



Virtuosity – How Easy it is to Overlook

-Mark Haeussler, CEO

Americans work hard. In 2020, Americans worked 1,767 hours per year. Other highly successful, economic powerhouse countries, work much less. For example: Austria 1400, Canada 1644, Germany 1332, Japan, 1598. (Source: OECD.stat). While the American “work-ethic” often is a place of pride, one could wonder if working harder has drawbacks to success; after all, many countries, more than those listed above, find great success and a high standard of living without the same frantic hours.



In 2007, the *Washington Post* set up a simple way to determine people’s ability to observe in their busy-ness. They enrolled a violinist to play for about 45 minutes during morning rush hour in L’Enfant Plaza, standing against a bare wall in an indoor arcade near the escalator that takes you down to the Metro light-rail system. Even the term, rush-hour, imagines a frantic pace.

But the violinist was not just any violinist, it was Joshua Bell. Joshua is a virtuoso who, by age 17, made his Carnegie Hall debut. At the Metro station, he was playing a 300-year-old Stradivarius violin named Gibson ex Huberman. The violin is one of those priceless masterpieces, so extraordinary, *that it has its own name*. Joshua plays so well, that he is not just playing the notes; he *becomes* the music.

Of the 1,000 plus people who passed by him in an area that provided decent acoustics, *just seven* stopped to listen to him, and of those, three who committed time to listen. He made \$32.17 from 27 people (plus, he earned \$20 dollars from the one person who recognized him). The lottery ticket kiosk in the same area was busier. Cheap seats to hear him in concert likely would run \$100-\$200.

Of the seven who stopped to listen, three people really spent time to take-in his performance. One person listened for nine minutes from a distance away. When interviewed, he said, “This was a superb violinist. I’ve never heard of anyone of that caliber. I walked a distance away, to hear him. I didn’t want to be intrusive on his space.” He continued, “It was a treat, just a brilliant, incredible way to start the day.” This man had had studied the violin, but realized it would not be a way to pay the bills. There was another woman who paused – just the amount of time she had for her coffee break – and said to a stranger (the *Washington Post* reporter), “I really don’t want to leave.” But she was on her way inside the constraint of the time allowed for the break. The very structure of her day by her employer denied her to listen to one of the best violinists on the planet.



The third person to listen in all the bustle recognized Bell, *even out of context*. She took a front-row seat to listen, with a huge grin on her face. "It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington," she said. "Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I wouldn't do that to anybody. I was thinking, oh my gosh, what kind of city do I live in that this could happen?" She was the one who gave him the \$20 bill.



There was a choice – even if unconscious – for each commuter: Stop and take a bit of time – even just minutes – to listen to music played to perfection, or to remain in their busy-ness. Have we been so programmed, perhaps unconsciously, that being busy is the most valuable trait in our society? How is your life like the busy Metro station?

In our own organizations, how do we get so busy, and so deep in our routines, we can fail to notice something even as extraordinary as a musical wonder? How well do you stop and listen to the extraordinary wonder in your own organization? Where is there virtuosity in your own organization that remains unseen due to the context? The author of the article, Gene Weingarten, postulated, "If a great musician plays great music, but no one hears...was he really any good?"

Two things to keep paying attention to:

- Know your *own virtuosity*. Many people have some challenge identifying it; the violin is not the virtuosity, it is the person behind it, and some deep skill or gift they have. Your virtuosity is not just your talent in a specific domain, but in *how you connect with the talent in such a way that others want to follow you*.
- See – *really see* the virtuosity in others, and *speak it to them regularly*. Appreciate it in a deep way (don't just toss quarters). This helps in two ways: First, it helps empower them to use it. Second, everyone wants to be validated beyond mere quarters.

Back to Joshua Bell. Being seen – and not being seen in the Metro – turned out to be meaningful to him. His reflection is a powerful: **"When you play for [concert] ticketholders, you are already validated. I have no sense to be accepted. I'm *already* accepted. Here [in the Metro], there was this thought: What if they don't like me? What if they resent my presence...?"**

Well said, Mr. Bell. Well said.

If you want to listen to Joshua Bell, perhaps, *Beau Soir*, by Claude Debussy (with pianist Frederic Chiu) to hear him speak tenderness with his violin. Another option – one that emphasizes his diversity in leveraging his gift – is *Greensleeves*, with Chick Corea (an American Jazz pianist).