, where I am associate conductor.

"Bob, [music director] Maestro Hermann Michael is ill and not going to be able to conduct our opening gala on September 13," she said. "We'd like you to conduct in his place."

Young conductors dream about calls like this. Not only would I be stepping in to conduct our highly publicized opening gala, but the guest artist would be none other than Yo Yo Ma, the renowned cellist. I spent nine years in my hometown of Greenville studying cello with Furman professor Richard Maag, who helped crystallize my love for the cello and my admiration for artists like Yo Yo Ma. So I threw myself completely into score study and preparation for the first rehearsal, which was scheduled for Tuesday morning, September 11.

I woke at 6 o'clock on the 11th (9 a.m. Eastern time) and turned on the television en route to making coffee. I never got to the kitchen. Watching the second plane hit the World Trade Center is a memory I can never erase, as is the case for so many of us.

When the orchestra gathered later that morning at Symphony Hall for rehearsal, the musicians were silent, dumbfounded and unsure even of why we were there. I asked for a minute of silence, and then we played Tchaikovsky, Weber and Haydn. Music has a healing quality, and it was certainly in effect that morning. But it could not completely relieve our anxiety and sadness.

Later that afternoon, we discussed whether or not to proceed with the gala on Thursday night. Sporting events, Broadway touring shows and rock concerts were being cancelled. We came very close to joining them.

Then we heard from Yo Yo Ma. He was in Denver, and although flights were grounded, he said that if we were going ahead with the gala, he would make the 16-hour drive to be with us.

That settled it. The concert was on.

He made the drive overnight, arriving in Phoenix just 90 minutes before his rehearsal with us. Yet he played with unflinching energy and artistry, and even stayed around for an hour afterwards,



COURTESY OF ROBERT MOODY

Yo Yo Ma (left) reviews notations for a Haydn concerto with Blythe Tretick, assistant principal cellist for the Phoenix Symphony, and Robert Moody.

speaking with music students who had been invited to the rehearsal.

As an opening memorial, I decided to add Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* to our program. This poignant work is performed often in times of crisis or tragedy and has become a national hymn of memorial and remembrance.

Ten minutes before the concert was to begin, there was a knock at my dressing room door. It was Yo Yo Ma. "I wonder if it might be all right with you," he began, "if I could sit in with the cello section for the Barber." I found myself chuckling inside at this question, while being moved that this artist, perhaps the greatest of our time, also possessed such deep humility. "Yes, it will be more than all right," I finally answered.

And so Yo Yo Ma sat in the cello section and waited for the concert to begin.

If there had been any concern that the audience might stay away, it was allayed as I stepped to the stage. All 2,500 seats in the hall were full, and the 14 portal-door entries were also jammed with people.

The first sounds were that of the National Anthem, which everyone sang with overwhelming fervor.

Then came the Barber. No string player has ever given more than our musicians did that night — including Yo Yo Ma. He wasn't a superstar at that moment. Instead, he was one of our string "team" that created the most unified and powerful rendition of the work that I will ever experience. For what seemed an eternity after the final

chords faded away, no one in the room could breathe.

And then the concert went forward. We realized we weren't there just to mourn loss, but also to celebrate life. The fire and energy of Yo Yo Ma's performances of the Haydn Cello Concerto in C-major and the Tchaikovsky "Rococo" Variations were matched by the orchestra's rendering of the Tchaikovsky Second Symphony. In those two hours there was no despair. There was only music, power and joy.

Yo Yo Ma took the stage at the end of the program and, unaccompanied, played a selection from Bach. Nothing could have served as a more appropriate "Amen" for the evening. Yet the audience called for more. So the orchestra played "God Bless America." The audience was in full voice once again, almost intoxicated now from hearing the world's greatest cellist lend his artistry to the evening, and from hearing our great Phoenix Symphony reach such a musical peak.

And where was Yo Yo Ma during this last piece?

In the cello section, playing and singing along with all of us.

— Robert Moody '89

The author is scheduled to conduct the final concert of Spoleto Festival USA June 9 at Middleton Place in Charleston, S.C. He dedicates this article "to the memory of my cello teacher, Dr. Richard Maag."