



Bill Murray (from left), Mira Wang and Jan Vogler perform at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

PHOTO BY PETER NICHOLLS/REUTERS

performance in 2003's "Lost in Translation."

But, as Murray tells it, the Christmas special was a major confidence boost.

"I went into it thinking I was just gonna collaborate," he said, "and I ended up singing 10 songs. I felt more comfortable each time. I'd done 'The Jungle Book,' and I had a lot of encouragement from the (film's musicians). It made me feel really good, and that I should develop it. Not develop it, but work at it."

While Murray's singing is decidedly unpolished, that's key to its charm. Plus, one can't help but hear echoes of his various film and TV roles from over the years — and start to smile and chuckle before he even cracks a joke. On the "New Worlds" album and tour alike, he tackles irreverent versions of showtunes like "Ain't Necessarily So," "Moon River" and several selections from "West Side Story," accompanied by a chamber trio consisting of Vogler on cello; Chinese violinist Mira Wang, who is married to Vogler; and Venezuelan pianist Vanessa Perez.

As if that's not enough, Murray recites prose and poetry from Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Walt Whitman and others.

So how do fans of Murray's wise-cracking comedy take to him dabbling in the greatest hits of American literature?

"Oh, they love the reading," Vogler said. "Bill is a master of reciting poetry and literature, and of course the works are so unbelievably great. We frame them with music, and sometimes we put music underneath. The texts are very, very touching, so it's material that carries us through the whole show."

Now I have to say something nice about (the) musicians," Murray said with a laugh. "It's like you're singing on top of clouds. They surround a note, and you've just got to get *kind of* close to it. They're doing all the rest for you."

It helps that Murray and company are open to improvising from night to night, playing around with distinct versions and even catering encores specifically to the vibe of a given audience. And if you think Murray's singing is only for laughs, his centerpiece rendition of Van Morrison's "When Will I Ever Learn to Live in God?" is decidedly emotional, his cracked voice radiating surrender.

Coming from such different worlds, do Murray and Vogler have much shared taste?

"Well, there's something much more important than taste here," Vogler answered. "It's chemistry. It's more than one plus one. It's multiple times that. And you can't really calculate that."

That extends to their other two collaborators, Wang and Perez. Murray agreed: "It's not so much taste. It's a different kind of thing, where if there's something that doesn't feel right, there's a clarity. So when we talk about how to make a piece work, it's in a sort of secret language that we all understand."

Some pieces are tougher to crack than others, and there's one in particular that's still not quite ready.

"It's like a piece of marble," Murray said, "and you keep chipping away at it and changing the way you attack it. There's something in these pieces that attracted us, and we have to figure out how to get it across."

That flexible, instinctive approach sounds similar to how Murray approaches his screen roles, whether playing purely for comedy or doing more dramatic acting in films like "Broken Flowers" and "Razor's Edge." But his dry wit is always at the ready. When it was pointed out that you can't get much more distinguished than playing Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera House, he responded: "Well, we could play the Forbidden City, I suppose."

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