

INCITE PROJECT
The Reminiscences of
Yo-Yo Ma

Columbia Center for Oral History
Columbia University
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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Yo-Yo Ma conducted by Gerry Albarelli on October 28, 2019. This interview is part of the Avery Fisher Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM

Session #1

Interviewee: Yo-Yo Ma

Location: Cambridge, MA

Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli

Date: October 28, 2019

Q: Since you have the questions there, no, I really did mean it when I said you're driving the interview. You know, it's just – let one story lead to the next, and it's whichever stories you choose. Just think of it as a series of strung-together stories.

Ma: [00:00:44] So I'll tell you one of the most vibrant memories I have of Janet and Avery Fisher, it came after I met them already in New York, but we were on a music cruise together, and what I remember are his checkered green pants, green, or I should say green trousers. What happened was that his luggage didn't arrive. So, this is a cruise in the Mediterranean, a music cruise where the English Chamber Orchestra, lots of renowned musicians from all over the world were there, and it's, you know, we get to see the Mediterranean. You go all over to the islands, to Santorini, to Athens, to I mean, it's an amazing thing. And of course, Avery and Janet were so looking forward to it because they love music, and I think Emanuel Ax ["Manny"] was on the boat with me, and I believe my wife was with me. And we all loved the Fishers. But there he was, for three whole days he had to wear one pair of checkered plaid green trousers. He's a very gentle, wise person, and for him to get all steamed up about this pair of plaid green trousers, oh my goodness. And then, you know, these boats have kind of small beds, and he was a fairly tall person, and so he was, like, incredibly uncomfortable at night. So, during the daytime he would be wearing— it was one of those cruises where people also dress up, you know. It was a very bad beginning to what was, I think, the tour that really made us become close friends. And

because when you spend that much time together and you're actually going to see essentially large swaths of world history in front of you. You go to Syracuse and you see that this is—it's like places where the Greeks and Romans, the Arabs and everybody has gone through many of those places, and you end up in Istanbul ... and then you have all this music that's happening. It's a place where you can really have unweighted conversations and it's a form of oral history, actually, of his recollecting what life was like for him when he was a graphic designer.

[00:04:18] And he had showed us; I think he was very proud to have done the jackets of Winston Churchill's *A History of the English [-Speaking] Peoples* sitting in his library. And I think he also spoke about the hardships and working at that publishing company. It was always, "Hey, Fisher, what are you doing?" You know, "Hey, Fisher, do this," and stuff — a little, what we would probably call today, micro aggressions [Laughs]. And how much he loved his violin. And he used to tease me all that time that I think he had lent me his rosin, so it's like he was saying, well, really you're playing well because it's the rosin I lent you. And how much he loved music. I think that's something that was — I mean *playing* music and actually *playing* music – that was so important to him.

In the early days, while he was playing music he was working as this designer, like the Steve Jobs era of fooling round in your garage and working with these vacuum test tubes and trying to figure out making radios. That was a great hobby which then turned into a strong, a very big profession. And how he had installed the stereo systems for various people, including going to the White House and installing the Fisher system. And I mean years of just pushing, pushing, and arduous work and constant traveling, and at the time when traveling was possibly either

much better or much worse [Laughs] than it is now. In retirement, he was so happy not to have to travel again. So therefore, his trip on the [Jean] Mermoz [MV Serenade] was particularly galling because (1), you know, they didn't have a suitcase, and (2), the beds were so uncomfortable

[00:07:14] So that was wonderful. And another thing, I think my wife, who is an extraordinary person, she's not a musician. Sometimes people in music, when you're not a musician, they stop talking to you. I don't know whether that happens in other fields, but it's sort of like, "Oh, then you know nothing." You don't know us. You don't know how it feels to be [a musician], you know, to make these sounds. The Fishers, Janet and Avery, were so immediately attentive to both of us; they recognized that she was not only an equal partner in this enterprise but that she was in fact the pillar that I leaned on in so many ways that allowed me to function as a musician. They got that. They got that very quickly. Janet, who always put on a brave face, was so vibrant and energetic and really full of pep and [a] spunky lady. She was such a great compliment to the quieter Avery. They were an extraordinary couple together.

[00:09:16] And I want to add that I only met the Fishers after Avery had retired, after the hall at Lincoln Center was named after him, after the Avery Fisher Prize was announced. I didn't know him during his years of being part of a captain of industry and Fisher Enterprises. I knew him during that phase, and I think one of the things that Avery was very proud of was how, in his mind, there was part of Avery that wanted to be "everyman." He did not sort of in any way want to project someone. He would be very proud of the successes of the company and of what he had accomplished, but it was never to show off anything. I think they lived in the same apartment on

the Upper East Side for decades; they never upgraded, and he always took the bus. Old habits stayed.

And that, again, was something that my wife and I felt very comfortable seeing in him. You never felt that there was a large gap in terms of age, in terms of experience. They were happy to share who they were, and that was really wonderful.

One of the things that he did in retirement, one of the places that gave him a tremendous amount of comfort, not having [a] large office -- I think he had, at that time, four assistants, who obviously took care of many different things. So, what do you do when you retire? Well, he went to The Century Association on 40th [43rd] Street. He loved it, because that was an arts association, so people who were interested in culture and music and the arts would gather. It was like a dining club, and no business was ever discussed. We went there for meals a number of times, and there was such great affection for it that he said what could I give to these young folks that I feel I've gained? So he made us all apply to The Century Association, and we became members, which is a little awkward because we were like 50 years younger than [any other members]. But that's the kind of affection he felt and lavished on I think both Manny and me. And I think that affection also extended to the fact that we were either one of or the first ones to receive the Avery Fisher Prize or very soon after that. I actually don't remember. But I think in their effort to do something new and meaningful, that kind of relationship was very, very strong.

[00:13:59] One of the pieces that Manny and I played that they [Avery and Janet] loved in particular was the third movement of the Rachmaninoff Sonata, which is just unbelievably lush,

romantic, poignant; that became sort of their piece. And I remember at various times, especially when Avery was ill and almost in a coma, I was able to play it for him over the phone, and also certainly for Janet at times in our apartment and later, in memory of her. I think there were pieces of music that were attached to the relationship, and to their relationship to music, and also to the personal relationship, and that piece was one.

[00:15:11] They had a place in Connecticut, and Janet was very fond of her garden. We never visited, but we knew that that was a special place for them, a respite, you know, from the busyness of New York social engagements. I think one of the things that happens when you have a hall named after you, you participate in just a whole variety of social activities. And one of the jokes we had was that at the time I think Alice Tully was still alive, and sometimes we would joke and talk to them as Mr. and Mrs. Hall.

I think it was when he turned 80 that there was a little party at Lincoln Center. I think Avery was very loath to become older. He did not take well to feeling that he was losing human capacity. I remember what he said, “I just wanted to say to the person who said the later years are your golden years. You know, he was a fool.” And he’d say, “You know, I wake up and everything hurts, but I’m still alive.” And I remember he said at the very end, just, he said, “Remember. Remember.” That’s what we’re doing right now is remembering. So, we’re actually doing something that he would have wanted us to do *that* many years later.

[00:17:42] I think it was a painful thing for the family when the hall was renamed [David] Geffen Hall, because suddenly wait a minute, this was maybe an identity for the children (who

are all wonderful, mature adults), to say, you know, we didn't necessarily want it [the naming]. It was then thrust upon us, and now it's taken away [Laughs]. We got used to it, and now it's not, so I think that's something. And Manny [Emanuel Ax], he's one of the most loyal friends to the family, and I know he tried to intercede and to talk them through it. I don't know how everything was resolved, but I think it's quite something to have a major institution named after you. I think it gives a certain kind of — certainly notoriety, status, and also acknowledgement of a tremendous contribution that someone has made to warrant that kind of naming opportunity. But I'm sure it also comes with a certain amount of attention, some wanted, some not, and probably certain responsibilities, some wanted, some not. And so, it's just one more additional thing that's associated with the Fisher name.

People say that when someone gets a Pulitzer Prize, forever that's going to be attached to their name — “That's so-and-so, winner of the Pulitzer Prize.” You can't get rid of it. Depending on how you look at it, it's either a good thing or maybe something that you want to move away from because it's always attached to you.

So, we never talked about that part of it for either Janet or Avery. But Nancy [Fisher], we talked a little, and Chip [Charles A. Fisher] also -- a wonderful man. I think we were almost classmates in college. He is very, very well spoken, a very decent person. I think the thing that joined us together was the love of music through the prize, which resulted in sort of a long friendship.

[00:21:24] And I think Janet was such a pistol as a personality, as a person who had great energy to do things. I visited the college that she went to once to give a concert there.; it was Goucher

[College] in Maryland. I could see from visiting that it was the kind of institution that gives [students] confidence to do things in life. [She and Avery] functioned so well as a couple. And they had their seats “M” one and three, at Avery Fisher Hall, and so whenever I played I could see. I would look for them, get a straight through line and salute them, and it was very personal, very, very personal.

[00:23:06] They had chamber music evenings, where I think he had a beautiful Bösendorfer in the living room. And I remember playing with Manny, and for those chamber music evenings they always had a buffet supper, with chairs with tray tables, and it was all very well set up. And one of Manny’s and my old teachers Felix Galimir, who is a wonderful violinist, who taught at Julliard and who is a great chamber musician, said, “Oh.” He has a great sense of humor. Originally from Vienna, he was a very short guy, immensely smart and kind of a wise guy. He said, “Ah, yeah, you’re going to the Fisher’s, yeah. The salmon, yes, the salmon.” Whenever they had chamber music, that was the menu -- great food, but it was always the same. Their attention was really for music. It’s not that they didn’t like good food; they just weren’t necessarily foodies, you know.

[00:24:58] It’s wonderful to have a chance to think about Avery and Janet. I think so often we go through life not necessarily appreciating what is right in front of us, who is there and how incredibly fortunate it is to be able to talk to somebody with incredible knowledge, experience, and history – you know, to extract what you’re trying to extract now. For me, it’s [the question] always, are we giving enough time to relationships and friendships? In our busy world, that always gets cut short. I’m reminded of the fact that when we watch a television interview, what’s

so strange is that the interviewer always has a clock and says, “Okay, we have 30 seconds left,” and I’m thinking, right, says who? If you’re having the most interesting conversation in the world, you have just said something [that] is much more important than anything that someone might have to say, [it’s difficult to have the clock] take priority.

The values constantly being injected into our consciousness -- time, time, time. I’ve got five minutes. Tell me everything. And I’m guilty of that. I think knowing Janet and Avery when they had more time, and being decades younger when we thought we had less, is something that I regret. What if we had spent more time together, you know, spent a weekend together? What if? A relationship is not a transaction. It’s more, but sometimes when you’re producing life that’s what we end up doing. So, if I have any regrets it’s that. Wait a minute, let’s just take a step back, and appreciate that time. Let’s appreciate the wisdom someone has to offer and find out what their regrets were.

[00:28:23] Janet was always so beautiful and so well put together, and I know that takes effort, planning, and a lot of time. And she made the effort to be there, to be vibrant and energetic, and so that’s something that’s to be treasured. Time gives you a little bit more knowledge, and looking back you see how much they cared about things; you see what mattered. And that often with, you know, the age difference, some of that is lost, but they were always very lovely to our children. They were very unusual people and [I’ve] got to say that we all miss them [Janet and Avery] very much.

Q: There was a story someone mentioned about dinner rolls, you and Manny Ax throwing dinner rolls at each other [unclear].

Ma: [00:29:58] I would not be surprised that that happened. Do I remember the exact circumstances that led to those dinner rolls being thrown? No, but would I say that absolutely, this is very likely to have happened, and could possibly that have happened multiple times. Possibly. You know, I am someone who really, you know — I've just got bad habits. [Laughter] Look, we live in a crazy society with lots of different types of rules, hierarchies, and, you know, social norms. You break them, you follow them. Why? When? How? Why not have some fun? [Laughs]. Manny does it verbally, and I'm not as verbal, so I end up throwing things [Laughs]. What a time. What a time. Growing up and beginning to see the world, and I have to say winning the Fisher Prize, the one thing I loved about it is that it was not a competitive thing. People were just chosen. I think that's a deliberate value that they treasured, and I so respect them for doing that. So, now that I'm thinking about it, it was in 1976, May, and the reason I remember that is that—no, sorry, 1978.

Q: Eight.

Ma: [00:32:13] Right, 1978, because I was married on May 20, 1978. It was a couple weeks before that, that all of this happened, and am I correct? Is it 1978?

Q: It is.

Ma: May, something?

Q: It is, yes.

Ma: [00:32:36] Okay. We were so young. To be given an award like that was pretty momentous. I may not think of it now today, as [there are so many] prizes. No, no, no. When you're twenty-three, it's a lifeline to something that may really pan out to having a life in music. So, it was pretty amazing to be presented with this kind of accolade. I forget what was attached to it, but I think there were opportunities to play or something. , It was an acknowledgment from what was in a way, part of the center of the field to say, "Young man, you're okay. We believe in you." To have someone say that – an institution or a person – is pretty major. I view a lot of what we do in music as building trust. Part of a career is not, "Oh, you're so famous, you're so good." No, you're building trust. People believe that you have something to provide. To be trusted, to have someone say, "We think you're okay, we'll follow what you do, we'll give you chances, opportunities." To have that first kind of push was, in hindsight, absolutely huge, absolutely huge.

Q: Do you remember anything that came out of it as a direct result of it in some ways or ...

Ma: [00:35:57] You know, it's so long ago, and I think the direct result ... it's confidence giving, for both for recipients as well as presenters. A presenter who's waffling – "Should I take this 24-year-old? Is this a risk? Am I going to sell tickets?" "If [the Fishers] believed, maybe I should believe too, you know." [They could make direct and indirect things happen in] a young

person's life. I imagine what a music director or artistic administrator might say. "Oh, I heard so-and-so, you know." "Yeah, I hear they're pretty good." "You know, they're one of the Avery Fisher Prize winners." This opportunity begets other opportunities, I think.

Q: Talk a little bit, if you want to, about Manny Ax and your relationship because in fact I'll be interviewing him tomorrow, and it's interesting when there's—

Ma: [00:37:39] Okay. It's a terrible relationship!

Q: [Laughs] Okay.

Ma: [00:37:41] We have been frenemies for decades!

No, I mean [truly], it's an extraordinary relationship. We met at the Julliard [School] cafeteria because I majored in cafeteria, and I looked up to him because he's a little older, six years older than I am. I was 15 when I was at Julliard. He was 21 then or 22, maybe. And he had gone to Columbia [University] and majored in French, and I was like, wow, that's really cool. He was well spoken – I was pretty shy, and I think we first played something together at a benefit concert, and then gradually we started playing more things together.

But mind you, this is at a time when society was more stratified in the sense that people had different roles that didn't kind of bleed into one another. You're a soloist, or you're a chamber music player, or you're an orchestral player. Today some of the best orchestral musicians could easily be soloists or someone who's played chamber music all their lives will join an orchestra or

vice versa. Carter Brey, for example, the first cello of the New York Phil[harmonic] easily had a solo career, but then he wanted to probably travel less, you know, and took on that position. So I mean ... so on and so forth.

And so when Manny and I started playing together it was an anomaly for two people [soloists] to say we want to play together and be a duo. That was like chamber music. You didn't do stuff like that. But we wanted to, and actually made a good go at it, and we continue to. But it was considered more unusual than usual. And by that I mean that you have enough mutual respect to share the equal billing. You're not playing with an accompanist -- it doesn't say "Yo-Yo Ma, cello, and at the piano so-and-so, accompanist." We really wanted to say that, for certain repertoire we're doing, these are equal parts, because that's how it is in the music. That wasn't necessarily the societal perception. We wanted to make a quarter turn, to say wait a minute, if this is what the music is, then we want to actually [share the billing] because that's the right thing to do.

[00:41:44] So we played lots of duo concerts. We have had *so* many adventures doing all kinds of things: first the two of us together; then playing trios with a friend, Young Uck Kim; then eventually playing with Isaac Stern and Jaime Laredo as a piano quartet; and lots of different festivals where we created programs. But what made our friendship special was that we both tried, to the best of our abilities, to be concerned parents. We loved our families, and yet our profession required us to travel all the time. We dealt with that constantly. Manny to this day takes the very first flight home. He stays up until two in the morning, but at 5 a.m., he's on the plane back. And we did crazy things in order to get home. And he was always helping with, you

know, his children's homework and just being there and being attentive. I'm less responsible, but you know, that's me. But we shared that parenting thing, and I think Manny's also close to Itzhak [Perlman] because Itzhak also had that kind of homing instinct ... gotta be there, gotta be there.

It's not an easy life where you successfully do both and navigate the trials and tribulations of that kind of schedule. So part of our friendship is we wanted to do this duo thing, and another part is family. We also both share the idea that — and I think a lot of musicians feel that way, too — we have the opportunity to be guests in a lot of different places. We get to see — people take us inside — the world of many places. That, we think, is definitely a privilege. We somehow get the chance to participate; we're included, and with that privilege comes a certain responsibility because you start to care more and more about all the places you've gone to or the friends you've made. Manny's [a] very, very loyal friend and has many people all over the world that he's developed strong relationships with. It's something we talk about.

[00:45:05] We talk about what that does to the psyche. We talk about why this is important or not. And we talk about trends that we see—way before they become trends, because you're on the ground, you're infantry. You pick up little bits of information, and wrestle with what does this mean? What's going on? For example, in — was it after the breakup of the Soviet Union — suddenly populations were moving and changing ... like now with so much migration. He said those areas were dealing with what we have been dealing in the States for a long time, because we've historically had waves of migrants coming in, and we've had to deal with it as a society.

How well we dealt with it is another question, but we noticed and were thinking about these trends.

He has wonderful friends who are authors and writers and historians. The playing experience is very tied in to the music sector, but he gets other points of view and perspectives. We share that kind of curiosity about things. And we laugh a lot. We're always sending each other up. I once got an early Christmas present, a cashmere sweater, in the mail. And I thought, who? What friend would send me a cashmere sweater? It's got to be Manny. So immediately I wrote a thank you note. "Manny, thank you so much. It arrived. It's so gorgeous, and it's my favorite store. How did you know?" A week later I got another sweater from the same store, from Manny, with a note that said, "Dear Yo-Yo, I hope this is what you meant. Because, you know, I didn't send the first sweater, but since you like it so much, here's this sweater." I was totally embarrassed. And then, right around Christmas time, he sent a letter that said, "Yo-Yo, thank you so much for this most gorgeous metallic blue Saab 9000 that just arrived at my doorstep. How did you know that was the car I wanted?" [Laughs] So you know, we love doing that to one another. I think you'll have a lot of fun with Manny.

Q: [unclear]

Ma: Yes, I have to go. Do you have enough?

Q: I do. Maybe just one final about Avery, maybe the death of Avery and how you remember it?

Ma: [00:48:46] Well, I think I knew he was failing. This was one of the things that I realized was effective — that music does get through to parts of the brain that the conscious mind may not be able to access. So whether someone has Parkinson's [disease] or whatever, sometimes you can get through, to parts of them, to actually even allow them to get up for a moment and to kind of bypass certain neural pathways that are not functioning. And I think he was in a coma, and that was one of those moments when I did play that Rachmaninoff piece that meant so much. And I think the response was that there was a response. I don't know how much, and I didn't see it because I was on the phone on the other end, but I think so. I'm so glad that music was able to play a part in reaching a place that became more and more difficult to reach.

Q: Okay. Thank you so much.

Ma: You're welcome. It's lovely to have had a chance—

[END OF INTERVIEW]