

**Culture and Freedom of Expression / conversation with cultural actors and performance by
Fayha Choir in association with Yo-Yo Ma's Bach Project
August 25, 2019
President Fadlo Khuri's welcome speech**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, friends, and distinguished guests.

I welcome you all to this very special gathering devoted to culture, art, and conversation. I also welcome you to AUB's historical Assembly Hall. This beautiful edifice surrounding us was built in 1891 to serve as a chapel and a space for university ceremonies. As AUB became increasingly focused on a secular, liberal arts education by the early 20th century, Assembly Hall became not only a place of faith but a place of culture and acculturation. This venue is the stage for history makers and change agents, from politicians to academics and artists who stood and delivered enduring speeches and performances here that have provided both inspiration and healing. Jawaharlal Nehru in 1960, Noam Chomsky in 2006, Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus the same year, and Nobel Literature Laureate Wole Soyinka last year when he spoke about history, culture, and revisionism. And if you think this is a male preserve, think again! It was on this very stage that Anbara Salam doffed her full-face veil and addressed a public audience in 1927, the first Lebanese Muslim woman to do so.

Today, it is my pleasure to welcome *back* to Assembly Hall another pioneer, one of the greatest musicians on the planet, and certainly its finest cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the American University of Beirut in 2004. Back then, the audience enjoyed his performance of a *sarabande* from Bach's Cello Suite No.3 (in C Major). Yo-Yo Ma explained that the *sarabande* was "an example of trans-national roots of music" considering how it originated from a dance in North Africa, before travelling to Spain—where it was banned—and then being taken up by the French aristocracy to become a courtly dance, and later to be incorporated by Bach in his cello suites.

A year ago, Yo-Yo Ma and his team launched "The Bach Project" which is a world tour to perform Bach's six suites for solo cello in 36 locations over six continents. This tour however, is not only about sublime musical performance; it is about modelling an example of how culture connects us all over time and space. It highlights the role of culture in society in view of the many challenges the world is currently facing. The Bach Project curates at the same locations as these wonderful concerts a series of day-long inclusive activities that engage the community and form a local and global conversation as well as sheds light on critical cultural statements. Yo-Yo Ma has stated his belief that culture is the way we express ourselves and understand each other, whether through music, literature, science, or food, and culture is what can bind us together as one world.

So far, Yo-Yo Ma has performed in 19 different locations, with Lebanon as the 20th, and the first in the Arab world until now.

I believe this conversation in Lebanon, in Beirut, and at AUB, could not have been more timely, especially in light of the very recent and unfortunate events concerning our own alumni—the members of world renowned band Mashrou' Leila, who were subjected to vicious attacks and unfair criticism by local religious authorities for what they have expressed through their music. The band was forced to cancel its concert at the Byblos Festival, which was supposed to have taken place last week and its members have been made to feel ill at ease in their native Lebanon. A very alarming turn of events that reflects the urgent need to not only address the issue of freedom of expression, but also to find and implement corrective actions locally and regionally.

French-Iranian graphic novelist and director Marjane Satrapi—of *Persepolis* fame—described culture and education as “the lethal weapons against all kinds of fundamentalism.” I believe that this is exactly what we are in desperate need of at the moment. Just as this building has evolved from Chapel to Assembly Hall, AUB, founded by Protestant missionaries, has found that impactful and transformative education can be best achieved with a humanist philosophy that respects every credo—religious or secular—but does not insist upon one or other of them. And we understand that we are responsible modeling an inclusive and liberal society, outside our university gates in Lebanon and the wider Arab world.

I would like to thank Dr. Yo-Yo Ma and his team for including Lebanon and AUB in this outstanding project. Beirut has always been a cultural epicenter of the Arab world, with AUB at the pinnacle of that fulcrum. So it is only fitting that change and progressive thinking be nurtured here in order to radiate across the region. I would like to end by thanking everyone participating in today's event and conversation. Each and every one of you reflects an incandescent star in the surprisingly and alarmingly dark sky of the Lebanese and Arab firmament today. I hope that the echo of your voices, instruments, and thoughts would, indeed, bring the change that we need to see among us and around us.

Thank you.