

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.

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By Gene Weingarten

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?

On that Friday in January, those private questions would be answered in an unusually public way. No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made. His performance was arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception and priorities -- as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste: In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?

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.

The acoustics proved surprisingly kind. Though the arcade is of utilitarian design, a buffer between the Metro escalator and the outdoors, it somehow caught the sound and bounced it back round and resonant. The violin is an instrument that is said to be much like the human voice, and in this musician's masterly hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang -- ecstatic, sorrowful, importuning, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous.

So, what do you think happened?

HANG ON, WE'LL GET YOU SOME EXPERT HELP.

Leonard Slatkin, music director of the National Symphony Orchestra, was asked the same question. What did he think would occur, hypothetically, if one of the world's great violinists had performed incognito before a traveling rush-hour audience of 1,000-odd people?

"Let's assume," Slatkin said, "that he is not recognized and just taken for granted as a street musician . . . Still, I don't think that if he's really good, he's going to go unnoticed. He'd get a larger audience in Europe . . . but, okay, out of 1,000 people, my guess is there might be 35 or 40 who will recognize the quality for what it is. Maybe 75 to 100 will stop and spend some time listening."

So, a crowd would gather?

"Oh, yes."

And how much will he make?

"About \$150."

Thanks, Maestro. As it happens, this is not hypothetical. It really happened.

"How'd I do?"

We'll tell you in a minute.

“Well, who was the musician?”

Joshua Bell.

“NO!!!”

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 was first pitched this idea shortly before Christmas, over coffee at a sandwich shop on Capitol Hill. A New Yorker, he was in town to perform at the Library of Congress and to visit the library’s vaults to examine an unusual treasure: an 18th-century violin that once belonged to the great Austrian-born virtuoso and composer Fritz Kreisler. The curators invited Bell to play it; good sound, still.

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” Bell confided, as he sipped his coffee. “I’m thinking that I could do a tour where I’d play Kreisler’s music . . .”

He smiled.

“. . . on Kreisler’s violin.”

It was a snazzy, sequined idea -- part inspiration and part gimmick -- and it was typical of Bell, who has unapologetically embraced showmanship even as his concert career has become more and more august. He’s soloed with the finest orchestras here and abroad, but he’s also appeared on “Sesame Street,” done late-night talk TV and performed in feature films. That was Bell playing the soundtrack on the 1998 movie “The Red Violin.” (He body-doubled, too, playing to a naked Greta Scacchi.) As composer John Corigliano accepted the Oscar for Best Original Dramatic Score, he credited Bell, who, he said, “plays like a god.”

When Bell was asked if he’d be willing to don street clothes and perform at rush hour, he said:

“Uh, a stunt?”

Well, yes. A stunt. Would he think it . . . unseemly?

Bell drained his cup.

“Sounds like fun,” he said.

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.

He's single and straight, a fact not lost on some of his fans. In Boston, as he performed Max Bruch's dour Violin Concerto in G Minor, the very few young women in the audience nearly disappeared in the deep sea of silver heads. But seemingly every single one of them -- a distillate of the young and pretty -- coalesced at the stage door after the performance, seeking an autograph. It's like that always, with Bell.

Bell's been accepting over-the-top accolades since puberty: Interview magazine once said his playing "does nothing less than tell human beings why they bother to live." He's learned to field these things graciously, with a bashful duck of the head and a modified "pshaw."

For this incognito performance, Bell had only one condition for participating. The event had been described to him as a test of whether, in an incongruous context, ordinary people would recognize genius. His condition: "I'm not comfortable if you call this genius." "Genius" is an overused word, he said: It can be applied to some of the composers whose work he plays, but not to him. His skills are largely interpretive, he said, and to imply otherwise would be unseemly and inaccurate.

It was an interesting request, and under the circumstances, one that will be honored. The word will not again appear in this article.

It would be breaking no rules, however, to note that the term in question, particularly as applied in the field of music, refers to a congenital brilliance -- an elite, innate, preternatural ability that manifests itself early, and often in dramatic fashion.

One biographically intriguing fact about Bell is that he got his first music lessons when he was a 4-year-old in Bloomington, Ind. His parents, both psychologists, decided formal training might be a good idea after they saw that their son had strung rubber bands across his dresser drawers and was replicating classical tunes by ear, moving drawers in and out to vary the pitch.

TO GET TO THE METRO FROM HIS HOTEL, a distance of three blocks, Bell took a taxi. He's neither lame nor lazy: He did it for his violin.

Bell always performs on the same instrument, and he ruled out using another for this gig. Called the Gibson ex Huberman, it was handcrafted in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari during the Italian master's "golden period," toward the end of his career, when he had access to the finest spruce, maple and willow, and when his technique had been refined to perfection.

"Our knowledge of acoustics is still incomplete," Bell said, "but he, he just . . . *knew*."

Bell doesn't mention Stradivari by name. Just "he." When the violinist shows his Strad to people, he holds the instrument gingerly by its neck, resting it on a knee. "He made this to perfect thickness at all parts," Bell says, pivoting it. "If you shaved off a millimeter of wood at any point, it would totally imbalance the sound." No violins sound as wonderful as Strads from the 1710s, still.

The front of Bell's violin is in nearly perfect condition, with a deep, rich grain and luster. The back is a mess, its dark reddish finish bleeding away into a flatter, lighter shade and finally, in one section, to bare wood.

"This has never been refinished," Bell said. "That's his original varnish. People attribute aspects of the sound to the varnish. Each maker had his own secret formula." Stradivari is thought to have made his from an ingeniously balanced cocktail of honey, egg whites and gum arabic from sub-Saharan trees.

Like the instrument in "The Red Violin," this one has a past filled with mystery and malice. Twice, it was stolen from its illustrious prior owner, the Polish virtuoso Bronislaw Huberman. The first time, in 1919, it disappeared from Huberman's hotel room in Vienna but was quickly returned. The second time, nearly 20 years later, it was pinched from his dressing room in Carnegie Hall. He never got it back. It was not until 1985 that the thief -- a minor New York violinist -- made a deathbed confession to his wife, and produced the instrument.

Bell bought it a few years ago. He had to sell his own Strad and borrow much of the rest. The price tag was reported to be about \$3.5 million.

All of which is a long explanation for why, in the early morning chill of a day in January, Josh Bell took a three-block cab ride to the Orange Line, and rode one stop to L'Enfant.

AS METRO STATIONS GO, L'ENFANT PLAZA IS MORE PLEBEIAN THAN MOST. Even before you arrive, it gets no respect. Metro conductors never seem to get it right: "Leh-fahn." "Layfont." "El'phant."

At the top of the escalators are a shoeshine stand and a busy kiosk that sells newspapers, lottery tickets and a wallfull of magazines with titles such as Mammazons and Girls of Barely Legal. The skin mags move, but it's that lottery ticket dispenser that stays the busiest, with customers queuing up for Daily 6 lotto and Powerball and the ultimate suckers' bait, those pamphlets that sell random number combinations purporting to be "hot." They sell briskly. There's also a quick-check machine to slide in your lotto ticket, post-drawing, to see if you've won. Beneath it is a forlorn pile of crumpled slips.

On Friday, January 12, the people waiting in the lottery line looking for a long shot would get a lucky break -- a free, close-up ticket to a concert by one of the world's most famous musicians -- but only if they were of a mind to take note.

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. It’s a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect. Plus, it was written for a solo violin, so I won’t be cheating with some half-assed version.”

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.

If Bell’s encomium to “Chaconne” seems overly effusive, consider this from the 19th-century composer Johannes Brahms, in a letter to Clara Schumann: “On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.”

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.

No, Mr. Slatkin, there was never a crowd, not even for a second.

It was all videotaped by a hidden camera. You can play the recording once or 15 times, and it never gets any easier to watch. Try speeding it up, and it becomes one of those herky-jerky World War I-era silent newsreels. The people scurry by in comical little hops and starts, cups of coffee in their hands, cellphones at their ears, ID tags slapping at their bellies, a grim *danse macabre* to indifference, inertia and the dingy, gray rush of modernity.

Even at this accelerated pace, though, the fiddler's movements remain fluid and graceful; he seems so apart from his audience -- unseen, unheard, otherworldly -- that you find yourself thinking that he's not really there. A ghost.

Only then do you see it: He is the one who is real. They are the ghosts.

IF A GREAT MUSICIAN PLAYS GREAT MUSIC BUT NO ONE HEARS . . . WAS HE REALLY ANY GOOD?

It's an old epistemological debate, older, actually, than the koan about the tree in the forest. Plato weighed in on it, and philosophers for two millennia afterward: What is beauty? Is it a measurable fact (Gottfried Leibniz), or merely an opinion (David Hume), or is it a little of each, colored by the immediate state of mind of the observer (Immanuel Kant)?

We'll go with Kant, because he's obviously right, and because he brings us pretty directly to Joshua Bell, sitting there in a hotel restaurant, picking at his breakfast, wryly trying to figure out what the hell had just happened back there at the Metro.

"At the beginning," Bell says, "I was just concentrating on playing the music. I wasn't really watching what was happening around me . . ."

Playing the violin looks all-consuming, mentally and physically, but Bell says that for him the mechanics of it are partly second nature, cemented by practice and muscle memory: It's like a juggler, he says, who can keep those balls in play while interacting with a crowd. What he's mostly thinking about as he plays, Bell says, is capturing emotion as a narrative: "When you play a violin piece, you are a storyteller, and you're telling a story."

With "Chaconne," the opening is filled with a building sense of awe. That kept him busy for a while. Eventually, though, he began to steal a sidelong glance.

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

The word doesn't come easily.

". . . *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 . . .*"

He was, in short, art without a frame. Which, it turns out, may have a lot to do with what happened -- or, more precisely, what didn’t happen -- on January 12.

MARK LEITHAUSER HAS HELD IN HIS HANDS MORE GREAT WORKS OF ART THAN ANY KING OR POPE OR MEDICI EVER DID. A senior curator at the National Gallery, he oversees the framing of the paintings. Leithauser thinks he has some idea of what happened at that Metro station.

“Let’s say I took one of our more abstract masterpieces, say an Ellsworth Kelly, and removed it from its frame, marched it down the 52 steps that people walk up to get to the National Gallery, past the giant columns, and brought it into a restaurant. It’s a \$5 million painting. And it’s one of those restaurants where there are pieces of original art for sale, by some industrious kids from the Corcoran School, and I hang that Kelly on the wall with a price tag of \$150. No one is going to notice it. An art curator might look up and say: ‘Hey, that looks a little like an Ellsworth Kelly. Please pass the salt.’”

Leithauser’s point is that we shouldn’t be too ready to label the Metro passersby unsophisticated boobs. Context matters.

Kant said the same thing. He took beauty seriously: In his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Kant argued that one’s ability to appreciate beauty is related to one’s ability to make moral judgments. But there was a caveat. Paul Guyer of the University of Pennsylvania, one of America’s most prominent Kantian scholars, says the 18th-century German philosopher felt that to properly appreciate beauty, the viewing conditions must be optimal.

“Optimal,” Guyer said, “doesn’t mean heading to work, focusing on your report to the boss, maybe your shoes don’t fit right.”

So, if Kant had been at the Metro watching as Joshua Bell play to a thousand unimpressed passersby?

“He would have inferred about them,” Guyer said, “absolutely nothing.”

And that’s that.

Except it isn’t. To really understand what happened, you have to rewind that video and play it back from the beginning, from the moment Bell’s bow first touched the strings.

White guy, khakis, leather jacket, briefcase. Early 30s. John David Mortensen is on the final leg of his daily bus-to-Metro commute from Reston. He’s heading up the escalator. It’s a long ride -- 1 minute and 15 seconds if you don’t walk. So, like most everyone who passes Bell this day, Mortensen gets a good earful of music before he has his first look at the musician. Like most of them, he notes that it sounds pretty good. But like very few of them, when he gets to the top, he doesn’t race past as though Bell were some nuisance to be avoided. Mortensen is that first person to stop, that guy at the six-minute mark.

It’s not that he has nothing else to do. He’s a project manager for an international program at the Department of Energy; on this day, Mortensen has to participate in a monthly budget exercise, not the most exciting part of his job: “You review the past month’s expenditures,” he says, “forecast spending for the next month, if you have X dollars, where will it go, that sort of thing.”

On the video, you can see Mortensen get off the escalator and look around. He locates the violinist, stops, walks away but then is drawn back. He checks the time on his cellphone -- he’s three minutes early for work -- then settles against a wall to listen.

Mortensen doesn’t know classical music at all; classic rock is as close as he comes. But there’s something about what he’s hearing that he really likes.

As it happens, he’s arrived at the moment that Bell slides into the second section of “Chaconne.” (“It’s the point,” Bell says, “where it moves from a darker, minor key into a major key. There’s a religious, exalted feeling to it.”) The violinist’s bow begins to dance; the music becomes upbeat, playful, theatrical, big.

Mortensen doesn’t know about major or minor keys: “Whatever it was,” he says, “it made me feel at peace.”

So, for the first time in his life, Mortensen lingers to listen to a street musician. He stays his allotted three minutes as 94 more people pass briskly by. When he leaves to help plan contingency budgets for the Department of Energy, there’s another first. For the first time in his life, not quite knowing what had just happened but sensing it was special, John David Mortensen gives a street musician money.

THERE ARE SIX MOMENTS IN THE VIDEO THAT BELL FINDS PARTICULARLY PAINFUL TO RELIEVE: “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.

After “Chaconne,” it is Franz Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” which surprised some music critics when it debuted in 1825: Schubert seldom showed religious feeling in his compositions, yet “Ave Maria” is a breathtaking work of adoration of the Virgin Mary. What was with the sudden piety? Schubert dryly answered: “I think this is due to the fact that I never forced devotion in myself and never compose hymns or prayers of that kind unless it overcomes me unawares; but then it is usually the right and true devotion.” This musical prayer became among the most familiar and enduring religious pieces in history.

A couple of minutes into it, something revealing happens. A woman and her preschooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She’s got his hand.

“I had a time crunch,” recalls Sheron Parker, an IT director for a federal agency. “I had an 8:30 training class, and first I had to rush Evvie off to his teacher, then rush back to work, then to the training facility in the basement.”

Evvie is her son, Evan. Evan is 3.

You can see Evan clearly on the video. He’s the cute black kid in the parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door.

“There was a musician,” Parker says, “and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time.”

So Parker does what she has to do. She deftly moves her body between Evan’s and Bell’s, cutting off her son’s line of sight. As they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look. When Parker is told what she walked out on, she laughs.

“Evan is very smart!”

The poet Billy Collins once laughingly observed that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, because the lub-dub of the mother’s heart is in iambic meter. Then, Collins said, life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us. It may be true with music, too.

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.

IF THERE WAS ONE PERSON ON THAT DAY WHO WAS TOO BUSY TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE VIOLINIST, it was George Tindley. Tindley wasn't hurrying to get to work. He was *at* work.

The glass doors through which most people exit the L'Enfant station lead into an indoor shopping mall, from which there are exits to the street and elevators to office buildings. The first store in the mall is an Au Bon Pain, the croissant and coffee shop where Tindley, in his 40s, works in a white uniform busing the tables, restocking the salt and pepper packets, taking out the garbage. Tindley labors under the watchful eye of his bosses, and he's supposed to be hopping, and he was.

But every minute or so, as though drawn by something not entirely within his control, Tindley would walk to the very edge of the Au Bon Pain property, keeping his toes inside the line, still on the job. Then he'd lean forward, as far out into the hallway as he could, watching the fiddler on the other side of the glass doors. The foot traffic was steady, so the doors were usually open. The sound came through pretty well.

"You could tell in one second that this guy was good, that he was clearly a professional," Tindley says. He plays the guitar, loves the sound of strings, and has no respect for a certain kind of musician.

"Most people, they play music; they don't feel it," Tindley says. "Well, that man was *feeling* it. That man was moving. Moving into the sound."

A hundred feet away, across the arcade, was the lottery line, sometimes five or six people long. They had a much better view of Bell than Tindley did, if they had just turned around. But no one did. Not in the entire 43 minutes. They just shuffled forward toward that machine spitting out numbers. Eyes on the prize.

J.T. Tillman was in that line. A computer specialist for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he remembers every single number he played that day -- 10 of them, \$2 apiece, for a total of \$20. He doesn't recall what the violinist was playing, though. He says it sounded like generic classical music, the kind the ship's band was playing in "Titanic," before the iceberg.

"I didn't think nothing of it," Tillman says, "just a guy trying to make a couple of bucks." Tillman would have given him one or two, he said, but he spent all his cash on lotto.

When he is told that he stiffed one of the best musicians in the world, he laughs.

“Is he ever going to play around here again?”

“Yeah, but you’re going to have to pay a lot to hear him.”

“Damn.”

Tillman didn’t win the lottery, either.

BELL ENDS “AVE MARIA” TO ANOTHER THUNDEROUS SILENCE, plays Manuel Ponce’s sentimental “Estrellita,” then a piece by Jules Massenet, and then begins a Bach gavotte, a joyful, frolicsome, lyrical dance. It’s got an Old World delicacy to it; you can imagine it entertaining bewigged dancers at a Versailles ball, or -- in a lute, fiddle and fife version -- the boot-kicking peasants of a Pieter Bruegel painting.

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. The meaning is a little opaque, and the Web is filled with earnest efforts to deconstruct it. Many are far-fetched, but some are right on point: 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.

“YES, I SAW THE VIOLINIST,” Jackie Hessian says, “but nothing about him struck me as much of anything.”

You couldn’t tell that by watching her. Hessian was one of those people who gave Bell a long, hard look before walking on. It turns out that she wasn’t noticing the music at all.

“I really didn’t hear that much,” she said. “I was just trying to figure out what he was doing there, how does this work for him, can he make much money, would it be better to start with some money in the case, or for it to be empty, so people feel sorry for you? I was analyzing it financially.”

What do you do, Jackie?

“I’m a lawyer in labor relations with the United States Postal Service. I just negotiated a national contract.”

THE BEST SEATS IN THE HOUSE WERE UPHOLSTERED. In the balcony, more or less. On that day, for \$5, you’d get a lot more than just a nice shine on your shoes.

Only one person occupied one of those seats when Bell played. Terence Holmes is a consultant for the Department of Transportation, and he liked the music just fine, but it was really about a shoeshine: “My father told me never to wear a suit with your shoes not cleaned and shined.”

Holmes wears suits often, so he is up in that perch a lot, and he’s got a good relationship with the shoeshine lady. Holmes is a good tipper and a good talker, which is a skill that came in handy that day. The shoeshine lady was upset about something, and the music got her more upset. She complained, Holmes said, that the music was too loud, and he tried to calm her down.

Edna Souza is from Brazil. She’s been shining shoes at L’Enfant Plaza for six years, and she’s had her fill of street musicians there; when they play, she can’t hear her customers, and that’s bad for business. So she fights.

Souza points to the dividing line between the Metro property, at the top of the escalator, and the arcade, which is under control of the management company that runs the mall. Sometimes, Souza says, a musician will stand on the Metro side, sometimes on the mall side. Either way, she's got him. On her speed dial, she has phone numbers for both the mall cops and the Metro cops. The musicians seldom last long.

What about Joshua Bell?

He was too loud, too, Souza says. Then she looks down at her rag, sniffs. She hates to say anything positive about these damned musicians, but: "He was pretty good, that guy. It was the first time I didn't call the police."

Souza was surprised to learn he was a famous musician, but not that people rushed blindly by him. That, she said, was predictable. "If something like this happened in Brazil, everyone would stand around to see. Not here."

Souza nods sourly toward a spot near the top of the escalator: "Couple of years ago, a homeless guy died right there. He just lay down there and died. The police came, an ambulance came, and no one even stopped to see or slowed down to look.

"People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?"

What is this life if, full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare.

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

Let's say Kant is right. 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.

Not much has changed. Pop in a DVD of "Koyaanisqatsi," the wordless, darkly brilliant, avant-garde 1982 film about the frenetic speed of modern life. Backed by the minimalist music of Philip Glass, director Godfrey Reggio takes film clips of Americans going about their daily business, but speeds them up until they resemble assembly-line machines, robots marching lockstep to nowhere. Now look at the video from L'Enfant Plaza, in fast-forward. The Philip Glass soundtrack fits it perfectly.

"Koyaanisqatsi" is a Hopi word. It means "life out of balance."

In his 2003 book, *Timeless Beauty: In the Arts and Everyday Life*, British author John Lane writes about the loss of the appreciation for beauty in the modern world. The experiment at L'Enfant Plaza may be symptomatic of that, he said -- not because people didn't have the capacity to understand beauty, but because it was irrelevant to them.

"This is about having the wrong priorities," Lane said.

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?

That's what the Welsh poet W.H. Davies meant in 1911 when he published those two lines that begin this section. They made him famous. The thought was simple, even primitive, but somehow no one had put it quite that way before.

Of course, Davies had an advantage -- an advantage of perception. He wasn't a tradesman or a laborer or a bureaucrat or a consultant or a policy analyst or a labor lawyer or a program manager. He was a hobo.

THE CULTURAL HERO OF THE DAY ARRIVED AT L'ENFANT PLAZA PRETTY LATE, in the unprepossessing figure of one John Picarello, a smallish man with a baldish head.

Picarello hit the top of the escalator just after Bell began his final piece, a reprise of "Chaconne." In the video, you see Picarello stop dead in his tracks, locate the source of the music, and then retreat to the other end of the arcade. He takes up a position past the shoeshine stand, across from that lottery line, and he will not budge for the next nine minutes.

Like all the passersby interviewed for this article, Picarello was stopped by a reporter after he left the building, and was asked for his phone number. Like everyone, he was told only that this was to be an article about commuting. When he was called later in the day, like everyone else, he was first asked if anything unusual had happened to him on his trip into work. Of the more than 40 people contacted, Picarello was the only one who immediately mentioned the violinist.

"There was a musician playing at the top of the escalator at L'Enfant Plaza."

Haven't you seen musicians there before?

"Not like this one."

What do you mean?

"This was a superb violinist. I've never heard anyone of that caliber. He was technically proficient, with very good phrasing. He had a good fiddle, too, with a big, lush sound. I walked a distance away, to hear him. I didn't want to be intrusive on his space."

Really?

“Really. It was that kind of experience. It was a treat, just a brilliant, incredible way to start the day.”

Picarello knows classical music. He is a fan of Joshua Bell but didn't recognize him; he hadn't seen a recent photo, and besides, for most of the time Picarello was pretty far away. But he knew this was not a run-of-the-mill guy out there, performing. On the video, you can see Picarello look around him now and then, almost bewildered.

“Yeah, other people just were not getting it. It just wasn't registering. That was baffling to me.”

When Picarello was growing up in New York, he studied violin seriously, intending to be a concert musician. But he gave it up at 18, when he decided he'd never be good enough to make it pay. Life does that to you sometimes. Sometimes, you have to do the prudent thing. So he went into another line of work. He's a supervisor at the U.S. Postal Service. Doesn't play the violin much, anymore.

When he left, Picarello says, “I humbly threw in \$5.” It was humble: You can actually see that on the video. Picarello walks up, barely looking at Bell, and tosses in the money. Then, as if embarrassed, he quickly walks away from the man he once wanted to be.

Does he have regrets about how things worked out?

The postal supervisor considers this.

“No. If you love something but choose not to do it professionally, it's not a waste. Because, you know, you still have it. You have it forever.”

BELL THINKS HE DID HIS BEST WORK OF THE DAY IN THOSE FINAL FEW MINUTES, in the second “Chaconne.” And that also was the first time more than one person at a time was listening. As Picarello stood in the back, Janice Olu arrived and took up a position a few feet away from Bell. Olu, a public trust officer with HUD, also played the violin as a kid. She didn't know the name of the piece she was hearing, but she knew the man playing it has a gift.

Olu was on a coffee break and stayed as long as she dared. As she turned to go, she whispered to the stranger next to her, “I *really* don't want to leave.” The stranger standing next to her happened to be working for The Washington Post.

In preparing for this event, editors at The Post Magazine discussed how to deal with likely outcomes. The most widely held assumption was that there could well be a problem with crowd control: In a demographic as sophisticated as Washington, the thinking went, several people would surely recognize Bell. Nervous “what-if” scenarios abounded. As people gathered, what if others stopped just to see what the attraction was? Word would spread through the crowd. Cameras would flash. More people flock to the scene; rush-hour pedestrian traffic backs up; tempers flare; the National Guard is called; tear gas, rubber bullets, etc.

As it happens, exactly one person recognized Bell, and she didn't arrive until near the very end. For Stacy Furukawa, a demographer at the Commerce Department, there was no doubt. She doesn't know much about classical music, but she had been in the audience three weeks earlier, at Bell's free concert at the Library of Congress. And here he was, the international virtuoso, sawing away, begging for money. She had no idea what the heck was going on, but whatever it was, she wasn't about to miss it.

Furukawa positioned herself 10 feet away from Bell, front row, center. She had a huge grin on her face. The grin, and Furukawa, remained planted in that spot until the end.

"It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington," Furukawa says. "Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people were not stopping, and not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I wouldn't do that to anybody. I was thinking, *Omigosh, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?*"

When it was over, Furukawa introduced herself to Bell, and tossed in a twenty. Not counting that -- it was tainted by recognition -- the final haul for his 43 minutes of playing was \$32.17. Yes, some people gave pennies.

"Actually," Bell said with a laugh, "that's not so bad, considering. That's 40 bucks an hour. I could make an okay living doing this, and I wouldn't have to pay an agent."

These days, at L'Enfant Plaza, lotto ticket sales remain brisk. Musicians still show up from time to time, and they still tick off Edna Souza. Joshua Bell's latest album, "The Voice of the Violin," has received the usual critical acclaim. ("Delicate urgency." "Masterful intimacy." "Unfailingly exquisite." "A musical summit." ". . . will make your heart thump and weep at the same time.")

Bell headed off on a concert tour of European capitals. But he is back in the States this week. He has to be. On Tuesday, he will be accepting the Avery Fisher prize, recognizing the Flop of L'Enfant Plaza as the best classical musician in America.

Emily Shroder, Rachel Manteuffel, John W. Poole and Magazine Editor Tom Shroder contributed to this report. Gene Weingarten, a Magazine staff writer, can be reached at weingarten@washpost.com. He will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m.
