

Can Yo-Yo Ma save Chicago? He's certainly trying.

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By Lisa Bertagnoli



Photo by Manuel Martinez Cellist Yo-Yo Ma with members of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago at the Concert for Peace at St. Sabina Church.

Why does the celebrated cellist devote his time and talent to making our city a better place? For Ma, it's not about the music — or any art, really. "It's about people."

He bounds onto the stage with the grace of an athlete and the verve of a motivational speaker. The audience stands, cheering, before the first note sounds. Even if they've never heard him play, they've heard of Yo-Yo Ma. The legendary cellist is headlining the Concert for Peace, a fundraiser for highly at-risk youth, at St. Sabina in Auburn Gresham.

It's Ma's third visit here in four months. The concert is his latest effort to help make Chicago a better educated, less violent city. For seven years, as the Judson & Joyce Green creative consultant at Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Ma has traveled to the city five times a year, collaborating and performing with musicians from the CSO and Civic Orchestra of Chicago, and with students at music schools.

Plenty of big cities need what he offers: a celebrity name, drive, energy and desire to make the world a better place. So why Chicago?

"I love the city," he says during an interview before the St. Sabina concert, presented by the church, Ma and the Negaunee Music Institute at Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "There's a lot of depth, a lot of pride in the way the city

operates, and the institutions here are fabulous." Ma says the late [Lois Weisberg](#), former city commissioner of cultural affairs, once pointed out that 100 million people are within 500 miles of Chicago. "I am particularly interested in this third of the country because I think that third has a deep soul, and the soul of the country in many ways stems from what happens here," he says.

It's a thoughtful answer from a musician who studied anthropology at Harvard University. The more immediate answer: citizens being injured or killed by gun violence. "We lost [Xavier Joy](#) (a 23-year-old shot in Woodlawn) just a few days ago, and our driver, Chet, told us another person was shot on the Riverwalk last night," says Ma, who counts Chicago nonprofit executive Ra Joy, Xavier's father, as a friend. "I try to say, 'How can I help?' " Ma, 61, takes Chicago's reputation as seriously as if he were born and raised here. "I care about how people talk about Chicago in other cities, countries, states," he says. "We don't want people to think of Chicago as a place that's dangerous."

There's another reason the globe-trotting musician does his work here: He can. The city has the philanthropy, culture and desire to support it. "It's a civic pride, a civic responsibility you don't see in every city," says Renee Fleming, soprano and creative consultant at Lyric Opera of Chicago who was honored at a recent Arts Alliance Illinois luncheon for her arts education efforts in the city. "I don't see this in New York." Ma, she adds, "not only thinks about things in extraordinary ways, he makes it happen. He is my hero."

Judson Green, former CEO of [Navteq](#) and a jazz musician, and his wife, Joyce, underwrite Ma's post at CSO, though neither he nor CSO officials would say how much it costs. The CSO, one of the world's great musical organizations, provides Ma a solid platform for both music and his outreach. His work dovetails with that of Riccardo Muti, Zell music director at CSO, who has made it his mission to reach into the city's neighborhoods with the orchestra.

Chicago is a resource-rich city that enables Ma to do the kind of work he wants to do here, says Paul Szniewajs, CEO of Ingenuity, a public-private partnership founded in 2011 to revitalize arts education in Chicago Public Schools. It has "the economic and cultural infrastructure, the civic infrastructure, that creates the condition for change to happen," he says. Ma's work has made a difference, according to Szniewajs. Over the past three years, there's been a 107 percent increase in CPS schools that rate "strong" or "excelling" in the arts, and a 48 percent increase in CPS elementary schools providing two hours a week of arts instruction. Ma "has played a significant role in those changes," he says.

Ma's work reaches beyond the CPS system. He has visited young people at the state prison in Warrenville. He has performed at fundraisers with grade school students at People's Music School in Uptown, which offers free classes. "He will eat pizza with our families in a public school hallway after a rehearsal and look completely normal doing it," says Jennifer Kim Matsuzawa, president and artistic director at People's Music School. Last year, Ma, a Red Sox fan, wore a Cubs jersey during the team's journey to the World Series, Matsuzawa says. Some kids know what a big deal it is to work with Ma, she says. Others do not. "I love that mixture," she says.

Ma's work in arts education in Chicago grew out of the 10-year Cultural Plan for Chicago, ordered by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and crafted by Michelle Boone, then the city's commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events. Ma had been a frequent visitor to Chicago and collaborator with CSO since his debut with the orchestra in 1979, and a decade ago, he and his multicultural [Silk Road Ensemble](#) spent a year here. As the cultural plan unfolded, Ma met with Chicago Board of Education members to advocate for more arts education. "He really stepped forward into a leadership role," Szniewajs recalls.

The creative consultant role at CSO, which would support Ma's education efforts, was "a risk," says Judson Green, adding that very few orchestras have such positions. "We didn't quite know what we were getting into. I don't think (Ma) did, either." Green calls the consultancy a success, though not one measurable in business-world metrics. "It's about his presence and his being free to be involved in everything and anything—let him come up with ideas and the big picture."

The June 11 Concert for Peace at St. Sabina featuring Ma, the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, Chicago Children's Choir and St. Sabina's church band raised \$70,000 for Strong Futures, which provides job training and placement for highly at-risk youths. More than 1,000 people from 150 ZIP codes paid \$20 for tickets, less than half the price of the least expensive seats for Ma's March appearances at Symphony Center. The 90-minute program began with Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and ended with the pop anthem/hymn "You Raise Me Up."

"There will be some people who have never been to 78th Place and Racine who will be here because of him," the Rev. Michael Pflieger said before the concert. "He becomes a magnet to bring people together from all walks of life and bring them here to one place."

The concert sprang from a meeting Ma had with Pflieger in early March. The priest came into the St. Sabina sanctuary to find Ma, who had recently asked Chicago Symphony Orchestra officials how they planned to address Chicago's unceasing violence. He was carrying his Stradivarius. "He said, 'I believe in your work, I love what you're doing and want to connect with you,' " Pflieger recalls, and then Ma asked if he could play. As Ma performed "Song of the Birds," made famous by Pablo Casals, a crowd gathered.

Soon a deal was sealed for a concert to be headlined by Ma, a fundraiser for the church's Strong Futures program. "He said to me, 'This is only the beginning,' " Pflieger says. CSO officials won't confirm that the concert will be an annual event but say they are in discussions with St. Sabina about "the future of the partnerships."

For those cynical of music's transformational power, Ma says it's not about the music, or any type of art, for that matter. "It's about people," he says, "individuals who may be in the arts, or a parent, or a science teacher."

Ma was born in Paris in 1955 to Chinese parents. His mother was a singer and his father a violinist and music professor. When he was 7, the family moved to New York; he spent his formative years there and now lives in Cambridge, Mass., with his wife, Jill Hornor. The couple has two grown children. He loves big cities; when in Chicago, he spends time in the neighborhoods—especially Pilsen—Chicago Children's Museum, Theaster Gates' Stony Island Arts Bank, the schools. "I love going into the schools," he says. "Every school is a different culture."

As he works magic in churches and classrooms, those who perform with him are ever aware of his exquisite musicianship. In 2015, Civic Orchestra of Chicago violinist Tara Lynn Ramsey, 28, performed with Ma at the Kennedy Center Honors ceremony and program. Before the performance, Ma visited the musicians backstage to talk through a score. "He knew what he wanted," Ramsey says. "He had everything mapped out so we could create something really beautiful."

Whether it's at Symphony Center or a South Side church, that's what Ma is doing in Chicago. As the audience at St. Sabina realized, it deserves a standing ovation. Even without a single note sounding.