

Sunday, April 30, 2017, 6pm
Hearst Greek Theatre



Danny Clinch

Yo-Yo Ma – Edgar Meyer – Chris Thile Bach Trios

This evening's performance will be announced from the stage.

*The concert will be performed without intermission
and will last approximately 75 minutes.*

Put any random combination of musicians in a room together, and no matter their instruments, histories, personalities, it's more than likely that they'll find common ground playing Bach.

This is partly because Bach addressed so many musical contexts over the course of his lifetime. Though he is revered as a protean creator and obsessive craftsman, he was also equal parts humble artisan and compulsive speed-writer. Suffering was not yet a requirement for 18th-century artists; in Bach's music, one senses instead a musician eager to make himself as useful as possible, to find every outlet for his immense skill and energy.

In a musician's repertoire, therefore, Bach is both a foundation and a pinnacle. You start your training with something from the Notebooks for Anna Magdalena, a two-part invention or simple prelude—music that teaches you not just how to play, but how to listen to harmony, counterpoint, voice-leading, and form. And you gradually ascend to the heights of instrumental and compositional virtuosity—the *Goldberg Variations*, the D-minor Chaconne, *The Art of the Fugue*.

In these epic pieces, the performer necessarily channels the composer through a kind of individual heroism. But at the core, Bach was an intensely collaborative musician. Part of the utility of his music is its protean adaptability to any number of instrumental combinations; the labor of performing is divided easily into voices or parts, each a satisfying narrative thread on its own.

The more diverse the voices, the more it becomes possible to tease out the movement of these separate lines. There's always something interesting happening, no matter which frequency you decide to listen to at a given moment. The act of hearing the mercurial A-minor fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier Book II* becomes a kind of auditory tennis match, as subjects and sequences volley among players at warp speed.

One of the joys this evening is the extraordinary chamber group, comprised of three virtuosi: Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, and Chris Thile. Cello, double bass, and mandolin are, at face value, an unlikely instrumental combination,

but this is an obviously harmonious set of personalities and musical predilections. The history of collaboration between these three is long and wide-ranging.

Each has recorded Bach individually, and in 2012, when thoughts turned to encores during the *Goat Rodeo Sessions*, Bach was a natural choice. There is a huge range of possibility in Bach interpretation, from the revisionist, almost authorial approach (Busoni or Glenn Gould) to the scholarly and historically informed (epitomized by John Eliot Gardiner). There's much to be gained from both schools, and, wisely, the Ma/Meyer/Thile trio finds its voice somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Here, drawn in by the directness of the music itself, it's entirely possible to lose oneself for long stretches, just listening.

The sonatas bookending the trio's recently released Nonesuch recording are straightforward and direct, with all the athletic rhythmic snap of the best period-instrumentalists. In fact, through some sleight-of-hand sonic mimicry, it sounds remarkably Baroque. Chris Thile's mandolin takes on the personae of harpsichord, lute, or even something close to a piano; Yo-Yo Ma's cello, a whole chorus of human voices and a few centuries of stylistic string playing besides. Other moments, though, are unmistakable musical signatures. The rollicking arpeggios in *Kommst du nun, Jesu*, jaunty with the barest hint of swing, could only be Thile; the chorale tune answering it, complete in its shape and phrasing, characteristically Ma. Meyer's bass, vaulting far above the instrument's typical continuo register, makes the melody in *Wachet auf* all the more strivingly human. This unique and shifting orchestration brings an unexpected transparency to some familiar music.

Though one thinks of cello and bass as similarly dark-hued instruments, here they tend to take opposite roles in the three-part harmony, with the cello melody soaring above. The mandolin, so idiomatically suited to moving, contrapuntal lines, keeps the pulse while maintaining a crystalline clarity. Similarly, when the mandolin takes the highest voice, as in the bustling Sonata for Viola da Gamba, its short reverberation moves aside quickly, allowing

the ear to parse the maze of interchanges and switchbacks between cello and bass. Even more complex is the massive E-minor Prelude and Fugue, originally an organ piece. Far from making things simpler, dividing the soloist's labor among three creates an opportunity for some fun. The central section of the fugue is transformed into an over-the-top chase scene, cello pouncing on the mandolin's tail in endless barages of running notes. This technique, called *hocket*, in which musicians interrupt each other at just the right moment to form a continuous musical line, is found in everything from central African Pygmy music to the work of the contemporary Dutch composer Louis Andriessen.

Not everything is quite so rough-and-tumble. Moments of suspended, almost shocking harmonic beauty abound, especially in the chorale-derived works. In the second phrase of *Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, the continuo (bass accompaniment) stubbornly clings to the same note two beats longer than the ear expects—interrupting long enough that the arc of the vocal line (here a plangent and nearly vibratoless cello) turns into a sequence of unstable, dissonant intervals on its downward path, sounding simultaneously inevitable and lost.

The organ chorale *Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott* also features the cello as vocalist, though it is the uncharacteristically stark accompaniment that stands out—plucked bass, with Thile now joining on guitar, strumming a constant eighth-note pulse. The complete absence of contrapuntal activity draws attention to a sly harmonic ambiguity: beginning seemingly in B minor, constantly feinting at D Major, but never quite sticking the landing. The final phrase ends on B minor's dominant, F sharp, as if to say, "Again." Light and shade give way to each other in an endless cycle.

Bach's music gives the player a sense of making something tangible, conjuring the physical out of the abstraction of a fugue or chorale. A musical score is, of course, just a set of instructions—the steps to take in construction, with little specified about the finished product. In Bach's catalogue, we have an entire city in plans, its cathedral ringing with organ preludes, its back rooms full of chamber music. That every-

one has access to this trove—and can, with a little experience, will these same creations into being—is one of the most profoundly democratic facts I know of, and stands as a great equalizer in an unequal world.

—Timo Andres, December 2016

The composer and pianist Timo Andres was raised in rural Connecticut and now lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Yo-Yo Ma, cello

The many-faceted career of cellist Yo-Yo Ma is testament to his continual search for new ways to communicate with audiences and to his personal desire for artistic growth and renewal. Ma maintains a balance between his engagements as soloist with orchestras worldwide and his recital and chamber music activities. His discography includes over 100 albums, including 18 Grammy Award winners.

Ma serves as the artistic director of Silkroad, an organization he founded to promote cross-cultural performance and collaborations at the edge where education, business, and the arts come together to transform the world. More than 80 works have been commissioned specifically for the Silk Road Ensemble, which tours annually. Ma also serves as the Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Negaunee Music Institute. His work focuses on the transformative power music can have in individuals' lives, and on increasing the number and variety of opportunities audiences have to experience music in their communities.

Ma was born in Paris to Chinese parents who later moved the family to New York. He began to study cello at the age of four, attended the Juilliard School, and in 1976 graduated from Harvard University. He has received numerous awards, among them the Avery Fisher Prize (1978), the National Medal of Arts (2001), and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2010). In 2011 Ma was recognized as a Kennedy Center Honoree. Most recently, Ma has joined the Aspen Institute board of trustees. He has performed for eight American presidents, most

recently at the invitation of President Obama on the occasion of the 56th Inaugural Ceremony.

www.yo-yoma.com; www.silkroadproject.org;
www.opus3artists.com

Edgar Meyer

In demand as both a performer and a composer, Edgar Meyer has assumed a role in the music world unlike any other. Hailed by *The New Yorker* as "...the most remarkable virtuoso in the relatively un-chronicled history of his instrument," Meyer's unparalleled technique and musicianship in combination with his gift for composition have brought him to the fore. His uniqueness in the field was recognized by a MacArthur Award in 2002.

As a solo classical bassist, Meyer can be heard on a concerto album with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Hugh Wolff and featuring Bottesini and Meyer concertos both alone and with Yo-Yo Ma and Joshua Bell. He has also recorded an album featuring three of Bach's Unaccompanied Suites for Cello. Meyer was honored with his fifth Grammy Award in 2015 (Best Contemporary Instrumental Album) for his *Bass & Mandolin* collaboration with Chris Thile.

As a composer, Meyer has carved out a remarkable and unique niche in the musical world. His music has been premiered and recorded by Emanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Yo-Yo Ma, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Bela Fleck, Zakir Hussain, Hilary Hahn, and the Emerson String Quartet, among others.

Collaborations are a central part of Meyer's work. He has been and remains a member of numerous groups whose members include Chris Thile, Bela Fleck, Zakir Hussain, Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, Mark O'Connor, Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Mike Marshall, and Amy Dorfman. His debut album in 1985 featured the first public appearance of Strength in Numbers, whose members were Bush, Douglas, Fleck, O'Connor, and Meyer.

Meyer began studying bass at the age of five under the instruction of his father and continued to study with Stuart Sankey. In 1994 he re-

ceived the Avery Fisher Career Grant and in 2000 he became the only bassist to receive the Avery Fisher Prize. Currently, he teaches bass in partnership with Hal Robinson at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

<http://edgarmeyer.com>

Chris Thile

Multiple Grammy Award winner and MacArthur Fellow Chris Thile, a member of Punch Brothers and Nickel Creek, and now the host of *A Prairie Home Companion*, is a mandolin virtuoso, composer, and vocalist. With a broad outlook that encompasses classical, rock, jazz, and bluegrass, Thile transcends the borders of conventionally circumscribed genres, creating a distinctly American canon and a new musical aesthetic for performers and audiences alike.

A child prodigy, Thile first rose to fame as a member of the Grammy Award-winning trio Nickel Creek, with whom he released three albums and sold over two million records. In 2014, along with a national tour, the trio released a new album, *A Dotted Line*, their first since 2005.

As a soloist, Thile has released five albums, including his most recent, *Bach: Sonatas and Partitas, Vol. 1*, which was produced by Edgar Meyer. In 2013 Thile won a Grammy Award for his work on *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*, collaborating with Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, and Stuart Duncan. In September 2014 Thile and Meyer released their *Bass & Mandolin* collaboration, which won the Grammy for Best Contemporary Instrumental Album. Punch Brothers released its latest album, *The Phosphorescent Blues*, in January 2015, and a follow up EP, *The Wireless*, in November of the same year. In January, Thile released a double-album with Brad Mehldau. Beginning last fall, Thile took the helm of *A Prairie Home Companion*, a public radio favorite since 1974. Garrison Keillor, the show's creator and former host announced: "He is, I think, the great bluegrass performer of our time and he is a beautiful jazz player. There just isn't anything he can't do—and he is very enthusiastic about live radio."