

Kind critique from maestro Ma



Photo by Anne Becker/The Washington Times

World-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma holds a master class for young cellists at the World Cello Congress III at Towson University. Ten students, age 7 to 10, took part in the class.



With Noreen Beehouse Cello Ensemble and Japan's Toho Cello Ensemble, plus world premiere of Richard Pieter's "Celloptone"
Music Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, 1212 Cathedral St., Baltimore
When 6 p.m. June 3
Phone 410-515-6400
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By Patrick Butters
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The gaggle of giddy child cellists gaped up at their smiling maestro, Yo Yo Ma, as if he were a god. Well, maybe for this lot, a Pokenon master.

The eight Washington-area children, from age 7 to 12, played with and asked questions of the 44-year-old cellist as part of a master class during the World Cello Congress III at Towson University's Center for the Arts.

"They were like Little League players seeing Cal Ripken," says Towson University staffer Sedonia Martin. "They just marveled at his exuberance and his skill."

The children who took part were Sara Lemar, 7, Andie Salad, 7, and her sister Marissa Salad, 9, Kendall Lowrey, 12, and Elizabeth Connor, 8, all from Arlington; Abi Loufou, 10, and Samuel Youn, 11, of Rockville; and Laura London, 11, from Bethesda.

One wonders who benefited more, the students or the artist.



Arguably the greatest living ambassador for the wraparound classical instrument, Mr. Ma has become as celebrated for his joie de vivre as for his virtuosity.

As in other cities where he performs, Mr. Ma regularly visits D.C. area schools for master classes and less-formal school appearances through venues such as the Washington Performing Arts Society.

He instantly connects with children, perhaps because he has two of his own and he started cello lessons from his father at age 4. Mr. Ma's

first public recital came at age 5, and by age 19, he was being compared to Pablo Casals and Mstislav Rostropovich.

The children were all dolled up in their Sunday best, basic black on white. They practiced together for 25 minutes before Mr. Ma showed up. The cellist deferentially bowed to each student, asked their names, and said, "I'm Yo-Yo Ma."

"Like we don't know who he is," said an excited but exhausted John Kaboff, a renowned cellist from the District who has soloed at the



Andie Salad, 7, of Arlington (above) listens to Mr. Ma during the class. Mr. Ma greets Andie's 9-year-old sister, Marissa (left).

Corcoran Gallery of Art, the French and New Zealand embassies and Strathmore Hall. "He doesn't take for granted that everybody knows who he is. He just said this is my name and I'm happy to work with you."

The children and Mr. Kaboff were left alone with Mr. Ma "so they wouldn't be intimidated by a big audience," says Tom Williams, publicist for the event. A lone video cameraman recorded it for posterity, and the closed-circuit audience of parents and staff watched from another room.

"They felt like they were in their own private little world," Ms. Martin says. Mr. Kaboff noted that he stretched to the children not to let their little eyes wander toward the high-tech cameras.

Mr. Ma had each student play for him. He calmly and softly gave them feedback and entertained all sorts of questions, such as, "Did you think the bow was big when you were a kid?"

With the older students, he was still calm and gentle but a little firmer, Ms. Martin says. "It was more like, 'Let me tell you...' in an excited tone."

Mr. Kaboff noted that the chil-

dren once again exceeded his expectations. Having just recruited a 4-year-old student, he says teaching small children isn't much different from teaching older ones.

"You just have to teach on their level," Mr. Kaboff says. "One has to learn how a 4-year-old thinks. I don't teach them any less, just smaller amounts and more slowly."

Yet by the end of the class, Mr. Kaboff "seemed exhausted," Mr. Williams said. Mr. Kaboff and the children had been practicing for this hourlong event since September.

The World Cello Congress III, which has attracted more than 500 musicians from 45 countries, runs until Saturday.

With Baltimore Chamber Orchestra
Music Stephens Hall Theatre, Towson State University, Towson, Md.
When 8 p.m. tonight
Phone 410/530-2757