

**Preview****Tuesday Musical: Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble—  
conversations with Yang Wei, Johnny Gandelsman & Christina Pato**

by Mike Telin



When cellist **Yo-Yo Ma** decided in 1998 to launch a collaborative enterprise to promote artistic exchanges between cultures, he named it The Silk Road Project after the 4,000-some miles of ancient trade routes that for two millennia linked parts of Asia with Europe and encouraged the trading of art, knowledge, philosophy and religion — as well as silk and other commercial goods.

Two years later, The Silk Road Project spawned **The Silk Road En-**

**semble**, a collective of some sixty performers and composers from more than twenty countries. Fifteen musicians from eight of those countries, including Yo-Yo Ma, are currently on tour to six cities in the United States, and will perform on the Tuesday Musical Association Series at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron on Thursday, March 14 at 7:30 pm. We spoke with three of them, pipa (Chinese lute) player Yang Wei, violinist Johnny Gandelsman and gaita (Galician bagpipes) player Christina Pato (who will also play piano) to ask how they first became involved in the Silk Road Ensemble and to glean some of their insights into what makes it tick.



Born in Moscow, violinist **Johnny Gandelsman** came to the United States in 1995 to study at the Curtis Institute of Music. He was introduced to Silk Road through friends Colin and Eric Jacobsen and Nicholas Chords. “We played chamber music together and had a lot of reading parties. Colin and Nick were part of the first Silk Road Ensemble workshop in 2000 at Tanglewood.” Then Gandelsman filled in for Colin Jacobsen for a Silk Road appearance at the Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. the following year. After that he became more of a consistent member and Eric joined the Ensemble shortly after that. By 2004-05 they were all members. Gandelsman, Chords and the Jacobsen brothers would go on to form the acclaimed string quartet Brooklyn Rider and the Knights Chamber Orchestra.



“Random occurrences” led Spanish-born **Christina Pato** in the direction of Silk Road. “But that is the way things usually happen. I was studying at Rutgers University, earning my doctorate in collaborative piano. Osvaldo Golijov came to give a master class, and I was the pianist assigned to the master class. His music was very beautiful but afterwards we started talking about my other life as a bagpiper. This was in 2006, and a few months after that he invited me to a workshop that the Silk Road Ensemble was doing at Tanglewood.” Pato says that was the turning point in her life. Golijov decided to include the bagpipe in one of the pieces he was writing for the ensemble, and her first concert with Silk Road took place at Carnegie Hall in 2006.



Born in China, **Yang Wei** began playing classical Chinese instruments at the age of six, and came to the United States in 1996. On the recommendation of composer Bright Sheng, one of Silk Road's advisors, he was invited for an audition. “I remember receiving my audition music by FedEx at my home in Chicago. I played it for them over the telephone and they said, 'Thank you'. Then they called back and said, 'OK, you're in.’” Wei started in 2000 with the Tanglewood workshops where he was surprised to meet so many composers from China.

Wei looks forward to performing the repertoire on this Silk Road Ensemble tour. “There is one cool piece of Gypsy music called *Turceasca*, arranged by Osvaldo Golijov & Ljova, and I like it very much. It’s very energetic and the rhythms are so interesting. The fun thing for me is that there will be a string quintet.”

The first time he played the piece he says it was difficult to figure out what was happening. But after listening to the quintet play it a few times he began to understand the mindset of the piece. “I look forward to working with them again.”

He has become very fond of traditional gypsy music and he looks forward to playing the tunes *Kali –Sara* and *Rustem*. “For me these are really interesting. When I was learning these pieces I related them to jazz. I think these are the most rhythmically energetic pieces I have learned.”

As members of the ensemble, all three of the musicians came to admire Yo-Yo Ma's role as its catalyst and source of inspiration. “Yo-Yo has such a great musical sense,” Wei says. “I remember playing a traditional piece for him and what he told me was not only about music but about what my body was doing while I played. We are all open because he is so open. He's seen so many kinds of music.”

The importance of education is very strong and the ensemble is constantly scheduling educational activities. “Watching Yo-Yo work has been an inspiration to all of us. He is constantly there worrying about everything,” Pato says. “Even in the middle of a long tour, he arrives at schools at 9 am to make things happen. He works with all the children and brings joy and happiness. It's great to have a mentor like him.”

Gandelsman mentions Ma's inspiring ideas on collaboration. “Yo-Yo often talks about how if you're working with someone and you get to know something that is important to them and learn from their culture, you are much closer to understanding and to be able to truly collaborate. We have had a chance to visit each other's homes. Some have had the chance to visit Iran and the home of kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor. That was a life-changing experience for people like Nick and Colin.

What has Gandelsman learned most from the experience? “That’s a big question. We’ve learned to be open to each other's cultures, and we've learned how to collaborate. We've also learned about programming concerts and how to communicate with the audience. Before I became a member of the Silk Road Ensemble, being able to stand on stage and talk about what we are doing was not something that I felt comfortable with.”

Being part of the ensemble has changed Christina Pato's life in a meaningful way. “We all came [to the group] through organic connections. For example, in my case Osvaldo saw something in me that he wanted to share.” She says that the creative environment, which has a sense of sharing, creating and freedom, gives them all the ability to connect to one another as musicians.

“Because I have always had this [dual] life, one as a collaborative pianist and one as a folk musician, the ensemble really showed me that I could feel the same freedom in traditional music that I now feel in contemporary music.”

Joining Silk Road has expanded everyone's musical horizons. “It has been a great opportunity to meet so many musicians,” Wei says. “We all listen to and accept one another.” Although Gandelsman grew up in a musical family, what he learned through Silk Road has transformed him. “When I came to the States I would have never thought that I would be able to go on stage and improvise in a Persian mode, or play with an Indian tabla master and actually know a little bit about what he was doing. So I would say it’s been a decade of learning and continuously being surprised.”

“It was a beautiful turning point”, Pato says, “because in the ensemble everyone is encouraged to bring what they think is musically interesting. We try to create something together, which makes it the most democratic ensemble that I know.”

### **Christina Pato Up Close**



Christina Pato grew up the youngest of four sisters and began playing the gaita, the traditional Galician bagpipes, when she was four years old. She says the gaita plays a very important role in Galician society. “It’s like the national instrument. When I was four, my sisters were already playing the instrument, so it was the typical thing of the youngest sister always wanting to do whatever your sisters are doing. And when my sisters started to play the piano I did too.”

Pato reminds us that bagpipes can be found all around the world: “wherever there was a shepherd there was a bagpipe.” She points out that everybody has a completely different image of what a bagpipe is, and that many people in North America only have the Celtic image in their mind.

She laughs; “People do have preconceived notions about what it means to be a bagpiper. I just did a show yesterday with my band and for the first five minutes you could see the audience thinking, What is that?” She adds that many audience members are often confused to see a woman playing the bagpipes.

But is it unusual for Galician women to play the pipes? Pato answers with a quick NO! “In the city of my birth there are around 100,000 people, and 10,000 are enrolled in the bagpiper school. It is a very popular instrument; every time people are together there is a bagpipe. The thing that keeps me connected with the instrument is that for me the sound is very powerful – in a beautiful way.”

While many people play the instrument, finding consensus about the age of the instrument is not easy. “Now that really depends on whom you ask, but it is certainly measured in thousands of years.” Although there are documents that go back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, she says that date only marks when the instrument began to appear in the history books.

Christina Pato is also a lover of jazz; “That is the beautiful thing; being part of the Silk Road Ensemble has taught me a lot about improvisation”. After moving to New York, she re-connected with a long time Galician friend, Victor Prieto, a jazz accordionist, “which is not a common instrument in jazz either.” She says that Prieto gave her the needed strength to start her jazz career. “I always tried to connect to jazz through my piano playing as well. But, I happen to play the bagpipes and I happen to love jazz so it’s really about putting all of the things I love together.” Pato enthusiastically points out that there are a lot of Silk Road Ensemble members on her new CD, *Migrations: Roots & Jazz in NYC*.

Inspired by her Silk Road experiences, Pato founded the Galician Connection festival in her home region of Spain. The festival’s focus is mentoring young musicians by bringing together established musicians from many cultures. “I think it’s because of Yo-Yo’s inspiration; he is one of the most generous artists I have ever met.” She says his way of sharing music was very inspiring to her. “He always giving us the opportunity to keep working on our own paths. Like the Silk Road Ensemble, we all come from different cultures and musical languages.”

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