Beirut: 27-8-2019

Yo-Yo Ma delights AUB and Lebanon
by connecting culture and dialogue

The American University of Beirut (AUB) has hosted a memorable musical performance and critical discussion on culture and freedom of expression, as part of the internationally acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma's Bach Project – a global initiative aimed at connecting cultures and fostering a global dialogue. The Assembly Hall event was part of a weekend of dazzling activities organized by the Yo-Yo Ma team in Lebanon, in partnership with local cultural actors.

The Bach Project was launched in 2018 to perform Bach's six Cello Suites, each of which had six movements, in 36 locations around the world, and start local and global conversations to highlight and address pressing cultural issues. Uniquely, the virtuoso soloist plays all six suites in a single spellbinding two-and-a-half-hour performance. Yo-Yo Ma had already visited 18 different locations, making Lebanon the midpoint of his global endeavor.

"I'm here to ask a simple question – what can we do together that we can't do alone?" Yo-Yo Ma explained during the Conversation at AUB. He continued, "I'm trying to ask this question, not only in this room, but in many other rooms… to find out what people share in common more than what actually divides them."

Assembly Hall was packed with attendees as Nadine Touma from Lebanese publishing house Dar Onboz opened the event with a hakawati storytelling accompanied by guitar and piano. AUB President Fadlo Khuri then welcomed the attendees and participants with a message about the timeliness of this conversation in light of current events and situations in Lebanon and the Arab region, and about the importance of using culture and education to counter fundamentalism and extremism. "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 it does not insist upon one or other of them. And we understand

that we are responsible for modeling an inclusive and liberal society, outside our university gates in Lebanon and the wider Arab world."

Art as Freedom

A diverse group of Lebanese artists, journalists, and NGO representatives held an enlightening conversation about encroachments on Lebanese cultural space since the Civil War and more broadly in the region, and collective efforts to resist that trend. "Making art is an act of freedom in itself," said Syrian clarinetist Kinan Azmeh.

Ziad Hakim from the Sawa for Development and Aid NGO said his group has started including artistic and cultural elements in development projects. "From one side the economy is stagnating, from another politics is not bringing positive change, so culture is the last resort for us to break through and give some hope."

An audience member described it as a "bleak appraisal of the cultural situation in Lebanon and the Arab world, but one which also reflected a great sense of optimism" that art and culture can safeguard meaningful conversations between people so they can build a better future together.

After the discussion, Yo-Yo Ma offered a compelling "musical response" to the cultural actors' interventions, by playing an impassioned version of Tayf (Ghost) by AUB alumni band Mashrou' Leila, recently dropped from the Byblos Festival line-up amid a controversy about censorship and violation of the group's freedom of artistic expression. Yo-Yo Ma, who was awarded an AUB honorary doctorate in 2004, had played the six Bach Cello Suites at the very same festival the previous evening.

Cultural Crossroads

The Assembly Hall event concluded with a joyful performance by the internationally award-winning Fayha Choir conducted by Maestro Barkev Taslakian. The choir, established to counter negative stereotypes of Lebanon and the Arab world, was joined by Yo-Yo Ma and Kinan Azmeh for a surprise and unrehearsed performance of Lebanese artist Marcel Khalife's song Asfour.

Earlier in the day, the streets of Sodeco intersection were buzzing with spectators and music as Azmeh, with vocalist Oumaima al-Khalil, and oud player Ziad al-Ahmadieh joined Yo-Yo Ma in an unprecedented pop-up performance on the balconies of "Beit Beirut", the historical structure on the former "Green Line" which bears witness to the ravages of Lebanon's civil war.
The performance was organized in partnership with the Municipality of Beirut and the Director of the AUB Neighborhood Initiative Mona Hallak, who also curated the Assembly Hall event.

"This day with Yo-Yo Ma has brought us together from many institutions and cultural fields to share our positive initiatives towards a more inclusive society," said Hallak. "On the balconies of Beit Beirut, culture united us and we bridged the gap between east and west in geography and in music with Yo-Yo, Kinan, Oumaima, and Ziad." She continued, "In the Assembly Hall, we highlighted that our identity is layered, our unity of action is our only hope and humanism is in itself our ultimate fight for a better future."

ENDS

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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