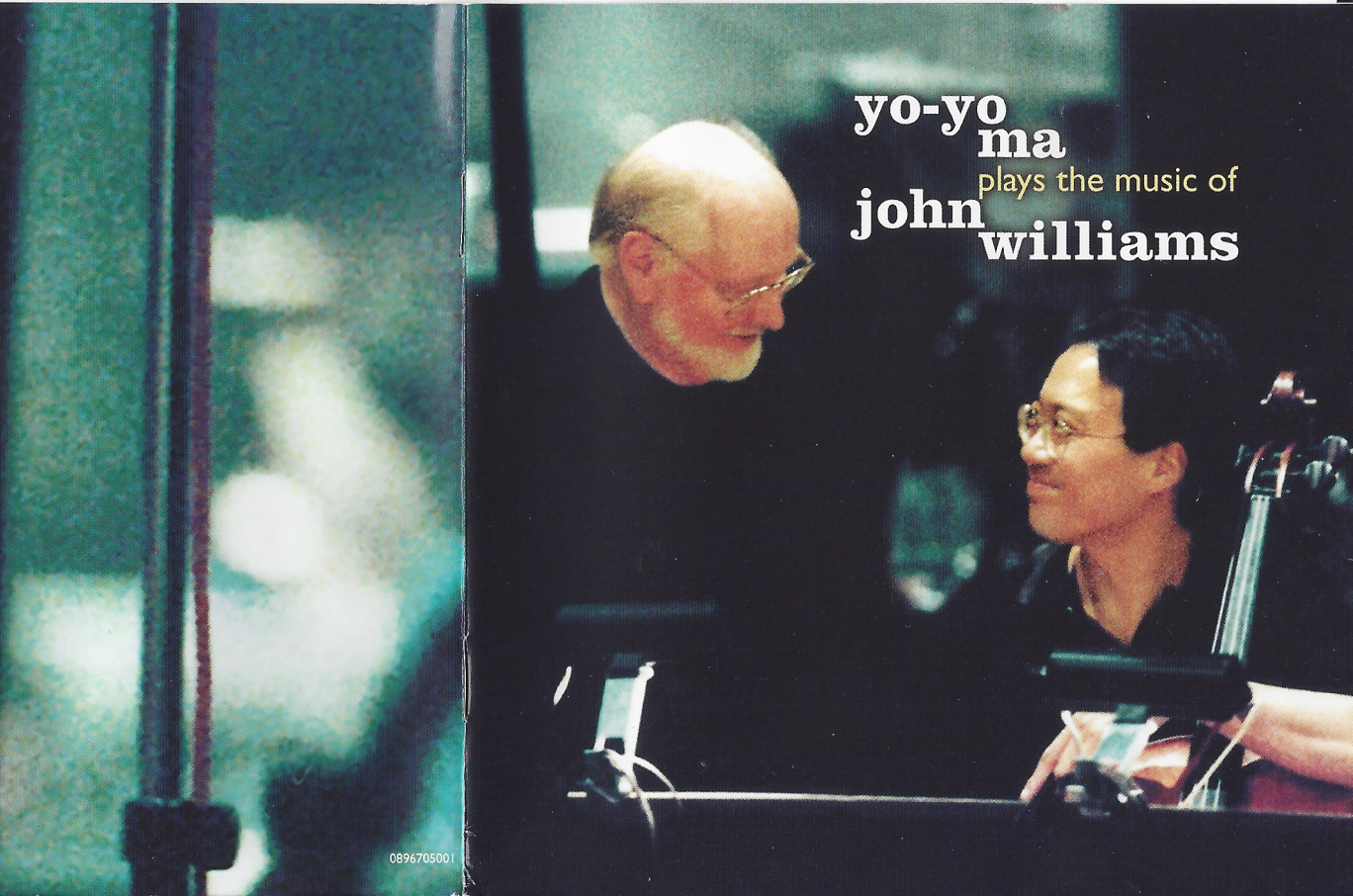




yo-yo  
ma  
plays the music of  
john  
williams



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**yo-yo**  
**ma**  
plays the music of  
**john**  
**williams**

**john williams** (\*1932)

CONCERTO FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA

- 1 I. Theme and Cadenza 9'12
- 2 II. Blues 4'39
- 3 III. Scherzo 5'12
- 4 IV. Song 11'13

5 ELEGY FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA 6'22

THREE PIECES FOR SOLO CELLO

- 6 Rosewood 5'37
- 7 Pickin' 2'35
- 8 The Long Road North 6'14
- 9 HEARTWOOD 15'43

**yo-yo ma** cello

recording arts orchestra  
of los angeles

**john williams** conductor



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ALBUM PRODUCED BY **JOHN WILLIAMS**

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## CONCERTO FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA

My cello concerto resulted from a suggestion by Seiji Ozawa that I write a piece for cello and orchestra expressly with Yo-Yo Ma in mind. Discussions on this project developed and the Boston Symphony agreed to commission the work, requesting that it be premiered at the opening of the new Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, Massachusetts, during the summer of 1994. I began work at the end of 1993, and I conducted the first performance with Yo-Yo Ma as soloist on July 7, 1994, on a celebratory concert that marked the dedication of Tanglewood's exciting new venue.

I had known Yo-Yo Ma for quite a few years before this event. Together we had performed concertos of Elgar, Dvořák and Haydn among others, and on several occasions I had accompanied him at the piano. Over the years we've become close friends, and I looked forward to writing for him with great pleasure. Given the broad technical and expressive arsenal available in Yo-Yo's work, planning the concerto was a joy. I decided to have four fairly extensive movements that would offer as much variety and contrast as possible, but that could be played continuously and without interruption.

The first movement, **Theme and Cadenza**, after an opening salvo of brass, immediately casts the cello in a kind of hero's role, making it the unquestioned center of attention. It's a movement that attempts to put the cello on display in the time-honored sense of "concerto," and as the hero's theme is developed, it "morphs" into a cadenza in which I tried to create an opportunity for exploration of the theme that would be both ruminative and virtuosic.

The second movement I call **Blues**. In my mind, and without any conscious prodding on my part, the ghosts of Ellington and Strayhorn seemed to waft through the atmosphere. Invited or not, this was for me, very welcome company. I set up clusters in piano and percussion that form a frame within which the cello unveils its misty quasi-improvisations.

The **Scherzo** is about speed, deftness and sleight of hand. The music romps along in triple-time over treacherous landscape where athletic exchanges are periodically and suddenly interrupted by a series of fermati, as the orchestra and cello try to dominate and outdo each other. There's a short tutti where it appears that the orchestra might prevail, but the cello outwits and outlasts it.

In thinking about the finale of the concerto, I was always aware of the fact that Yo-Yo's ability to "connect" personally and even privately with every individual in his audience is perhaps the greatest of his abundant gifts. I therefore tried in **Song**, the concerto's finale, to create long lyrical lines that would give the cello the opportunity to address the audience in the manner of a clear and direct soliloquy.



Whatever virtues the concerto may have can never surpass for me the experience of knowing and working with Yo-Yo Ma. Happily, and with complete justice, the world loves and reveres this man as do I, and working with him is always a joyous journey to be treasured.

#### ELEGY FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA

A few years ago, an acquaintance of mine, a brilliant young violinist, lost her two young children in tragic circumstances. For the memorial service for little Alexandra and Daniel, a group of composer colleagues and I each contributed a small piece to mark this occasion, which was not only heart-rending but also suffused with a great deal of love.

A short time before this event, Yo-Yo Ma appeared as soloist on my sound-track recording of *Seven Years In Tibet*. The score included a short melodic fragment which I thought might be expanded, so I shaped it into the form of the present "Elegy," always with the cello in mind. The original version of the piece was for piano and cello and was beautifully performed at the memorial service by John Walz, an outstanding Los Angeles cellist. When the opportunity to record this CD with Yo-Yo Ma emerged, I decided to orchestrate **Elegy** and Yo-Yo kindly agreed to record it.

Given this history, the making of this particular recording was, at least for me, a joyful and healing experience, especially since my violinist friend was playing in our orchestra at the time.

I'm also happy to report that this lovely young woman is recovering from the unrecoverable, has started another gorgeous family, and is playing as brilliantly as ever. Bless her.

## THREE PIECES FOR SOLO CELLO

In the summer of the year 2000, I conceived an idea to write **Three Pieces for Solo Cello** that might musically reflect something of the powerful and historic African-American experience. I thought that the cello might be especially well-suited to express the vernacular manner of musical speech and rhythmic inflection that characterize this most important "root-source" of American music.

In the first piece, **Rosewood**, the cello groans under the crack of the work-gang whip and imitates the old steel-fronted guitar played by some of the early workers as they tried to ease the pain of their long hours in the fields.

The second movement, **Pickin'**, refers both to the art of banjo pickin' and the act of picking cotton itself. In this piece I also tried to capture some of the energy and drive of the old "side-slap" and "shoe-slap" dances that brought forth a natural exuberance that couldn't be quelled by the blanket of oppression.

**The Long Road North** is inspired by the Rita Dove poem of the same name. When she writes "No more rockin' in Jim Crow's cradle..." she describes the indomitable spirit that has always animated the long and inspiring African-American journey to freedom. The music also partly takes the form of a lullaby in which we might imagine a mother singing...hush now child – don't cry...someday...someday!

I feel especially honored that our greatest cellist, Yo-Yo Ma, has played and recorded these pieces, and in so doing has not only met the great technical demands of the music but exceeded them in every way.

## HEARTWOOD

During the time I was thinking about writing some lyric sketches for cello and orchestra, I received a beautifully bound collection of photographs of trees as a gift from a friend. The book is entitled *Heartwood* and contains a series of exquisite photographs of a southern species of live oak (*Quercus Virginiana*) taken by William Guion.



Each tree pictured in the book conveyed a dignity and enduring strength that suggested a wisdom only attained after reaching great age. I was moved and impressed by these pictures, and I tried to capture something of their quiet majesty in the sketches I was writing. I decided to call the piece **Heartwood**, a word which coincidentally might almost describe the cellular structure and spiritual core of the cello itself. At the time I was working on this, I don't think I was aware of an almost forgotten part of my own musical past that would be involuntarily revisited here.

The deep vertical sonorities set out in the piece, particularly by the brass, I perhaps unconsciously thought might evoke images of the great trees. But as I listen now I realize how much they also recall and reveal an early enthusiasm of mine that I revealed in as a youngster. I refer to the Claude Thornhill Orchestra which was popular in the 1930s and '40s. I heard in this music, almost certainly for the first time, the rich impressionistic harmonies favored by Thornhill which he usually presented in a reflective and moody setting. In what was then essentially a dance orchestra, he featured the french horn, making his music seem unusual and even eccentric at the time. Thornhill is perhaps best remembered as having inspired and been the mentor of the great jazz composer-arranger Gil Evans.

If the pictures of the great trees and the memories of Thornhill's music have any connection at all, the artistry of Yo-Yo Ma forms an ideal link to bind them. Hearing his eloquent voice framed in this setting is like a dream I couldn't have hoped to realize as a youngster listening with such eagerness to Claude Thornhill so many years ago.

JOHN WILLIAMS



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- 1-4 Concerto for Cello and Orchestra
- 5 Elegy for Cello and Orchestra
- 6-8 Three Pieces for Solo Cello
- 9 Heartwood

yo-yo ma cello

john williams conductor

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