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Style

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For He's a Jolly Good Cello

Yo-Yo Ma Coaxes Melodies From Young Musicians

By JOHN PITCHER
Special to *The Washington Post*

Half past 2 in the afternoon, and four young cellists are giving the concert of a lifetime. Ensnared in a small practice room at Towson University's Center for the Arts, the players—ages 10 through 12—open with their big piece, Georg Goltermann's "Serenade." Though the performance begins tentatively, the ensemble is soon lost in concentration, so the players hardly seem to notice the sole member of their audience, a thin, casually dressed man in the front row.

Most great musicians begin their studies at an early age, so at first blush the foursome's focus and dedication may seem commonplace. But under similar circumstances, one can hardly imagine four veteran cellists maintaining their composure for the solitary figure in this audience: Yo-Yo Ma.

The 44-year-old cello superstar is the featured guest artist at this week's World Cello Congress III, a musical expo and jamboree that has attracted more than 600 artists and musicians from 45 countries to the state

TOWSON, Md.



BY MICHAEL LUTZKY—THE WASHINGTON POST

university near Baltimore.

Highlights of the event include the American debut today of Denis Shapovalov—winner of the 1998 Tchaikovsky International Cello

See CELLO, C12, Col. 1

Cello celebrity Yo-Yo Ma, in his element directing a children's master class at Towson University during this week's World Cello Congress.

Music

The Alba Tran Sorre

By PHILIP
Washington

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See MUSIC

The Difference That Ma Makes

CELLO, From C1

Competition—with the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra at Stephens Hall Theatre, and the world an ensemble of more than 200 cellists will perform tomorrow at Baltimore's Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall.

The last Cello Congress—held in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1997—drew an audience of more than 10,000. This year, at least 13,000 people are expected to attend the gathering's events, exhibits and performances.

Ma took time out from his hectic schedule to conduct back-to-back master classes at this year's congress. He began with what organizers of the event called a "children's cello party," a low-pressure, entry-level master class for eight local youngsters ages 7 through 12.

A singular phenomenon in the classical music world, Ma is a bona fide celebrity who draws about as much attention at a cello expo as Bill Gates does at a Microsoft convention. Entering the building with a blue cello case strapped to his back, he is instantly recognized by a throng of enthusiastic well-wishers, autograph seekers and photographers. He doesn't so much walk to his master classes as he is swept along in the wave of the crowd, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries all the way with the ease of a politician on the campaign trail.

Anticipating the excitement, Ma and Cello Congress administrators are concerned about distracting the youngsters, so the world's best-known cellist conducts the children's class in private. Parents and members of the audience are asked to watch the session on a giant screen in the art center's nearby concert hall. Only the young ensemble's teacher and conductor, John Kaboff, is allowed to remain.

Ma wastes little time getting started.

"Let's make this sound fantastic," he says to the group, which is divided into two sections of four each, according to age.

The older kids open with "Serenade," the piece they've been practicing all year. With their eyes fixed on the score and on Kaboff's baton, the quartet (Gaithersburg students Abi Loutoo, 10, and Samuel Youn, 11, along with Laura London, 11, of Bethesda and Kendall Lowrey, 12, of Arlington) begins softly, expressively, adopting a leisurely tempo that clearly defines the music's architecture, but seems to lack a sense of animation and enthusiasm. Time to make a few adjustments.

"That was so beautiful," Ma says, "but this time I want to see what happens when all of the energy is coming from you."

Ma throws his arm around Kaboff's neck and removes the surprised conductor from the scene. The children start from the top, but this time their performance seems a revelation. Phrases that previously sounded angular and blocky now unfold with comfort, elegance and grace. Accents are clearly marked throughout, and their new tempo zips along with spunk and sparkle.

A similar exercise with the younger kids (Sara Lamar and Andie Salad, both 7, Elizabeth Conner, 8, and Marissa Salad, 9, all from Arlington) breathes new life into the song "Long, Long Ago" by T.H. Bayly.

"I think their teacher did a fantastic job in getting these kids to the point where they can fly on their own," Ma said after the class. "Moving to a new performance level is always exciting because it involves a different kind of thinking. It's the



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Superstar Yo-Yo Ma gets a warm reception at the third World Cello Congress at Towson University.

"I was really amazed at how their playing level rose," Kaboff said. "The kids learned to use their eyes and ears in a way that made them sound much more musical and together."

In essence, Ma's goal was to help the kids learn how to think independently. That's a valuable lesson for cellists, who are often assigned the secondary role of performing the oom-pah-pah accompaniment in ensemble pieces.

But when the congress's mass cello ensemble takes to the stage tomorrow to perform Heller's "Cellophonic" under the direction of Laszlo Varga, former principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic, the 200-plus musicians will find themselves at the center of attention.

"It's really freaky playing with this many cellists, but it's also beautiful because I'm playing the melody," said Kee-Hyun Kim, 18, a cello student from Boston performing in the mass ensemble. "Cellists are always playing the bass, but this time I'm the one who gets to make the melody and the music."

The ensemble has already experienced a few problems. Musicians playing at the back of the huge group complained during a rehearsal earlier this week that they could neither hear nor see the conductor. And since the Meyerhoff stage can accommodate only 235 cellists, some of the 300 or so players planning to perform will have to bow out.

Still, one gets the impression that the cellists will find a solution.

"Cellists are team players who know how to work out problems," Ma said. "When they have to, cellists know how to check their egos at the door."

The World Cello Congress, which runs through Sunday, includes concerts and master classes.

Information is available online at www.towson.edu. Tickets for events held at Towson University may be purchased at the Center for the Arts ticket office (410-830-2787); for events held at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore, at the Meyerhoff ticket office (410-783-8000). Tickets, ranging from \$15 to \$75, are still available for most

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