

Even when he's not playing, Joshua Bell likes to keep an eye on his violin. Which is understandable: when your instrument is a Stradivarius that was made in 1713 and stolen twice from its previous owner, and which you bought for a cool \$4 million, you would be inclined to bring it along with you to interviews too. Little wonder, then, that having checked out of his room in a plush hotel off London's Oxford Street, and after taking a seat in an armchair in the lobby, the American virtuoso slides his violin, in its tough custom-made case, behind his feet on the marble floor underneath him.

"I do a lot of my practice in hotel rooms," says 49-year-old Bell, who has kept up a punishing tour schedule of about 150 concerts a year for decades. "Occasionally I'll get a call from the front desk telling me that someone has complained." He pauses. "Luckily that doesn't happen very often."

Only the most cloth-eared of guests would even consider complaining about a noise made by Bell. The Bloomington, Indiana-raised violinist is one of the most popular classical musicians of his era, a former child prodigy with faultless technique and a gift for coaxing intense emotion from a repertoire that spans Brahms to Vivaldi, Bruch to Tchaikovsky and beyond.

His mega-selling recording catalogue has brought him a Grammy, an Emmy, a Mercury Prize and a Gramophone Award; he has collaborated with stars including Sting, country singer Alison Krauss and Grammy-winning banjo player Bela Fleck, performed before three US presidents and on movie soundtracks including, most famously, the 1999 Oscar-winning film *The Red Violin*.

"I want to thank Joshua Bell," said the film's soundtrack composer John Corigliano at the podium to accept best original score, "for playing it like a god."

In a few hours Bell will be back home in New York, in the spacious Manhattan apartment he co-designed with architect Charles Rose, complete with library, rooftop outdoor shower and long black bench shaped like the fingerboard on a violin; a mini concert hall with a stage curtain and state-of-the-art acoustics and a media room with a projector screen for watching movies and NFL football (while his team is the Indianapolis Colts, this morning he was up until 5am watching a New York Giants match at a casino in Leicester Square).

"I don't like being away for more than two weeks at a time, especially since I have three kids." Bell has a 10-year-old son, Josef, and twin seven-year-old boys, Benjamin and Samuel, with his ex-girlfriend, violinist Lisa Matricardi, all of whom were conceived by mutual agreement after the couple broke up; he has said he is too nomadic to commit to a full-time relationship. His children live a couple of blocks away; he likes to zoom between their homes on a scooter.

When he's at home, he loves to entertain: "I have these house soirees with music and friends, wine and eating; I've had 150 people over for a concert. For some it's the first time they've heard classical music played live and they love it. People feel the power of music more strongly when it's up close."

In two weeks Bell will return to London to play and conduct a performance with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, the chamber orchestra that was established in 1958 by the British conductor Neville Marriner (1924-2016), and which Bell has officially directed since 2011.

Bell and the Academy will then tour Britain and Europe before arriving in Australia, where audiences in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney will be treated to separate programs variously featuring Beethoven's Symphony No 3, Mozart's swaggering Symphony No 25 and violin concertos by Bruch, Schumann and Tchaikovsky. Bell has played Australia with the Academy once before, in 1999.

"I only went to Brisbane, and that was when Sir Neville was leading," says Bell of his friend, who with the Academy partnered the 21-year-old violinist in his first ever concerto disc, for London Records, in 1988.

"I'm so excited to be going back to Australia, and this time to be conducting as well as playing. Of all the many things I do, my work with the Academy is what I love the most."

A peek at Bell's dizzying 2017 schedule re-



Joshua Bell

ATTACHED TO STRINGS

Joshua Bell is passionate about his Stradivarius as well as the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, writes **Jane Cornwell**

veals recital appearances all across North America with his long-term musical partner, Italian pianist Alessio Bax, along with guest spots with the Atlanta Symphony and New York Philharmonic and the symphony orchestras of San Francisco, Seattle and Montreal. Further afield, there is a European tour with the Swedish Radio Symphony and a tour of Japan and South Korea with the Orchestra de Paris, both under the English conductor Daniel Harding, another former "boy wonder".

It is the challenge presented by simultaneously conducting and playing, you feel, that Bell especially relishes. Unlike other soloists who have second lives as conductors, at one remove from their instruments, Bell is unusual in his eagerness to direct from the violin.

"The Tchaikovsky piece is especially demanding," he says. "It's a work that almost always has a [separate] conductor. It is incredibly athletic and energetic; the violin keeps going and going until you finally get a couple of breaks, except then I have to whip around for conducting, then get straight back into playing."

Having previously featured in *People* maga-

zine's "50 Most Beautiful People" list, and with fan sites dotted all across the internet, Bell's easygoing charm and boyish good looks belie his staggering talent and finely thought-out interpretations — even if, as a self-confessed perfectionist, he has had to learn to accept compliments.

Eschewing the wearing of tails and white tie ("I balance comfort with respect"), Bell lends rock star quality to the Academy, an ensemble that Marriner made famous through a prolific recording schedule but which had lost profile in the run-up to Bell's appointment — which was widely considered a coup.

The offer came a few years after the so-called "Washington Post experiment"; an event that made him a household name. In January 2007, Bell donned a baseball cap, picked up his 300-year-old Stradivarius and posed as a busker in a Washington, DC subway station during morning rush hour, with the reactions of passersby recorded on a hidden camera. It was an experiment in context: "In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?" asked columnist Gene Weingarten (whose article brought him the 2008 Pulitzer prize for feature writing).

As it turned out, not necessarily: of the 1070 people who passed by, only 27 stopped to listen. Bell wound up with just \$US37 in his open violin case, including \$US20 from a woman who recognised him.

It was big news then, with a widely watched documentary. Bell would rather not talk about it today. "I get why you have to ask me about it," he says with a sigh, "but it's been a double-edged sword. On the one hand it's a link for people