

Art without Frame: A Field Experiment at an American Metro Station

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Abstract: *This article describes and analyzes an intriguing “experiment in context, perception and priorities”, in which the worldwide acclaimed violin virtuoso Joshua Bell played incognito at a Washington DC metro station as if he were a street musician. Conceived and carried on by The Washington Post in 2007, the experiment aimed at finding out if beauty would transcend and influence people’s behavior in a banal setting at an inconvenient time. It reached the pages of the newspaper a few months later in the form of a feature article that extensively discussed the surprising outcome. This essay summons classical writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Raymond Williams on culture and society in order to interpret the results from other points of view and thus shed some more light at such a puzzling complex issue.*

Keywords: Washington Post, culture, society, context, beauty perception.

*“There are ideas, and ways of thinking,
with the seeds of life in them, and there
are others, perhaps deep in our minds,
with the seeds of a general death.”*

Raymond Williams, *The Masses*

As the readers skimmed *The Washington Post*’s Sunday edition of April 8, 2007, they might have come across the heading “Pearls Before Breakfast” topping a catchy subtitle: “Can one of the nation’s great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour?”. Signed by Gene Weingarten, the feature article¹ described and analyzed what happened as a “youngish white man”² wearing jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap came out from the metro at L’Enfant Plaza station,

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¹ It is rather extensive, almost 7,400 words long. A slightly shortened version was published in July 2007 on the Brazilian magazine *Piauí*, issue 10, pages 42-47, under the title “Pérolas aos poucos” (“Pearls to a few”), an ingenious pun on the expression “pérolas aos porcos” (“pearls to pigs”). Gene Weingarten was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for this story. Two years later, another feature story by him won the Pulitzer again, in the same category.

² To avoid unnecessary repetition, excerpts from the story will be only indicated by inverted commas, without the obvious bibliographical reference (Weingarten, 2007). Since only the online version of the story has been consulted, there are no page numbers to refer to.

stopped in an “indoor arcade at the top of the escalators”, took his violin out of the case and started playing in the middle of the morning rush hour: 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, 2007.

During the next 43 minutes, while he rendered six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. Nearly all of them had a government job and were heading to work. “L’Enfant Plaza is at the nucleus of federal Washington”, informs the reporter, “and these were mostly mid-level bureaucrats with those indeterminate, oddly fungible titles: policy analyst, project manager, budget officer, specialist, facilitator, consultant.”

No one knew that the 39-year-old fiddler was no street musician, despite being clothed and behaving as one, but rather a “onetime child prodigy” called Joshua Bell, who had started taking music lessons at the age of four and soon became a worldwide acclaimed virtuoso. Three days before his appearance at L’Enfant Plaza he had given a concerto in Boston before a crowded audience, who paid over US\$ 100 for a reasonable sit at the stately Symphony Hall. And right after busking in Washington that morning he would leave for a concert tour through European capitals, coming back less than a week later in order to accept the Avery Fisher prize as the best classical musician in America.

In short, at one of D.C.’s “most plebeian” subway stations there was an amazing artist performing for free on one of the best violins ever made – his own US\$ 3.5 million Stradivarius, handcrafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713, when the master from Cremona was 69 years old and, having been the best luthier³ in Europe for the past thirty years, had just reached what posterity would consider to be the “golden period” of his production (Faber, 2006, p. 63).

As the journalist further explains, the metro presentation was orchestrated 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?” Just from listening to the music, would people notice that something special was going on? Would they hold on a moment to enjoy it? Perhaps toss in a coin or a dollar bill? Would they show any sign of acknowledgement or just walk by unheeded, without even turning their heads? Would anyone recognize Joshua Bell?

³ One that makes or repairs stringed instruments, such as violins, cellos, violas and guitars.

In order to have the guess of an expert to confront with the actual outcome, Weingarten asked Leonard Slatkin, the music director of the National Symphony Orchestra, what he thought would happen, “hypothetically, if one of the world’s great violinists had performed incognito before a traveling rush-hour audience of 1,000-odd people”. Slatkin estimated that if the artist were really just taken for a busker, “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” and the musician would probably be able to make “about US\$ 150”.

Reality proved to be rather different. Bell began his presentation with the “Chaconne” from Johann Sebastian Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D Minor, for solo violin, which he considers to be “not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history.”⁴ After that he executed Franz Schubert’s widely known “Ave Maria”; Manuel Ponce’s “sentimental” “Estrellita”; a piece by Jules Massenet; a “joyful, frolicsome” gavotte by Johann Sebastian Bach and again the “Chaconne”. Weingarten’s striking account of what occurred since the first notes filled the room is worth quoting:

“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 US\$ 32 and

⁴ The reader may have an idea of the music and also of the impressive result of this experiment accessing the videos posted by the newspaper in its website, for everything was recorded by a hidden video camera. There is also a shortened version of it at YouTube, under the title “Joshua Bell ‘Stop and Hear the Music’ by the Washington Post”. Most of it is played fast forward, so that the commuters passing by seem also like small particles of a steady briskly moving stream.

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.”

There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to differentiate the people who took a minute to watch or who gave money from the vast majority who just ignored him. The behavior of one group, however, “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.”

The experiment raised aesthetic questions about the nature of beauty and human perception. To deal with them, Weingarten evoked Immanuel Kant, to whom beauty is not just a measurable fact, as believed Gottfried Leibniz, nor merely an opinion, as defended David Hume, but rather, in the paraphrase of the reporter, “a little of each, colored by the immediate state of mind of the observer”. This means that the environment, as well as the subjective viewing conditions, does play an important role. A great painting removed from its frame and hang on the wall of a cheap restaurant side by side with other mediocre works of art would probably raise no great interest either. Joshua Bell playing at a metro station was “art without frame”. The explanation is convincing indeed. People were in a hurry, they did not have the time and peace of mind to appreciate art; and, besides, the context and environment did not warn them to be alert. Yet it is still intriguing that so few had the curiosity to turn their heads – no need to stop – just to see what was going on.

Even more puzzling is the lottery line across the arcade. Sometimes there were five to six people standing there, one behind the other, about a hundred feet away from Bell. They would have a good view of him just by turning around *while waiting*. “But no one did”, affirms the reporter. “Not in the entire 43 minutes. They just shuffled forward toward that machine spitting out numbers. Eyes on the prize.” The scene struck me as particularly symbolic and revealing about the relationship between culture and economy. Marxist theorists have long been showing that “culture must be finally interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production”, reminds us Raymond Williams in his instigating essay “Culture is ordinary”. For “culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly and radically affects.” (Williams, 1989, p. 7) Such influence stands up in the case of the

lottery line, moreover if we consider what a computer specialist for the Department of Housing and Urban Development said later that day when contacted by the newspaper. He clearly recalled all the ten numbers he had played, for US\$ 2 each, but not what the violinist was rendering (the “Ave Maria”).

“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.”

From all the revealing passages in this experiment, this one seems to be the most emblematic example of how the contemporary capitalist society has turned music into a fetish and hence a commodity, a phenomenon that Theodor W. Adorno critically analyses in his insightful essay “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening”, from 1938. He states that the world of musical life has become one of fetishes: “The star principle has become totalitarian. The reactions of the listeners appear to have no relation to the playing of the music” (Adorno, c.1978, p. 276), but rather to market oriented aspects, such as the prominence of the artist or the place and occasion of the presentation, i.e., the “frame”. Hence, if a great musician plays incognito in a subway station almost nobody pays attention to him in spite of the artistic quality of his rendering. The evaluation criterion has shifted from the domains of aesthetics to those of the market, so that all the critique potential of music is gone. “In capitalist times”, Adorno (c.1978, p. 273) further argues, “the listener is converted, along his line of least resistance, into the acquiescent purchaser.” That is actually the parameter underlying and directing the computer specialist’s utterance above. He perceived the whole episode in monetary terms, from his judgment on Bell (“just a guy *trying to make a couple of bucks*”) to his final word. For he does not seem to regret

missing something beautiful, but rather the opportunity of listening for free to what eventually would cost him a lot, just as someone who laments missing the occasion of saving some bucks on a nice shoe sale. It is an economic, not an aesthetic loss. Also noticeable is the fact that what raised his interest was Bell's fame (again the "frame", informed by the reporter) not the quality of his music. The sad implication of turning art into fetish and commodity is people's loss of perception and autonomy, for in order to pay attention to a song and enjoy it one needs to be told beforehand that it is good. "The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening", anticipated Adorno (c1978, p. 286). "Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with freedom of choice and responsibility, the *capacity for conscious perception of music*, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but they *stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception*." (my italics).

Adorno's essay is usually interpreted as an almost open polemic with the ideas exposed by Walter Benjamin two years earlier in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", released in 1936. Benjamin considered that the work of art lost its "aura" of uniqueness as the technological development enabled mass reproduction, but that such was not to be sorrowed, because it opened up new possibilities – referring especially to photography and cinema (Benjamin, 2003, p. 520). Besides, one should always bear in mind an important change in the very nature of artistic pieces while evaluating them, as reproducibility becomes a growingly significant and even directing factor: "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility." (Benjamin, 2003, p. 522)

We may see a lot of that in the lottery line episode, not only because Tillman makes reference to music that was played in a movie (*Titanic*), but mainly because of the role he assigns to what he called "generic classical music". In the film, the mentioned ensemble was playing in the sophisticated restaurant of the ship, it was *background music*. Not the kind you are supposed to listen quiet and attentively, for restaurants are places to, first of all, eat and chat, socialize. "Generic classic music" is this kind of soundtrack one expects to have at a fancy restaurant, a dentist's waiting room or wherever one may want to avoid silence. Benjamin is certainly right when he talks about the new possibilities of mechanical reproduction – as well as digital, we might add. It allows us to have the pleasure of lying on the couch of our own living

room to appreciate good quality recorded music that could perfectly well be, for instance, a Bach sonata executed by Joshua Bell. One of the seven people who stopped to listen to him at the subway station, John Picarello, was a former dilettante violinist who was himself a fan of Bell (yet didn't recognize him at the distance). To Picarello, the recordings have probably been not only a source of aesthetic pleasure, but also a means of perception training and refinement. They certainly added to his musical education. So when the melodies reached his ears at L'Enfant Plaza, he clearly perceived something special going on. Frankly puzzled and overwhelmed by the experience, he stayed and listened carefully.

Reproducibility, however, does have a preoccupying side, which Adorno discussed in his essay. For once music is turned into a commodity it loses its prominence and autonomy as a work of art. In contemporary society it is often assigned the role of inhabiting "the pockets of silence that develop between people molded by anxiety, work and undemanding docility. (...) *It is perceived purely as background*. If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen." (Adorno, c.1978, p. 271; my italics) Such words recall an impressive passage of the novella *Che Bandoneón* by Renato Modernell, in which the protagonist, being himself a musician, protests against this same issue with an uncommon blend of corrosiveness and lyricism:

"Music stops when someone accepts to play in a noisy steakhouse, or when it comes out from the loudspeakers of the airport's restroom, between two boarding announcements, to stimulate the passengers' intestines. That was not the purpose why we have devoted ourselves to this wild math, those crazy maneuvers of air gusts within this room, this invisible puzzle called music, these countless molecules that come out from our cones, cylinders and valves here on the stage."⁵
(my translation)

⁵ "A música para quando alguém aceita tocar numa churrascaria barulhenta, ou quando sai pelo alto-falante do banheiro do aeroporto, entre uma e outra chamada de voo, para estimular o intestino dos passageiros. Não foi para isso que nos entregamos a essa matemática selvagem, essas loucas manobras de tufo de ar aqui dentro dessa sala, esse quebra-cabeça invisível que denominaram música, esse monte de moléculas que saem dos nossos cones, cilindros e válvulas aqui em cima do palco." (Modernell, 1984, p. 71-72)

The behavior of the people lining before the lottery machine, the fact that not a single one had the curiosity to turn and glance at Joshua Bell while waiting, Tillman's statement, all that seems to be clear evidence of the phenomenon discussed above. The show was perceived as mere background music, something you listen on the run, doing other things, paying little attention to. In explaining the result of his field experiment, Adorno, Benjamin and Raymond Williams could have been insightful references, if the journalist had chosen to follow this interpretive line. But he did not, and from the authors he has selected, Alexis Tocqueville and John Lane's contributions stand out. The French sociologist visited the United States in 1831 and, as Weingarten puts it, "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." Almost two centuries later the situation has obviously not changed much. John Lane has addressed this issue in his 2003 book *Timeless Beauty: In the Arts and Everyday Life*, in which he writes about the loss of the appreciation for beauty in the contemporary world. He found the experiment at L'Enfant Plaza may be symptomatic of that – "not because people didn't have the capacity to understand beauty, but because it was irrelevant to them." According to him, "[t]his is about having the wrong priorities."

This sense that something about the American contemporary culture and society has long been heading in a sadly wrong direction struck many readers. Right on the next day after the article appeared on the pages of *The Washington Post*, Gene Weingarten opened his online column at the *Post Magazine* ("Too Busy to Stop and Hear the Music") stating that "this story got the largest and most global response of anything I have ever written, for any publication. (...) I am still wading through more than a thousand emails." Many of those messages revealed that people had been touched at a deep very personal level. According to the journalist: "With little or no elaboration, more than 100 readers so far have told me that this story made them cry. It was not a reaction I anticipated, at least not so universally, and it has somewhat taken me aback." Some readers found it "scary and depressing" to think of "how obliviously most people go through daily life", or to find out so bluntly that their own culture is "strangling" them, leaving no space for spiritual life. Some could not really tell why they wept, they

just couldn't help it. And there was also a reader who thought the tears were from "not knowing what's important and not using our important time on this earth wisely." Although touching on varied and particular aspects, all those answers seem to convey an underlying common feeling of affliction from having to face one's own culture and society, one's own ways of thinking, living and behaving, and finding in them not "the seeds of life", as Raymond Williams (2001, p. 64) puts it in the epigraph of this paper, but rather "the seeds of a general death".

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