

# bio.

## CLASSROOM



### **BIO: Yo-Yo Ma Classroom Guide**

#### **Introduction**

Yo-Yo Ma is considered the most talented cellist of our time. Through his tremendous creative genius and the popularity of his compositions, he has raised the profile of classical music and drawn fans throughout the world. This one-hour documentary of ***Biography®: Yo-Yo Ma*** traces his journey from his childhood in Paris through his growth into one of the most renowned composers in the world today. Born to Chinese parents in 1955, Yo-Yo Ma spent his early childhood in Paris before moving to New York City. From his experiences in New York through his college years at Harvard University, viewers will follow along as this path-breaking composer developed and honed his musical skills to become the world's premier cellist. From early on, Yo-Yo Ma's talent seemed destined to transcend borders, both geographically and musically.

Throughout his career Yo-Yo Ma has mastered classical music, but has also been determined to make his music accessible to those not usually drawn to traditional music halls. By combining cello with jazz, folk, vocal and many other musical forms, Yo-Yo Ma has integrated genres of music previously regarded as distinct. He has been called “the best of East and West” as well as “a remarkable combination of the extraordinary and the ordinary.” After the music has stopped, Yo-Yo Ma is known for connecting with fans interpersonally, shaking hands, posing for photographs and interacting casually with his admirers and fellow musicians. This biography offers students an excellent opportunity to explore how and why musical genius develops, and to gain a fresh perspective on the meaning and significance of classical music in our world today.

#### **Curriculum Links**

*Biography: Yo-Yo Ma*, would be useful for Music, American Studies, Arts and Culture, Current Events, Journalism, and Popular Culture courses. Teachers may want to use clips from this program to supplement their course lectures on music and music history. This program is appropriate for middle school, high school and college students.

## **Vocabulary**

Using the dictionary at [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com), an Internet resource such as [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

collaboration	genre	virtuoso
composer	meticulous	
concerto	musicologist	
debut	prolific	
discography	repertoire	

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Yo-Yo Ma is internationally renowned for playing which instrument of the orchestra? What do you think is unique and valuable about this instrument?
2. Where was Yo-Yo Ma's birthplace and parent's country of origin? Where did he grow up? Explain how his international upbringing could have influenced his musical talent and style.
3. Yo-Yo Ma began playing the cello at age four. What instrument did he play first, soon discarding it because he didn't like the way it sounded?
4. At age 16, Yo-Yo Ma enrolled in college at Harvard University. Why do you think that Yo-Yo Ma decided to attend a liberal arts university instead of a musical conservatory? How would his experience at a musical conservatory been different than his experience at Harvard?
5. What medical condition was Yo-Yo Ma diagnosed with during college? Why could this condition have been so damaging to his musical career?
6. What class in the humanities and sciences did Yo-Yo Ma take at Harvard that sparked his interest in foreign cultures? What group of people in the Kalahari Desert did he end up visiting as a world-famous cellist as a result of this class? What does this reveal about his career and interests?
7. Yo-Yo Ma decided in college that he would limit himself to one off-campus concert a month. Why do you think he made this decision? Would you make the same decision if you were in his position?
8. Where did Yo-Yo Ma perform? Did he limit himself to formal concerts only? Explain how this might have increased his appeal for his audiences.
9. Which Sesame Street character did Yo-Yo Ma meet and play music with? What does this reveal about his personality?
10. How is Yo-Yo Ma different from other classical musicians? Describe a few examples from the documentary of how his innovations and experiments and with classical music.

11. Yo-Yo Ma has been credited with making classical music seem valuable to younger audiences and keeping it vibrant for listeners of all ages. How do you think Yo-Yo Ma has shaped the world of classical music?

### **Extended Activities**

1. Yo-Yo Ma mentions in this documentary that he is interested in appearing on children's shows to introduce them to classical music. Devise a game that encourages young children to get excited about learning about classical music. A few examples: (1) draw flashcards with musical instruments on the front and their corresponding names on the back to work on visual recognition of the instruments or (2) compile a CD of simple classical music pieces and have the children identify each instrument played. Use your creativity to develop your own game for young children. If possible, present this game to your class, or try it out on younger students at your school or in your community.

2. Long before Yo-Yo Ma was born, many other composers shaped the world of music that he inherited and made his own. At the library or using the internet, write a short article on the life of an influential musician or composer in the music genre of choice. If you would like, you can pretend that you are writing from the time period of your chosen figure and reviewing an up-and-coming talent. Either way, be sure to include the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) in your piece.

3. Over the years-- in media such as this documentary, newspaper articles, and TV interviews-- Yo-Yo Ma has been asked many questions about his life and musical career by filmmakers and journalists. If you had the opportunity to interview Yo-Yo Ma, what more would you want to learn about him? Make a list of the questions you would ask to get this information. Writing documentary scripts and articles, in addition to developing interview questions, also require lots of research. Where would you look to find out more information about Yo-Yo Ma and classical music? Make a list of useful resources.

### **Websites**

More about Yo-Yo Ma from Bio.com

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Yo-Yo-Ma-9390099>

Yo-Yo Ma's Own Project: The Silk Road

<http://www.silkroadproject.org>

The Library of Congress: A Conversation With Yo-Yo Ma

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cocoon/ahas/html/greatconversations/great-bios-ma.html>

An interview and music clips:

<http://www.sonyclassical.com/music/89667/>

BBC Orchestras: Guide to the Orchestra! (Great for younger students)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/orchestras/guide>

### **Further Reading**

Blum, David. *Quintet: Five Journeys Toward Musical Fulfillment*. (Cornell University Press 1999).

Lach, William. *Can You Hear It?* (Metropolitan Museum of Art series); (HNA Books, 2006.)

Ma, Yo-Yo. *Along the Silk Road*. (University of Washington Press, 2002).

Smith, Tim. *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music*. (The Berkley Publishing Group, 2002).

Weatherly, Myra. *Yo-Yo Ma: Internationally Acclaimed Cellist*. (Compass Point Books, 2007).