



*On the
(Silk) Road*

Alumna Cristina Pato celebrates 10 years
with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble

On the Silk Road

Alumna Cristina Pato discusses her globetrotting life as a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble

BY LAURIE GRANIERI

Here's a twist on how to get to Carnegie Hall.

A decade ago, Cristina Pato was working toward her doctorate of musical arts in collaborative piano, assisting Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov with his master class on campus.

Their shared affinity for global music and the Galician language (Pato, a native of Spain, also plays *gaita*, Galician bagpipes) spurred Golijov to extend an invitation to Pato to haul her bagpipes north to Massachusetts, collaborate with cellist Yo-Yo Ma's famed Silk Road Ensemble, and, as she describes it, "make a party."

"And the party began," Pato, now 36, says in an email. "A week later I was playing Golijov's music at Carnegie Hall with the ensemble and Yo-Yo...and the rest is history."

In September, Pato celebrated her 10th anniversary crisscrossing the globe as a member of the ensemble, an eclectic group of esteemed musicians from more than 20 countries. The nonprofit Silkroad organization, which Ma initially established as the Silk Road Project, in 1998, was inspired by the interchange of traditions along the ancient Silk Road trade routes, which stretched from Southern Europe to Asia. Silkroad's mission: promote

multicultural collaborations via educational, cultural, and performance programs. *The Boston Globe* describes the ensemble as a "roving musical laboratory without walls"; NPR calls it "one of the most visionary arts initiatives of our time."

Now Pato is prominently featured in a documentary from Academy Award-winning director Morgan Neville (*20 Feet from Stardom*). *The Music of Strangers* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2015 and was released in



Pato (right, with bagpipes) with Silk Road Ensemble members, including founder Yo-Yo Ma (top center).

theaters June 10. The film explores notions of culture, home, and dislocation via the Grammy-nominated ensemble, an experiment Ma describes as "a group of musicians getting together and seeing what might happen when strangers meet." No doubt, *The Music of Strangers* is especially trenchant in a year that has seen mass migrations from the Middle East into Europe. The companion album, the ensemble's sixth, released in April, is called *Sing Me Home*, and features guest performers Rhiannon Giddens, Abigail Washburn, Gregory Porter, Lisa Fischer, and jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, among others.

Pato says Neville traveled with the group for several years and that the issues he explores in *The Music of Strangers* aren't merely theoretical; she grapples with notions of culture and home herself. In fact, Pato says, traveling and collaborating with artists rooted in a wide range of cultural traditions has only nudged her toward a deeper understanding of herself.

"I'm still struggling with the idea of what or where is home for a person like me who spends eight months a year on the road," says Pato, who lives in New York City, "but this movie has helped me to understand that your roots go with you wherever you go, and that they only get richer in the process of searching for your own path. No matter where you decide to live, those roots re-root in the land you now call home, and something richer grows. It's amazing to think how connected we all are in places like New York City, where everybody comes from another place but we share a common sense of identity."



Pato (front) performs with *shakuhachi* (flute) player Kojiro Umezaki in 2011 at the Mondavi Center at the University of California, Davis, with the Silk Road Ensemble.

Inset: A still from the recent documentary *The Music of Strangers*.

'CITIZEN ARTIST'

For nearly two decades, Pato has enjoyed a robust career as a recording artist, composer, and solo performer in her own right. *The New York Times* calls her "a virtuosic burst of energy," while *The Wall Street Journal* has dubbed her "one of the living masters of the gaita." But the Silk Road Ensemble isn't merely a high-profile side gig: Pato seems driven to forge and sustain meaningful exchanges between communities in concrete ways. She serves as educational advisor to Silkroad's leadership council and says the ensemble has inspired her to establish an annual multidisciplinary festival back home in Galicia, as well as a conference on arts and education.

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Meanwhile, Pato clearly adores her boss. She insists there are no stars in Ma's orbit. Instead, she says, he has cultivated an "incredibly democratic environment—this ensemble is like a book of values." Working alongside Ma, whom she describes as "empathetic, full of joy, and always ready to listen to everybody in the room," reminds Pato of the bigger picture: that she's not merely an entertainer but an active contributor, one with obligations to the wider world.

"Yo-Yo has helped me to understand the role of the artist in society, the importance of being a citizen artist, of assuming the responsibility that comes with your talent," she says.

"And yes, I love playing with Silk Road and with Yo-Yo," Pato adds, "but to me it is 'Yo-Yo the humanist' who has changed my life in so many different ways."



ERIN BAIANO