

# Beautiful noise

**Cheryl Botha**

Potchefstroom's own world-class concert violinist has challenged the myth that this instrument should either be Italian Golden period or nothing at all.

Overlooking the Puk's sports field at Wesenhof, Piet Koornhof (47) shares with the Herald why he believes it is possible for modern day instruments to be equally well made.

He says his instrument, made in the eighties by Boris Sverdlik, compares with any Stradivarius on offer. The story is delightful.

Whether a violinist prefers the sweet tones of the Stradivarius or the more robust sound of the Guarneri, most will tell you that the art of violin making has been lost since the 1800's. Piet does not disagree entirely.

"Many modern violins may look good but they just don't sound as good and their response is different. But, when the BBC asked three experts to identify the real McCoy during a concert master's performance, they were unable to do so," he explains.

Not that it really matters any more, because almost all of the golden age fiddles have been snatched up by collectors and are largely inaccessible to the maestros who bring out their true value. (Old violins go for

anything between US\$1 million and US\$5 million).

While modern day concert violinists pay around US\$60 000 for their instruments, Piet acquired his through a deal between his father and Sverdlik, one of the greatest luthiers and restorers of our time. The latter was looking for investors to buy what he believed to be a genuine Gofriller cello that was in desperate need of repair. Koornhof (senior) agreed, but for the next twelve years Sverdlik battled to obtain a certificate of authenticity.

On his deathbed, Koornhof suggested that he make his son a violin in exchange for the return on his investment. (Sverdlik later managed to sell the cello at a huge profit and paid Piet the dividends anyway).

"I have played on some remarkable violins in my time and I honestly believe mine is the best," Piet says. According to him the Sverdlik stands out in terms of its varnish (aesthetics), response and sound.

Piet got to know Sverdlik personally whilst studying in New York, but this is not the first of the master's violins he has ever owned. In fact, his dad bought his first one as a gift for him after befriending the violinmaker in the early eighties.

Koornhof had offered to get a valuable old cello restored for a



World-famous concert violinist, Piet Koornhof (second from left), performed with pianist, Thomas Hecht (left), during the Echos Music Festival in Alessandra. Boris Sverdlik, who made his violin, is second from the right.

friend, and was referred to Sverdlik. Since Piet, at the tender age of two, first singled out the violin as his favourite orchestral instrument, his father, who was a professor in piano and keyboard, sought out the best for his son.

Sverdlik studied in Italy and served

his apprenticeship under Jacques Francaix, a big name in the industry. As an accomplished restorer, he worked on many violins from the golden era, and concluded that something had, indeed, been lost. He dedicated his efforts to finding what it was, and to creating instru-

ments as close as possible to those of the masters.

"If the prejudice against modern instruments is true, then Boris is the exception. In my opinion, he has succeeded in recapturing the essence of old instruments," he says.