

Bonaparte's Retreat

Traditional

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by Donald J. Borchelt

The musical score is written for guitar in D major (D, A, F#, D) and 2/4 time. It consists of six systems of four measures each, with measure numbers 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, and 21. The notation includes various techniques: triplets (HH, Po), slurs, and accents. A 'boney part' is indicated by a bracketed '1-2' under measures 6 and 7. The score concludes with a final measure (measure 25) that repeats the first measure's pattern.

1-2

"Now this makes the boney part..."

"That's the boney part!"

29

33

37

41

45

49

53

Harmonics

3.

This is perhaps the signature tune of the legendary Magoffin County, Kentucky fiddler William Hamilton Stepp (1875-1957), who was recorded by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax in October, 1937, near the end of their epochal two month long folk music collecting tour through eastern Kentucky for the Library of Congress. About ten days earlier they had recorded another fiddler who will be long remembered, the great Luther Strong. Five years later, the composer Aaron Copland would incorporate Stepp's rendition of Bonaparte's into his score for the ballet Rodeo, using a transcription provided to him by Ruth Crawford Seeger, Pete Seeger's mother, instantly making the tune the most recognizable fiddle tune almost

no one had ever heard of.

Bonaparte's Retreat is one of those tunes with dozens of versions across the country, and most, like Stepp's rendition, use DDAD tuning, with the 4th string dropped down a full octave below the 3rd, in order to fill the tune with its deep droning sound, while the 1st string is dropped a full tone to D also. Stepp plays the high A and course B parts through twice, but on the third through, he plays the B part an octave higher, and then plays back on a slight variation, so that he has played the high B part through 3 times. He repeats the whole sequence again, and then ends on the A part. So his structure is:

A A B B A A B B A A B' B' B" A A B B A A B B A A B' B' B" A A

Just before he goes to the low part for the second time, Stepp famously yells out, "That's the bony-part!"