



# A Journey of Discovery

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These days, the Silk Road is mostly remembered as a string of fabled places — Samarkand, Nishapur, Bukhara, Kashgar. For me, however, the Silk Road has always been fundamentally a story about people, and how their lives were enriched and transformed through meeting other people who were at first strangers. By starting a conversation and building shared trust, strangers could become allies, partners, and friends, learning from one another along the way and working creatively together.

If you accept that the Silk Road is still present in our world as an inspirational symbol of intercultural meetings, then there are many people alive today whose lives exemplify modern-day Silk Road stories. I am one of them. I was born in Paris to Chinese parents. My father was a violinist and composer who devoted his career to building musical bridges between China and the West. When I was seven, my family moved to the United States. I began playing Western classical music as a youngster but have always been curious about other cultures.

As a cellist who loves working in different musical styles, I've had the good fortune to travel and learn about music outside my own tradition. I have visited the Khoisan people of the Kalahari Desert and listened to Buddhist chant in Japan's ancient Todaiji Temple. I have learned Celtic and Appalachian dance tunes and have taken lessons on the *morin huur*, the Mongolian horsehead fiddle. These encounters have led me to think about the way that music reveals the connections among us.

For example, is the horsehead fiddle, held upright and played with a horsehair bow, in fact an ancient ancestor of European viols? How did a Japanese stringed instrument, the *biwa*, originally created in the 8th century and now part of the Imperial Shosoin collection in Nara, come to be decorated with West and Central Asian motifs? Why does music from the Celtic lands, Mongolia, India, and many other disparate places rely so heavily on the concept of melody played against a steady drone? Answers to these questions are not always fully known, but persuasive evidence suggests that peoples now separated by great distances had at some time been connected. Moreover, these

connections were not passive but based on a vigorous exchange of ideas, artifacts, technologies, and fashions. Cultural exchange has in turn inspired innovation and creativity.

The message seems clear: we all have much to gain by staying in touch, and much to lose by throwing up walls around ourselves. We live in a world of increasing interdependence where it is ever more important to know what other people are thinking and feeling, particularly in the vast and strategic regions of Asia that were linked by the Silk Road.

In 1998 the Silk Road Project was founded to study the historical and present-day flow of culture and ideas along the trans-Eurasian trade routes. I believe that when we enlarge our view of the world we deepen our understanding of our own lives. Through a journey of discovery, the Silk Road Project hopes to plant the seeds of new artistic and cultural growth, and to celebrate authentic living traditions and musical voices. But what are "authentic" traditions? Look deeply enough into any one, and you'll find elements of others. Discovering what's shared, and what can be appropriated, refined, and restyled, is the essential work of cultural exchange and innovation.

As a crucible for cultural intermingling, the lands of the Silk Road, then and now, offer an unparalleled vantage point from which to understand vitally alive and ever-evolving languages of music, art, and craft that may seem by turns familiar and exotic. Our challenge is to embrace the wondrous diversity of artistic expression while remaining mindful of the common humanity that links us all. I hope that your own visit to the Festival will lead to enduring discoveries on both fronts.