

“Bonaparte's Retreat”--W.H. Stepp (1937)

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Essay by David S. Lynch (guest post)*



W.H. Stepp

In 1997, I boarded a flight from Los Angeles headed to the Southeast where I planned to spend a week learning the Eastern Kentucky fiddle tunes that were popular a few generations ago. As I entered the plane's cabin, an Aaron Copland composition emanated from the overhead speakers. It was the perfect music for the occasion because the melody originated from a rendition of a tune called “Bonaparte's Retreat” as played by East Kentucky fiddler William Hamilton Stepp.

Through Copland's work, many people are familiar with Stepp's version of the tune “Bonaparte's Retreat,” but few have heard “Fiddler Bill” Stepp's 1937 performance. Those familiar with Stepp's presentation have heard the raw power, technique, and musicianship that placed Stepp in high ranking among his musical contemporaries.

Most people recognize the aforementioned melody from a symphonic work titled “Hoe-down,” the fourth movement of Aaron Copland's score for the ballet “Rodeo.”

Copland's piece gained further awareness in the 1970s when the rock band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer released the tune on their “Trilogy” album. In the early 1990s, advertiser Leo Burnett selected Copland's piece for a TV commercial titled “Beef – it's what's for dinner.” At that point, more Americans associated the tune with stir-fry than with ballet.

Copland's exalted orchestration of Stepp's “Bonaparte's Retreat” was faithful to the melody but did not retain the nuances of Stepp's fiddling technique. It is likely that Copland sourced the melody from musical notation and never heard Stepp's performance.

Stepp's rendition of “Bonaparte's Retreat” and Copland's symphonic adaptation of the tune were as different as Stepp and Copland themselves.

William Hamilton Stepp was born in Lee County, Kentucky, in April 1875, the illegitimate son of a prominent father and a half-Indian mother who supported herself as a prostitute. Shunned by his father, Stepp spent his first five years as a troglodyte, living with his mother in a ramshackle crèche under a sandstone cliff near Beattyville, Kentucky.

At age five, the court separated Stepp from his mother and placed him with a foster family headed by Asa Smith. Mr. Smith allowed Stepp contact with his biological family, which

included his aunt, Morning Stepp, whose partner was a fiddler named William “Greasy Bill” Tincher. Tincher became Stepp’s musical mentor.

By his late teens, Stepp performed regularly at local events and dances in Lee County, Kentucky. Stepp was a popular showman and dapper dresser who could clog dance while he fiddled.

Stepp’s first wife died in childbirth in 1893. He remarried in 1896 and moved further east to Lakeville in Magoffin County where he often played for dances and at the local store. His neighbors and friends included some of the finest fiddlers in Eastern Kentucky, including Luther Strong and John Salyer.

Though Stepp worked in the lumber trade, he preferred making music to manual labor. He often spent weeks away from home, much to the consternation of his second wife. Though people rarely saw him work, he always seemed to be well-dressed and well-funded. His descendants remember him as a resourceful man who could thrive on very little.

During the advent of recorded music in the early 1900s, commercial recording companies selected many rural musicians to be immortalized on 78 RPM records. Those producing rural recordings selected a paltry number of players from Eastern Kentucky.

Stepp’s remarkable fiddling remained overlooked by the outside world until the autumn of 1937, when folklorists Alan Lomax and his wife Elizabeth visited the region for a week-long song collecting trip. They visited Stepp last, recording him on October 26th. Alan Lomax referred to Stepp as “The best fiddler I have heard.”

In the early 1800s, a young America took great interest in the exploits of Napoleon Bonaparte. As was customary in that era, people disseminated popular current events via folk music. The tune “Bonaparte’s Retreat” is one of those propagative works, composed to mimic Bonaparte’s army marching in retreat from Russia. The tune’s melody favors an Irish bagpipe march called “The Eagle’s Whistle.” During the Civil War, soldiers in retreat played the Americanized version.

The non-standard tuning of DDAD (coarse to fine), helps the fiddle imitate the regiment’s musical instruments: the G string is tuned to a wobbly low D, which drones a determined, somber beat, mimicking both the drums and bagpipes of an army on the move. Most of Stepp’s colleagues played “Bonaparte’s Retreat” at its intended slower march tempo.

Stepp made his rendition of the tune unique by fiddling it at a faster breakdown speed. In general, Stepp played unusually fast while retaining the ornamentation, fingering subtleties, and indigenous bowing patterns of the region. His fingered triplets were fast yet pristine. The open strings sounded overtones with remarkable sustain. Stepp noted the B part of the tune with quick staccato flicks of his fingertips. Stepp’s intonation was precisely and intentionally inaccurate. The combination of these stylistic techniques closely matched the manner in which one would play the piece on a bagpipe’s chanter.

As the Lomaxes recorded him, Stepp remarked while playing the A part of the tune, “That’s the Bony-part!” It is unclear what Stepp meant. The tune has distinct high and low parts, each communicating different aspects of the theme. Similar tune constructions convey a conversation between a man and woman. The low part mimics the voice of the man and, the high part, the voice of the woman. In this case, it is possible that the low part, with its simpler melody, represents Bonaparte himself, and the more complex melody of the B part represents Bonaparte’s army in retreat.

Musicologist Ruth Crawford Seeger recalled Stepp's curious "Bony-part" remark when she transcribed his rendition of "Bonaparte's Retreat" for the Lomaxes' book "Our Singing Country," giving the tune the title "Bonyparte."

In April 1942, choreographer Agnes de Mille contacted Aaron Copland to score a ballet she had just created titled "Rodeo." She set the plot in Texas; the hero and heroine were a cowgirl and a head wrangler. De Mille gave Copland exacting instructions for how she wanted him to structure the fourth movement, which she titled "Hoe-Down."

Copland was a modernist composer who sought to glorify the average working American through his musical arrangements. He regarded folk melodies as raw, foundational material he could enhance to create more sophisticated oeuvres. It was in this spirit that he approached Ruth Crawford Seeger's transcription of "Bonyparte."

Copland chose Stepp's "Bonaparte's Retreat" as the dominant melody in "Hoe-Down." He also interspersed melodies for the traditional fiddle tunes "Hop Light Ladies" and "Gilderoy." The result is a memorable piece though the rural flavor and character that Stepp originally delivered are absent in the symphonic composition.

Those intrepid enough to trace the primary melody in Copland's "Hoe-down" back to William Stepp's 1937 Library of Congress recording of "Bonaparte's Retreat" are rewarded with a performance that differs in character from Copland's orchestration, yet is equally exceptional.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.