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Review: Joshua Bell's intimate 'Voice'

A virtuoso, his violin, and the whisper of a Grammy to come

By Porter Anderson
CNN

NEW YORK (CNN) -- Violinist Joshua Bell proves that art, like science, loves an "elegant" formula when Sony Classical releases his new Grammy-worthy CD on September 5: "Voice of the Violin."

The 2003 "Romance of the Violin" positioned the instrument both in the classic Romantic repertoire and in romantic imagination. That CD went to the top of Billboard's classical charts for three months and remained among the Top 10 for 50 weeks.

A Grammy winner for his recording of the fierce concerto Nicholas Maw wrote for him, Bell found himself newly applauded for works from Puccini's Florentine "O mio babbino caro" to the Viennese sway of Schubert's "Serenade." ([Read the full review.](#))

Tradition said Bell would return to such pillars as his sturdy release last year of the Tchaikovsky Concerto in D Major with Michael Tilson Thomas and the Berlin Philharmonic. Bell, however, knows that to flourish in the market of MP3s, his best friends are two: his 1713 Stradivarius -- he calls himself its caretaker -- and his own long-seasoned sensibilities.

This is the guy whose psychologist parents in Bloomington, Indiana, found their prodigy at age 4 "playing" his bureau drawer-handles on rubber bands. "Credenzas to cadenzas!" is his latest wry crack about that boyhood brio.

But in the new CD, he and the Strad have the last laugh. This is what happens when that priceless creation hears its master's "Voice." The murmurs Bell and his strings exchange form a tête-à-tête of such delicate urgency, such masterful intimacy, that you come away privileged to have overheard it.

Darkening beauty: 'Beau soir'

The Rachmaninoff "Vocalise" leads off, serenely explored by Bell in one of the album's shimmering arrangements by J.A.C. Redford ("The Trip to Bountiful"). Schubert's "Ave Maria" is augmented by a tender choir. Massenet's "Pourquoi me réveiller?" -- "Why do you awaken me?" -- plays out with the trademark restraint Bell uses to quell musical melodrama.

The big hint of what's to come is in the Fauré "Après un rêve" -- "After a Dream" -- a sonic perfume tempered with respect, even love. It's followed by Dvorák's "Song to the Moon," producer Grace Row and engineer Charles Harbutt's clever bow to sentiment.

By the ninth track, you begin to sense just how close this man is letting you get to his heart, with the razor-poised "Il trutina" from Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana." Once a signature piece for soprano Lucia Popp, it hovers here "in the balance" on a new breeze, freed of its text. Bell's *sostenuto* fans a suspension of pitch and sonority so pure that it weighs nothing in your consciousness. Elusive, enticing, intelligent.

And in the 11th track, Bell finally leaves behind even the warm Orchestra of St. Luke's and conductor Michael Stern. He takes along only pianist Frederic Chiu to record the stunning zenith of this CD.

Thought to have been written around 1878 while Claude Debussy was in the Paris Conservatory, "Beau soir" is a setting of Paul Bourget's poetry, calling young souls into the "beautiful night," rivers running pink in the sunset. The Heifetz arrangement barely moves, no more than a handsome head turning in the darkness. Bell's rippling eloquence is at last released in a languid caress, an *arpeggio* of such fragile desire, you'll hold your breath.

In Manuel de Falla's colorist miniature, a setting of "Nana" cushioned by the damask-sheen of moonlit guitar, Bell navigates the hypnotic grace notes of nights in the gardens of Spain. And when Manuel Maria Ponce's "Estrellita" passes by, you find yourself smitten with the parlor-prim wink of that "little star."

By CD's end, soprano Anna Netrebko's collaboration with Bell on Richard Strauss' 1897 orchestration of "Morgen!" gathers the stately melancholy of a Mahler meditation. As in his pulsing 2003 "Mi mancerai" with Josh Groban, Bell ennobles the singer's voice in a haunting, muscular evocation of need and grace.

Maestro for moderns

Like cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Bell is a signal virtuoso for our age. Despite his youthful charm, we hear new overtones of mature, selective wisdom. He has convened these works in a musical summit even more rewarding than "Romance of the Violin."

Maybe "Mementos of the Violin" is ahead. Imagine the aesthetic scope his Gibson ex Huberman will have voiced when it turns 300 years old in 2013.

Wherever Bell next turns his focus, and we must hope it includes his own composition, we can be sure of the serious commitment of the man. This is rare authenticity. When the voice of Joshua Bell's violin speaks, the world will always listen.

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