

Classical 'Grass

Yo-Yo Ma, Mark O'Connor, and Edgar Meyer search for common ground between the worlds of classical music and bluegrass.

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

"Edgar, how was that for you?"

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma, seated on a small wooden platform between bassist Edgar Meyer and violinist Mark O'Connor, is inquiring about their just-completed run-through of "The Green Groves of Erin/The Flowers of Red Hill," a pair of Celtic reels adapted for string trio that they've been rehearsing on the stage of Nashville's Tennessee Performing Arts Center. Later that evening, they'll premiere the piece—the introductory track from their recent album, *Appalachia Waltz*—during the encore of Ma's performance with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. But just now, the trio is out of sync and struggling to nail the ending. Spoken softly, Ma's question sounds almost like a plea.

Meyer, though, knows a straight line when he hears one, and he breaks the tension of the moment by cracking, "Well, there are some things, like music and sex, that are always just fine."

"Just fine" may be the mildest of superlatives that can be applied to this extraordinary and eclectic group of musicians. Ma, of course, is one of the most respected and sought-after classical performers on the planet. He gave his first recital at age five and, in the 36 years since, has conquered the standard repertoire for solo cello, winning 10 Grammy awards along the way. Not content to merely revisit those victories for the rest of his career, Ma has continually sought out new challenges, commissioning works by contemporary composers and occasionally stepping outside the traditional boundaries of classical music. He has collaborated with vocalist Bobby McFerrin on the bestselling classical/jazz summit *Hush* and traveled to Southwest Africa, where he compared musical styles and structures with Kalahari bushmen. For Ma, approaching the country-fiddle stylings of *Appalachia Waltz* is the latest step in his continuing search to understand different cultures and build bridges between them. "It's really that simple," he says.



O'Connor's musical journey is in many ways similar to Ma's, but from a completely different musical direction. A child prodigy, O'Connor swept every major fiddle championship in America before he had finished high school. He toured with mandolinist David Grisman and French jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, and grew into one of the most in-demand session musicians in

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Nashville. On his own recordings, such as *The New Nashville Cats* and *Heroes*, O'Connor challenged and eventually broke free from the constraints of country and bluegrass music. He then crossed over into the classical realm with his album *The Fiddle Concerto*. You can't take all the country out of the boy, though. He still is a master of the mandolin and guitar, and he rides a mean skateboard, too.

Meyer is the trio's self-confessed "late-bloomer," but also its secret weapon. A composer/arranger as well as an instrumentalist, he has worked with groups from across the musical spectrum, including various symphony orchestras, the Guarneri Quartet, and Strength in Numbers, a progressive bluegrass band that included O'Connor and Bela Fleck, among others. Meyer also has done session work for such artists as Kathy Mattea, James Taylor, Garth Brooks, and Lyle Lovett. Of *Appalachia Waltz*, O'Connor says, "I really think this album could put Edgar Meyer on the international map in a lot of ways."

Following Ma's concert, at which the cellist held forth on a rapturous reading of Elgar's "Concerto for Cello and Orchestra," the trio is ushered to an after-party at Caffè Milano, a local restaurant. There they are feted by executives from Sony Classical (their record label) and a number of national tastemakers who have been flown in for the occasion. The idea is for Ma, O'Connor, and Meyer to play a few tracks from the album and then work the room, in the hopes that the effort will help break *Appalachia Waltz* beyond classical music's dwindling core audience. As he introduces the group, label president Peter Gelb recalls a lunch meeting with Meyer during which he enthused to the bassist how this trio could become "crusaders for the future of classical music." According to Gelb, Meyer politely but firmly informed him he didn't want to be part of any crusade, he just wanted to continue to make albums like *Appalachia Waltz*.

"I'm just not a crusader," a weary Meyer says later, as the clock strikes two a.m. and the last hand has been shaken, the last autograph signed.

"The crusades were many hundreds of years ago," adds Ma, whose immense popularity has, no doubt, produced many such discussions over the years. "I'm more interested in following. All of us, in a certain way, are very much involved in American music. I

am truly interested in finding the soul of America—period—in all its incredible richness and diversity. Can one find that? Is it possible? This is something that concerns all of us deeply, because this is our country. We live here, our children live here. What are we passing on? That's interesting. That's crusade material, if I have to have a crusade."

To that end, *Appalachia Waltz* passes along a wide range of music that has made America distinctive musically—fiddle music that draws on Southern folk styles and the virtuosic Texas tradition—but which also points back to its sources in the Celtic tradition as well as the droning styles of Scandinavia. It's the story of a certain kind of music, sure, but it's also the story of the settling of America. For the stunningly beautiful title track, O'Connor says he drew on sources from "Shetland, Norway, and Sweden. When I hear Appalachian fiddling, I hear almost a direct descendant of those early countries."

Other pieces on the album range from the wistful (O'Connor's mandolin excursion "Butterfly's Day Out") to the dramatic (O'Connor and Meyer's rhythmic "Druid Fluid"), to the downright playful (Meyer's "Pickles"). "People started to name their pieces in classical music in the 1800s, to make descriptive titles. We've probably taken that a little too far," O'Connor says with a laugh.

"College Hompipe," a fiddle tune out of the Texas tradition that O'Connor learned from his mentor, Benny Thomasson, is the piece that presented the greatest challenge for Ma. In an effort to soak up as much of Texas fiddle music as he could, Ma insisted on playing the melody line on his cello. "He didn't want us to shave any notes from it or edit the part at all," O'Connor marvels. "I swear, it is awesome to watch Yo-Yo fiddle on his cello."

Listening to the trio converse, it's easy to see how much they get from each other's company. When one answers a question, the other two hang on every word, often asking for an elaboration or posing additional questions themselves.

"For me, working with Yo-Yo and Mark allows me to pursue my interest in finding the essence of things," Meyer says. "With this group, we can pursue any abstract musical question to the degree we want. It's a very freewheeling situation."

"Working with Edgar and Mark, there's an extremely high learning curve," Ma says. "I've just learned a tremendous amount. They have such high standards in what they're looking for, the abstract ideal, what is right for a given situation. As Edgar says, it's looking for the essence of things. That's what a musician does: hone in on that nugget, that truth, that bit of thing that we know is right. To be able to learn in that way, and to know that we haven't reached the limit of finding that place—that it's a great adventure that can go on—is really exciting."

So exciting, in fact, that it likely will go on. Ma has taken to calling the trio a band. But does it have a name yet? Ma's answer causes the other two to erupt into fits of laughter that effectively end the interview.

"Just call us the Crusaders," he says. ☺

Daniel Durchholz is the editor of Replay.



Edgar Meyer, Yo-Yo Ma, and Mark O'Connor (from left).