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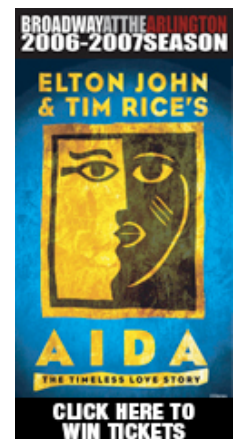
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## Double Happiness

By [Charles Donelan](#), March 8, 2007

### The Silk Road Ensemble, Featuring Yo-Yo Ma, Plays Two Dates At The Arlington

by *Charles Donelan*

When you have become the world's best-known classical musician well before turning 40, what is left for you to do?

When he took the first step in creating the Silk Road Project in 1998, Yo-Yo Ma seemed to have little to prove and not much motivation to change his routine: Wake

up in a luxurious hotel suite in some world capital, practice for a few hours, then perform in front of yet another distinguished (and sold-out) audience. But Yo-Yo Ma has never been one to rest on his achievements, or to follow the expected path. For the last nine years, he has been working to bring together an elaborate network of musicians, musicologists, performers, and institutions in a not-for-profit organization he founded to realize a dream he had while touring as a virtuoso soloist. The vision was this: If his performances of the standard classical repertoire could serve as such an effective bridge between different cultures, what would be possible if he were to initiate a cultural investigation into one of the world's oldest and most fertile trade routes, the great Silk Road that stretches from China through



Silk Road Project founder and Artistic Director Yo-Yo Ma in discussion with ensemble member Sandeep Da.

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## Central Asia to the Mediterranean?

On Friday, March 9 and Saturday, March 10, Ma will perform with the current Silk Road Ensemble in two major concerts at the Arlington Theatre. The Arlington shows are the first stop on a limited West Coast tour that includes only two other destinations — Berkeley and Seattle. The concerts will include some works familiar from the best-selling CDs released by the Silk Road Ensemble, but they are designed to showcase more recently commissioned pieces that premiered at Carnegie Hall in September. These performances are at the heart of several months' worth of programming at UCSB and elsewhere devoted to understanding the Silk Road.

Ma aims for nothing less than a novel cultural formation with this project, which operates on many levels. At the tip-top, where we will be Friday and Saturday, there are the major performances of commissioned works, which have been occurring at intervals since the first major Silk Road Workshop at Tanglewood in 2000. These meetings allow the members of the collective to do their main work, which is linking distinct musical traditions to contemporary musical innovation. Ma finds brilliant practitioners in all the cultures of the Silk Road — from China, Korea, and Japan to Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Iran. At Tanglewood they get to compare instruments and techniques, presenting each other with music and history lessons while they are rehearsing the selected composers' (there is a strict screening process) latest efforts.

Ma describes the Silk Road Ensemble's creative process with the zeal of a leader embarking on a campaign of grand design, saying that the first thing this project always makes him think is, "I love my new friends. Although we met as strangers, we were immediately fascinated by each other because of all the virtuosity and freshness of the different instruments and personalities. There was constant excitement, hearing these people play so well, wondering how they do it, and then having them show you. That was very satisfying. But now when we get together, we are more like a band of brothers and sisters. Everyone is so busy, but we all make the time, and the process is still amazing. When we develop pieces now, it's like we have been working on them in one way for four days, in another for five years, and then — from the point of view of the traditions that are present — thousands of years."

The 16 men and women who will make the Silk Road journey to Santa Barbara with Ma are among the world's elite multicultural musicians. They comprise at least two complete groups, including a primary



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ensemble centered on two string players, two winds, and two percussionists. Nicholas Cords, who plays viola on both Silk Road CDs, has a great rapport with Ma and a similar level of musicality. Cords and Ma are often the heart of what the ensemble does to unify the various traditions. The percussionists, Sandeep Das — one of the world's leading tabla players — and Dong-Won Kim — a traditional Korean master drummer — take the same expansive and flexible approach to rhythm that Ma and Cords take with melody. The core winds are Kojiro Umezaki, who plays *shakuhachi* flute, and Yang Wei, who plays *pipa*. Both can perform persuasively in a dozen musical idioms, bringing an unmistakable sound, depth, and texture to the Silk Road Ensemble's material. Azerbaijani singer Alim Qasimov is also scheduled to appear with Rauf Islamov on *kemancheh* (fiddle) and Ali Asgar Mammadov on *tar* (lute).

What makes these concerts exciting even to those who already know Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble's recordings well is the fact that audiences will be hearing new compositions that have only just premiered. Among the most highly anticipated of these is a piece called "From Air to Air" by Osvaldo Golijov that explores Arab, Jewish, and Christian folk melodies. Golijov's opera *Ainadamar: Fountain of Tears* won Grammys this year for best opera recording and best contemporary composition, so the new work is obviously an important collaboration for both partners.

Less well known but perhaps more interesting still, Evan Ziporyn's *Sulvasutra* combines the intricate time signatures of the gamelan with more traditional string quartet composition for a powerful and fully integrated whole. Ziporyn, who teaches at MIT, has chosen an ancient sutra on the mathematics of temple architecture as the basis for his composition, which was played for the first time in September at Carnegie Hall in New York. A hidden link to a streaming MP3 file allowed me to preview the work, and, after several listens, I still find it quite amazing. Ziporyn has been a stalwart member of the Bang on a Can collective for going on two decades, and he brings both a mature style and a knack for collaboration to the Silk Road that makes him enormously promising as a future composer for them. It will be fun to see how this *Sulvasutra* sounds live, but be aware that the programs for the two Arlington shows are somewhat different and this piece will be played only on Saturday.

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Yo-Yo Ma performs with the Silk Road Ensemble at the Arlington Theatre on Friday, March 9 at 8 p.m. and Saturday, March 10 at 4 p.m.

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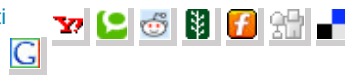
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