

Strings and Wings: the unusual passions of South African violinist Piet Koornhof.

by Patrick Grincourt



You might find him in concert, plummeting the depths of a trio by Sviridov; or you might spot him just below cloud base in his beloved LS1f sailplane, working a thermal for a last bit of energy to climb as high as possible.

In either case, he's eyes sparkle with the excitement of unusual experiences that light his fire. "It's the ideal combination". He's speaking about his love of gliding – or soaring, as it is more appropriately called – but hastens to add that it equally applies to music-making. "Freedom and discipline; Challenge and relaxation; nature and technology. It's a skill that takes a lot of discipline to learn. You learn the theory, the rules, the procedures; you practice a lot – a hell of a lot, actually, if you want to do it well—but then how you apply it inevitably reflects your own personality to some extent. When you are up there you feel unbounded, free as a bird. Yet you have to manage a sophisticated technology in a very disciplined way to remain safe while maximizing performance. Same with performing music: you can express yourself, but only once you have painstakingly developed sufficient technique, learned the theory and the rules of musicianship, and respect the composer's intentions. "

He looks up at the sky with that unique smile of an initiate. "One can't really describe it to someone who hasn't been up there at the controls. You have to experience it to truly understand."

Where did his interest in flying come from? "When I was still in primary school, my parents drove me from Potchefstroom to Johannesburg every Saturday for violin lessons with Alan Solomon. When we drove past the old Baragwanath airfield, I would often lie on the backseat of the car, looking up at the gliders high up in the sky, circling to gain height in thermals. It always fascinated me endlessly! I always

dreamed of becoming a pilot of sorts one day.”



However, the dream was elusive, due to lack of time and money. Piet’s dedication as a violin student led to studies in America, when he was only 14 years old, with the famed violin pedagogue Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School in New York. There was no time for recreational activities of the kind that requires a considerable investment of time, dedication and money. He intensely focused on his music studies, and practiced and practiced and practiced. Even in his matric year in high school, he practiced from 6 to 8 hours per day. He retained his interest in aircraft and flying, but any plans to learn to fly were shelved, at least for the foreseeable future. Now and then though, experiences arose that kept the flame burning. For example, he befriended a South African diplomat in New York who was doing his instrument rating as a private pilot, and joined him for some night-time training flights.

Ironically, this friend later confessed to having been an undercover agent for the South African secret police. His job was to closely monitor the activities of South African students studying abroad. Apparently Piet’s phone was tapped, and his letters were opened. His family’s disparate political activities most likely ensured that he be an object of suspicion. His namesake uncle was a high-profile and controversial cabinet minister in the Apartheid government, while his cousin was jailed for refusing to disclose her husband’s connections with the then banned ANC. “That’s a whole story to be told in detail one day”, Piet says wryly.

Some years later, while on vacation in South Africa, Piet indulged his desire to fly by doing a skydiving course in Stilfontein, completing 13 jumps. However, a healthy dose of fear kicked in when his instructor had a fatal accident. “I decided that other forms of flying might be more suitable for me.”

Piet is no stranger to dedication. He started playing the violin at 5 years of age, took lessons from Susan Sauerman at the Conservatoire in Potchefstroom, and when he turned 9 he started studies with Alan Solomon and Betty Pack (chamber music) in Johannesburg. The passion and dedication required came naturally, having been born into a musical family. Both his parents were musicians who taught full-time at the university in their hometown, though they were not string players, but piano and organ specialists. Despite the keyboard environment at home, their son gravitated towards the violin, having

as a toddler accompanied his parents to the national orchestral courses his dad organized for the SASMT (South African Society of Music Teachers). He can't recall it, but his mother says as a 3 year old he gaped in astonishment at the violinists in the youth orchestras at the course, and soon insisted on learning to play.

What he can recall is his dad's beloved classical LP records that were played late at night and which had him in raptures lying in bed in the dark listening to Henryk Szeryng playing the Mendelssohn and Bruch violin concerti, or the great Jascha Heifetz playing Tchaikovsky. He basically grew up in the Conservatoire building where both his parents taught music, and was a frequent visitor to the music library where the librarian, "tannie" Martha van Rooy dutifully and ritually played him his favourite LP, the Sibelius violin concerto performed by David Oistrakh. "I vividly remember the blue-green cover sleeve of that LP. One of my grandest fantasies was to play the Sibelius concerto as well as Oistrakh did. He had the most gorgeous sound! Like golden honey. Nothing gave me more pleasure than hearing that great piece of music over and over and over!" Piet did eventually perform the piece himself, first as soloist with the South African National Youth Orchestra on a tour of Israel and Europe. A reviewer in a Swiss newspaper reported, "...a revelation: ample and warm sonority, high dramatic enthusiasm, perfect exactness...maybe he is one of the big names of tomorrow....."

When discussing the dedication required to become a concert violinist, he can't remember ever having been forced to practice. "Maybe there were times when my parents needed to enforce the necessary discipline, but I can't remember such incidents. Having been surrounded by musicians it seemed natural to me to spend much time practicing a musical instrument. I do recall how utterly attractive and satisfying it was to make music with my parents – my mom accompanying on the piano, and my dad helping me to shape the music and polish the technical execution. Their musical enthusiasm was infectious."

There has been a lot mention recently in the wider press of scientific research that shows the enormous investment of time and dedication actually required to become truly masterful at any complex skill. Researchers like Anders Ericsson at the university of Florida in the USA have found that 10 000 (that's right, ten thousand!) hours of "deliberate practice" ("deliberate" referring to something much more sophisticated than mere mindless repetition) seem to be the minimum requirement in fields as diverse as chess playing, brain surgery, athletics and musical performance. In fact, Ericsson found that in classical music, it is actually more: it takes between 15000 and 25000 hours of dedicated practice to truly become competitive on an international level.

After 8 years in the USA, Piet ended up in his hometown, Potchefstroom, where the violin teaching job at the university became vacant. He took the job, and has been at it now for 25 years. "I never imagined spending so much of my professional life in Potch! But it worked out quite well, allowing me to have the best of both world, so to speak: I was lucky to have been given some scope to continue my career as a performer; at the same time, I had the security of a steady job, started a family, and enjoyed the benefits of living without the stresses and pressures of life in a big city. The dream to fly was always present, but time and money was always a problem. "

Then came the big surprise. A Potchefstroom family of soaring pilots, who had been flying elsewhere, the Jonkers, now famous for producing one of the best racing gliders in the world, announced the forming of a gliding club in Potchefstroom. "I am literally 5 minutes away from the local airfield where the gliding club operates. It is heaven on earth!" The club boast some of the best soaring pilots in the world: a former open class world champion, one runner-up at the world championships, and his brother who placed 5th.

The other enormous advantage of a gliding club is that it is one of the least expensive ways of learning to fly. In much of the world gliding instruction is provided free by instructors who gladly give their time and expertise for the love of the sport. Costs are limited to membership fees and the low tariffs for club gliders and winch launches. "Soaring is truly an amazing sport. The experience of gliding itself is breathtaking. Even after many years of flying, one is still awe-struck by the wonder of being able to climb to cloud base and fly hundreds of kilometres in a single flight by using the forces of nature to propel one of the most beautiful crafts ever designed by human beings. If one has any aesthetic sensitivity, you cannot help but fall in love with sailplanes and soaring. It's that perfect combination again: function and form; nature and technology.



And the camaraderie is incredible. People from all walks of life share their time and passion for the sport with great enthusiasm. Even at the intensely competitive gliding championships, the atmosphere is that of a bunch of friends getting together to have good time. They freely share equipment and information and advice, while fiercely competing for winning positions. It is very much like a classical chamber music festival. Everyone is striving to do their individual best, while sharing in the joy of experiencing

something greater than ourselves. ”



If his recreational passion is unusual, so is much of his professional focus. He has a special affinity for what he calls “unknown gems” of twentieth century chamber music. Contrary to popular perception, Piet claims, a great deal of music written in the 20th century is not strange to the ear, but actually quite accessible, written in a familiar tonal language, though unmistakably of the modern era. “I am always delighted when audience members express pleasant surprise at the accessible beauty of pieces and composers they have never heard of before.”

He has been uniquely responsible for the South African premieres of works by among others Sviridov, Babadjanian, Arutunian, Vasks, Pärt, Kupkovic, Martinu, Gliere, Chebodarian, Schnittke, Medtner, Karaev, Ben-Haim, Schulhoff, Piazzolla, Schoenfield, Skoryk and Toldra. He also commissioned and premiered works by South African composers, notably Peter Klatzow and Hendrik Hofmeyr, whose beautiful concerto for flute, violin and string orchestra he recorded with Italian flutist Raffaele Trevisani and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra under Constantine Orbelian for the American CD-label Delos.

His other recordings include 3 CD’s of “unusual” chamber music for Discover International, including Gliere duets for two violins with Gerard Korsten, “cream-puffs” for violin and piano by composers like Cyril Scott, Kodaly and Ľsaye (with a few golden oldies thrown in), piano trios by Babadjanian and Vasks (whoever heard of them?!), and believe it or not, the complete trio sonatas by Johann Sebastian Bach, the latter also for Delos.



Why do lesser known Eastern European composers feature prominently in Piet’s repertoire? “Perhaps because I visited Russia on three occasions, to perform and record, and was made aware by colleagues there of composers not generally known in the west. My Russian friends have also been a great resource for finding sheet music otherwise unavailable.

“I am on a bit of a mission. Tragically, too many people think their only choice in classical music is between the golden oldies – Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky – and “crazy modern stuff” that sounds like incoherent noise. Actually, there is a third alternative, and that is the vast amount of music composed all along by the majority of composers with no need to prove their originality by breaking with tradition, inventing a new musical language or deliberately trying to rock the boat. Many of these composers have been shunned or ignored by the “experts” and trend-setters in the academic world, or drowned out by the noisy revolutionaries. Out there in the real world, for most people – I dare say composers, performers and listeners alike --the boat has been sailing along just fine. They are quite content with new music in a familiar tonal language. I like to prove this third alternative to audiences. I get a tremendous kick out of the pleasant surprise of listeners who thoroughly enjoyed an unknown ‘modern’ composer’s work on a first hearing.

“It’s almost like there have been two kinds of classical music composed since the break with tonality by certain high profile composers early in the previous century. On the one hand, there were (are) those who considered it inevitable, almost like the communists’ historical imperative, that ‘tonality’ would have to be abandoned – that nothing short of revolution could enable fresh musical expression; on the other hand, those who were (are) confident that our Western tonal harmonic system allowed for unlimited expressive possibilities. By analogy, it was as though some claimed English had exhausted its expressive potential – that nothing original could be said in English anymore -- and that therefore it was imperative to invent or learn a new language. That seems absurd, doesn’t it? First of all, we would have to debate the meaning of ‘original’. Secondly, arithmetic can show that the number of possible comprehensible utterances in any natural language is for all practical purposes infinite. Similarly, our sophisticated Western system of tonal composition allows for virtually infinite possibilities. In a sense, one can argue that you don’t have to invent a new language to say something worthwhile! You have to have something to say, and have sufficient mastery of your language to be able to do it persuasively.

“Of course, there are modern works, composed in tonal languages or systems that differ from the traditional tonal harmonic system, that do deserve masterwork status, even though it may be accessible to only relatively few initiates. There is nothing wrong in itself with devising a novel language - there are interesting examples in science fiction, for example. I just don't think devising a new language is the only way of saying something original.

“My point is only that when it comes to classical music of the past century, that is not the only option, and it doesn't reflect what has been done by many, many, if not most, composers. I would also argue that a new tonal language can become a refuge for mediocrity -- that if you don't have something to say, you invent a new way of speaking that leaves those who haven't learned it clueless. Then, if you're not understood, you can claim it's because your listeners are ignorant. The less your work is comprehended, the more innovative and exalted it appears. It's very convenient. It makes it very difficult to point it out when the emperor is in fact naked. If a 'composer' has not mastered the tools of our magnificent tradition, or has nothing to say, it is relatively easy to hide behind such ideas about novelty.

“I agree with the great French composer Maurice Ravel who said that a composer can only truly begin to develop a unique voice once he or she has mastered the tradition. The great composers in our magnificent tradition did not each start afresh. They built on what came before. They climbed onto the shoulders of giants. Ravel considered the ability to compose in the styles of predecessors a prerequisite for becoming unique.”

Piet points to stacks of programmes of concerts he played over several decades. “A lot of music – maybe the greater part – composed in the last one hundred years, is not strange and inaccessible to the general public at all, but actually surprisingly appreciable on a first hearing, even by the lay public. One can spend a lifetime discovering neglected but wonderful music, and you would barely have scratched the surface.”

Piet can claim an enormous list of successful premieres of such music in South Africa. Virtually all the concerts he played in the last 25 years have included some music that no-one in the audience had heard before. The reaction has been wonderfully encouraging. “Given an alternative, does everyone really only want to listen to yet another violinist play a Beethoven sonata, or yet another performance of the Vivaldi Four Seasons? Many regard it as a breath of fresh air to experience music that is both new to them and accessible. They tell me so in so many words. They come back-stage after a concert and say, 'how fresh and exciting to hear such music!'”

“As a performer, I find it incredibly intimidating to perform standard repertoire that has been performed probably hundreds of thousands of times by countless violinists the world over, including the greatest ones on earth! It's not all that attractive to me to do what so many others have been doing, and have done extremely well, for so long. I'd rather do something unique, something fresh.”

He looks out the window at the developing cumulus clouds promising a spate of thermals. “Maybe that's why soaring draws me so much. It widens one's horizons, doesn't it?”