

PRIVATE AVIATION

WORDS BY RORY ROSS



A Victor-chartered Pilatus PC-12 on the apron at Gustaf III Airport on the ultra-chic Caribbean island of St Barths. Image courtesy of Victor

An aircraft hangar at Le Bourget, Paris's private jet airport, is an unlikely setting for Lang Lang, the world's most famous pianist, to give a recital. The customary jets had been replaced by what looked like a giant drum around whose interior two tiers of tables and chairs ran. In the centre of the drum, a Steinway grand stood on a small podium, looking like the prototype for a new-fangled personal flying device.

Thanks to his mass following, especially in China, Lang Lang is reckoned to have inspired 50 million people to take up the ivories, more than anyone in the history of the piano. However, this evening's recital was for a rarefied bejewelled clientele of 200 guests of Luxaviation, the world's second largest operator of private jets.

While the hangar's traditional function of receiving and storing aircraft was suspended for the evening,

it was business as usual outside at Le Bourget. In the dark, manoeuvring aeroplanes provided a steady obbligato of shrieking turbines, to Lang Lang's sublime renditions of Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Bach.

The evening was full of surprises. During Chopin's Waltz No 1 in E flat, the podium on which Lang Lang was playing sprang into life and began to revolve like a holding pattern above Heathrow. "How appropriate to play a waltz and find yourself going around in circles," quipped Lang Lang. He seemed as intrigued as the audience by this memorable evening.

Welcome to the world of private aviation, which now sells itself with exclusive concerts, private views, trips to the Monaco Grand Prix and sports clinics with professional stars. Yet private aviation has been under – rather than in or above – a cloud these last four years. Business has faced a number of headwinds, notably a depressed oil sector and a banking sector in retreat. Last year, broadly speaking, the overall

private jet market was flat.

Can Lang Lang create a bit of lift? He comes from the right part of the world. The men in epaulettes see China and Asia as their future. "Europe is a mature and fragmented market," says Patrick Hansen, CEO of Luxaviation. "Asia has fewer aircraft compared to the size of population than Europe. That continent is bound to grow. When you ask how to build a bridge between Europe and China, you look to Lang Lang. No other Chinese person has such a fantastic talent that can impress people from every culture."

Times may be tough, but never has flying privately been so accessible and such good value. This is because the supply-side is being hammered. There is a "significant supply of pre-owned aircraft on the market," says Clive Jackson, CEO / founder of Victor, disruptive champion of private aviation's millennial rebrand. "This has put downward pressure on manufacturers. You can get fantastic deals if you know where and how to look." Toss in a low oil price, and you'll

see that the economics of flying privately now stack up like EasyJets above the Home Counties. But what the macro-economy giveth, the government taketh away: on the negative side, regulatory and compliance costs have been soaring.

Fortunately, new constituencies of customer are having a look at private aviation and not all of them are from Asia. The financial sector and the oil and gas sectors, which provided a lot of business pre-2008, have given way to a younger demographic, says Patrick Margetson-Rushmore, CEO of London Executive Aviation. "We see more customers in their late 20s and 30s whereas before 2008 most of our customers were in their mid-50s and older. We do a lot of band tours and are looking forward to the European Football Championships. The stadia in France are relatively close to airports."

It seems that Europeans, who have never really bought into the American shtick about private aviation being a 'business tool', are now heading in the opposite direction and seeing it as a lifestyle enhancer. "Roughly 25 per cent of our clients are corporates," says Tom Ville of NetJets, "Another 25 per cent are individuals who fly purely for leisure. The remaining 50 per cent are entrepreneurs who use NetJets for both business and leisure purposes."

At Victor, Clive Jackson sees private air travel not only as a time-saving device for work, but also as a time-creating device for play. He reckons the door-to-door travel time when flying privately within Europe is "2.75 hours against 6 to 7 hours flying scheduled. That is significant in terms of percentage of time saved." So on a two-way trip, not only do you save yourself two



Jetfly's Pilatus PC12 aircraft at the world famous Courchevel 1850 Altiport (www.jetfly.com) Image courtesy of coutureeditions.com

15 years ago when a small group of European business men clubbed together to share the cost of a sole turbo-prop, in which to hop between chalets in the alps, villas in the south of France and their homes near Geneva.

Today, Jetfly operates 20 aircraft owned by 150 owners flown by 70 full time pilots. The entry-level cost

out at the end of next year. I dare say that somewhere in between the skiing, shooting, fishing, vineyard tending and sunbathing, a spot of work gets done, but that's not the point of Jetfly. The fleet of Pilatus jets, with big wheels, short take-off and landing capabilities, means you can put her down almost anywhere you fancy. No French chateau or Tuscan villa is safe!

Some private jet companies are taking the leisure theme still further and collaborating with luxury goods purveyors to combine the benefits of private jet travel with a more 'extreme' style of holiday. Victor, for example, has teamed up with Lamborghini, Belmond hotels and Burgess Yachts. At least in Europe if not the USA, private aviation has successfully extricated itself from the dead hand of the-senior-executive-on-the-move (most of whom these days can't be seen to be flying privately because it 'doesn't look good'), and reinvented itself in the more glamorous realms of luxury goods and services. This reflects the millennial zeitgeisty way in which, for some of us, work and play now overlap and meld into one seamless dynamic international lifestyle.

I dare say that somewhere in between the skiing, shooting, fishing, vineyard tending and sunbathing, a spot of work gets done.

existential meltdowns at the back of an EasyJet queue, but you also, "Harvest back 7 waking hours."

Jetfly operate a fractional ownership programme of Pilatus PC12 aeroplanes, a Swiss-built turboprop that can land on much shorter runways than an equivalent jet. This allows the Pilatus to drop in on the Altiport at Courchevel and at the Goodwood airstrip. Born of the desire to make life more agreeable for its well-heeled members, Jetfly began

of joining is \$335,000 for 1/16 share in a new Pilatus PC12 that you can use for 10 years without any further investment. This share gives you access to 31.25 hours' flying time per year, with a management fee of 4,210 Euros/month and a fee of 1,800 Euros per occupied hour flight. "Now we are moving into the jet market, we have been appointed as the launch customer of the Pilatus PC24 jet for Europe," says Jonathan Clough, UK Director. Pilatus's first jet comes



Lang Lang, the world renowned Chinese concert pianist, outside the Luxaviation jet (www.luxaviation.com)

has cut out the broker, the middle man whose business model relies on opacity and keeping both sides of the bargain apart. Victor brings supply and demand almost frictionlessly together.

"Fundamentally, we make the charter market transparent," says Jackson, speaking from the seafront in Palma where he has a house. "We can show you the identity of the operator, the tail number of the aircraft, what other customers think of that operator, and comparable pricing. You can make an informed decision. This is only possible by smart technology."

Last year, the overall private aviation market grew by just under 1% whilst Victor has seen three-year average sales growth of more than 142%. Its symbolic edge over the fractional ownership providers is neatly illustrated by the fact that Victor recently moved into the former offices of Netjets European HQ in Sloane Avenue, Chelsea.

"People see Victor as having a great brand with a great app," says Jackson. "But underpinning Victor is a multi-channel platform that allows all the information to be connected in real time. It allows a CEO like me not just to

You can put her down almost anywhere you fancy – no French Chateaux or Tuscan villa is safe!

Victor has furthermore positioned itself on the right side of the economic forces that are buffeting the private jet market, notably the oversupply of jets. This glut has hit the dicers and slicers of pre-paid aviation, the card-operators and the fractional ownership providers (although NetJets say they increased their market share in Europe in 2015). "There is so much on-demand supply today that there is no need to pre-pay in return for guaranteed availability," says Jackson. "You can literally get whatever you want whenever you want it."

flip open a laptop and see what is going on, but also to see what is happening in real time on both the consumer side and the supply side, from my car here on the waterfront at Palma."

"One year ago," he adds, "Victor went into the USA. Later this year, we will cover the Asia Pacific and Middle Eastern markets. By the end of the year, we will circle the globe. We are British and we're great and we dare to compete on the global stage. I'm proud of that." Who knows, perhaps one day Victor will be called the Lang Lang of private aviation?◆