

Pearls Before Breakfast

Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out.

By Gene Weingarten, Washington Post Staff Writer, Sunday, April 8, 2007

HE EMERGED FROM THE METRO AT THE L'ENFANT PLAZA STATION AND POSITIONED HIMSELF AGAINST A WALL BESIDE A TRASH BASKET. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. Almost all of them were on the way to work, which meant, for almost all of them, a government job. L'Enfant Plaza is at the nucleus of federal Washington, and these were mostly mid-level bureaucrats with those indeterminate, oddly fungible titles: policy analyst, project manager, budget officer, specialist, facilitator, consultant.

Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation, aware of your cupidity but annoyed by the unbidden demand on your time and your wallet? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he's really bad? What if he's really good? Do you have time for beauty? Shouldn't you? What's the moral mathematics of the moment?

The musician did not play popular tunes whose familiarity alone might have drawn interest. That was not the test. These were masterpieces that have endured for centuries on their brilliance alone, soaring music befitting the grandeur of cathedrals and concert halls.

So, what do you think happened? Would a crowd gather?

A little about Bell... A onetime child prodigy, at 39 Joshua Bell has arrived as an internationally acclaimed virtuoso. Three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where merely pretty good seats went for \$100. Two weeks later, at the Music Center at Strathmore, in North Bethesda, he would play to a standing-room-only audience so respectful of his artistry that they stifled their coughs until the silence between movements. But on that Friday in January, Joshua Bell was just another mendicant, competing for the attention of busy people on their way to work.

Bell's a heartthrob. Tall and handsome, he's got a Donny Osmond-like dose of the cutes, and, onstage, cute elides into hott. When he performs, he is usually the only man under the lights who is not in white tie and tails -- he walks out to a standing O, looking like Zorro, in black pants and an untucked black dress shirt, shirttail dangling. That cute Beatles-style mop top is also a strategic asset: Because his technique is full of body -- athletic and passionate -- he's almost dancing with the instrument, and his hair flies.

Bell decided to begin with "Chaconne" from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Bell calls it "not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history."

Bell didn't say it, but Bach's "Chaconne" is also considered one of the most difficult violin pieces to master. Many try; few succeed. It's exhaustingly long -- 14 minutes -- and consists entirely of a single, succinct musical progression repeated in dozens of variations to create a dauntingly complex architecture of sound. Composed around 1720, on the eve of the European Enlightenment, it is said to be a celebration of the breadth of human possibility.

So, that's the piece Bell started with.

He'd clearly meant it when he promised not to cheap out this performance: He played with acrobatic enthusiasm, his body leaning into the music and arching on tiptoes at the high notes. The sound was nearly symphonic, carrying to all parts of the homely arcade as the pedestrian traffic filed past.

Three minutes went by before something happened. Sixty-three people had already passed when, finally, there was a breakthrough of sorts. A middle-age man altered his gait for a split second, turning his head to notice that there seemed to be some guy playing music. Yes, the man kept walking, but it was something.

A half-minute later, Bell got his first donation. A woman threw in a buck and scooted off. It was not until six minutes into the performance that someone actually stood against a wall, and listened.

Things never got much better. In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

"It was a strange feeling, that people were actually, ah . . ." ". . . ignoring me."

Bell is laughing. It's at himself.

"At a music hall, I'll get upset if someone coughs or if someone's cellphone goes off. But here, my expectations quickly diminished. I started to appreciate any acknowledgment, even a slight glance up. I was oddly grateful when someone threw in a dollar instead of change." This is from a man whose talents can command \$1,000 a minute.

Before he began, Bell hadn't known what to expect. What he does know is that, for some reason, he was nervous.

"It wasn't exactly stage fright, but there were butterflies," he says. "I was stressing a little."

Bell has played, literally, before crowned heads of Europe. Why the anxiety at the Washington Metro?

"When you play for ticket-holders," Bell explains, "you are already validated. I have no sense that I need to be accepted. I'm already accepted. Here, there was this thought: What if they don't like me? What if they resent my presence . . ."

"The awkward times," he calls them. It's what happens right after each piece ends: nothing. The music stops. The same people who hadn't noticed him playing don't notice that he has finished. No applause, no acknowledgment. So Bell just saws out a small, nervous chord -- the embarrassed musician's equivalent of, "Er, okay, moving right along . . ." -- and begins the next piece.

There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch Bell, or the ones who gave money, from that vast majority who hurried on past, unheeding. Whites, blacks and Asians, young and old, men and women, were represented in all three groups. But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away.

BELL ENDS "AVE MARIA" TO ANOTHER THUNDEROUS SILENCE.

Watching the video weeks later, Bell finds himself mystified by one thing only. He understands why he's not drawing a crowd, in the rush of a morning workday. But: "I'm surprised at the number of people who don't pay attention at all, as if I'm invisible. Because, you know what? I'm makin' a lot of noise!"

He is. You don't need to know music at all to appreciate the simple fact that there's a guy there, playing a violin that's throwing out a whole bucket of sound; at times, Bell's bowing is so intricate that you seem to be hearing two instruments playing in harmony. So those head-forward, quick-stepping passersby are a remarkable phenomenon.

Bell wonders whether their inattention may be deliberate: If you don't take visible note of the musician, you don't have to feel guilty about not forking over money; you're not complicit in a rip-off.

It may be true, but no one gave that explanation. People just said they were busy, had other things on their mind. Some who were on cellphones spoke louder as they passed Bell, to compete with that infernal racket.

And then there was Calvin Myint. Myint works for the General Services Administration. He got to the top of the escalator, turned right and headed out a door to the street. A few hours later, he had no memory that there had been a musician anywhere in sight.

"Where was he, in relation to me?"

"About four feet away."

"Oh."

There's nothing wrong with Myint's hearing. He had buds in his ear. He was listening to his iPod.

For many of us, the explosion in technology has perversely limited, not expanded, our exposure to new experiences. Increasingly, we get our news from sources that think as we already do. And with iPods, we hear what we already know; we program our own playlists.

The song that Calvin Myint was listening to was "Just Like Heaven," by the British rock band The Cure. It's a terrific song, actually. It's about a tragic emotional disconnect. A man has found the woman of his dreams but can't express the depth of his feeling for her until she's gone. It's about failing to see the beauty of what's plainly in front of your eyes.

What is this life if, full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare.

-- from "Leisure," by W.H. Davies

Let's accept that we can't look at what happened on January 12 and make any judgment whatever about people's sophistication or their ability to appreciate beauty. But what about their ability to appreciate life?

We're busy. Americans have been busy, as a people, since at least 1831, when a young French sociologist named Alexis de Tocqueville visited the States and found himself impressed, bemused and slightly dismayed at the degree to which people were driven, to the exclusion of everything else, by hard work and the accumulation of wealth.

If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then what else are we missing?