

**Keeping Up with the Klincks**



words and photos by Jente Waerzeggers

Elisabeth sleeping



Paul napping



At the end of 2024, I visited the Klinck family home for the first time, an old, quiet house near Ghent's busy ring road. In the garden, we shot the cover for violinist Elisabeth Klinck's second album, *Chronotopia* (Hallow Ground). Elisabeth struck me as a driven tell-all, full of creative energy, pushing against the traditions of her classical background. Her father, Paul Klinck, one of Belgium's finest violinists, seemed more reserved than his daughter. He said hello, asked if he could help, then disappeared into the music room.

More recently, I saw Paul join Elisabeth onstage as a special guest. It felt like an emotional moment, and it left me wondering: What is their bond like? Did he teach her? Do they play together often? So I returned to find out what has changed in the Klinck family over time.

**Paul, you recently were a special guest at Elisabeth's performances of *Chronotopia*. Was this something new for you, playing together?**

Paul: I always try to involve Elisabeth when I have to put a group together. It's usually as a choir accompaniment or string quartet. But this was the first time it was the other way around.

Elisabeth: I was already playing with the idea of asking my father, but I didn't really dare to for a long time... It's a special dynamic. But I like it when you ask me, and I think you are the best violinist in the world – so I had to try. And since I write a lot for violins, but didn't really think about how to perform it live, I ended up with more violin lines than I can possibly play. My music is not like a classical score where everything is written down. It is much more free. Normally I have to give the musicians some directions. With my father, I gave him the score, he played it, and it was spot on, yet my father never improvises. He just got it and played magnificent. Maybe it is because we have the same arms or because we seek the same things. There is definitely something in our bodies.

**Why were you afraid to ask?**

Elisabeth: I thought there would be more friction – we are both quite difficult when we are outside of our habitat. But he arrived at my residency in Brussels cultural centre Pilar, and I quickly realized there wouldn't be any friction. Because actually, what we do – concerts and violins – exists in exactly the same habitat.

Paul: I felt at home. And I felt like it was Elisabeth's turn to run the show. She stood there like a battering ram in her music. And I thought, I'll just let her do her thing.

Elisabeth: Battering ram? I know what I want, but that's something... (*hesitates*) I pay attention to because you warned me from the start, since you had to learn to keep it inside more.

Paul: I might have phrased it a bit negatively, but I felt that energy and thought... Wow. You have to let her be. If Coppola is directing a film, you wouldn't say 'maybe don't open that door in this scene' would you?

**Elisabeth, you said your father never improvises. That sounds like a stark contrast between the two of you. Do you have experience in 'less classical music', Paul?**

Paul: I tried studying jazz for a while as an adult. I found it a super interesting world, but it wasn't my thing as a performer. I would say I am really a classical musician, in the classical sense of the word.

Elisabeth: But you recorded John Cage, for example, and you did research into old Flemish music. You've released a huge number of CDs. You've been busy with all sorts of things.

Paul: I did try to innovate in my own way. I had some revolutionary thoughts back in the days, like 'What are you all playing? Everyone is playing the same Bach and Beethoven, and surely some beautiful music must have been written here too.' I went looking for other music in the libraries. I stumbled upon violin concertos by a composer from Ghent, Karel Lodewijk Hanssens, and I paid an orchestra to record them with. After that I recorded and released a lot of music at an accelerated pace. I had a bit of Elisabeth's energy and stubbornness back then, the mentality of doing it all yourself. I started a label called PKP, Paul Klinck Productions, and self-published many CDs. I distributed them myself to the shops, and every shop had their own idea about them. They thought I had to do things differently to make them more commercially appealing. But I thought, no, that first track has to be on there. I executed everything on my own. I was making, making, making and moving fast. And I got quite a bit of radio attention from it back then. It's just like Elisabeth and her sister now.

Elisabeth: Isn't that bad? I'm 30 now and I'm just repeating history. I don't realize it, but the older I get, the more I look like my father. And like my mother too.

Paul: I think that's just your nature. It might be black and white thinking, but the energy is in the genes. And you're not repeating anything – the way Elisabeth makes music... I admire it so greatly. I think that we as classical musicians are... very, well... classical, as if we're restorers of an old painting, the Ghent Altarpiece, so to speak. We restore music and we perform it, just the way it was written long ago. It's maniacal and has its limitations, but it's my job. I find the road Elisabeth is going down so amazing. Sometimes I think that I am a Leopold Mozart and Elisabeth is my Wolfgang (*laughs*).

Elisabeth: I'm happy that you're so openly proud of me. I used to be scared of what my dad would think. You always try to be yourself as a child. It's scary. But we've reached a point where that's settled and the only ears I trust are actually yours.

Do you remember that time I was concertmaster and you played a solo? You might say you're classical, but you played it in such a way that I started crying. The phrasing was so beautiful; there was so much magic in performing that score as beautifully as possible. Or that Bach Chaconne you always play; that is such a different craft. I admire that too, because I can't do it. I always play the wrong note or can't commit to practising long enough to get it right. What you do is painstaking work. I hardly do that anymore, I look at it with wonder.

**Elisabeth, you seem to be slowly moving away from your classical background. What was the main reason for this transition?**

Elisabeth: In general, in school, I could play scores incredibly well one time and incredibly bad the next. My father always says you have to shoot into the goal every time. But that's not possible for me. It's not a discipline problem, I just can't manage to do it for some reason. I started experiencing playing classical concerts and getting feedback on my playing as something sour. Playing freer solo pieces by György Kurtág, was the first time my teacher actually said 'wow, that was

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ELISABETH

Benedictus Bruckner 18. 1. 98  
von Elisabeth Kluck, circa 1901

each other to the sounds of Texas I Eclipse of the Heart or I Want to Know What Love Is. Tile sticking beneath the shadow of an imaginary mushroom cloud. The eighties power ballad was the soundtrack of shuffling - but also of dismantling. The Cold War produced its own

beautiful.' My life in the conservatory and outside of it had always been so separated and I wanted to drift off. I remember having an ex boyfriend asking me: 'why do you only play music by other people? Why would you even do that?' I had never even asked myself that question. So I started looking for ways to combine both my worlds, inside and outside of this classical environment. I found one, and now I'm not afraid anymore that my bow would shake. Because I allowed my bow to shake, all of a sudden it stopped shaking. And to be honest, now, when I perform my music, it's always the case, it has become part of my body.

#### **Are there things in the classical world you admire?**

Elisabeth: I still play a lot with classically trained musicians. Maya Dhondt for example, a classical pianist, and Jasmijn Lootens on cello, for *Chronotopia*. They're classically trained musicians, who both make their own music. In them I find a craft and a focus I don't find in other people as easily. They always come prepared, in full concentration. We like to fully dive into the music and be active. Rehearsing well for a whole day is amazing. I love coming home tired and fulfilled.

#### **Is discipline important to you?**

Elisabeth: The older I get, the more I see the value of it. It makes me calm. I can fall back on it. I am at my calmest when I have my whole day planned. I sometimes try not to do it, because sometimes the pressure makes me nervous. I recognize it in my dad. He is super routine-oriented. Always the same steps. My father also always says, it is better to practice for five minutes every day than for an hour once a week. But you still practice for two hours every day. You make it seem like a meditation.

Paul: Yes. It never feels like a chore. I do it for the mental effect, to calm me down, but also to stay in shape. Many violinists are in good form but don't practice. It is my habitat. And it is routine. It is like brushing your teeth. Every. Single. Day. Or like exercising. Every few days, at the very least. But consistently. Then it never feels like practice.

Elisabeth: Your goal should never be: today I am going to learn this. I am going to finish that. No – today I am going to work on this for twenty minutes. Show up for twenty minutes. Listen to this for twenty minutes. And when you have done those twenty minutes, finished. The next day, another twenty minutes. Which means you are always satisfied because you have completed it. But if your goal is that you have to be able to do that, or that that composition has to be finished, then you don't want to do it the next day, because you're going to be frustrated that you didn't finish it. Then you stop doing that.

#### **Did you ever rebel against that, Elisabeth?**

Elisabeth: Yes. I had to practice every day. When I knew Dad was coming home, I would move my violin and adjust my seat so he would think I had practised. It is only now that I feel I get peace from it, but back then, it was a necessity.

Paul: And I would see, even when Elisabeth wasn't living at home anymore, if that violin was here, that four days later the violin would still be in the same place. Then I would think, okay, but...

Elisabeth: After some rebelling I actually recently started taking viola lessons. I had really missed that. Going to class, unpacking my violin, playing, and then the teacher says: 'Arm up! Out of tune! Come on! Faster!'

Paul: He's a Paul too. Paul De Clercq. We went to music camp together when I was 18.

Elisabeth: I compare it to someone reliving childhood trauma in a controlled environment as some kind of therapy (*laughs*).

#### **Did your Dad want you to play the violin too?**

Elisabeth: I think I actually wanted to play the violin but wasn't allowed to.

Paul: I thought, it would be better if you learned the cello, because otherwise... violin and violin, that's too close.

Elisabeth: The violin is really (*screams*) awful to start learning. I would have loved to learn the cello. But that is so big. A violin is so convenient.

#### **And getting lessons from your Dad wasn't possible?**

Paul: No, we clashed too much. I think it rarely works out when your child plays an instrument, that you can then give lessons. Only on rare occasions it does work. I remember once having an argument with my wife, and she said: 'The only thing you could still do is give Elisabeth violin lessons, and even that isn't working.'

Elisabeth: We both have fiery temperaments. I couldn't bear it. But later, when I was studying at the Lemmens conservatory in Leuven, I did sometimes dare to ask my father for lessons. Then our mom was also surprised that she didn't hear any slamming doors.

#### **Would you say you grew up in a home where music was a present part of life and the bond with each other?**

Elisabeth: Yes, definitely. My sister (composer and pianist Heleen Van Haegenborgh, ed.), the daughter of my mother, was also around often. She is 15 years older. I grew up with her, she didn't grow up with me.

Paul: It's funny that they both became composers. Their mother works as a public prosecutor, but they must have the creative spirit from her.

#### **How did you start playing the violin, Paul?**

Paul: They sent my brother and me to music school when we were kids. There we learned to play the recorder. It became clear that playing music came easily to me. The first year I played the clarinet, but that didn't work out. The following year – I was ten years old – I started the violin and it came naturally. When I see the pieces I played after two years or so, I think, 'Shit. That went well. I breezed through it.' I latched onto that talent because it seemed to offer me freedom and an escape from my less-than-rosy home situation.

#### **Was it a sweet escape?**

Paul: Yes. Practising was escaping. I still feel that practising is a pleasure for me.

As a teacher at the art high school,  
Paul, have you seen a lot of change?

Paul: I can stay much calmer now. *(laughs)*  
The older I get, the more I let go.  
It's a touchy subject.

Elisabeth: The level has really dropped, though. In the past,  
we were afraid of the teachers and super diligent as  
students. I am sometimes worried that nowadays,  
we are afraid of conflict and friction, while that is an  
important part of learning. It is good that tyranny is  
filtered out, but being able to handle discipline and  
criticism is something else and I'm coming to terms  
with that.

Would you still call yourself a classical musician?

Elisabeth: It's certainly still inside me. Some days I embrace it  
more than others. In a way, I do feel like an ambas-  
sador of classical music. My music is being labelled  
minimal, classical, and experimental music and jazz.  
Label it what you will, but I do feel that classical music  
is in my being when it comes to the kind of craft and  
deep dive into sound that I'm doing.


What is your dream duet? Except for the two of you, maybe.

Elisabeth: The two of us, actually never played a 'real' duet...  
But besides that...

Paul: You're catching me off guard with the question. My wife?  
*(laughs)* I have never played a duet where it truly clicked.  
There is one musician I admire, but he is a conductor. I  
played with him at La Monnaie, he is called Alain Altino-  
glu. It always struck me how, instead of saying, 'It's not  
good' or 'It sounds boring', he would say: 'Comment je  
peux vous aider? How can I help you?' He got along with  
everyone, which wasn't my strong suit back then. I would  
judge too quickly, but he was friendly to everyone. A great  
man, in the human sense of the word. In the classical world,  
conductors are often portrayed as angry people. And then  
you get the pressure Elisabeth felt. But that doesn't work  
anymore these days.

Elisabeth: A duet is intimate... You need experience with each  
other for that. It is almost like a relationship. You  
can't hide. Some people fall in love and feel that they  
instantly click with someone. Along the way things can  
go down the road or they run into each other again and  
with other people they need a lot of time before they  
feel like they're actually compatible. In any case you  
have to give it a chance. And you can't expect to under-  
stand each other immediately from the start. For the  
duet, I would choose Colin Van Eenhout of Amenra.  
He has a solo album on which he plays the hurdy-gurdy.  
I am exploring darker territories with my violin. I feel  
that I am already going deep during concerts, but  
I feel like actively seeking that out. Colin is always  
searching for an intense version of himself and  
his audience. I would really like to reach for  
that together.

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Illustration by  
L. J. ...  
based upon the  
drawing series by  
Julian Beckett

Heleen  
Van  
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SQUARING  
THE  
CIRCLE

Elisabeth dressed up



balloons somewhere between ceiling and that same floor. Safety hazards along the sidelines. Will someone ask you? How do you even dance together? Shuffling, Hands on hips, arms around necks, bodies swaying to three and a half minutes of declared love. The Dutch

