



BREAKING

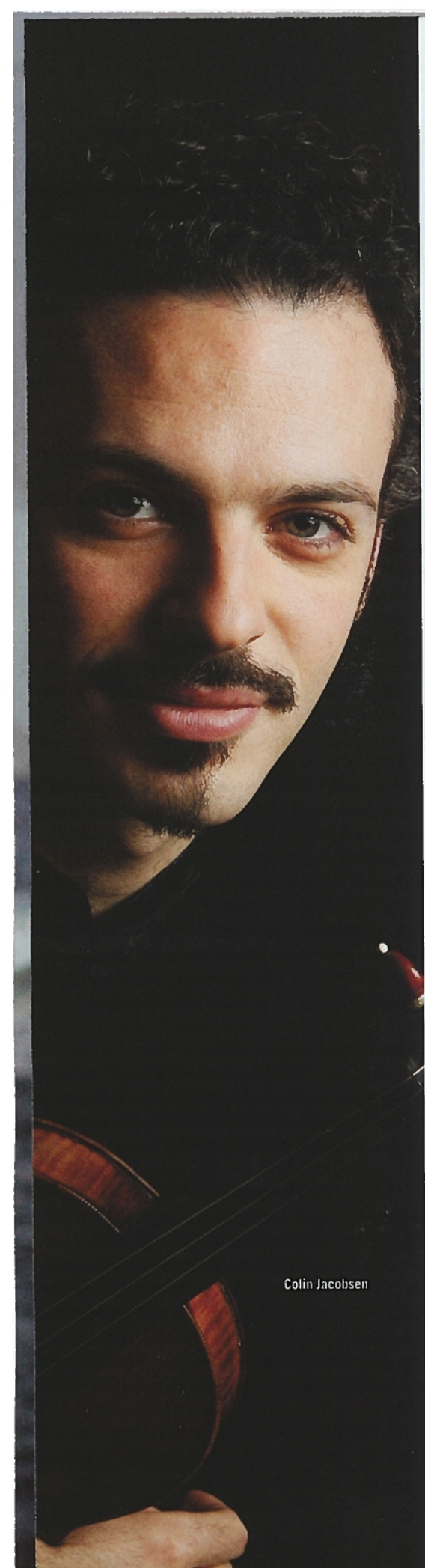
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A photograph of two men, likely violinists, standing back-to-back. They are wearing light blue, long-sleeved shirts and glasses. They are positioned in front of a large window, looking out towards a bright, possibly outdoor setting. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an indoor space with a view of the outdoors.

DOWN WALLS

*Violinist
Colin Jacobsen
on the latest
release from
Yo-Yo Ma's
Silk Road
Ensemble, and
the group's
journey
to the silver
screen*

By David Templeton



Colin Jacobsen

Transformation. It's a theme that Colin Jacobsen, of Brooklyn, New York, touches on often while discussing his career as an edge-pushing violinist working on the very boundary that separates classical music from everything else. In describing the appeal of playing as a regular member in Yo-Yo Ma's acclaimed Silk Road Ensemble, Jacobsen often brings up the subject of transformation, which appears to be an integral ingredient in the Silk Road experience.

"One of the things that has fueled the ensemble over the years," he says, "is the fact that the people who play in the Silk Road Ensemble are always changing and growing. We frequently go off and do our own projects, and then we come back together again. And every time we do, we return with something new, and we all learn from that and grow a little more.

And then, when we leave again and head back out to those other projects, we all take something *else* that's new, something we've just learned from each other.

"We are all always becoming new versions of ourselves," he says, "as artists and musicians, as interpreters and composers and arrangers, and as human beings."

Sometimes, Jacobsen explains, those skills are technical.

For instance, the bowing technique he learned from ensemble member Kayhan Kalhor of Iran, a renowned master of the *kamancheh*, a traditional Persian bowed-stringed instrument.

"Or it might be something Yo-Yo says in passing at a rehearsal," he says, "something about the meaning of a piece we are learning, a thought that makes some incredible connection between my own music and something completely different."

It's a sense of "zooming in and out of different perspectives," muses Jacobsen, a process of constantly shifting from one way of seeing a piece of music to another, and then back again.

"It's a sense of being very deeply rooted in my own personal musical tradition," he says, "and then suddenly seeing it from outside myself, from up above myself, from a much more global perspective.

"That," he adds, with a sudden, gentle laugh, "is what being a member of the Silk Road Ensemble is all about."

It all began in 1998, with the simple thought of strangers meeting. That thought, in a nutshell, is the origin of Yo-Yo Ma's revolutionary idea. That when people from different worlds, by accident or chance, step into each other's lives for just a moment, a certain kind of magic takes place—a magic that is all the richer when those strangers share a story, a meal, or a song.

What would happen, Ma wondered, if a group of musicians from very different cultures and experiences were brought together to make music, to blend styles and teach techniques, to sing each other's songs and share their most life-changing stories? The answer to that question is the Silk Road Ensemble, a simple experiment that has proven to be revolutionary, a flash point in a massive international musical consciousness-raising, in-your-face incitement to risky, rule-breaking, tradition-defying, musical mutiny. Silk Road tends to inspire just that kind of rhetorical hyperbole—and it might not actually be overstating the truth.

Once Ma had hatched the general idea of Silk Road—named for the ancient network of trade routes connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea—he founded an educational nonprofit named simply Silkroad. He envisioned it as a kind of cultural think tank, encouraging an exchange of Western and Eastern ideas about music, science, and culture.

Eventually, Ma began reaching out to various musicians representing an array of countries and cultures. Once together, uncertain what would happen, these world-class musicians simply played together, experimenting and basically jamming on the greatest hits of each participant's native culture.

Soon dubbed the Silk Road Ensemble, this loosely structured assemblage began performing in front of dazzled audiences. No one knew quite how to describe what they were hearing, but the emotional response was electrifying. Silk Road's first album, released in 2002, was *Silk Road Journeys: When Strangers Meet*. It quickly reached No. 2 on the Billboard Classical Crossover chart.

Though Ma's name on the album was clearly a major initial attraction, it soon became obvious to fans and music



Kayhan Kalhor, of the Silk Road Ensemble, is playing the kamancheh, an Iranian spike fiddle. He's pictured with Kurdish singer Aynur Dogan in 'The Music of Strangers.'



Kinan Azmeh of the Silk Road Ensemble and students in 'The Music of Strangers.'



Cristina Pato plays a gaita, or bagpipe, from Galicia, which is located in the northwestern corner of Spain.



JENNIFER TAYLOR

Members of the Silk Road Ensemble

“

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journalists that the real appeal of the Silk Road Ensemble wasn't the involvement of any one musician. It was the thrilling alchemy of watching something unfold that was both rooted in identifiable world traditions and also completely and totally new. And it did not take long for listeners to extend their curiosity from just Yo-Yo Ma to the musicians playing with him.

Now, 15 years later, the members of the Silk Road Ensemble may not all be household names, but they are certainly a lot closer than they were. Constantly busy with other projects and ensembles, the core group, which continues to include Jacobsen, still finds time to come together every few years and make another record, or to head out together on another world tour.

June 2016 marks the release of a major documentary film about the Silk Road Ensemble—appropriately titled *The Music of Strangers*—that will hit movie theaters across the country. Helmed by Morgan Neville, the filmmaker behind Oscar-winning *20 Feet From Stardom*, it vividly captures the origin story and globetrotting musical impact of the Silk Road Ensemble.

Concurrent with the debut of the film, the Silk Road Ensemble is releasing its seventh album, titled simply, *Sing Me Home*. Envisioned as an exploration of folksongs and traditional tunes, the album contains a great deal more singing than most Silk Road recordings, and features a number of guest vocalists and musicians performing some of the most beloved and influential folk tunes on the planet.

“The new album came from a desire to do something celebratory, maybe something a little more personal,” says Jacobsen. “And, of course, it was another way of exploring the idea of bringing strangers together to make something new.”

An innovative violinist, composer, and fearless collaborator, Jacobsen was called “one of the most interesting figures on the classical-music scene” by the *Washington Post*. In 2005, with Johnny Gandelsman, also of the Silk Road Ensemble, he founded the quartet Brooklyn Rider, and later the Knights, an extraordinary New York-based orchestra that blends genres, excites young artists, and generally blows minds.

Asked about the simultaneous arrival of the movie and *Sing Me Home*, Jacobsen says the movie was part of the inspiration for the album, which, now completed, is arguably the ensemble's lightest, sweetest, broadest, and most infectiously appealing recording to date.

"Yes, the CD was definitely timed to come out alongside the film, but it was also just an excuse to open our doors to a bunch of guests whose work we've always admired over the years," he says. "We wanted to bring in some of these new people and see where that would take us."

The album was two years in the making. Initially, it took a while to assemble the various "strangers."

Over the course of several tours, whenever the ensemble was together, there would be spontaneous "listening sessions," in which they would go through music and brainstorm ideas. Eventually—under the guidance of Gandelsman, serving as producer—*Sing Me Home* came into shape, with a list of collaborators and specific

arrangements slowly forming the backbone of the recording project.

That, says Jacobsen, is always how things come about with the Silk Road Ensemble—slowly, but surely, decisions made through a combination of emails, short conversations on the phone, and the occasional moments between gigs.

"There were also a lot of informal conversations over a drink in a bar after a show in one city or another," he allows, adding that a driving force of the project was the idea that each member would spearhead the development of a song or composition that was close to his or her heart, representative of some key musical component of the person's culture, landscapes, and people.

"I certainly threw a number of my own ideas into the mix," Jacobsen says, pointing out the two pieces on the album that sprung from his original brainstorm.

The first of those is the traditional "O'Neil's Cavalry March," with acclaimed Irish fiddler Martin Hayes appearing as that track's special guest. As performed by Hayes

and the Silk Road Ensemble, it's a rousing collaboration that starts simply and builds, with intertwined elements of jazz and Americana, to a stirring climax, then strips back down to the simple recognizable tune from the start.

"I've always loved that piece, and I've always admired Martin," says Jacobsen. "What's special about this album is the idea that there have been people we've always loved, either from afar or close up, who we've been wanting to work with, and for me, Martin Hayes is one of those people. He's one of the great string players whose work I've always loved, along with Kayhan Kalhor, who's already been working with me for years within the ensemble."

The idea of putting Hayes together with Kalhor was a large part of the appeal of recording that particular track, Jacobsen says.

"I don't know if they would necessarily think this way, but I've always thought of those two players in somewhat the same breath," he says, "in relation to their



Wu Man of the Silk Road Ensemble and Zhang Ximin in 'The Music of Strangers.'

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cultures, Ireland and Iran. So I was very excited about bringing them together to play on 'O'Neil's March.' It's a very traditional Irish march, notated by one of the very first guys to notate Irish music, back in the early 1800s. It leads one to believe that this music goes back—way, way back—beyond memory.

"Something about that, I thought, would connect really well with Kayhan's music."

The other piece Jacobsen championed is a sly, somewhat Asian-tinged turn on the traditional Appalachian folk tune "Little Birdie," with Texas-born singer-songwriter Sarah Jarosz sitting in as vocalist.

"Back when Pete Seeger passed away a few years ago, I went on a YouTube binge, and watched lots of video of him singing songs," Jacobsen recalls. "And 'Little Birdie' was one that he sang a lot. I found several videos of Pete Seeger singing 'Little Birdie,' and one of them was with Johnny Cash, on an old TV show. I just loved the sentiment of the song, partly because it connects me back to another piece we've done in Silk Road a lot, a piece I wrote called 'Ascending Bird.'"

Other pieces on the album include the American folk song "St. James Infirmary Blues," with vocals by Rhiannon Giddens, and a cover of Hoagy Carmichael and Frank Loesser's 1938 pop standard "Heart and Soul," sung as a duet by Lisa Fischer and Gregory Porter.

And because this is a Silk Road project, one track, titled "Green (Vincent's Tune)," includes the Boston-based vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth in an astonishing, somewhat "heavy metal"-tinged demonstration of Tuvan throat singing.

In a way, the album serves as the perfect example of the kind of transformation that has always defined Jacobsen, as well as Yo-Yo Ma and the entire Silk Road Ensemble. And though he is somewhat reluctant to say so, Jacobsen and the one-time strangers he now makes music with clearly believe that Silk Road, and projects like *Sing Me Home*, might just have the power to transform the world.

"There's a sense that, in a way, the time is right for this kind of album, and for the kind of work that Silk Road has always done," Jacobsen affirms.

"At a time when people are talking a lot about putting up walls, this is an album that very heartily says, 'Let's not put up walls. In fact, let's tear more walls down!' I like that a lot."