

## Multimedia Storytelling with Music and Pictures

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Exploring the interaction between picture books and the fine arts is a specialized project but a comparison of different ways of telling can be surprisingly informative. I set out to investigate stories told with music - not narrative songs in which words and music are blended, not film in which the music augments the emotional impact of one plot development or another, not opera in which the music provides the major narrative impetus, but stories primarily based on words in which the music is woven as a part of the narrative.

It may be, as our story-telling becomes more multi-media, that such forms of narrative will become relatively commonplace, but to explore this question today I found I had to turn to the didactic story. Two examples will feed my analysis: *Peter and the Wolf* by Serge Prokofiev and *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* written by Barbara Nichol. Both these stories first appeared in audio form and were later reincarnated as picture books. *Peter and the Wolf* was written to make children familiar with instruments of the orchestra and *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* uses story to sweeten a biographical pill, telling many important details of the life of Beethoven through the fictional voice of his landlady's young son.

Both of these stories could be performed live with an orchestra and are also well suited to recording. When the music is an integral part of the story, some other elements are necessarily involved as well. Such a story is always voiced; it is really very difficult to envisage a silent reading with appropriate orchestral interventions. These are stories written to be heard.

But a voiced story is a story with many elements fixed. The gender of the narrator is not negotiable in these circumstances and his or her accent is an integral part of the experience. The pacing and rhythm are determined by the

speaker and the orchestra; the pauses for the orchestra to take over and the swelling and fading of background music are all built into the experience by the producers, not by the listeners.

The musical elements also provide their own narrative impetus. Music can be played slowly or quickly but the timing is usually fixed in advance and at a minimum the orchestra has to reach some agreement so they all play at the same pace. Furthermore, though it is technically possible to play music backwards, this kind of scrambling is unusual and listeners to the story effectively respond to the forward movement of the musical pieces which are interwoven into the story experience. Robert Jourdain observes that melody is created out of contour, harmony and rhythm (80-81), all of which are working directionally as we listen to them. Music is temporally based; by definition we cannot suspend it while our ears explore the contours in the way that our eyes can roam around a painting. We listen forward; the pause button cancels the music. Such a definitive ingredient in the artistic mix has its own effect on the final experience.

So, turning such productions into stories told by means of print and picture means that some substantial changes are necessary. Two examples of titles where this has happened may offer some illumination on the processes involved in such adaptation.

### ***Peter and the Wolf***

In Prokofiev's famous story of Peter and the animals who live in his neighbourhood, the motifs for the different characters, played by particular instruments, are woven into the telling of the story, affecting pace, rhythm, character development, and plot. The music tells its own story, supplementing and counterpointing the words in somewhat the same way as pictures do in a picture book. One of the intentions of the work is to introduce children to instruments of the orchestra and this didactic impulse plays its own part in the

shaping of the story and the foregrounding and repetition of the musical motifs.

In many versions of *Peter and the Wolf*, the musical themes are introduced at the beginning of the story, so they act as a kind of foreshadowing - we know in advance that there will be hunters shooting, for example. When the characters appear in the story, however, their themes are developed more fully and the music of the different instruments weave in and out of each other so that we know which characters are talking to each other through the music.

The story is effectively told twice, once through the words and again through the music. As a rule the words come first, though the moment when the cat jumps at the duck is relayed first through the pounce in the music and it is subsequently that the words make the situation clear.

When such a story is turned into a picture book (and there have been a number of versions of *Peter and the Wolf*), the words are preserved, the music is effectively lost, and the pictures are added. What does this do to the story? Obviously a lot depends on the interpretation of the individual picture book designer, but some generalizations are possible and they shed some light on broader elements of story telling.

The greatest single change lies in the pacing. *Peter and the Wolf* is shaped and crafted around the interspersed musical motifs that represent different characters. The words often come to a halt as the music takes over the story. When the music subsides to the background it still affects the pacing of the words in the foreground. Furthermore, the simple motifs originally introduced to represent different characters are sometimes developed into more complex melodies and by the end there is a clear sense of the different instruments all working together.

In the picture book, external control over rhythm and pacing disappears and the

reader is in charge of when to turn the page and progress with the story, when to look back to an earlier picture, when to pause and when to move on.

An artist setting out to interpret an already known story for picture book format must decide whether or not the new telling is going to acknowledge the rigid pacing of the original and if the answer to that question is yes must decide how it will be done. Some illustrators simply decide that the answer is no. Michele Lemieux, after a page of introduction in which she makes the connection between the orchestral instruments and the characters, works straight through the story in a relatively linear fashion in her 1991 account of the story.

It is interesting to contrast the role of Lemieux's very stylized pictures with the impact of the music. The size and scope of the meadow are conveyed graphically rather than musically; the pictures are elaborately patterned. In many of the backgrounds the strict patterning plays a role that could be described as offering a form of visual parallel to some of the qualities of the music, the fixed themes in particular. There are points in the story where the music works more flexibly and some of this is also reflected in the pictures. The moment when the wolf swallows the duck is musically lively and the corresponding picture breaks free of the patterned backgrounds and offers the action scene against the contrast of smooth bright colours.

Overall, however, this book version of *Peter and the Wolf* works on a different set of principles from the recorded story, a point that can be made more clearly when we explore a contrasting picture book interpretation of the story. This is a 1940 edition, designed and illustrated by Warren Chappell. Chappell pays much more explicit attention to the circular, repetitive shape of the story. His opening double-page spread offers three versions of the opening phrases. On the left-hand page, the text reads, Early one morning Peter opened the gate and went out into the big green meadow. On the branch of a birch tree sat... The sentence continues over the page but before we can get there we must take some account of the

remainder of the opening. Underneath the words is a musical score of Peter's theme, and on the right-hand page is a drawing of Peter with the opening sentence of the story repeated in red letters this time: Early one morning Peter opened the gate and went out into the big green meadow. All of the coloured pictures have this red caption that repeats certain crucial points of the story, and the pacing of the reading through the book is more tightly controlled as a result - although the reader, unlike the listener, has a fair degree of freedom simply to overlook these captions and turn the page regardless. Similarly the orchestral themes are represented throughout by musical notation added to the relevant page. At the end of the book a list connects each character to the appropriate instrument in the orchestra.

The contrast between these two versions is interesting at a number of levels. It could certainly be argued that the Chappell interpretation is much more referential and would make very little sense without some awareness of the musical original. On the other hand, Lemieux places her explanation of the orchestral origins of the story right at the beginning of the book and shows the animals actually playing their own instrument in an opening picture. After that, she leaves the music behind except as her patterned pictures draw on something of the same elements. There is no further direct reference to the original arrangement of the story.

Some of the questions surrounding these three versions of the same story are questions which arise over any adaptation. Are there deep structures in a story which should be preserved in any form of adaptation? What are the obligations of fidelity to the first story? Are certain kinds of story-telling more complexly tied to such performative issues as pace and rhythm? And are our answers to such questions in relation to particular versions simply indicative of personal taste or connected to which version we meet first? I certainly prefer the Chappell version to the Lemieux version but that may be because my complete preference is for the orchestral telling and I prefer the more faithful rendition of the particularities of

that version.

### ***Beethoven Lives Upstairs***

Questions also abound in a story that is composed on a very different basis from that of *Peter and the Wolf*. *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* belongs to the sub-genre of fictionalized biography. By now there may even be a sub-sub-genre of stories of famous musicians which use the story to introduce children to biographical and musical themes.

In *Peter and the Wolf* the music is composed to fit the story; in *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* the music is excerpted from many famous compositions of Beethoven's. This music is often powerfully emotional and the story borrows that emotive power to charge what is often a relatively lame narrative. There are elements in Beethoven's life that are also irreducibly potent; it is hard to imagine a listener or reader who could remain impervious to the image of the deaf composer who could not actually hear the sublime music he had created, whose conducting of his masterpiece had to be shadowed by a lesser musician who could really hear, who conducted past the actual end of the performance of the Ninth Symphony and had to be taken by the arm and turned to face the wild applause of the crowd.

*Beethoven Lives Upstairs* takes that moving story and transplants it into the epistolary narrative of a child writing to his uncle. Christoph is the fictional son of Beethoven's landlady, and he is not at all pleased with the eccentricities of his mother's lodger. His musical uncle replies soothingly to the child's unhappy letters and provides biographical information to calm his nephew and to educate all the other listeners.

The music in this story plays a number of roles. Chiefly, of course, it is present to contribute to the education of the young listeners who may one day recognize a

Beethovenian air and pause to listen more carefully. I do not wish to decry the impact such early contact with classical music may have on some children. However, the design of the story means that a large number of very short motifs are crowded into a small time-frame. Furthermore the music often camouflages inconsistencies in the verbal story. Take the introduction where the contradictions of snow and thunder pale in comparison to the incoherence of the tense framework:

Monday March 26 1827. The north wind blows and snow billows through the air. Thunder claps above the empty streets. It is a day that will go down in history. [Music.] A fine gentleman stands alone in a doorway. His carriage awaits but he does not move. He waves the carriage on. Tonight the gentleman will walk home. Like many in Vienna, his eyes are full of tears. Ludwig van Beethoven has died. [Small swell of music.] Three days later spring had arrived. The people of Vienna flooded into the streets. They had come to pay their respects to the man who has written such beautiful music. [Music.] At three o'clock in the afternoon nine priests blessed the composer's coffin and the funeral procession left Beethoven's house. . . . The schools of Vienna were let out that day. If you would look carefully you might have spotted in the crowd a boy with a serious face. His name is Christoph and he is my nephew. And there was a time when he came to know Mr. Beethoven well.

This passage starts in the present tense and moves quickly to the past perfect, with the music smoothing the transition. As we get to the section about the schools being let out we move to the conditional, to the present and back to the past again. Only the final transition is grammatically accounted for in the development of the story; the remainder are arbitrary and, to me, very ugly. Yet the beautiful music working in the background distracts even my picky ear and

provides some compensation for the inadequacies of the narrative voice, at least in these early stages.

Soon, however, it becomes apparent that the music is going to chop and change as fast and as often as the tenses. The excerpts have all the drawbacks of extracts in any language; the contour of the complete piece is sacrificed as one short theme crowds on another. Beethoven, of course, can be raided to supply music for every mood, and the musical extracts support Christoph's laments about the lodger's noisy ways, his uncle's placatory responses, Christoph's ruminations on how lonely the composer seems, and so forth. Sometimes the connection between the music and the scene in Christoph's life is highly forced and annoying; for example the fictional Beethoven is sent out into a storm apparently just to make room for the storm passage from the Sixth Symphony. Sometimes the power of the music overwhelms the moment of the story and any associations I feel come from my own life-long experiences of listening to or even playing Beethoven in many different circumstances; other listeners will respond differently.

The audio version is told in two voices, those of Christoph and his uncle played by Stephen Ouimette and Nathaniel Moreau. The boy does a good job of conveying his fatigue and exasperation, but his very North American accent necessarily adds its own distinctive flavour to the overall impact of the story. I am aware that my own internal voice, when I read a story silently, is probably also very North American but the effect of that inescapable element of my private reading is ubiquitous and somehow therefore diffused for me. The specifics of a determinate actor work in a different way and become part of the creation of the final product. Christoph is a Viennese boy but his accent is discordant to my ear.

The specifics of the actor and the music work together to show Christoph coming around to appreciate Beethoven. It is a hot night and the boy can't sleep so his mother lets him stay up to listen to the music coming from a party in Beethovens

room. Two sopranos are singing, then the tape shifts to piano music.

When they were finished singing, we heard the song another way. The party became quiet. Suddenly I was happy to be staying up so late. Mother let me listen, standing in my pyjamas in the hall. I closed my eyes and imagined I was by a little waterfall, where water tumbles into little streams.

The limpid piano music swirls round Christoph's spoken words; his interpretation is rather strenuous perhaps but it at least addresses the qualities of the music and the words and the music are completely integrated in the telling of the story at this point. The emotional forces of the music are yoked to the narrative power of the story in an inseparable way.

As will by now be apparent, this audio story evokes fairly complex responses at least from this reader. What happens when the story moves into picture book form? Barbara Nichol, who wrote the story for the audio version, has also written the text and Scott Cameron has produced the pictures for Lester Publishing's picture book version of this story.

The book works on a very similar format. The introduction by the uncle describing the scenes surrounding Beethoven's death is still there, though the tenses are cleaned up. The bulk of the story is conveyed in letters as before, though the book adds occasional glosses by the uncle telling us what is happening in his own life at the same time. The music is simply subtracted. For example, the little scene with Christoph listening to the music has evaporated; the party and the sopranos remain but he makes no mention of standing in his pyjamas to listen to Beethoven play the piano. Instead the turning point in the relationship between the two characters comes when they go for a walk together in the woods, an occasion conspicuously without musical input.

So today I went along with him on his walk. At times Mr. Beethoven forgot that I was with him. He would hum and sometimes wave his arms. He took out his papers and made some little notes.

We walked outside Vienna into the tall woods and then past the woods and into the fields. Uncle, if you were to come to visit me, I would show you where we walked today.

The gist of the picture book version of this story is biographical much more than musical. And the work the pictures do is biographical as well. There is no sense that the pictures intend to convey any of the power and sweep of Beethoven's music. They are contained in their rectangular limits, neatly framed in white. There is one double-page spread where the picture bleeds off all the edges and that is the scene of Beethoven being turned to acknowledge the applause of the crowd, a moment more biographical than musical, if I may resort to shorthand. There is also no sense that the pictures convey any of the romantic fervour of Beethoven's age; the artist explicitly announces in the blurb on the dust jacket that. His fine oil paintings are influenced by his favorite turn-of-the-century illustrators, N.C. Wyeth and Frederic Remington.

Unlike the two versions of *Peter and the Wolf*, this book simply eliminates the music. We learn about Beethoven the famous man and the music is simply the cause of that fame. There are numerous pictures with crowds of people testifying to Beethoven's reputation but little that conveys anything of the force of his music. The absence of the music from the book throws into clear relief the impact of its presence in the audio version of the story.

## **Conclusion**

As our technology heads down the multimedia road it seems likely that our

stories will follow. All kinds of narrative experiments using image, music, animation, and other ingredients will shape our stories. In the early stages of this development, a simple analysis of these music-linked stories may shed some light on potential changes. Children will not stop to analyse their stories in any such way, they will simply take for granted that stories work through a variety of media and forms. However, a close reading of different forms of story-telling may be useful to the adults who work with them and offer some guidance to the complexities of narrative understandings required and developed by new kinds of text.

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