

Celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma performs Bach Project in Cape Town

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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On Saturday, 8 February 2020, Yo-Yo Ma, one of the most accomplished and renowned musicians of our time played to a capacity crowd at Cape Town's Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. As a full moon rose over the city, the audience was held spellbound by the signature rich tones of his cello - which filled the iconic setting.

The concert series, part of an initiative called [The Bach Project](#), will see Yo-Yo Ma play the suites at 36 locations over six continents around the world. The project is a celebration of the incredible emotional power and resonance that the Bach suites hold to this day, as well as the ability of the music to transcend cultural barriers and bring people together.



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The programme of the six famous suites for solo cello by Johann Sebastian Bach, was played one after the other over the course of the two hours.

Sharing with the audience that playing in South Africa had been a lifelong dream of his, Ma added that he thought Cape Town one of the most creative cities in the world, dedicating the third of the six suites: "The most celebratory of all the suites, to all of you who are doing so much to make your world a better place."



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My plus one for the evening, my son who has himself been playing the Bach cello suites for many years, informed me that Yo-Yo Ma has been playing the suites since he was four years old – his life experiences changing his relationship to the music and shaping the way he plays. Embedded in the mature playing we witness today is a lifetime of musical growth and

a deep understanding of the sublime tranquillity of the suites.



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From the soaring and instantly recognisable first bars of music, the audience was rapt. The unusually still evening, combined with the warm, resonant sound of Yo-Yo Ma's cello created a truly unforgettable atmosphere. Yo-Yo Ma's playing was sensitive, playful and heartfelt, and he understands how to animate the music and make it accessible.

Over the course of the performance, he truly embodied the music, often pausing to allow the music to breathe, or smiling warmly at a particular passage as though it was an old friend. He plays in a style that respects the firm Baroque roots of the pieces, while still allowing for personal expression and emotional movement.





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Asking whether we had the patience for one more number, revealed the surprise guest appearance of none other than Zolani Mahola. Wearing a white pearl-encrusted traditional headdress, she announced that they would dedicate the finale to South African legend, Johnny Clegg. Thus, an emotional audience had the honour of experiencing our Zolani singing Clegg's beloved "Asimbonanga" anthem under the stars, accompanied by possibly the world's greatest living cellist on what was likely a priceless Stradivarius!

With huge thanks to all the organisers and Kirstenbosch for this once in a lifetime experience.

ABOUT TERRY LEVIN

Brand and Culture Strategy consulting | Bizcommunity.com COO at large. Email terry@offtheshelf.co.za, Twitter [@terrylevin](https://twitter.com/terrylevin), Instagram, LinkedIn.

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