

## TIMOTHY MCFARLANE

*Notes (Red)*, 2019  
Acrylic on panel, 8 x 6 in



COURTESY BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

## JEANNE ALTHOUSE

### In Concert

Transported by the  
music of Yo-Yo Ma

**Y**o-Yo Ma sits on the lone chair in the center front of the otherwise empty Trinity University stage, ready to begin his marathon performance of all six Bach Cello Suites, played in order, unaccompanied and without intermission. In the rustling and whispering as the audience settles, I look around.

Next to my husband, a slick black-haired young man clicks photos of Mr. Ma on his cell phone, ignoring signs that forbid taking photographs. To the right of this enthusiastic teenager sits a woman, possibly his proud grandmother, her gray hair cut in a fierce short afro; she stares forward, her brown face glowing with light. I observe with a smile a wiggly six-year-old girl in a sparkly dress sitting in the front row, a man, possibly her papa, holds her arm and whispers in her ear, most probably to encourage silence during the performance. Her expensive seat at this sold-out concert is a tribute to her father's devotion to her music education.

There is a hush as the seated Mr. Ma positions his arm around his Stradivarius; its red-orange hues shimmer in the spotlight like a rich satin. The curves, holes, and varnished wood of his cello remind me of the violin I still yearn for, cradled under my jaw, its silky, sensuous soprano a sister to this mellow tenor.

I am transported to my childhood on a tree-lined neighborhood street in Denver, on my way to my weekly lesson, carrying my violin in its brown case. Its moon-shaped side bangs against my leg as I shuffle along the sidewalk. I am old enough to be sent off alone to this weekly lesson, whose payment somehow fits into my engineer father's family budget. I feel the angst as I walk slowly, worrying my fingers back and forth against the case handle, where the leather is worn and peeling, worrying the beginning of a stomach ache over my performance at the lesson. In my head I fume over the fingering, wondering whether I will be good enough.

My thoughts return to the concert as Mr. Ma begins to play the familiar arpeggiated chords of the prelude to Suite no. 1. Bach's Cello Suites can be considered *participation* music because the listener is asked to supply in his or her head the implied harmonies of counterpoint from the single voice of the cello. The movements following each prelude are composed in baroque dance forms; someone once called these pieces a "dance of God." As the music

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takes over my body, as if I am beginning a deep meditation, I marvel in awe at how this Chinese American cellist and dead German composer, both geniuses of all time, dare to ask me, an ordinary seventy-year-old woman, to participate in this profound, passionate, intimate partnership through the medium of this beautiful cello. Again I wonder: Will I be good enough?

After the prelude, as the baroque dances in Suite no. 1 progress—the allemande, the courante, the sarabande—the music pulls me in, challenging my heart to match the rhythms, to beat along. The cello tilts on its end pin, like a lover leaning in for the spin of a dance, looking up at Mr. Ma, following his lead. The man and his cello move together as if each dance is effortless, and they can last on and on into the night. Minuettes one and two make my feet tingle and during the gigue, my fingers tap the beat, making depressions in the fabric on my chair. I feel opened up, to the air, to the space beside me, to the space above me, to the world outside. The audience around me has fallen away and I sink into the music, lost to time, lost to the beat, lost to the silences between notes, calculated with genius by Mr. Ma.

When the first suite ends, I am startled to find myself back in the concert hall. Glancing over at my husband, sitting on my right, next to my bow arm, I wonder if he

has noticed. He often reads my thoughts, but he is concentrating on the stage and shifts in his chair, looking uncomfortable at sitting for the required 135 minutes without intermission. Why did Mr. Ma choose to play the six suites without an intermission? Is there some reason not to take a traditional break?

Before the second suite begins, my mind wanders back to my violin. All the money my dad spent for lessons and I gave up playing during college. I believed at the time that I was not what I called “concert material.” When it came to talent, I labeled myself second tier.

“Leave music to the first tier,” I said to my first serious lover, who had never played an instrument and didn’t care for classical music. He agreed with my lack of talent, diminishing me like I let men do in college. I always wondered if my father, now dead, had regrets that I quit. Did he believe he had wasted his money?

Soon I am drawn back again—into the sounds of Suites no. 2 and no. 3. The dances flow by like the changing joys and sorrows of my life. In the first suite, I felt that lone cello resonate my early life’s big emotions—like the awe of first love, the shock of first death. With the second suite, another set of dances, the cello reminds me of a second love, and another loss, so different from the first. And the third suite, like life—each love and sadness, each joy and each loss different from the last.

At the midpoint of the concert, following the gigue of Suite no. 3, Mr. Ma stands, stretching to his five-foot-ten height, though his break is not intended for anyone to leave their seats. As he grips the standing cello by its neck, the lights come up briefly and he thanks the city of San Antonio for its hospitality. I notice the water bottle next to his chair has fallen on its side. It rolls near his foot. He ignores it, does not drink. I feel thirst. I feel pain in my back. I take a deep breath. If he can do this, I can do this. Some of us in the audience know that the first three suites are the easy ones, if I dare use the word *easy* to describe the work. He sits down, pulls the cello toward himself, and begins the prelude of Suite no. 4. As he plays, he smiles, tilts his head, lost in the music. His glasses shine, little stars in the spotlights.

By the sarabande in Suite no. 5, my throat fills. This quiet, haunting piece has one musical line with no chords. I reach into my jacket pocket for a Kleenex. I begin to

understand why this profound sarabande, which is Mr. Ma’s favorite for solace in times of tragedy, has been called an “extension of silence.” On September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, he played this as the names of the dead were read. In the Trinity concert hall, after the last note, he stops where his bow finished the note, arm held completely still. He waits, frozen, horsehair kissing string. You cannot hear a sound in the hall. Even the wiggly six-year-old girl in the front row is still. Under the spotlight, the silent cello sweats as if catching its breath.

In the stillness I am left hypnotized, feeling in the flow, similar to the at-one experience of meditation. I hear my inner voice ask me: Why did that young woman I used to be stop playing violin? What really happened to her during her first year of college to take away that habit of music that had grown necessary to her days? The sarabande reminded me of my own tragedy. That was the year my father died. Nothing was the same after the accident that took his life.

Breaking the stillness, the bow moves and we race on to Suite no. 5’s gavottes and gigue and finally the last, Suite no. 6, which is my favorite, and the hardest to play. Hearing the resonance of those high notes in the prelude of Suite no. 6, when Mr. Ma’s flying fingers make a dramatic climb up the fingerboard to a high G, I forget everything but the music. A light opens up inside my body, as if someone has dropped a camera into the sound holes of the cello and vibrating there are the joints of my spine, shaken into sounds by the hair of the white stallion’s tail.

He plays the last gigue, and the performance is over.

In the silence before the explosion of applause—when we clap as we all stand to honor this man, this composer, this music—I understand why Mr. Ma plays them all without intermission. I hear the echoes of all the dances in my head: the suites play in harmony *with each other*, leaving lingering emotions no individual suite alone could match. The six suites are *essential* to each other, like family, like community.

After the concert, waiting in a line of traffic to exit the theater garage, my husband marvels at how the cellist plays the complete concert from memory without sheet music. “How many notes in his head must that be?” he says, looking over at me in the passenger seat. I smile at his mathematical approach, counting notes. I see he is entertained, amazed,

but not moved. He never played a string instrument, does not have it imprinted as I do, in my bones.

I pull up the covers in bed that night, ears ringing with the melody from the evocative, haunting sarabande of Suite no. 5. I remember again the feeling of my old violin, how it fit under my jaw, as familiar as my husband’s sleeping head tucked under my shoulder, his hair tickling my skin. As I close my eyes, I smell bow rosin in the air of my room, like fresh pine with a slight sweetness, riding on the breeze through the open window.

Lying there in darkness, I realize the point of all those lessons. They prepared me to appreciate, to pay attention, to listen in ways others, without training, could not. I thank my teacher. I thank my father. I am good enough. I am good enough after all.

Flash fiction, creative nonfiction, and longer stories by **Jeanne Althouse** have appeared in numerous literary journals. She was a finalist in the Glimmer Train Very Short Fiction contest. Her story “Goran Holds His Breath” was nominated by *Shenandoah* for the Pushcart Prize. A collection of her flash fiction, *Boys in the Bank*, was published this year by Red Bird Chapbooks. “In Concert” is a hybrid—part essay, part memoir flash.