

Music and Science, Reunited in a Swarm of Ants

By JAMES R. OESTREICH



Yo-Yo Ma, with giant ants, honoring the biologist Edward O. Wilson, on backdrop, at Alice Tully Hall on Wednesday.

national dance institute

"Ants" was performed by children of **National Dance Institute** and choreographed by Associate Artistic Director, **Tracy Straus**.

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The cellist Yo-Yo Ma was playing unaccompanied Bach at Alice Tully Hall on Wednesday evening, and all was right with the world. Then a young person crawled onto the stage, soon followed by others. The creepers surrounded Mr. Ma and started grooving to the music, the Prelude of the Cello Suite No. 1 in G.

At the rise to the insistent high G at the end, one of the most ecstatic moments in all of music, they were visibly bowled over. Then they rose to dance to the Gigue, the suite's finale. If it were not obvious by now — from their antennae and their quirky movements — what they represented, their T-shirts, reading "ANT," cinched the case.

This quaint vignette was part of the opening-night gala performance of the second annual World Science Festival. Occurring on the 80th birthday of the biologist Edward O. Wilson, the program was geared toward honoring his achievements in pioneering the field of sociobiology through his lifelong study of ant populations and, by extension, toward honoring ants.

It's surprising that there wasn't more dance in this variety show, since it was directed and produced by Damian Woetzel, a former principal dancer of New York City Ballet and the artistic director of the Vail International Dance Festival in Colorado. Alan Alda introduced the event, calling science and art "long-lost lovers," aching to be reunited.

The performances began with a musical theater segment. Jonathan Hadary brilliantly spit out Tom Lehrer's patter set to an Arthur Sullivan tune, "The Elements," leaping around the periodic table with greater agility than the high-tech projector that was tracking his movements. Danny Burstein added "Need to Know," by Alan Menken and David Spencer; and Christine Baranski, "It's a Chemical Reaction, That's All," by Cole Porter.

Perhaps the most atmospheric segment came in an alternating exchange between strings and string theory. The violinist Joshua Bell played movements from Ysaÿe's Solo Sonata No. 2 in A minor ("Obsession"), haunted partly by Bach, partly by death (or at least, the Dies Irae theme). Brian Greene, a professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia and a founder of the festival (with his wife, Tracy Day), offered fascinating remarks on human perception, time and, finally, string theory, which suggests other dimensions, neither straight nor merely curved but "curled up" in a way.

Then the Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist James Watson — with Francis Crick, a co-discoverer of the structure of the DNA molecule — took the stage to pay tribute to Mr. Wilson in what seemed more like a roast. Mr. Wilson once wrote, Mr. Watson said, that in their early encounters he found Mr. Watson "the most unpleasant person he'd ever seen." For his part Mr. Watson said: "I really didn't think that there was any point in knowing him. Biology was the dumb part of science."

"The essence of biology doesn't need string theory," Mr. Watson added. "It needs only one theory, evolution."

Though professing friendship today but seeming determined not to overpraise, Mr. Watson said, "We should all be happy that Ed did not die prematurely."

Mr. Wilson himself, though very much alive and present, took the stage only in the unlikely person of the actress Anna Deavere Smith, who enacted a transcript of an interview she had conducted with him.

The conductor Marin Alsop and the Orchestra of St. Luke's took over after intermission, playing music by Philip Glass for a showing of Frans Lanting's "Life: A Journey Through Time," a projected parade of nature photographs by Mr. Lanting. The song "What a Wonderful World" ended the evening, with Marcus Printup, a trumpeter, and the Inspirational Voices of the Abyssinian Baptist Church filling in for Louis Armstrong.

This occasioned the first balloon drop in the renovated Tully Hall, each balloon a sea of blue bearing highly approximate green continents. It was odd to see grown scientists take such glee in stamping on them, repeatedly blowing up the planet.