

# A wordless book full of meaning

By Kumudini Hettiarachchi

A book without words! A lovely pink cover with a beautifully round 6 at the centre and encircled within the tummy of the number; an image of a boy and a girl and flowers and birds.

More than 200 copies of this colourfully illustrated book were handed over this Tuesday to the Roman Catholic Church to be distributed among all those child-victims of the Easter Sunday bomb blasts. No child is to be left out – whether directly affected by being at the bomb sites themselves or having lost someone near and dear to them.

This is a labour of love from the hands of author, translator, graphic designer and illustrator Deepthi Horagoda who has been engaged in this type of creativity since 2006 and she hopes healing would flow forth from its pages.

“This is my first wordless book,” smiles Deepthi who has authored and illustrated six children’s storybooks as well as translating, designing and illustrating more children’s book, folk verses, historical biog-

A labour of love by author, translator, graphic designer and illustrator Deepthi Horagoda for the children affected by the Easter Sunday bombings

raphies and cookery books for other authors.

This wordless book is the first to be certified by the Good Books Council of the International Board on Books for Young people (IBBY) Sri Lanka Section, she says, explaining that what happens is that the 15-member council including scholars in the field of children’s literature reviews a submitted manuscript or book and issues a certificate of approval.

The IBBY Sri Lanka Section has had a name-change from this month to Sri Lankan Board on Books for Young people (SLBBY).

There is also a different twist to this particular wordless tale – it is being promoted as bibliotherapy for all those children who faced the horrors of the April 21 bombings.

Putting it in a nutshell, Deepthi says that bibliotherapy is a broad term and means the use of books specifically created to help not only children and youth but also adults to bring out their hidden fears and problems. “They are helped to come to a catharsis (the release of strong feelings) by identifying with the characters in the book.”

By whatever name it may be called, bibliotherapy, bibliocounselling, bibliopsychology, bookmatching, literotherapy, library therapeutics guided reading and biblioguidance, it is the use of story-telling and reading as a therapeutic tool.

Quoting the National Association of School Psychologists, USA, Deepthi says that books can be wonderful tools to use with children who have experienced diffi-



Deepthi

cult times such as trauma or loss. Reading or being read to and talking to adults can help them understand and cope with their feelings. Reading also offers a great way to spend time with a child, reinforce a sense of normalcy and security and connect with them, all of which are important to recovery from a traumatic experience.

In the aftermath of the mindless violence on Easter Sunday, the SLBBY, re-established after a lapse of 30 years in June 2018, was wondering what contribution it could make to ease the emotional burden of those who had been affected.

“What can we do to help these child-victims?” was foremost on the mind of SLBBY President Dinesh Kulatunga for according to UNICEF figures 176 had lost either one or both parents.

Just across the Palk Strait, India had used wordless books as a therapeutic tool after the Bhopal gas tragedy and the 2004 tsunami.

“The fact that 232 children in the age-group 6-18 years were directly affected by being present at the bomb blast sites came later from Seth Sarana, the social arm of the Roman Catholic Church’s Colombo Archdiocese,” says Deepthi, who explains that the SLBBY which she is also part of had already put on their thinking caps to find ways and means of helping these children.

She points out that all children who are 15 years or below have no conscious memory of any such violent incident as the war ended back in 2009 in Sri Lanka. So it was a



An illustration from the book. Pix by M.A. Pushpa Kumara

double-shock as even those not directly involved were affected.

With the IBBY having a Children’s Crisis Fund, usually what would follow is seeking help to get a travelling exhibition of wordless books to tour the country, but that was very costly.

Then dawned the idea – why don’t we create our own wordless books, says Deepthi, adding that it would also overcome language barriers and keep the content in context. This would provide an opportunity for these books to be distributed among schoolchildren and spread the message that there could be a few bad people among any ethnic or religious group and in all strata of society.

Even though Deepthi started on her wordless book about six days after the bomb blasts, the essence had been swirling in her mind when she woke up one early morn, about a week before the tragedy to the raucous cries of a “murder” of crows down the road. Yes, murder is the collective noun for a group of crows. They were in mourning over the death of one of their own.

“It was April 14 and there were no street-sweepers as it was New Year time and the crows mourned until about 5.30 in the evening showing so much concern for another. In hindsight, was it a premonition of what was to happen,” she asks, adding that another incident was imprinted in her mind.

She had observed a red-vented bulbul which had nested in an upstairs room in her home down Skelton Road, Colombo 5. Two of the nestlings the mother-bird had nurtured had flown out, but there was a third, the runt, smaller and weaker, making plaintive noises for its mother’s attention. Finding its way to the window, it had crash-landed in the garage and when Deepthi attempted to help it, it had landed on her thumb.

“It was a special moment, the way this tiny chick trusted me,” says Deepthi with emotion.

These were the unconscious influences that helped Deepthi to create this story, using dry water colour pencils with “everything” done by her including the bearing of the printing cost for 1,000 books of this ‘Affection Bibliotherapy’ which will “affect” the reader in a positive manner.

The balance books Deepthi is planning to distribute to libraries in remote schools through two not-for-profit organizations as she fervently hopes that they would create peace and harmony, starting with children, in our multi-religious, multi-ethnic society.

To fortify the good work that is being carried out silently, a well-known Australian author Dr. Ken Spillman who has over 70 children’s books to his name, has pledged funds for 2,000 more copies of Deepthi’s wordless book to be printed and sent to more schools.

## Saying it through symbolism

There is much symbolism of relevance to Sri Lanka in this wordless book, says Deepthi, pointing out that the four doves in it are of different colours, symbolic of the different ethnic groups. The doves live in the same dove-cote, symbolic of an apartment building.

“The children throw lit fire-crackers which are symbolic of bombs and do so because they are naughty, in other words rebellious, symbolic of terrorists, while the reactions of the doves indicate efforts to avoid reality: see no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil. The dead dove, meanwhile, is white, denoting peace,” she says.

However, the story does not end there. The planting of a flowering plant is symbolic of the blossoming friendship between the three doves and the two children and can act as an example which the bereaved children can imitate.

The flowers are yellow, the colour of peace and the contrast between the kind and unkind children is a depiction that all are not alike, even if they are of the same race, she adds.

## Her forte, connecting people through music

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write about and to talk about my life, there is no way for me not to talk about what I felt about myself. So I just wrote it honestly, and it wasn’t to actually make my life seem exciting or beautiful, or only about my concerts and being on stage and travelling and meeting different people, it was about my life and the many different elements within.

■ (ST) Could you tell us about your work with Midori & Friends and any current community engagement projects you are involved in? Why should music be more of a priority in mainstream education?

(M) I am involved with all the organizations and projects that I started, Midori & Friends, Music Sharing, Partners in Performance and the Orchestra Residencies Programme. They keep me very engaged. Through Music Sharing, there’s an ongoing International Community Engagement Program (ICEP) with which I will be going to Cambodia with three young musicians in December, and to Japan in June next year.

Midori & Friends and Music Sharing are getting close to celebrating the 30th Anniversary. Our world is changing, our meaning of peace is changing, the standards of music education, the standards of education in general. We always continue to re-evaluate our programmes to stay up with the times. Both these organizations have changed quite a bit since inception, and we’re also working quite a bit now with the elderly at Music Sharing in particular, not just with children.

Just to clarify, Music Sharing is based in Japan and does quite a lot of work in Japan and Asia, not just focusing on classical music, but also in traditional Japanese music and South American music. Midori & Friends is based in New York City working through the schools in the City. Again not concentrating just on classical music, but bringing the value of the Performing Arts and Music in particular of different genres into the lives of children and their families. I’m also quite involved with Partners in Performance, I’m one of their main performers in what might be called Community concerts.

We’re partnering with Community-minded presenters of music in the United States, concentrating on smaller towns and less urban areas, mostly in rural America. The Youth Orchestra Project and all these projects and my work for the United Nations as a messenger of peace, they keep me very involved in life.

■ (ST) What has occupied you in 2019? What projects or engagements have proved particularly exciting or rewarding?

(M) I think this year has been very exciting and rewarding for me, to be able to live this music, to practise these works, to spend time with them are a pleasure to me. They stimulate and inspire me. Life in general also inspires

me. I don’t need anything that is actually out of the ordinary. I don’t have to go to a special place, to go and see a special thing, or hear special sounds in order to become inspired. I find inspiration in every day and in music. I place a very important role in what I hear from the pieces I work on, from what the composers have given us in their scores, and what they may have meant, why they decided to go that way.

These are all the things that interest me and keep me curious. In terms of my travels, I’ve gone to many places that are very interesting. Some of them were return trips. Some places were new. In the next few months I get to do something that I appreciate very much, I’m looking forward to concentrating on some modern works. This is a project in which I am going to be playing five pieces, all by living women composers, including one commissioned by the Library of Congress. This is an interesting and exciting project for me. The process of commissioning was fascinating as well. Working on this piece, learning it, giving it life, and then introducing it out to the public for the first time. In December, I will be visiting Cambodia through my Music-Sharing project, a nonprofit organization that I started some 30 years ago. We will be going there with three young musicians, and we are very much looking forward to sharing our music and being in the presence of that culture for a few weeks, and also to listen, watch and interact with my students. That’s always very meaningful to me.

While we are talking about 2019, I’m also very excited about next year, 2020. We are going to be celebrating a special anniversary year for Beethoven. I have several different projects coming up, the complete sonatas for Piano and Violin, the Violin Concerto, a special commission, and Beethoven Trio concerts. All this is going to keep me occupied for a good part of the year.

What is also particularly important in 2020, is the 100th anniversary of the birth of one my mentors, Isaac Stern, and this is a very important occasion for me, because I think of him as one of the people that strongly shaped my character, and made me into the musician that I am today.

■ (ST) What first drew you to Sri Lanka, and what brings you back?

(M) Back in the 80s, I knew a couple of friends from Sri Lanka, and through them and with them, I lived through the current events with what was going on in Sri Lanka. It’s a country that I have always had in my consciousness, interested in what was going on, and engaged, so to say in this country.

When I first had the chance to visit a year and a half ago, it was a very special treat, and back then I came with a group of my students from the University of Southern California, we were interested and very focused on reaching out to the community and working with different populations, both musicians and non-musicians, and bringing music and enjoying it together.

This was all coordinated beautifully from the Sri Lankan side by the Chamber Music Society of Colombo. We were able to travel around the country and visit hospitals and schools up north, down in the south and in Colombo. It was a beautiful trip and it was so memorable, my students experience as well was incredible. We had gone to other countries, we had worked quite extensively in Los Angeles where we were all based in. But Sri Lanka was something special, and to be spending that much time and to get to know the culture, the tip of the iceberg, of course, was something that made a great impact on everyone.

It was such a pleasure to return to Sri Lanka again, this time to play a full recital in support of the new Chamber Music Society Education Fund, it brings so many different interests of mine together of supporting music education and interacting with music. I will always cherish the opportunity to return to Sri Lanka. Not just Colombo, but also Jaffna and Galle, or just anywhere. I’m not particularly interested in travelling as a tourist, I would say it is the combination of being able to be within the communities and music, this is what I enjoy.

■ (ST) Why did you decide to personally support the CMSC Education Fund for Exceptionally Gifted Music Students? What difference do you hope such a programme will make?

(M) Young people. I remember when I was one of them, we survive and we grow because we’re supported, and it’s not just about family support, it’s also about social and financial support, it’s the combination, it is so important that we are given this opportunity that we benefit from this opportunity. It’s not possible to learn only on one’s own in the privacy of a practice room. Music education is important, to understand the concepts and information. Interaction with other musicians and non-musicians, to experience life through music.

This can be quite expensive, so I think having the CMSC fund makes it possible for young musicians to have more access to education that is so critical for their growth.

■ (ST) What would be your advice to young performers hoping to follow in your footsteps?

(M) I think one of the important questions that any musician has to ask is about his or her relationship to the music itself. This is something that is constantly being asked, that should be constantly asked, and it doesn’t have to be the same answer all the time. But at any given time, I think that it helps to have that clarity. It could mean different things to different people; for me, music supports me spiritually and psychologically, music also allows me to express myself, music gives me the tools with which I can bring people together. I connect with people to share myself, and so, this is what music means to me.

## Applause for thought?

Midori in Concert with Ieva Jokubaviciute, piano, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Colombo at the Lionel Wendt on Thursday September 26.

Reviewed by A.S.H. Smyth

It is a tricky task to say that something was exactly as good as it should have been – without this sounding like faint praise, at least. But such was the case with the Midori concert last week.

Having debuted with the New York Philharmonic aged 11, Midori (Goto) is an international leader in a crowded field, with additional credentials for her long-standing and widely-recognised commitment to charitable music-education. The purpose of this particular event was to inaugurate and raise funds for the Chamber Music Society’s Education Fund (of which she is Patron), not least through her donation of the concert itself: a gift of some considerable value.

Comprised of pieces by Brahms, Fauré and Debussy, there was a seasonal – if not strictly cyclical – feel to the programme.

They opened with a loosener of the ‘Sonatensatz’: thundery, with racing clouds, dispelled by outbreaks of golden summer sunshine – not unlike the elements round here these past few weeks. Midori’s violin had bite and punch, pursued by long, drawing melodies, while Ieva Jokubaviciute’s piano rumbled away always slightly-ominously beneath.

Debussy’s gentler ‘Beau Soir’, literally a song about a beautiful evening (arr. by Jascha Heifetz), settled us into the more-contemplative, French end of things, which was to dominate the programme.

Then came the first of three sonatas (all ‘for violin and piano’), the heaving, rolling, blustery Northern European autumn of Fauré’s Sonata No.1 in A Major, in which the skittering, chatty third movement and the crashing waves of the allegro quasi presto were captivating highlights. (In this and each of the following major pieces it should be noted that Jokubaviciute was in every way an equal partner. This was no accompanist’s gig.)

Fauré’s wintry ‘Les Berceaux’, melancholic and lyrical (originally a song about abandoned wives and children), began the second half, indulged in all its mournful ralls and rit.s. Then we were back into the warming (Eastern) sun of Debussy’s Sonata in G minor, the kaleido-



A masterclass: Midori and Ieva Jokubaviciute. Pic by Kesara Ratnavibushana

scopic harmonies evocative of a late-spring river gathering in pace and power as it makes its progress to the sea (‘très animé’ indeed!), before we climbed back onto the tonal drier land of Brahms’ Sonata No.3 in D minor. The hammers rang down, the catgut snarled, the horsehairs broke: no hostages were taken.

Of the night’s three near-contemporary composers, the two Frenchmen are closer together in every sense than their German confrère (‘Kollege’, as Google Translate here assures me), and personally, I’d have preferred the Fauré and Debussy broken up a little by the Brahms, to ward off slight Impressionist fatigue.

But from the dark cellistic depths to the shimmeriest harmonics, Midori’s performance was a masterclass in poise and intricacy, and at a range that few are likely to experience too often.

To say that there was never a note out of place is, let alone being in the same ballpark, probably not even discussing the same sport.

It was, in short, world-class – and was followed, rightly, by a more-or-less complete standing ovation. Sadly, as the continuing online scuttlebutt bears out, the excellence of Midori’s playing was not the chief thing many listeners came away with that night from the concert.

In a personal ‘Message’ in the programme Midori thanked Sri Lanka (ns) for the ‘beauty, enlightenment and excitement I have found here in the past’. But she may well be reconsidering that second item, now.

Despite the President of the CMSC, Lakshman Joseph de Saram, alternately imploring and instructing the audience to put away their phones, and the presence of unmissable print

notices to the effect that no photography, videography or texting would be permitted... well, you know what’s coming.

No sooner had the performers left the stage after their first, short item (to let – ahem – late-comers in) than a recording of the paint-fresh ‘Sonatensatz’ played out across the auditorium. More phones rang as the performance went on, children were allowed to make egregious noise (bringing babies to such improving fare is probably a step too far in terms of educational ambition), and the blue haze of lit screens was routinely visible.

The jury’s not out on these issues. There is a standard and accepted etiquette, and distracting a world-class (or indeed any class) performer like this is inexcusable. Doing these things when you’ve been told not to only moments before borders on the insanely stupid/self-centred.

There’s also the small matter of your fellow concertgoers. (Though – in an education/out-reach context, NB – the “Crucifixion” too good for ‘em!’ crowd might want to reflect that a few people enthusiastically applauding between sonata movements is neither a mortal insult nor as disruptive as a chorus of well-heeled music-lovers shushing piously in not-quite-unison.)

Nor should it be imagined that these infractions were coming only from the cheap seats. Perpetrators, frankly, should consider themselves lucky to escape without direct humiliation. (And to think some folk complain about ‘elites’.) Midori had closed her gracious message ‘respectfully and in appreciation’. That respect, bluntly, was not reciprocated. There was no encore.