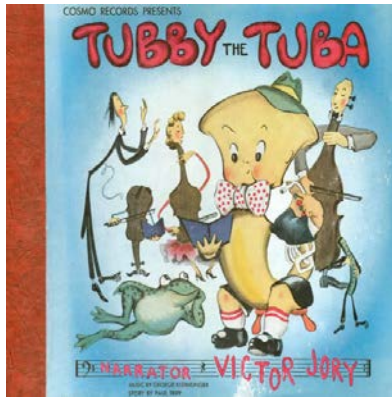


# “Tubby the Tuba” (1945)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*“Tubby’s” original album*



*Victor Jory*



*Tubby as a Puppetoon*

It was an off-handed comment by a perturbed tuba player that gave rise to one of the world’s most beloved children’s recordings. One evening in late 1941, lyricist Paul Tripp and composer George Kleinsinger were conducting an orchestral rehearsal of one of their works when their resident tubist informed them afterward, “You know, tubas can sing too.”

That night, or so legend has it, Tripp went home and conceived of a deceptively simple story, to be told in music and spoken word, focusing on the plight of the largest, lowest and usually most disrespected instrument in the orchestra.

Loadedly naming his tuba hero Tubby, Tripp’s story relates how the “fat, little” tuba is, one day, feeling down: he wishes to do more and be more, to have a melody all his own, a role in the orchestra beyond just “oom-pah, oom-pah.” But when Tubby shares his wish with his fellow personified instruments, he gets laughed at and laughed out of the orchestra. The arrogant violins and the snooty French horn all scoff at him. An imperious piccolo even goes so far as to inform him, “People never write melodies for tubas. It just isn’t done!”

In the story, a dejected Tubby finally retreats to a riverbank to find solace. There, after gazing at his reflection in the water and singing a short, forlorn song, Tubby meets up with a kindly, musically-inclined, deep-voiced bullfrog. The frog, too, is feeling a little downtrodden that day, upset over the fact that few seem to listen to him either even though, every night, he “sings his heart out.” The frog (who Tubby calls “Mr. Frog”) then starts to hum, sharing with Tubby a most original and memorable tune. Soon, Tubby is also playing the catchy chords, convinced that he has found exactly what he needs!

Empowered by his new friend and this new melody, Tubby returns to his orchestra the next day just in time to impress a visiting conductor, Signore Pizzicato, who has never before heard such a tune, especially from a tuba. Tubby’s new melody even manages to win over his fellow instruments--the piccolo, the trombones, the xylophone!--who all join in in a symphony built around Tubby’s remarkable measure. In the story’s denouement, Tubby and the bullfrog reunite by the river, satisfied that they have both finally been heard. “We have our points too,” the little frog informs the big tuba.

Though fleshed out and buoyed by its remarkably catchy signature tune, “Tubby’s” story is a relatively simple one. “Tubby” is a fable, an audio fairy tale; the story even begins “Once upon a time....” In this reading, therefore, if Tubby is our forlorn, downtrodden, and slightly troubled protagonist (cf. Cinderella), then his fellow instruments are the story’s evil stepsisters. And our

generous frog, on whose suggestion and generosity the story pivots, is “Tubby’s” fairy godmother, a conduit to salvation, an oracle of advice.

Tubby’s meeting up with this unnamed amphibian, as opposed to any other possible potential advisor, seems like a symbolic choice. Despite their omnipresence in fairy tales (as often princes in disguise) and the best efforts of Kermit, et.al., the frog is one of the animal kingdom’s most frequently maligned creatures; it is the tuba of the natural world. Cold, wet, slimy, and supposedly wart-inducing, frogs seldom seem to catch a break. They are even mocked for their sounds they make: “croak” is seldom used as a compliment; we refer to a temporarily seized or troubled throat as having a “frog” in it. Thus, that someone or something—even a tuba!--should turn, and turn so successfully, to a frog (as opposed to, say, a nightingale) for musical advice is both unexpected and ironic, yet still seems to make sense in this context, within this forest of misfits.

While Paul Tripp created the story of “Tubby the Tuba” and wrote all its spoken passages, George Kleinsinger contributed the story’s signature musical refrain. The two began the work in 1941. Its creation was interrupted, in fact almost halted, by World War II before finally being finished in 1945. Widespread success for “Tubby” had an equally long gestational period. Tripp would relate later, “For years, nobody wanted it until a little company called Cosmo Records [a subsidiary of “Cosmopolitan” magazine] put it out. It was Walter Winchell who discovered it, wrote about it in his column, and turned it into a big hit.”

The original “Tubby” (the one named to the National Sound Registry in 2006) was issued in 1945 as a two-record 78rpm set. Its multi-color cover was charming, depicting all the story’s main characters including a bow-tied Tubby. Printed on the inner album sleeves was Tubby’s full story, complete with a handful of simple line drawings illustrating Tubby’s early malaise, his sojourn into the forest and his orchestral return.

For the recording, while conductor Leon Barzin handled the orchestrations, beefy boxer-turned-actor Victory Jory, most famous today for his role as Jonas Wilkerson in “Gone With the Wind,” acted as the recording’s narrator. And despite a career spent playing mostly tough guys and heavies, Jory brought a warmth, playfulness and tenderness to Tubby’s tale.

Since its initial pressing (and incarnation), “Tubby” has often been rerecorded, remade, expanded and even reinterpreted. Most famously Danny Kaye put his stamp on the original story in a 1947 recording. His version also included an appealing recap song, “The Tubby the Tuba Song” (“Tubby said, ‘Oh, gosh, oh, gee, wish I had a melody’”) which has since become part of “Tubby’s” enduring legacy. Over the years, “Tubby” has also been “covered” by the likes of David Wayne, Jose Ferrer, Carol Channing, and the Manhattan Transfer. In 2006, NBC “Today” show host Meredith Viera did the honors in a recording with Stephen Gunzenhauser serving as conductor. Even the Mouse House has gotten into the act; in 1963, Disney issued its own “Tubby” narrated by its then-reigning teen queen, Annette Funicello. “Tubby,” its music and spoken word passages, has also become a part of various symphonies’ repertoires, proving equally popular with children and adults. “Tubby” has also been published in children’s book form.

“Tubby” has even inspired sequels. After its initial success, creators Tripp and Kleinsinger penned “The Further Adventure of Tubby the Tuba” in 1948 and “Tubby the Tuba at the Circus” in 1950. Eventually, also via the hands of Tripp and Kleinsinger, some of Tubby’s friends and fellow instruments also gained names, personalities and stories and songs all their own. These include “Peepo the Piccolo” and a feminized celeste who was featured in the children’s recording “The Story of Celeste.”

Though Tripp and Kleinsinger's partnership would eventually dissolve, as individuals, the men both continued on on creatively interesting paths. Tripp remained an innovator in children's entertainment. Along with writing and producing numerous other children's records, Tripp also created and hosted the landmark early children's television "Mr. I-Magination" which aired over CBS-TV from 1949 to 1952. Later, he hosted WNBC's local children's show "Birthday House" from 1963 to 1967. He also authored the book, "The Christmas That Almost Wasn't." It was later produced as a film, with Tripp in the lead, in 1966. He died in 2002. Kleinsinger would go on to write the 1957 Broadway show "Shinbone Alley." Previously, in 1941, he had written "I Hear America Singing," a cantata based on the poems of Walt Whitman. Kleinsinger died in 1982.

A couple of times since his aural birth, "Tubby" has been visualized, produced for the big screen. Most famously and most successfully, in 1947, innovative animator George Pal used the tale as the basis for his last—and some say best—"Puppetoon" film.

Best embodied by classic "Gumby" 'toons (but also by "Coraline," "The Nightmare Before Christmas," and innumerable children's TV Christmas classics), Pal's enchanting, innovative Puppetoon works are examples of "replacement" or "stop-motion" animation, a type of animation utilizing models and small sculptures rather than one-dimensional drawings. The Puppetoon technique lends itself exceedingly well to Tubby's tale. The woodwinds and string section, literally, come to life. Pal's "Tubby" would go on to be Oscar nominated for Best Animated Short and be a key component of the 1987 Pal retrospective film "The Puppetoon Movie." Later, a more "traditionally" animated treatment of "Tubby" arrived, in 1975. Yet despite an all-star cast that included Paul Tripp acting as narrator and Dick Van Dyke as Tubby, as well as an expanded storyline and early use of computer-assisted animation, the film did not find much critical favor nor many film goers.

Though "Tubby" has gone on to enjoy a highly varied, imaginative afterlife, originally, the work was conceived by its creators simply as a counterpart to Sergei Prokofiev's instructional "Peter and the Wolf" piece. Like that composition, "Tubby's" initial purpose was to be as a tool for music education, for teaching types of instruments, arrangements and musical appreciation. And certainly the work begins with that intent; there is an introductory litany of instruments and sounds, a sampling of each section that kicks off the recording. Yet the recording's value as musical educator has long been pleasantly eclipsed by the story's myriad of charmingly imparted life lessons. With Tubby acting so innocent and sounding so youthful, it is not hard to see (nor hear) how relatable he is to children. Tubby's early bull-in-a-china-shop-like actions and his admonishing by his first conductor illustrated how he, too, was always getting into trouble even when he was only trying to help. Finally, Tubby's early shunning by his fellow instruments, no doubt reminded many young minds of numerous playground-based dramas.

Despite "Tubby's" relatively simple story, there's a menagerie of messages embedded in his yarn. First, his is a story of self-acceptance as a means of personal redemption. In the course of his tale, Tubby comes to accept both his size and his sound. "Tubby" even takes on pretentiousness. The supposed haughtiness of classical music is undercut by a garden-variety frog's inventive involvement and creativity that eventually saves the day and rights a wrong. And Tubby's meeting with the frog, along with our main character's Thoreau-like repair to the forest early in his story, seems to be a call for a return to nature while also echoing the message of that other kids' lit classic, "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse." Finally, Tubby's ultimate triumph back in his home orchestra, is a message of tolerance. The latter is an oft-repeated theme, and variation, in children's literature and recordings, from "The Wizard of Oz" (whose message is that everyone has something to offer) to that other recorded children's classic, Ray Bolger's "The Churkendoose" (whose moral is it's okay to be different). Ultimately as well, Tubby's story is one of the unexpected underdog silencing his critics. In his role as an unlikely victor, Tubby takes his place in the pantheon of those, fictional and non, who have defied expectations--

from a host of once-under-estimated sports teams to the tortoise and the hare to David vs. Goliath to even TV talent show phenomenon Susan Boyle. Certainly, it is this panoply of warm-hearted lessons, as much as its trademark tuba solo, which has endeared Tubby, his story and this recording, to generations of listeners.

*Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).*