

Storytelling and Music: Powerful Harmony

Tim Van Egmond

Everyone has experienced how music can touch our hearts and reach deep into our souls. Stories and music are a powerful combination that can take many forms. My entry into the world of storytelling was in large part through music. I have been a folk music fan since childhood, and when I heard Pete Seeger’s musical story “Abi Yo-yo” on one of his albums, I was enchanted. I retold and sang it for kids when I was a teenage babysitter and a college-age summer camp counselor. It was magical how it captivated the kids! Pete Seeger actually based this story on a lullaby he found in a book of African folk tunes.¹³

In the mid to late ‘70s, Barbara Freeman and Connie Regan (the tandem storytelling duo known as The Folk Tellers) were performing at folk music venues. I saw them at the Brink Coffeehouse at Mt. Holyoke College and the Fox Hollow Folk Festival. I heard them rave about the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, and it drew me to make a pilgrimage there in 1980. I think it was the tellers and the tales at that

¹³ Seeger, Pete. *Where Have All The Flowers Gone*. Sing Out Corporation, 1993.

festival that inspired me with the burning desire to be a storyteller myself. I remember being especially struck by storytellers who had a musical element in their tales. I heard the songs Jay O’Callahan crafted in his stories, the scat-singing, harmonica-playing Brother Blue, Heather Forest accompanying herself on guitar in her musical adaptations of tales, and a shivery lumberjack tale Doug Lipman told interspersed with verses of “The Lumberman’s Alphabet.”

These and other storytellers have inspired the musical side of my storytelling ever since. Hearing Michael Meade led me to accompany some African tales with a hand drum. I emulate other performers when I tell the legend behind the traditional tune “The Gold Ring” and then play on my hammered dulcimer. The same is true when I play a musical interlude in a tale to suggest dancing. At times I think of a song that goes well culturally and thematically with a story, such as “Brown Girl In The Ring” for a Caribbean story, or “Brinca La Tablita” for a bilingual tale from Cuba. Occasionally I come up with a melody for words already in a tale (often borrowing a melody from another song). For example, whenever the peddler in “The Peddler of Ballaghadereen”¹⁴ set out his wares, he would call out:

“Come buy a trinket — come buy a brooch —
Come buy a kerchief of scarlet or yellow.”

I experimented and made up a melody for those words, so the peddler’s call was a song.

There are many ways music can enhance a story. From playing an instrument to simply using one for a sound effect, from singing to speaking in rhythm, from evoking a mood to inviting audience participation, there’s a wide range of possibilities and levels. I’ve joined in with delight when one storyteller patted his legs in rhythm to a simple chant for a character’s travel, or another clapped in a rhythmic pattern and swayed to give an image of a protagonist dancing. Music provides wonderful opportunities for audience participation. I’ve also been tickled or deeply moved by songs storytellers have written to go with their stories.

¹⁴ Sawyer, Ruth. *The Way Of The Storyteller*. Viking Press, 1965.

One simple but powerful approach is to “frame” a story with music, beginning and closing with it. Often in my programs for senior centers, I tell “Fat Or Lean,” a humorous tale from Virginia about an older man who’s down in the dumps because his rheumatism keeps him from getting around.¹⁵ On a dare, he agrees to be carried to a haunted house to spend the night, and he proves amazingly spry running away when he’s badly spooked. It occurred to me to match the story up with the song “The Old Grey Mare,” having the older man sing it mournfully in the introduction, then up-tempo and spunky at the end when he’s been inspired to get around better.

It’s also good to look for opportunities to weave music through a story. Many tales have an element of repetition that lends itself well to a song when something comes around again. I remember hearing Tom Callinan and Ann Shapiro doing a tandem telling of the Irish tale “The Corpse Watchers,” with three sisters in turn watching over the corpse of a young man on three different nights.¹⁶ Each one sings “Isn’t It Grand Boys, To Be Bloody-Well Dead” to pass the time until the corpse sits up and asks “All alone fair maid?” Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss (Beauty and the Beast Storytellers) retell “The Enormous Turnip” with a simple song and dance each time the characters try to pull the turnip up: “Turnip, turnip come on up! “Turnip, turnip come on up!”¹⁷ Bill Harley created a song for Fox to sing in “Fox’s Sack,” his adaptation of the English tale “The Travels of A Fox.” The trickster sings it to pique the curiosity of each person with whom he leaves the sack (with strict instructions not to look in it).¹⁸

Another avenue is to seek out stories that have strong musical elements already in them. For instance, a tale from Ireland that I fell in love with early on is “A Matter of Brogues.”¹⁹ The folk of the village are lamenting because no one can afford shoes to make themselves presentable to attend a wonderful wedding coming up soon. Over the hill comes Conal of the

¹⁵ Chase, Richard. *American Folk Tales and Songs*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

¹⁶ Kennedy, Patrick. *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*. New York, MacMillan & Co., 1886. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/lfic/lfic010.htm>.

¹⁷ Brody, Ed et al. *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope*. New Society Publishers, 1992.

Thousand Tunes who knows the Music of Enchantment, with his fiddle under his arm. He goes to the stingy cobbler's shop after hours and plays and sings to each pair of shoes to send them walking down the streets to the villagers they'll fit. This being May Eve, the Gentle People come down from the fairy mound above the town and make new shoes to replace the ones that Conal sent away. However, it turns out these will pinch the feet of anyone who tries them on, so the mean-natured cobbler can't sell them. All the villagers attend the wedding, and Conal plays the merriest of tunes for them to dance. Now I couldn't figure out the music notation provided at the beginning of the story, but under Doug Lipman's coaching, I set it to the tune "Drowsy Maggie," an Irish reel I knew well from playing for contra dances.

Some collections of musical tales like this that have given me help and inspiration are *The Singing Sack* compiled by Helen East, *Patakin — World Tales of Drums and Drummers* edited by Nina Jaffe, *Shake-It-Up Tales!* collected by Margaret Read MacDonald, and *Troubadour's Storybag* edited by Norma J. Livo. The first three collections have lyrics and music notation, and the first two also have companion recordings. The resource list accompanying this article provides full biographical information for these books, as well as other books and recordings and particular stories.

In crafting a story with music, it's important to consider how to do it in a way that best supports the story, without distracting the audience or yourself. You'll need to play and/or sing with a quality that makes the listeners comfortable so they can lose themselves in the tale. If what you're trying to do at first isn't up to this standard, ask yourself if there's something simpler that you can do more easily but would still add magic. If you can't sing well, can you recite the words to the song in rhythm? For a model, check how Rex Harrison does this in the musical "My Fair Lady." If what you're trying to play is prone to mistakes or just makes you tense, can you experiment or consult someone else to come up with

¹⁸ Holt, David, and Bill Mooney. Ready-To-Tell-Tales. August House Publishers, Inc., 1994.

¹⁹ Sawyer, Ruth. *The Way Of The Storyteller*. Viking Press, 1965.

something that will just flow from your heart?

As always in preparing a story to perform, it's invaluable to work with a buddy or a story circle for appreciation and feedback. Try the story out, see how it feels and what others comment or suggest, record yourself on video and watch, adapt, and polish. As you progress, you might arrange "safe" audiences to test your tale on, with their understanding that it's a work in progress. Can you make a connection with a classroom in your local school, a senior center, your men's or women's group, or some other group?

Another option is to collaborate with someone else, a musician and/or singer who will accompany your telling. For example, Diane Edgecomb performs at times with Celtic harper Margot Chamberlain, and Katie Green has performed and recorded with percussionist Tony Vacca. Laura Simms has a number of recordings out with bamboo flute virtuoso Steve Gorn. When I appeared on the program *The Storycrafters*, Jeri Burns and Barry Marshall hosted on Albany's Public Radio station years ago, Jeri had prepared to weave her harp playing through my telling of the "The Gold Ring." (There's a transcription of the Irish piper Seamus Ennis telling "The Gold Ring" at <http://forums.chiffandfipple.com/viewtopic.php?f=40&t=77197>). I was delighted at a house concert by an Appalachian "rewrite" Hope Lewis did of the Irish tale "The Mouse, The Bee, and the Bum-Clock" with mountain dulcimer accompaniment provided by a friend.²⁰ Collaboration like this can have its advantages in bringing in skill and artistry, and present challenges as well in communication and sharing a vision.

I'm deeply grateful for the way storytelling and music have enriched my life, and I feel they're needed more than ever in these times. In this spirit, a tale that's especially meaningful to me lately is "A Sufi Creation Story" adapted by Jennifer Armstrong from the telling of the Mayan storyteller Floating Eagle Feather (you can listen to it on her recording "Tuneful Tales"). In the beginning, the Creator first fashions the bodies, then the souls, and then tells the souls to climb into the bodies. The souls refuse to climb into "those heavy, lumpy things." After an interval of silence, the Creator laughs and music and dancing and storytelling come into being.

The souls see all the people dancing and singing, and they're intrigued, saying "That looks like fun. What's going on?" They enter into the bodies to find out. "And so it has been ever since. To hold body and soul together, we sing and we dance and we tell stories."

I wish you good fortune and great joy as you bring your storytelling and music into the world. This article isn't meant to be definitive, and I hope it starts a conversation or better yet, a "chorus" of conversations on the topic. I welcome you to contact me with questions, ideas and inspirations.

²⁰ <http://archives.nd.edu/episodes/visitors/macmanus/tales09.htm>



Tim Van Egmond Raised in a musical family, a lover of books from an early age, enraptured by daily sing-alongs as a kid at day camp, enchanted by a storyteller who performed at his grade school, Tim had a lot leading him to his chosen profession as a folksinger and storyteller. Van Egmond has performed for over 30 years throughout the country, weaving together tales, tunes, and songs to share their wellspring of rib-tickling, spine-tingling, heartwarming water of life.

Tim has been chosen for the New England States Touring Program, and has been a featured performer at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, Three Apples Storytelling Festival, and the New Jersey Storytelling Festival, among many notable venues. He's also a member of the contra dance band Swallowtail, and the folk music duo Yankee Notions. Renowned author and storyteller Jane Yolen has said "Tim is a triple treat. He can sing, he can play a variety of wonderful instruments, and he can tell whopping good tales!"

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