Great Performers in Recital from Tanglewood
Streaming from Saturday, August 1, at 8pm through Friday, August 7

YO-YO MA, cello
EMANUEL AX, piano

BRAHMS
Violin sonata in D minor, Opus 108: II. Adagio

MENDELSSOHN
Song Without Words, Opus 109

BEETHOVEN
Cello Sonata No. 3 in A, Opus 69
  Allegro ma non tanto
  Scherzo: Allegro molto
  Adagio cantabile—Allegro vivace

YO-YO MA
Cellist Yo-Yo Ma’s multi-faceted career is testament to his enduring belief in culture’s power to generate trust and understanding. Whether performing new or familiar works, collaborating with communities and institutions to explore culture’s role in society, or engaging unexpected musical forms, Mr. Ma fosters connections that stimulate the imagination and reinforce our humanity. In August 2018 he began a new journey, setting out to perform Bach’s six solo cello suites in one sitting in thirty-six iconic venues around the world. The Bach Project continues Mr. Ma’s lifelong commitment to stretching the boundaries of genre and tradition to explore music as a means not only to share and express meaning, but also as his contribution to a conversation about how culture can help us to imagine and build a stronger society and a better future. It was this belief that inspired Yo-Yo Ma to establish Silkroad, a collective of artists from around the world who create music that engages their many traditions. Silkroad performs in venues from Suntory Hall to the Hollywood Bowl and collaborates with museums and universities to develop training programs for teachers, musicians, and learners of all ages. Yo-Yo Ma has expanded the cello repertoire by performing lesser-known music of the 20th century and newly commissioned works from a diverse group of composers, including Osvaldo Golijov, Leon Kirchner, Zhao Lin, Christopher Rouse, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Giovanni Sollima, Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, and John Williams. Among his many roles, he is artistic director of the Youth Music Culture Guangdong festival and a UN Messenger of Peace; he is the first artist ever appointed to the World Economic Forum’s board of trustees. Yo-Yo Ma’s discography of over 100 albums (including nineteen Grammy Award winners) ranges from iconic renditions of the Western classical canon to such category-defying recordings as “Appalachia Waltz” and “Appalachian Journey” with Mark O’Connor and Edgar Meyer and two Grammy-winning tributes to the music of Brazil. Other releases include the Grammy-winning “Sing Me Home” with Silkroad Ensemble; “Brahms: The Piano Trios,” with Emanuel Ax and Leonidas Kavakos, and “Six Evolutions–Bach: Cello Suites.” Yo-Yo Ma was born in 1955 to Chinese parents living in Paris. He began cello studies with his father at age four and three years later moved with his family to New York City, where he studied with Leonard Rose at the Juilliard School. After his conservatory training, he sought out a liberal arts education, graduating from Harvard University with a degree in anthropology in 1976. He has received numerous awards, including the Avery Fisher Prize, Glenn Gould Prize, National Medal of the Arts, Dan David Prize, World Economic Forum’s Crystal Award, Presidential Medal of Freedom, Kennedy Center Honors, Polar Music Prize, and the J. Paul Getty Medal Award. He has performed for eight American presidents, most recently at the invitation of President Obama on the occasion of the 56th Inaugural Ceremony. Yo-Yo Ma and his wife have two children. He plays three instruments, a 2003 instrument made by Moes & Moes, a 1733 Montagnana cello from Venice, and the 1712 Davidoff Stradivarius.

EMANUEL AX
Born in modern day Lvov, Poland, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. His studies at the Juilliard School were supported by the sponsorship of the Epstein Scholarship Program of the Boys Clubs of America, and he subsequently won the Young Concert Artists Award. He also attended Columbia University, where he majored in French. Mr. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series. He won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv, the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, and the Avery Fisher Prize. Emanuel Ax appears as orchestral soloist and in recital throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia. He is a perennial guest as chamber musician, recitalist, and orchestral soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood. A committed exponent of contemporary composers he has recently added HK Gruber’s Piano Concerto and Samuel Adams’ “Impromptus” to his repertoire. A Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987, Mr. Ax has recorded Mendelssohn trios with Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, Strauss’s Enoch
Notes on the Program

As with the symphony and the string quartet, JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897) waited until a surprisingly late date to compose his first violin-and-piano sonata. his Opus 78 in G major, in the summer of 1879, immediately after completing his Violin Concerto. Seven years later he complete his Violin Sonata No. 2 in A, Op. 100, during the enormously productive summer in 1886, immediately thereafter sketching the third, perhaps meant as a companion piece to Opus 100. Brahms put the sketch aside, however, and it was not until 1888 that he finished the Sonata No. 3 in D minor, Opus 108. Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax frequently perform this work in recital, with Mr. Ma playing the string part an octave lower than it was originally. The consoling, rich-textured slow movement performed here consists of a single extended melody.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847) wrote eight volumes—forty-eight pieces in all—of the short, lyrical piano pieces known as Lieder ohne Worte, or Songs Without Words, over the course of his career, but Song Without Words for cello and piano, Op. 109, is a standalone piece not intended to be part of the series. Mendelssohn wrote the piece in 1845 for the French cellist Lisa Cristiani, having accompanied her as pianist in a performance in Leipzig. Cristiani, who made her public debut in February of that year, was one of the first women to have a professional career as a cellist. (Her 1700 Stradivarius cello with her name carved into its side is now in the collection of the Museo del Violino in Stradivarius’s hometown of Cremona, Italy.) Mendelssohn’s lyrical work in D major was not published during Mendelssohn’s lifetime. The designation “Lied ohne Worte” is not his, but certainly fits the mood of this lovely five-minute piece, which erupts into romantic passion between more sedate outer passages.

Dating from 1807-08, the Cello Sonata No. 3 in A major, Opus 69, of LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) is in three movements, giving the music a scope and sweep approaching that of Beethoven’s string quartets. The general time period is that of the Fourth and Fifth symphonies; Opus 69 shows us the extraordinary powers of the mature Beethoven. Here we are well into his second period, aka “Heroic.” Now all the great works are imposing, unforgettable individuals. This sonata presents another angle on the heroic model: not the conquering hero but an introspective one—as in, say, the Fourth Piano Concerto.

On the first page, beginning with a quiet, epigrammatic motto for cello alone, the central elements are established. First, the piano enters with the second phrase of the theme and continues with a repeat of the motto: this sonata will be a story of equals who constantly echo one another. Second, the opening theme contains in embryo all the themes of the sonata. Third, for all its impact, much of the work will be surprisingly subdued in volume. Fourth, both cello and piano interject small cadenzas into the music, as if reflecting on its course.

The straightforward A major of the first page is suddenly shadowed by a turn to a passionate A minor, and that change echoes through the movement: the expected E major of the second theme is startlingly prepared by E minor, and the E major is oddly un-sunny for that usually bright key. By the end of the exposition the music has turned pealingly triumphant. That triumph, though, is the last one for a while—and there, perhaps, is the essence of this particular journey.

The development section is largely quiet, minor, undramatic except for a furioso outburst in the middle. The recap is much expanded and recomposed, developmental, the cello more dominant, much of the music still quiet and inward. The note of triumph has vanished. By the end the movement has taken on an almost Hamlet-like quality of reflection and retreat. The scherzo in A minor is rhythmically quirky and offbeat, with a touch of the demonic. Its lyrical Trio section, repeated twice, is marked dolce, “sweetly.” The loud moments are almost grimly assertive, but it ends nearly inaudibly in sighs and fragments.

Next comes what seems to be an aria-like slow movement, stately and formal in tone, but it suddenly breaks off and we discover it is an introduction to the Allegro vivace of the last movement. This begins with a broad A major theme recalling that of the opening. Once again, much of the music is quiet where we expect otherwise. Has
the triumph from the first movement vanished for good? No: after a muted opening of the development, the music finds that tone again. From that point, racing joy is unleashed and prevails to the end.

Notes by BENJAMIN FOLKMAN (Brahms), ROBERT KIRZINGER (Mendelssohn), and JAN SWAFFORD (Beethoven)

Benjamin Folkman is an annotator and lecturer on music as well as author-editor of "Alexander Tcherepnin: A Compendium."

Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger is the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Associate Director of Program Publications.

Jan Swafford is a prizewinning composer and writer whose books include "Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph"; "Johannes Brahms: A Biography"; "The Vintage Guide to Classical Music," and "Language of the Spirit: An Introduction to Classical Music." An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied composition, he is currently working on a biography of Mozart.

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