Bach, ever lofty
Master musicians Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer and Chris Thile performed their own special take on music of Bach, in an education-oriented benefit show

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
May 7, 2017 12:58 AM

As a very sold-out house at the Granada Theatre last Tuesday soaked up the sonic splendor of cellist Yo-Yo Ma, double bassist Edgar Meyer and mandolinist Chris Thile in an all-Bach evening, certain questions sprang to mind. Such as: what are the qualities that make a "super trio" super, something greater than the sum of the proverbial parts?

This threesome shares some overlapping yet disparate traits, as virtuosos on their respective instruments whose cultural curiosities have pulled them into assorted "crossover" ventures — from classical orthodoxy to Asian and bluegrass, Americana and elsewhere. They also share an unpretentious, naturally humorous and humane nature.

In a real way, the concert, a benefit for the UCSB Arts & Lectures Education and Outreach Program, was a super quartet, with the not-so-silent fourth partner being the master composer J.S. Bach. All avowed Bach fanatics, the trio has released the compelling album "Bach Trios," and hearing the music live and in thrilling, subtle living color made for what was surely one of the great performances in town this year.
As it happens, all three musicians have played Bach in town within the past decade — Mr. Ma in a stunning concert of all the Cello Suites at the Granada, Mr. Thile in a solo recital at the Lobero and Mr. Meyer at architect Barton Myers' stylish house of steel in Romero Canyon. Their Bach credentials are fully in order, despite the fact that Mr. Thile and Mr. Meyer have been rooted in the "progressive bluegrass" field, alongside their classical passions. The sweet rueful emotionality and profound musical math of Bach's compositional and contrapuntal ingenuity rang true throughout the program. Bach, we think, would heartily agree.

After opening the concert with an arrangement of a three-movement organ sonata, staking their claim as flexible and assured Bach purveyors, Mr. Ma addressed the adoring crowd with kind words beyond idle praise. "You know you live in paradise, right?" he asked. He also spoke of the musician's belief in the importance of "being hopeful and finding beauty and truth. This music takes us there." Indeed, it does, and did.

Mr. Ma's philosophical sentiment provided a telling segue into one of the most beautiful and soothing of Bach's better-known "tunes," "Sleepers Awake," from the peaceable 1731 cantata "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (Awake, calls the voice to us)." In this ear-opening context, with the percussive intimacy of the mandolin part and foundational loam of the double bass merging with Mr. Ma's singing cello lines, the arrangement may be the most moving new version of this popular jewel of recent vintage.

Also on the concert program were arrangements of music from Bach's last great project, "The Art of Fugue," preludes and fugues from the "Well-Tempered Clavier" and the gorgeous, reverential title piece from his bounty of Leipzig cantatas, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ (I call to You, Lord Jesus Christ)."

Mr. Thile has recently radically elevated his public presence as the replacement host for Garrison Keillor on public radio's "Prairie Home Companion." He brings a far more music-centric presence to that role than did Mr. Keillor, but the mandolinist also has an easy humor that holds him in good stead on the radio, and onstage. Late in the Granada show, he joined Mr. Ma's effusive appreciation of our town, and its highlights: "This is a truly miraculous, lovely town you live in, the kind of town you can play Bach with your friends forever." He went on to introduce the next piece, "Kommst du nun, Jesu, von Himmel herunter," cheekily adding, "Which translates to, 'You should have been in line earlier at La Super Rica.' Bach thought of everything."
As a palate cleanser and contrast's sake, the trio departed the realm of Bach during the encore, including a soul-tinged groove tune with a woozy slow section to close.

All in all, Tuesday's concert was something of a religious experience, as all great and deeply felt Bach performances should be. As a composer, Bach was all about music created "for the glory of God," after all. And, in this case, the setting was all about that double bass and mandolin, in taut collusion with the more established Bach tool, the cello.

Generally, the balance of musical and melodic powers in the trio found cello taking most of the primary melodic roles, with bass in the grounding position — but not always. Mostly, the impression was of a natural, conversational flow to their collective take on Bach, respectful of the original score, but relishing the freshness of the fresh ensemble voice of their own special devising.