

# Star power

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## ABSTRACT

Even longtime violin faculty member Zvi Zeitlin, a discerning voice in the world of violin playing, says, "He's probably one of the best, if not the best of his generation." Since his Rochester debut, Bell has earned continuing fame in highly publicized ways.

## FULL TEXT

Rochester churns out innumerable professional musicians, whether they're graduates of the Eastman School of Music or homegrown from area grade-school music programs. The connections spread through major orchestras around the world and even include some of the prime artists of our time, such as Renee Fleming, who graced Rochester with a performance last month.

Rochester became the springboard for yet another major artist of our time in the early 1980s, though only a few people remember the connection.

In 1982, Seventeen magazine and General Motors teamed up to host an International Concerto Competition at the Eastman School. It was the year that an unknown 14-year-old violinist from Indiana showed up. The musician was Joshua Bell.

"I have fond memories of Rochester, even going back to when I was 14 years old," says Bell. "One of the most musical moments of my life happened in Rochester."

Bell won the competition. The prize was a solo spot with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Riccardo Muti. It was Bell's first major concerto performance and ultimately led to his Carnegie Hall debut and a recording contract. He's been a sensation ever since.

"That really started everything in my career," he says. "So, funny enough, Rochester is a location that is a very momentous time for me."

The concerto competition only lasted about three or four years, but will forever be credited with discovering a great talent -- yet another claim to fame for Rochester's music scene.

Bell performs a special concert with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra next Sunday, his first performance back in Rochester since October 1993. "I've been wanting to come back," says the now 43-year-old violinist, who just finished an international recital tour of 24 cities over 28 days -- a typical schedule for this in-demand violinist.

He is a frequent collaborator with two musicians who just performed on Eastman's Kilbourn Concert Series in December: cellist Steven Isserlis and pianist Jeremy Denk. Bell and Denk recently recorded a CD called French

Impressions that will be released in the fall. Bell just returned from a tour with Isserlis, performing the Brahms Double Concerto for Violin and Cello in England.

Charles Castleman, a violin professor at Eastman, remembers Bell's Rochester competition win and has followed Bell since his youth. He says Bell is a natural and charming performer, though his musical talents didn't always come easily.

"I felt that when he was young, maybe early 20s, I felt that the playing wasn't very efficient," he says. "But he was such a wonderful musician, such a talent, that he made it work despite the fact he wasn't doing it in the easiest possible manner."

But in the ensuing years, Bell's playing has "become masterful. He's clearly thought about and resolved whatever made it inefficient. ... He is a great major artist and it's wonderful that he's coming here and everybody loves his playing."

Even longtime violin faculty member Zvi Zeitlin, a discerning voice in the world of violin playing, says, "He's probably one of the best, if not the best of his generation."

Since his Rochester debut, Bell has earned continuing fame in highly publicized ways. In addition to traveling around the world to perform with orchestras, Bell is often best known as the violinist on the soundtrack for the movie *The Red Violin*. The score, by John Corigliano, won an Oscar. He also is the violinist on the movie recordings for *Ladies in Lavender*, starring Judi Dench, and *Angels and Demons*, based on the popular Dan Brown novel.

But even more than his movie stints, there's one special performance that keeps coming back to haunt him.

In 2007, Bell agreed to an experiment by the Washington Post to busk unannounced in a D.C. subway station during morning rush hour, two days after performing at the Kennedy Center. Would people, in the midst of their busy lives and rush to work, be able to notice beauty of the highest order?

Not so much. Bell ended up with \$32 after 45 minutes, and of the 1,097 people who passed by him, only seven stopped to listen. Only one recognized him. No one applauded when he finished.

The resulting article, called "Pearls Before Breakfast" by Gene Weingarten, won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

"Not a day goes by without someone mentioning it," says Bell. "I thought it would come and go in a week, and it took on a life of its own on the Internet."

Somewhat disenchanted by the experience, he says there have been positive outcomes. "I probably expanded my audience, people coming to my concerts who say they never went to a concert period until they read the article and came out to see my recital. If it's had that effect on some people, that's definitely cool." But it's not something he'd be willing to do again, he says.

"I don't want to be known as the subway guy."

Rather, Bell is known for his star-quality looks and his nearly \$4 million Stradivarius violin, as much as his star-quality violin playing.

Helped along by his concert with the RPO next Sunday, Bell also hopes to be known for shedding due attention on an oft-forgotten composer. He'll play Bruch's Violin Concerto -- a staple of violin repertoire, but one that often gets overlooked because Bruch's total output wasn't as impressive as some of the other major Romantic composers like Brahms and Tchaikovsky.

"I think it is one of the top five most important violin works, often underrated by musical snobs," he says. "The specific work stands as high as any of the great works for the instrument, and if played sincerely, it's got a lot of depth to it. The slow movement I think is the most beautiful of any for the violin and orchestra, and it's incredibly exciting for the audience. Audiences always love it."

The RPO will also perform pieces by Borodin, Tchaikovsky and Smetana. Christopher Seaman conducts.

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A \$4 million violin

Joshua Bell played the music in the 1998 movie *The Red Violin*, which follows the owners of the violin over centuries.

Yet many believe the story of the 1713 Gibson ex-Huberman Stradivarius that Bell plays would make a more interesting film.

Many musicians agree that Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) was the best maker of stringed instruments in history. About 600 of his 1,100 instruments remain, many named after their famous owners through the centuries.

The Gibson was owned in the first part of the 20th century by Polish violinist Bronislaw Huberman, known for his individualistic interpretations of music. Someone stole the instrument in 1919 in Vienna, but it was quickly returned.

In the mid-1930s, Huberman also purchased a Guarnerius violin and was playing the new violin in the first half of a 1936 concert in Carnegie Hall, while his Stradivarius was in his dressing room. Sometime during the concert, the Stradivarius was stolen and was never recovered during Huberman's lifetime.

It showed up again in 1985, under questionable circumstances, after the death of Julian Altman.

Marcelle Hall, Altman's longtime partner who married him two days before he pleaded guilty to charges in connection to Hall's accusations of Altman molesting her granddaughter, presented the violin to Lloyd's of London and received a finder's fee. At the time, she said that Altman purchased the Stradivarius for \$100 from a friend who stole it from Huberman.

However, Altman's daughter later challenged the estate, and during the trial Hall said that Altman had indeed stolen the violin. He was working down the street at the Russian Bear cafe, bribed a security guard to get backstage to see the Huberman concert and stole the instrument, hiding it in his peasant costume.

The violin was restored and sold to British violinist Norbert Brainin. Bell, at one of the Brainin's concerts, played the Gibson and said it had the best sound he'd ever heard.

A few years later, Bell learned that Brainin was selling it to a German industrialist. Bell immediately began negotiating

to buy it himself, selling his 1732 Tom Tyler Stradivarius for \$2 million and coming up with another \$2 million.

The varnish on the Gibson is red, leading Bell to tell one interviewer that he now gets to play the real red violin.

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