

Paths of Globalization: From the Berbers to Bach

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Yo-Yo Ma is one of the world's most renowned cellists. This article is based on a talk he gave at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, in January.

5 DAVOS—Over the past 30 years as a professional cellist, I have spent the equivalent of two full decades on the road, both performing and learning about musical traditions and cultures. My travels have convinced me that in our globalized world, cultural traditions form an essential framework for identity, social stability and compassionate interaction.

10 A world changing so quickly as ours is bound to create cultural insecurity, to make people question their place. Globalization so often seems to threaten the identity of the individual, by subjecting us to someone else's rules. That naturally makes us nervous, since these rules ask us to change our time-honored habits. So the critical question for today's global leaders is: How can habits and cultures evolve to join a bigger planet, without sacrificing distinct identities and individual pride?

15 My musical journeys have reminded me that the interactions brought about by globalization don't just destroy culture; they can create new culture and invigorate and spread traditions that have existed for ages. It's not unlike the ecological term

↑ also I agree with the art

"edge effect," which is used to describe what happens when two different ecosystems meet, for example, the forest and savannah. At that interface, where there is the least density and the greatest diversity of life forms, each living thing can draw from the core of the two ecosystems. Sometimes the most interesting things happen at the edge. The intersections there can reveal unexpected connections.

Culture is a fabric composed of gifts from every corner of the world. One way of discovering the world is by digging deeply into its traditions. In music, for instance, at the core of any cellist's repertoire are the Cello Suites by Bach. At the heart of each suite is a dance movement called the sarabande. The dance originated with music of the North African Berbers, where it was a slow, sensual dance. It next appeared in Spain, where it was banned because it was considered lewd and lascivious. Spaniards brought it to the Americas, but it also traveled on to France, where it became a courtly dance. In the 1720s, Bach incorporated the sarabande as a movement in his Cello Suites. Today, I play Bach, a Paris-born American musician of Chinese parentage. So who really owns the sarabande? Each culture has adopted the music, investing it with specific meaning, but each culture must share ownership: it belongs to us all.

In 1998, I founded the Silk Road Project to study the flow of ideas among the many cultures between the Mediterranean and the Pacific over several thousand years. When the Silk Road Ensemble performs, we try to bring much of the world together on one stage. Its members are a peer group of virtuosos, masters of living traditions, whether European, Arabic, Azeri, Armenian, Persian, Russian, Central Asian, Indian, Mongolian, Chinese, Korean or Japanese. They all generously share their knowledge and are curious and eager to learn about other forms of expression.

Over the last several years, we have found that every tradition is the result of successful invention. One of the best ways to ensure the survival of traditions is by organic evolution, using all the tools available to us in the present day. Through recording and film; through residencies in museums, universities, design schools and cities; through performances from classroom to stadium, ensemble musicians, including myself, are learning valuable skills. Returning home, we share these skills with others, ensuring that our traditions will have a seat at the cultural table.

We have found that performing a tradition abroad energizes the practitioners in the home country. Most of all, we have developed a passion for each others' music and developed a bond of mutual respect, friendship and trust that is palpable every time we're on stage. This joyous interaction is such a desirable common greater goal that we have always been able to resolve any differences through amicable dialogue. As we open up to each other, we form a bridge into unfamiliar traditions, banishing the fear that often accompanies change and dislocation. In other words, when we broaden our lens on the world, we better understand ourselves, our own lives and culture. We share more in common with the far reaches of our small planet than we realize.

Finding these shared cultures is important, but not just for art's sake. So many of our cities—not just London, New York or Tokyo, but now even the mid-sized cities—are experiencing waves of immigration. How will we assimilate groups of people with their own unique habits? Must immigration inevitably lead to resistance and conflict, as it has in the past? What about the Turkish population in Germany, Albanians in Italy, North Africans in Spain and France? A thriving cultural engine can help us figure out how groups can peacefully meld, without sacrificing individuality and identity. This is not about political correctness. It's about acknowledging what is precious to someone, and the gifts that every culture has given to our world.

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