

Maria Botha and the Masidlale strings



Appearing in photo: Back row: Thembisa Ntshongontshi (trainee teacher), Syathemba Nteta (trainee teacher), Maria Botha De Girardier, Siposethu Gontsi (learner), Front row: Mandisa Jordan (learner), Khethiwe Shingenge (learner) Nolovuyo Nteta (trainee teacher).

Maria Botha De Girardier teaches violin in Nyanga, Gugulethu and Langa townships in Cape Town. This month, her work made front page news in the world-renowned magazine, *The Strad*. In 2009 she was asked to lead the establishment of the Masidlale Strings Project, a music outreach and development project under the auspices of the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra. We asked her about her experiences and how it has impacted on her life. ...

Where did your passion for playing the violin start originally?

I started violin lessons with Alan Solomon in Pretoria at the age of six. From a very early age, I jumped on tables and pretended to conduct an imaginary orchestra...and I even have photos of myself with violins that I built from any material I could find. So I definitely had a passion for the violin from the start.

Both my parents played the violin too, which might have been the reason for my being exposed to it so intensely. They played 'for pleasure', which surely contributed to my later views on the importance of the violin to be learnt in a joyful manner. I also think I was born a 'performer' and have loved playing all my life.

While living in Europe, I invented creative ways of earning a living through my violin playing and I really enjoyed playing, because I was not in the usual competitive scene where you have to be the best at all times. I played to make people feel good, and loved giving people a feeling of well-being through music. I think this saved my love for music, because I was on the 'good side' of the violin...

I believe the essence of music is firstly what it creates within us and how we can express emotions through an instrument. I enjoyed giving listeners an experience of some kind. I like to see music making as a journey from the player to the soul of the listener and then it returns back to the player in the form of the delight it creates for the listener.

Did you EVER think of becoming a teacher?

Not at all ! But, during a vacation in South Africa, my first violin teacher Alan Solomon told me about Christophe Bossuat and his Suzuki Institute in Lyon. I went to visit him upon my return to France and asked Christophe if he could give me a few violin lessons. We started a long journey together.

Over the five years that followed, I went to Lyon regularly and felt like I had found someone who rebuilt my violin technique. At the institute, I watched them teaching the Suzuki method to all ages in, and became more and more fascinated by what I saw. Then Christophe suggested I do the Suzuki training, but I responded that I did not want to be a teacher! In the end I was so intrigued by this method that I decided to do the training for my own research. I was very fortunate to have Christophe as my personal trainer and teacher for the following years and we did most of the levels together.

Sometimes I refused to do the next exam, because I told him I would NEVER BE A TEACHER, and did the training only for my own interest. Being a single parent and full-time musician, I also did not have the time to drive to Lyon that often.

However, I did decide to start testing this method with children in Dijon, where I lived, as I was naturally curious to see if it worked. And what do you know? Besides private students, I finally ended up teaching at a few schools in the area! As I taught this method more and more, I realised that the tools you are equipped with empower you to 'create' real violinists. I was amazed at the way my learners could produce an incredible sound, and at how good their postures were. It felt like I was in possession of a treasure that could suddenly be of benefit to others. I became increasingly excited by the results of simply applying these basic violin playing principles.

How did you become involved in teaching the violin in a township in Cape Town?

I decided to return to South Africa in 2007. The Suzuki method was taught in Johannesburg at the time, but I quickly realised that there was not much knowledge about the Suzuki method in Cape Town. At most schools where I had job interviews, no one had the 'need' for a Suzuki teacher-trainer, and most people had never even heard of this method or they had a very wrong understanding of it.

So, as a single mother of two dependant children, I could also not afford the time to establish an 'unfamiliar' way of teaching until it became my only source of income. I therefore found employment in wine tourism, my other field of expertise. I worked for several companies in wine tourism over the next two years, but did manage to start teaching for a few hours at a music school in Cape Town which was open to the method of teaching I used.

Then, in 2009, I was approached by the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra to start their outreach programme in townships surrounding Cape Town.

After not living in South Africa for quite some time, it must have been quite an eye opener for you to start a violin teaching project from scratch in a township and drive into a township all by yourself?

I think the fact that I had not lived here for so long made it possible for me to drive into a township fearlessly. I guess I was a bit like an uninformed tourist. I left South Africa in 1983, the Apartheid system was still in place and I was, like most South Africans, oblivious of the realities in this country. However, coming back, I learnt that my foreign friends, living here, had friends in townships. At that point I did not know any South Africans who had ever been to a township.

When the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra asked me to be in charge of the Masidlale project, I felt I had the opportunity to experience township life myself. I was quite emotional when I drove into Nyanga township for the first time and felt uncomfortable about not making any real effort to experience it before. I realised that we were in constant contact with people who lived only 10 minutes away from us, but we never bothered to go and visit them and share their environment.

Anyway, in the beginning it caused 'havoc' in the traffic when I drove through the streets. Everyone stopped and even let me drive over red traffic lights! Everyone looked at me. At school the children surrounded me and touched my clothes and hair, and sometimes literally went wild around me. I remember going into the school playground once and thought I had made the biggest mistake ever. I could not get out of the young crowd surrounding me. For weeks I never dared leaving my classroom again!

How did you introduce the project to the children?

I chose the Suzuki method simply because it resonated strongly with my personal life experience and I knew I could share what I've experienced in my own violin playing through this method. It is a way of education and not just a method. As a matter of fact, I brought up my children with the Suzuki method without knowing it, because I simply believe whatever we teach a child needs to be done with passion and love.

Names always create associations, and when you give a method a name, people link it to a collection of personal ideas and opinions very quickly. With Suzuki, we educate children to 'listen' from a very early age. So in the township, as with everywhere else, I have taken care to explain to teachers and parents that it's not about learning to play Western music, but rather to teach them to listen to music that is so beautiful that it will cause them to strive to live beautiful lives.

With this approach we also find ways to inspire children to work. The more the child practises, the easier it becomes to play. The more a child is able to listen to (classical) music, the better his or her playing becomes and their listening becomes more refined too. The children also get the opportunity to play with others on a weekly basis. Playing with others helps to repeat even difficult technical exercises in a fun atmosphere, and helps to achieve learning skills in a natural way.

Compared to other teaching methods, what is it about this particular teaching method that really works for these young players?

When a seven year old child picks up a violin and plays one piece after another freely from memory for over fifteen minutes, people are in awe. They applaud and it makes the child aware that he has achieved something special.

With this method we specifically develop the hearing and listening abilities of children during most of the initial phases of teaching them how to play the violin. You do not learn to write before you can speak a language. Very soon, the children are able to play a whole repertoire of music from memory and it allows them to listen and enjoy the instrument with friends, playing along with them. From the start they play for audiences, and it makes them feel valued and appreciated.

The Suzuki pupils are used to playing spontaneously for listeners and one another in relaxed, natural environments. Instead of blindly dashing ahead in a 'learn another piece' race, we take the time to review and repeat what we have already learnt. In this way, all children perform regularly and therefore obtain a natural and spontaneous relationship with their instrument, instead of getting all stressed when someone asks them to suddenly play for others.

Playing the violin is not just about arriving for a lesson and learning a few new notes. It is also about the individual child. I spend a lot of time in helping children to become aware of their body condition, doing breathing exercises and teaching them how to have 'relaxed' shoulders, weight in their elbows and loose fingers.

The difference in sound once they play is so obvious, that they are easily convinced of the importance of their body condition too. A good body condition allows the child to be receptive and connect to their inner being. Once they find that magic moment of connection with their inner energy, they are ready to fly with their violins!

I enjoy teaching with this method because of the joy and spontaneous playing that results from it. Moreover, this method does not require from any child to be 'talented', but on the contrary provides the 'education of talent'. This allows any child, even when one may regard them as "untalented", to become a violinist (musician).

As the project developed, which realisations did you have personally and as an educator?

As this project developed, I was gradually more fascinated by the results that can be achieved when the conditions under which to teach are challenging. Understandably, the conditions we have in the townships are totally different to what we are used to in traditional private teaching. However, the one big plus side is that we are in daily contact with the children, and they literally practise with their teachers-in-training every day, which allows them to progress in a remarkable way.

I have never taught children before that did not have much to stimulate them once the school day is finished. Through teaching violin in the townships, we are able to fill that gap for around 120 learners currently and I've started to view the Suzuki method in a new light, in the way we can

adapt it for conditions specific to our country. Children can take their time to apply the tools they are given and improve in their playing. The pride and self-confidence it results in for each individual has convinced me more than ever that we have 'gold' in our hands and that all children can learn anything well with the correct teaching.

Ultimately, my experience, teaching with this method in France and in South Africa, has made me fall in in love with the violin more and more every day!

In what way do you feel the work you do have an impact on the lives of the young children?

Firstly, it makes them feel valued. I was afraid that their friends might mock them, but on the contrary, by making them play to everyone else in the school often, it gave everyone a certain pride that this music experience was happening in their school. Neighbouring schools have also shown interest and the schools are increasingly aware of the privilege that they are granted.

Many development projects 'bus' the kids out to teach them in other 'safer' environments. I believe the fact that I drive to them, and experience and teach in their environment, has had a great impact on their approval of the Masidlale project.

Brain elasticity is excellent at these early ages, and therefore the best time to learn. Every lesson has a structure and a focus. The discipline of learning the violin creates regularity and consistency. I believe we give them more than just playing an instrument, but the ability to become a creator of their own well-being. The ability to feed your soul is a guarantee of self-value and self-realisation. The regular routine of practising and getting results creates trust and security.

Your work at the Masidlale Project was recently featured on the front page of *The Strad*, considered all over the world as the most prestigious magazine for strings players. How did this honour come about?

Earlier this year, violin teacher Brenda Brenner from the well-known Jacobs School of Music at the University of Indiana visited South Africa for this first time. She was invited by Lainey Trequesser, founder of the Paris-based organisation Association Musiquelaine and advocate for the support of music development in South Africa, to come to South Africa in view of future collaborations with local music development projects.

After they visited projects in Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein, I was fortunate to meet Brenda in Cape Town and ended up working with her for three days. She accompanied me to all the township schools where I teach and could therefore experience the project first hand. Our teaching approach is so similar that we connected in a magical way. We were all left amazed by the results we obtained from our joint efforts in each lesson.

I believe Brenda was touched by what she experienced in South Africa to such an extent that she could simply not stop talking about it. Her new-found personal understanding of the South African scenario was captured in an inspiring article published in *The Strad* and the story made front page news! We are very proud of this outcome!

What keeps you motivated to teach music in challenging township surroundings?

The reason I never wanted to be a teacher was because I thought I would get bored doing the same lessons over and over again. I feared that my own love for the instrument might be drowned in the routine of another child walking into a lesson every half an hour. Teachers are often teachers simply because they play the instrument, and not because they are able to teach it, which is a very different 'ball game'. I was also afraid that I would lose my passion if I only taught, and had no time left to play myself.

Luckily, the method I use made me aware of the uniqueness of each individual and the challenge to find the different way that appeals to each individual. In the township I was able to take more time to really enter into the inner beauty of each child.

This keeps me passionate. Each child responds with a "happy soul" when the notes start tickling their hearts. I believe township children are far from being spoiled and so thirsty for joyous moments that they freely flow with the vibrations of the music. They are very disciplined and appreciative of every opportunity to play. They come to the lessons with excitement. This is fuel for the passion of any teacher.

The one great obstacle for a teacher in the township is to close your ears, especially when everyone thinks you are crazy and irresponsible to drive into often dangerous circumstances. I realise today that I was fortunate to experience life in very under privileged environments in Europe, West Africa, and Eastern Europe.

The rules are universal. Going around with the fear that you may be in danger on every street corner will 'cripple' you to the extent that you actually might end up in an incident. Walking around aware of the 'hot spots', and avoiding them, also makes you appreciate the ordinary life routines of everyone and appreciate their warm hospitality, despite the insecurities they face on a daily basis. The local township people have taught me how to behave and avoid insecure situations.

Were there any other demands the project has had on you other than being a teacher and training your assistant teachers?

It is difficult not to get involved with the very basic needs of children when there are so many shortcomings on every level. When you teach a child and discover he is cold or hungry, you need to look after his general condition before you can continue teaching. I get to know all my learners very well. I can see straight away in their eyes when something is wrong. I can detect their inner condition even by the way they walk into the classroom.

When I find a violin student bitten in the face by a stray dog, I cannot walk away and close my eyes to the unattended infections that follow. When one of my violin students has an iron door falling on his head and runs to me for help, because no one else will take it seriously, I cannot close my eyes. I often find myself looking for solutions or finding help for what seems to be of no concern to others.

I've had to learn to control my emotions and not to show my inner feelings. I also have to remind myself often that I am there to teach the violin, and cannot physically save every situation. However, the natural instinct wanting to do that is often very difficult.

To deal with it, I also decided to make people outside of the project aware of the needs and general development of the project, as a means to change lives. On Saturdays I often take the township kids to a hall in town where they can play in groups with city kids. The parents of the city kids are gradually getting to know the Masidlale children, and on several occasions have contributed clothing and basics.

Because of my life abroad for 23 years I have also started a greater network of communication internationally and, as people hear about the project, they want to participate. Recently, a few musicians gathered in Paris and created an association to raise funds for the project. They gave concerts and used the funding to buy a few violins, which they brought in person to the township, handing it over to the children and thus sharing the experience as close as they possibly could.

To finish this question - it was quite something to get used to jumping over a big filthy rat when I fetch some kids to come to their lesson. But I have come to know the schools so well, that I even have peaceful relationships with the rats now!

How do you see the future of the Masidlale project and the young players applying their skills in time to come?

I believe if they do not become professional violinists, it will motivate them to achieve in whatever career they choose. The skills they obtain give them higher results in maths and science, especially, and it will enable them to evolve intellectually to the extent where they can consider any proper education. It gives them confidence that they can achieve whatever they want.

At present African music teachers and musicians are in high demand in this country, and if they receive proper training they will qualify for these job opportunities.

Besides the material aspect of creating a job opportunity, the regular routine of practising creates trust and security. Developing consistency in attitude enables anyone to obtain ways to go through difficulties in life and create long-term success. It also nurtures more balanced emotions to cope better with all challenges.

Musical instruments are expensive. Where do you get enough instruments for the children to use?

Part of the funding for the project is used to buy instruments for every school. These instruments are kept at the school and only used during lessons. After one year, most children play well enough to start practising at home and therefore need to possess their own instruments.

We received a huge violin donation from Germany, which enabled us to give the senior violin students each a violin to practise on at home. These violins were donated after a broadcast on television in Germany, showing children in a township learning to play the violin. More and more people are sending us violins, as they want to become involved in the project

If someone would like to support the outstanding work that you do, who do they contact?

The Education Manager at the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra is Laurika Steenkamp. She can be contacted for any questions or support on 021 410 9809.

After two years with the project, how is Maria and the township environment doing?

Today all traffic continues normally when I drive on my usual routes, and no one really notices me anymore. The kids just shout 'Hi Maria' when I walk through the playgrounds, and will only come up to me to shout 'I also want to play the violin!'

Everyone can hear our playing or freely walk into the classes to see what we are doing. I believe most of the children (and staff) have come to enjoy the lessons, because they can see everyone who is playing is passionately involved.

The children that are not learning how to play the violin also get regular exposure to music, by listening to their classmates play, and I think I have succeeded in giving staff, non-players and parents the necessary exposure to gradually become aware of this music that beautifies the hearts of everyone.

After 2 years of being involved in lessons, the parents and teachers have noticed several players improving in other school subjects too, having more focus and concentration on their daily activities.

The other day a school teacher looked at me and said, 'Gosh, you are black - there is nothing white about you, we must find you a black man!' In terms of being accepted, I was quite touched and it felt like the biggest compliment I've ever received. I feel very much a part of everyone, and more than that, I really begin to think I might have some Xhosa ancestors! I love the warmth, spontaneity, sense of humour and energy in the community.

I believe creating and developing passion for something is the best fuel for anyone to navigate' through life. Hence, every violin lesson and practise session is based on passion and passion ultimately brings inspiration.

This is the stepping stone out of material, as well as emotional poverty.

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