

CelloTales: The Melding of Music, Myth and Memories **By Leeny Del Seamonds (with Gideon Freudmann)**

I first met cellist Gideon Freudmann at a performers' showcase in 1999, where we had the opportunity to attend each other's twenty-minute showcase. Gideon presented a portion of his CelloBop program geared for students. His musical ability, pleasant demeanor and versatility impressed me, as well as the audience. During his presentation, Gideon played both acoustic and electric cellos, explaining and demonstrating the differences and similarities of each instrument. Each cello can sound virtually the same; both are capable of being bowed, strummed, plucked and amplified. But I was most fascinated by Gideon's electric cello and accompanying pedals, because they create some amazing and awesome sounds, unlike anything I had heard before (except sometimes in my head).

Gideon describes his electric cello as "an anchor-shaped instrument that looks like a cello on a diet gone awry." He enhances the cello's sound with digital effects: a delay which makes notes echo; a pitch shifter which adds harmonies to any note he plays; and a phrase sampler which records a group of notes or sounds and instantaneously plays them back. With this last effect, Gideon can add layer upon layer, creating a rich tapestry of sound. Gideon adds, "For years, I have been fascinated with the cello's expressive qualities, specifically its ability to make interesting sounds that aren't necessarily notes."

As a storyteller, I often hear music in my head while I'm performing, which may engulf the spoken words (a result of musical theatre training, perhaps?). When I heard the digital sound effects and layers of melodies created by this electric cello, I knew they could complement and enhance some of my stories. I thought of one story in particular, a retelling of *Fisherman and His Wife*, in which I sing a refrain and had imagined additional melodies and sound effects (storms brewing and waves crashing) throughout the piece. I believed the electric cello could only augment the imagery I was trying to create.

After the showcase, Gideon and I discussed the possibility of combining forces. We agreed that our working in tandem should be more than just musical accompaniment setting a mood for my storytelling. Our collaboration should be a melding of our two art forms, complementing each other and intertwined in such a way that when my voice stopped, his cello continued, and vice versa. The cello would become a character in the story.

At our first rehearsal, I brought two pieces from my repertoire for us to experiment with: *Suki* (a traditional Japanese story) and *Fisherman and His Wife* (adapted from a traditional German tale). In both stories, I had heard music in my head whenever I performed them. After giving him a quick synopsis, I began telling *Suki*, while Gideon followed along, improvising here and there. He played what he saw in the pictures created by the words and the emotions behind them. We used a tape recorder every step of the way so we could stop, listen to, and critique each section. I needed to speed up the tempo in a few places and not wait for Gideon; he decided to be silent in certain sections to allow the words to take over. We knew we were on the right track because it felt and sounded good to both of us. In less than an hour, we were satisfied with the result and recorded the story. The same process occurred with *Fisherman and His Wife*, incorporating additional melody to accompany the refrains sung throughout the tale.

We called our program "CelloTales" and submitted a demo tape a month later to First Night Boston. We were hired for three performances at the Hynes Convention Center for the First Day Millennium celebration. "CelloTales" was born.

Working in tandem with Gideon has been a rewarding experience. When he begins the opening 'Ito Theme' in *Suki*, the first story in the program, I become immersed in the music and transported to the clear winter landscape in Northern Japan, standing outside Ito and Umi's cottage. As the story unfolds, we match each other pitch for pitch. With the aid of the cello's digital enhancement, intricate sound effects are created to set the mood of the scenes and actions in the story: howling winds; snowstorms; the clacking of an ancient loom; a plaintive cry; soaring through the sky; a character's transformation. Gideon repeats the Ito Theme several times throughout the story to represent joyful times in the small family's life.

In *Fisherman and His Wife*, our closing story, the 'Fisherman Theme' is played throughout the story, sometimes to represent the fisherman's happiness and sometimes (in a minor key) to represent his sadness with his wife's greed and discontent. At the end of the story, when I vocally create the call of a seagull, Gideon echoes that sound and loops it over and over until it fades, as the seagull flies away. I gasp along with the audience at the breathtaking sound.

Even though we prepare thoroughly, we can also be spontaneous and improvisational, so our performances are constantly evolving. We appreciate the power of silence, as well. It is a very effective tool in creating drama. In *El Desafío (The Dare)*, my retelling of an urban legend set in Spain, the story begins in silence to set the tone. Gradually the cello's voice is heard, underneath my words, first with a Spanish flamenco motif, then building tension through a series of descending chords, creating the dark, creepy atmosphere of the old graveyard, complete with the pounding and thumping of the young girl's heart. The intense sound of the cello resonates through me, inspiring words to complete the picture and inviting listeners to live the story.

Gideon once claimed: "It's Leeny's words that drive the stories in CelloTales." If that's true, then Gideon's cello is the limousine!

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Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™, is an internationally known performer of Latino, original and world tales spiced with mime, a cornucopia of voices, song, and love of people. A Parents' Choice Silver Award winner, Leeny presents 17 programs for listeners of all ages and 7 workshops.

Gideon Freudmann is a noted cellist and composer. He has recorded 8 CDs and performs frequently around the US and beyond. He has appeared on *Good Morning America*, his music is frequently heard on NPR, and he has composed music for film, theatre and dance.

A CelloTales CD is planned for a December 2003 release. For further information, contact: Leeny Del Seamonds, 978-692-3961; leenydel@comcast.com or Gideon Freudmann, 413-586-8855; Gideon@cellobop.com.