

On-screen text:

**Kinan Azmeh and Yo-Yo Ma**

**Art in a time of crisis**

The Silk Road Ensemble recording "Wedding" New York, City, September 2015

Yo-Yo: So, Kinan, you run every morning?

Kinan: I do. I do run every morning.

Yo-Yo: And what's the exercise? Is it a form of discipline... what does it do for your mind?

Kinan: You know, different exercises... sometimes I run, sometimes I play. Anything that will postpone being engaged in... the heaviness of the world.

Yo-Yo: What enters your thought when you're making music? How do you... process your work and how does outside life enter into it?

Kinan: I notice actually that the way I work changed in the last four, five years. I didn't write music for a whole year. When the popular uprising started in March 2011 to March 2012, I did not write any piece of music. For me, I was maybe... wondering, "what can you do?" ... all

these questions. But then [in] March 2012, I felt that I owed it to myself to keep my voice loud.

If the whole uprising was about people expressing themselves, then I thought that I owe it to myself actually to really speak up. You know, I am believing in the freedom that music-making is all about. You know, you see a tragic situation, what do you do? You play an instrument just because it's some kind of a haven... because it makes you feel better. It empowers you. If you think about the creation of art... art is not a medication.

It's not because...there is violence, let's do something in response. I think the way human nature responds to violence is it just continues to produce beauty, right? That's what we do naturally. But also we are the same humans who are creating all the violence too.

Yo-Yo: I'm paraphrasing, but I think Bernstein was once asked, "What do you do in the face of violence?" I think his response was that you just continue to create even more passionately. Would you agree with that?

Kinan: Absolutely. But... the first thing on your mind is not "Let me create beauty." I think creating beauty or whatever moves people, that's the side effect of you being passionately involved in doing what you're doing.

Yo-Yo: And that seems to match what you were saying about keeping your voice loud, that you are fully engaged... You will run in the morning. You will do things that will keep you strong, your voice loud.

Kinan: You want to respond with something meaningful, not something beautiful in particular... If you see some kind of violent act in front of you, your first reaction is not to actually create something. You want to stop the violence. But then the moment where you realize "I am not able

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to jump into that fight and stop the violence," you try to find other ways... So the doctor will continue to be a doctor. The engineer will continue to be an engineer. You work harder... and you realize that it actually makes sense that you are doing this ... you are a little piece of a much bigger puzzle, so [you] might as well just focus on that as much as you can.

I'd like to think that what we do as artists can move people to be proactive. You know, when

I play my clarinet or compose, I am being proactive. I am doing something. It might be very small. And sometimes I wonder if it will make any change. I realize the limitation

of my instrument. I realize the limitation of the art, too. It doesn't offer the answer for everything. But it can offer one little answer. A piece of music doesn't stop a bomb from falling. It doesn't feed somebody who is hungry. It does not free a political prisoner. It doesn't do any of this stuff. But what it can do... it can motivate people to be proactive. I hope when I play that the music will make people think, "What can we do?" All of us, I think, are wondering, concerned humans. "What can we do, and how can we do that?" Art is one of the answers, pushing people to be more and more proactive.

Yo-Yo: As you were talking, I was thinking... what it prevents is people from shutting down. Kinan: Of course.

Yo-Yo: It keeps the windows open. It keeps [open] the windows of actually saying that "I may not be able to do something, but I still care." That's the humanity part of it.

Kinan: Yes.

Yo-Yo: You can't change certain realities, but you therefore don't deny someone's existence. Kinan: Absolutely.

Yo-Yo: And that's a hard muscle to activate all the time, because in some ways we want to protect ourselves, and to continually keep ourselves open doesn't necessarily come naturally. But by doing that, we actually become human or more human.

Kinan: True.

Yo-Yo: You don't deny someone's dignity.

Kinan: Absolutely. You know also, culture might be the only survivor of violent times... Culture and art does preserve in the most positive sense—I'm not somebody who likes to keep things as they are—but it documents our times for future generations to learn from.

On-screen text:

"Wedding" was composed by Kinan Azmeh. It is dedicated to all the Syrians who have managed to fall in love in the past five years.

**transcript**