

His rapport with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and quirky composer Edgar Meyer ensures that Joshua Bell keeps pushing the boundaries, he tells David Kettle

‘I actually come from Scottish descent, on my father’s side of the family,’ says Joshua Bell. ‘Bell is a Scottish name, after all.’

Caledonian connections might come as a bit of a surprise from the US violinist, one of classical music’s starriest figures, who returns to the land of his forefathers for a concert at Edinburgh’s Usher Hall on 21 January. But to him, those roots clearly matter. ‘My father used to talk to me about his grandfather and great-grandfather, who fought in the Black Watch,’ he continues. ‘So there’s something sentimental about playing in Scotland – and of course it’s a special place anyway.’

So special, in fact, that Bell has a long history of performances in Scotland. Born in Indiana and now based in New York, he burst on to the classical scene with a debut disc of Mendelssohn and Bruch concertos way back in 1988 (despite his famously youthful looks, he’s been around for a few decades).

Since then, with an ever-expanding repertoire, he’s become famed for his slick, immaculate playing, for his faultless but unshowy technique, and, increasingly, for the breadth of his musical activities. His most recent Scottish performances were just last year firmly in the spotlight as a featured artist at the Edinburgh International Festival, across three concerts showcasing different facets of his musicianship – as a recitalist and chamber musician; as a soloist; and as an orchestra director.

It’s that last side to Bell’s musical

activities – the most recent, in fact – that will be on show in the Usher Hall next weekend, when he both directs and plays as a soloist with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, the renowned London-based chamber orchestra, whose music director he’s been since 2011.

When Bell took on that role, he was only the second figure at the ASMF’s helm since it was founded in 1959 by legendary conductor Sir Neville Marriner, who died in 2016. Becoming music director came as the culmination of an already long-standing and intimate relationship with the group, Bell explains. ‘It goes right back to 1986 – jeez, was it really that long?’ he says. The occasion in question was for none other than Bell’s debut disc. ‘There are a couple of guys in the orchestra who still remember that time – but not too many now...’

The ASMF is a remarkable ensemble – one that Bell himself admires enormously – whose chamber proportions allow an intimacy and focus to its playing seldom encountered in larger symphony orchestras. ‘My real relationship with the ASMF probably started about 15 years ago,’ Bell continues, ‘when I began coming as a regular guest. We started out doing lots of string music together, then small orchestral programmes, and organically I began taking more of a director’s role. So when they were looking for a new music director, it was a no-brainer for me.’

Despite its achievements, however, towards the end of Marriner’s half-century at the helm there was also a feeling that the ASMF’s aristocratic sheen and finesse had become a little... well, tired – not helped by perky period-instrument ensembles snapping at its heels in its core classical repertoire of Mozart and Beethoven. Under Bell’s leadership, however, it has rediscovered a new sense of energy and vitality – and, as Bell explains, taking the reins of the ensemble has also opened up new possibilities for him.

‘It’s allowed me to ease my way into a conductor’s role,’ he explains. ‘For concerts I still direct them from the



leader's chair, but in rehearsals I often just conduct them and don't play. It's a great way for me to learn how to interact with an orchestra as a conductor. It's allowed me to feel comfortable in that role, so that now I'm taking on engagements with other orchestras simply as a conductor from the podium, which is very exciting."

For the Usher Hall concert – the third on a seven-stop tour of the UK and Ireland – Bell will be directing from the leader's chair in Beethoven's buoyant Second Symphony. He directs the rest of the concert, too, but from out front in his more usual role as a soloist. The wild card of the programme is a piece with strong personal connections for Bell: an overture for violin and orchestra written specially for him by Tennessee-born bassist and composer Edgar Meyer. "He's an old friend of mine," Bell explains. "We go back to the early 1980s. When I was about 14 years old. Edgar was one of the American musicians I admired the most."

Meyer is a fascinating figure, lionised stateside though lesser known in

Bell is increasingly leaving his violin behind to take to the conductor's podium. Below left: performing with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields



'On stage, you have to allow yourself to feel free to experiment and be spontaneous'

Europe, perhaps because of his distinctively American blending of classical music with jazz, blues and folk (especially bluegrass), all in an idiom that's as immediate as it is invigorating. Anyone expecting a down-home hoedown, however, might be surprised by Meyer's more classically-focused *Overture*, Bell explains. "We gave its world premiere at Vail in Colorado last year, and the musicians really enjoyed trying to figure out Edgar's musical language, which is very rhythm-based. It's quite mathematical."

If he's pushing the envelope with Meyer's bluegrass-flavoured music, Bell is sticking to a sure-fire favourite to close the concert: Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. "Everyone knows it, not just the core classical music lovers," he says. How long has Bell been playing the piece? "Oh, forever, pretty much! Probably since I was a teenager. It's a very personal piece – everyone plays it differently. There's a lot of room for personal ideas and improvisations."

With such a long history with the *Four Seasons*, how does Bell make sure he

keeps it fresh? "Well, that's a challenge for any piece," he explains. "But with the *Four Seasons*, it's about dedicating some time to it before the tour, trying to clear my mind to a certain degree, to allow myself to think of new ideas – which is much more difficult than it sounds when you've done something a thousand times. But you really have to re-evaluate: do I really want to do this, or am I just doing it this way because that's how I've always done it?"

Coming up with fresh, perhaps even unexpected approaches draws on Bell's warm relationship with his band. "On stage, you have to allow yourself to feel free to experiment and be spontaneous, and this orchestra is very good at responding to that – if I do something different, I can show it with my body language, and they'll react immediately." It's clearly a fruitful partnership – and one that's taking both the orchestra and Bell in new directions.

Joshua Bell directs the Academy of St Martin in the Fields at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 21 January, 3pm