

The Young Musician, Yo Yo Ma

Can you imagine a four-year-old playing a big double bass? This largest instrument in the violin family would tower over him. The little boy who asked for this big instrument was Yo-Yo Ma. He was already playing the violin, but wanted a bigger instrument. His father borrowed a child-sized cello for him instead. That was how Yo-Yo Ma started on his way to become a world famous cellist.

Yo-Yo was born into a musical family in 1955 in Paris, France. His name means “friend” in Chinese. Mr. Ma, Yo-Yo’s father, was a professor of musicology and a composer, and his mother was an opera singer. He had listened to classical music from infancy. His older sister was a gifted pianist. It was little Yo-Yo who showed the exceptional talent of a cello prodigy.

At first, Mr. Ma gave cello lessons to Yo-Yo who learned quickly and had great concentration. His father would teach him two measures of music at a time, until he learned the whole piece. Soon he played well enough to be taught by a renowned cello teacher who was impressed by his memory and musicality.

When he was practicing, he was oblivious to everything else. Afterwards, he would be his mischievous and outgoing self, like many boys his age. He would jump around the room like a frog, singing his favorite song. He bombarded his sister with spitballs while she was practicing piano. At times, he needed to be disciplined.

The family moved to New York City when Yo-Yo was seven. While the city offered exciting new sights and sounds, it was a bewildering new world. French and Chinese were Yo-Yo’s first languages. He spoke Chinese at home. Now he had to learn English.

Suddenly, the traditional Chinese culture he was raised in was at odds with this new world. Yo-Yo’s parents demanded the utmost respect from their children who had to live up to their expectations. In school, he had to think for himself and show his individuality, but at home he had to show deference to his parents.

His parents managed his time strictly. After school, he practiced the cello, did his homework and practiced again after dinner. He had very few friends and outside activities. His father knew that a prodigy’s talent had to be directed and polished, guided by discipline. Young Yo-Yo resented this discipline, but he loved the

music. Even as a youngster, he poured his soul into the cello, making it “sing.” He had the best teachers who recognized his talents. The family’s discipline worked wonders on his playing. One teacher, Leonard Rose, said that he was impressed by how well Yo-Yo prepared for his lessons. His playing matured as he grew older.

His rebellion also grew as he entered his teenage years. In high school, he cut classes. When he was at a music camp, away from home for the first time, he drew graffiti on stonewalls and even left his cello in the rain. He was often late for rehearsals. He was behaving like a troubled teenager. At fifteen, he even took to drinking with a fake I.D., until one day he passed out drunk and had to be hospitalized. His parents were very embarrassed by the incident. Yo-Yo was ashamed and when his father gave up his dinner glass of wine for fear of setting a bad example, he never got drunk again.

Yo-Yo’s growing pains did not hamper his enthusiasm for music. His youthful exuberance made his playing more passionate and emotional. At sixteen, he realized that he wanted to be a professional musician. He had already performed to great reviews in the prestigious Carnegie Recital Hall.

His grades at Harvard University were not the best, but the variety of courses he took expanded his world view and helped him to understand and appreciate the diverse influences in his life. Yo-Yo went on to be a world-famous cellist, one of the finest. He continues to spread his love of music to young people with master classes and discussions. The charming, enthusiastic little boy has grown into a talented musician who has won many awards for his performances.

In 2011, Yo-Yo received the Kennedy Center Honors from President Obama for his contribution to American culture through the performing arts. On April 18, 2013, he gave a stirring performance at an interfaith service for the Boston Marathon bombing memorial.

—Fanny Wong, *New York*.

