



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

The cellist Yo-Yo Ma testified before a House committee on Tuesday.

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### **Yo-Yo Ma Plays Capitol Hill To Talk About Visa Problems**

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

Scrounging for younger audiences. Squeezing donors. Seeking relevance alongside the pop culture behemoth. In some ways, times are tough in the performing arts. But a quiet new headache has arisen: just getting foreign artists into the country.

Agonizing waits and mounting costs for artist visas are plaguing arts presenters, partly because of post-9/11 security measures, but also because of changes that occurred before the attacks. On Tuesday, the performing arts world succeeded in taking its case to Congress, putting Yo-Yo Ma on a hearing room stage.

In a crisp black suit and without his cello, Mr. Ma testified before the House Committee on Government Reform, appealing to the government to ease the path of foreign musicians coming here.

"I think dignity is the huge issue that we're all talking about," he told the committee, which is looking into the delays for visas issued to performers, students and workers.

Concert and dance presenters, festivals and countless smaller organizations -- often those who can least afford it -- have had their budgets burdened with new immigration costs. Anecdotes abound about tours that have been canceled because the artists did not receive visas in time or did not want to pay the extra costs, or because the presenters did not want to risk a cancellation. Other artists have simply decided not to try to come.

Mr. Ma appeared in his role as leader of the Silk Road Project, an ensemble bringing together musicians from across Central Asia and the Middle East, which he founded a decade ago.

While the hearing was strongly focused on the difficulty of bringing in nonartists, like technology workers from India and graduate students from China, Mr. Ma was clearly the star of the show. But by the time his question-and-answer period came, only the committee's chairman, Representative Tom Davis, Republican of Virginia, was in attendance.

"You don't need a passport or a plane to visit someplace new," Mr. Ma testified. "Music provides a shortcut, allowing you to be transported thousands of miles away and back during the two-hour span of a concert."

Mr. Ma said barriers to foreign musicians "have become extraordinarily high." He cited the case of two Iranian musicians, Siamak Aghaei and Siamak Jahangiri, who have visited the United States eight times with the Silk Road Project since 2000 and must still wait months before receiving visas. They have to fly to Dubai for a consular interview and then fly back to pick up the visa. In the last year, Mr. Ma said, they went a third time because the visa printer was out of order. The latest procedure lasted three months and cost \$5,000.

**In another case, the Halle Orchestra of Manchester, England, canceled a two-concert United States tour partly because of the cost of having to take all 100 players and staff members to the United States Embassy in London for personal interviews, said Sandra L. Gibson, the president and chief executive of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Ms. Gibson said the cost mounted to \$80,000.**

Post-9/11 rules now require almost all nonimmigrant visa applicants to undergo face-to-face interviews. The wait for an interview can often take three months in some places and sometimes up to five months in India. Costs have gone up, too. Performing arts presenters must apply here to bring in performers, another process that can drag on for weeks or months. The United States Customs and Immigration Service charges organizations a \$1,000 "premium processing fee" to do it in two weeks, instead of the normal \$190 fee. Many organizations just pay the larger fee. In addition, each individual applying for a visa must pay \$100.

The arts presenters association represents a field of 7,000 organizations. Ms. Gibson said 75 percent of them presented foreign artists in 2002. The percentage was down to some 60 percent last year, she said, because of the red tape.

Arts presenters acknowledge that the United States immigration service is hard pressed for funds, staff and facilities, and that the number of visa requests is rising.

Tony Edson, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for visa services, defended the government's record on visas, saying that 515 consular jobs had been created since September 2001. The State Department has improved training, computer systems and efficiency, he added. Paperless visas and digital video interviews are being considered. Personal interviews, he said, are an "incredibly useful" security tool.

Committee members acknowledged that security was important but argued that it had to be balanced with openness. "In the long run, our security is enhanced and not diminished by the exchange of people and ideas," said Representative Henry Waxman, Democrat of California.

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## Visa hurdles 'bar cultural dialogue'

Front Page

By Alexander Kliment in Washington

Renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, a US citizen born in France of Chinese parents, told a congressional committee on Tuesday that "the high financial cost, uncertain timeline and countless logistical hurdles" involved in obtaining US visas for foreign artists meant that cultural exchanges were becoming less frequent.

The House government reform committee was told that since new restrictions were imposed following the September 11 2001 attacks, delays in obtaining visas had caused the number of foreign artists performing in the US to drop.

Foreign artists, along with students, scientists and business travelers, have been the hardest hit by the tighter reviews on visas enacted to prevent terrorists from entering the US.

**Since 2002, visa-processing delays at US consulates have caused the proportion of US artistic groups using foreign performers to drop from 75 to 60 percent, largely because of risks that foreign artists would be denied visas and shows cancelled, according to Sandra Gibson, the president and chief executive of Association of Performing Arts Presenters.**

The administration of President George W. Bush has pledged to tackle the delays. Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, launched an initiative in January to streamline procedures, promising "faster, more secure and more respectful process of welcoming foreign visitors to the US".

But the effort faces hurdles. Tightened border security and visa-adjudication procedures, including a personal interview requirement for all visa-seekers, have combined with soaring south Asian and Chinese demand to create a large and persistent global backlog of applicants.

Jess Ford, the director of international affairs and trade at the US Government Accountability Office, said that between September 2005 and February 2006 some 97

consular posts, just under half the total, reported average wait times in excess of 30 days for visa applicants. In one of the worst cases, applicants at Chennai, India, waited an average of 126 days.

Tony Edson, the deputy assistant secretary for consular affairs at the State Department, said the US had raised the number of consular officials and commissioned reviews of management and building design at all consular posts.

But he said that in many cases, particularly in India, the sheer number of applicants had overwhelmed the physical and human capacity of the consular posts and that the State Department was still seeking ways “to cope with that”. Mr. Edson also suggested that greater use of technology, such as internet-based preliminary interviews and biometric data, could increase the efficiency of the visa-adjudication process.

The visas issues are a significant concern for US companies, with corporate leaders such as Bill Gates of Microsoft repeatedly raising the alarm. Kevin Schofield, of Microsoft Research, told the hearing: “Let there be no doubt, without [visa] reform American competitiveness will suffer...The ability to bring the best and brightest to conduct business, to study, to join our workforce is indispensable.”

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# Impediments to Art Exchange

With all the talk about brain drain in science and technology fields, and about how real and perceived problems in the U.S. visa process are deterring some of the world's best and brightest scholars and students from coming to America, artists and art students have been largely below the radar.

But at a hearing of the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform Tuesday, lawmakers and art enthusiasts alike said that artists are being affected, too, at a time when cultural exchange through art is more necessary now than ever in a quickly globalizing world.

"In the long run, our security is enhanced, not diminished, by this kind of exchange," said Rep. Henry A Waxman (D-Calif.).

Tony Edson, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for visa services, said that scientists and science students still face potentially more delays, because they are often from countries that prompt thorough background checks, and may work with potentially hazardous materials or sensitive information.

But all students have faced increased visa delays since 9/11. Meanwhile, European and Australian institutions have ratcheted up recruitment of Asian students. In [January](#), Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice assured more than 100 college presidents that the visa situation was much improved. She noted that, despite legitimate security concerns, "we are now moving 97 percent of our visas in just one or two days."

At the Tuesday hearing, Edson referred to the 97 percent, but put it in more context. "Once [candidates] are interviewed," he said, "97 percent who are eligible for visas get them within one or two days." The trouble is, he added, that nearly all applicants must show up in person to give biometric data or do an interview, and demand for visas in India and China has outpaced staff growth at consulates there. All applicants suffer as a result. Several people at the hearing singled out Chennai in India, where they said the wait for an interview routinely reaches 160 days.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) did not raise the kind of competitiveness flags that have been ubiquitous to similar hearings on science and technology issues lately, but he did say that arts students “enrich our experience” and are a “boon to the economy.”

Edson said that he understands, and that “the importance of higher ed has never had a higher profile in the [State Department]. We have added training on higher ed to the basic consular training.”

Experts said that they have seen marked improvement in the way consulates handle non-science students. Angela Ashley, a spokeswoman for the Savannah College of Art and Design, which has more than 600 international students, said that the number of foreign students did fall after 9/11, but that it has bounced back.

The famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma was on hand to testify at Tuesday’s House hearing, and stressed to the committee that exchange for visiting artists and art scholars is often time specific, so visa delays are a major hurdle.

Ma is the founder of the Silk Road Project, which brings together musicians from all over the Silk Road region, an ancient trade route between China and the Mediterranean Sea, to perform. “The barriers to bringing these musicians, these cultural guides, to the U.S. have become extraordinarily high,” he said, because of “high financial costs, uncertain timelines, and countless logistical hurdles.” Ma was one of several witnesses who emphasized the need for an expedited visa process for frequent visitors.

He recounted a story of two Iranian musicians who had been part of the Silk Road Project since 2000, and, though they had visited the U.S. almost 10 times, with no embassy in Iran, the two had to fly to Dubai for an interview, and then again to get their visas. In 2005, the printer happened to be down when they came to get their visas, so the ordeal required a third flight.

**Sandra L. Gibson, president and CEO of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and a witness at the hearing, added that performers and visiting scholars often want to map out tour dates before coming to the U.S., and the uncertainty of visa timing is a deterrent.**

Several months ago, the Manchester, England based Hallé Orchestra canceled scheduled performances in America when it was told that all 100 musicians and staff of the orchestra would have to travel to London to get visas in person.

Michael Fahlund, deputy director of the College Art Association, said that he hasn’t been tracking the issue specifically, but called it “unfortunate” that logistical hurdles are “in the way of making it easy for artists to exchange.”

Michael McCarry, executive director of the Alliance for International and Cultural Exchange, said that he hoped modern technology could alleviate the burden of in-person interviews.

When asked by the committee's chairman, Tom Davis (R-Va.), to characterize the visa experience of visiting artists, Ma responded, "Artists lose their dignity."

— [David Epstein](#)

**Knight Ridder - Centre Daily Times (State College, PA); The Miami Herald;  
Monterey County Herald (California); San Jose Mercury News**

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**Visa delays costly to U.S. companies, visiting performers;  
Extremely long processing times driving away special talents**

By Jennifer Martinez, Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON -- Post-Sept. 11 delays in processing visas by U.S. consulates overseas are forcing foreign performing artists to cancel American bookings and are sending potential Microsoft wizards to Indian and Chinese competitors, recruiters of those talents claimed Tuesday.

The delays are widespread, State Department and Government Accountability Office officials acknowledged at a House Government Operations Committee hearing, especially at some of the busiest consulates. They include Chennai, India, where the wait has been up to 168 days; Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, where it's 167 days; Bombay, India, 154 days; Mexico City, 134 days; and Havana, where it's 129 days.

Tony Edson, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for visa services, told lawmakers that delays at Chennai and other clogged consulates were unacceptable. He blamed the problem on staff shortages and consular office buildings that are too small to handle the traffic.

He also said 97 percent of international visa applicants who were found to be qualified received visas one or two days after in-person interviews.

Committee Chairman Tom Davis, R-Va., and other lawmakers said they were all for faster processing, but without compromising security.

Acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, in town for a Kennedy Center concert, testified that he'd run afoul of the problem in his Silk Road Project, which has brought hundreds of foreign musicians to the United States in recent years.

According to Ma, a pair of Iranian musicians, Siamak Aghaei and Siamak Jahangiri, had to visit the U.S. consulate in Dubai three times over three months in 2003 to obtain their visas. The first was for an in-person interview, which is required under post-Sept. 11 security rules, the second to pick up approved visa forms and the third because the consulate's visa printer was broken on their second visit.

The ordeal cost Ma's organization \$5,000 in travel expenses and, he said, nearly kept the Iranians off the Silk Road Project's U.S. tour.

"Our (nation's) cultural strength has always been derived from our diversity of

understanding and experience," Ma said, urging lawmakers to streamline the visa process.

**Sandra Gibson, the head of the U.S. Association of Performing Arts Presenters, a trade group, said visa delays had reduced the number of U.S. venues that offer foreign artists. According to Gibson, 75 percent of her group's members offered foreign talent in 2002. By 2005, it was down to 60 percent, "largely because of the onerous visa process and risk that these performances would have to be canceled."**

Microsoft has a variant of the same problem, testified Kevin Schofield, the company's general manager for strategy and communications. He said Microsoft had difficulty getting prospective employees' visas through the Chennai consulate in particular. He called the delays "a direct threat to American competitiveness."

Edson said the State Department was moving to meet India's burgeoning demand by opening new consulates in Hyderabad, a major center for offshore operations of U.S. computer companies, and in populous Bombay.

**Inland Valley Daily Bulletin (Ontario, CA); LA Daily News;  
<http://www.dailybulletin.com>**

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## **Foreign artists kept out of USA: Yo Yo Ma**

By Lisa Friedman, Staff Writer

Post-9/11 security rules aimed at stopping terrorists from entering America are keeping artists, musicians and others out as well, renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma told a congressional committee Tuesday.

### **Beyond Borders Special Section: Complete current immigration news, photos, video, audio and documents**

With a growing number of foreign artists canceling their U.S. performances --last week Britain's Halle Orchestra called off its American tour citing prohibitive visa fees and requirements -- Ma said America is in danger of losing meaningful cultural exchanges.

"Bringing foreign musicians to this country and sending our performers to visit them is crucial," Ma, a U.S. citizen born in France to Chinese parents, told the House Government Reform Committee.

"[But] the high cost and lengthy timeline make these programs difficult to execute," he said.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, visitors from Mexico City can expect to wait more than four months to get a consulate interview for a temporary business visa. Visitors from throughout India face waits as long as 100 to 160 days.

The delays in large part are the result of requirements Congress imposed upon the State Department after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Directives now include that every visa applicant to the U.S. be interviewed in person, and that biometric data such as fingerprints be collected.

But spurred by the Chamber of Commerce and a range of worried corporate leaders, lawmakers are seeking to relax some of those requirements.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, said delays in processing business visas have significant implications for the California economy.

"Obviously, we're an entertainment capital. But we're also the high-tech capital of the

world, and it has been an incredible challenge for our companies," he said.

The push to loosen rules for business visitors and some other foreign visitors comes as Congress continues to rage over illegal immigration. Immigration officials estimate at least a third of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants overstayed their visas.

Issa on Tuesday said those figures are irrelevant and he accused the State Department of excessively denying visas to people from poorer countries, presumably based on an assumption that they are at higher risk of overstaying their visas.

Nationwide, executives said they fear the hurdles are fostering a poor image of the United States even as they damage industries' bottom lines.

Dennis Slater, president of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers, said he expected a delegation of about 40 people from India to attend an agriculture equipment trade show in Las Vegas last year.

When nearly half were denied visas and received poor treatment from the U.S. consulate, Slater said, another 12 canceled their visa appointments in solidarity.

The group attended a competing European trade show instead, he said.

Ma, who brings foreign musicians to the U.S. as part of his Silk Road project, said two Iranian performers he invited had to wait three months and spend \$5,000 to get their visas.

With no U.S. embassy in Iran, he noted, both were forced to fly to Dubai first for an interview and later to pick up the visas. Last year, when the printer at the consulate was broken, they were forced to leave empty-handed and return to Dubai a third time.

**Sandra Gibson, president of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, cited a new field study showing the number of organizations hosting foreign artists has dropped from 75 percent to 60 percent since 2002.**

**She called the figure alarming, and said the anecdotal stories are equally troubling.**

**The Halle Orchestra, which last toured America in 1994 and performed at the Hollywood Bowl, this year discovered that each of their 100 performers would have to travel from Manchester about 185 miles to London for interviews.**

**Travel costs plus the new fingerprinting and other fees would have cost nearly \$80,000, she said, so they canceled.**

U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services called the personal interviews "an incredibly useful security tool" in weeding out those who wish to do harm to the U.S.

But, he acknowledged, the requirement as well as the need to collect biometrics is burdensome to applicants, and said the State Department would welcome the ability to be more flexible.

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