

## Bonyparte's Retreat

mandocello

arr. by Larry Polansky

(originally written for the journal *Mandolin World News*)

I ran across W.H. Stepp's amazing fiddle tune performance of "Bonyparte's Retreat" a few years ago when I was working on an edition of Ruth Crawford Seeger's landmark work, *The Music of American Folk Song*. Seeger had transcribed this tune (sometimes spelled "Bonaparte", but on the recording, Stepp clearly says: "Now this is the bony part!", referring to his amazingly virtuosic middle section) for the Lomax's *Our Singing Country* (1941)— one of only two fiddle tunes she transcribed for that pivotal publication (the other is "Callahan," played by Luther Strong, but there was a third in manuscript, "Glory in the Meeting House," also played by Strong). It is pretty obvious to me that Aaron Copland used Seeger's transcription, not the original recording, in his now famous arrangement of it in *Rodeo*. But for those of you who've only heard the Copland, and not the original, or seen Ruth Crawford Seeger's remarkable transcription, you'll find the latter two a revelation.

When my editing project was done, I decided, just for fun, to begin performing a long out-of-print and completely unknown children's book by Ruth Crawford Seeger called *Let's Build a Railroad*. It was the last thing she wrote before she died. The musical notation (it includes the music for 8 traditional American railroad songs) was completed by her husband, Charles Seeger, after her death. The illustrations are by Tom Funk. Mary Ann Haagen, Jody Diamond and I have performed this book (we read the book, sing the songs) many times now, mostly for kids, in schools, at festivals, and at community concerts. We use various instrumentations for the different songs (including lots of percussion instruments, dobro, guitar, mandolin, mandocello, dulcimer, tenor banjo, and our voices). I thought it would be nice, since the book is very much about "seeing" the music, and Ruth Crawford Seeger was very much about "writing things down", to begin the performance with an instrumental. So I made a (highly simplified) arrangement for the 'cello of "Bonyparte...", which Mary Ann and Jody accompany on snare drum and cymbal. I've tried to notate that version in the page that follows, though it's an admittedly simplified version. Do your own things with it.

It should be played fast. It's not tricky except for the use of the artificial harmonics and the second B section, which is high on the neck and involves cross-picking (higher notes on lower strings). In that section, let the II string (D) ring as much as possible while playing the other notes of the melody on the III (G) string. This is a pretty standard mandolin and fiddle technique for traditional music, and it sounds quite lovely up on the 'cello neck.

The difficult harmonics are notated here in a kind of tablature, with the string number below (IV for the low C, I for the high A), a diamond on the "node" where you put your finger, and a small notehead where the pitch actually sounds. As an example, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> measure, there's a double-stop with one of the pitches a harmonic (the 4<sup>th</sup>, sounding a double-octave higher than the open string). So for that chord you play the high F# on the I string (in the usual way), and simultaneously hit the 4<sup>th</sup> harmonic on the II string, which sounds a D two octaves above the open string. That harmonic is played by touching the string at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret (where the diamond-shaped notehead is). The chord produces a lovely chimelike sound (try to let the harmonic ring), but it's hard to get consistently at a fast tempo!

The other harmonics in the piece are a bit simpler. The high A in measures 15 and 17 (during the cross-picking section) is notated more simply, since the sounding pitch and the “node” are the same. It’s just the ordinary octave harmonic. The last three notes in the piece (F#-E-D) are all natural harmonics as well, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> respectively on the II, I, and II strings. The diamond-shaped noteheads show where to finger those. Remember that the 5<sup>th</sup> harmonic is a major 3<sup>rd</sup> (two octaves up) which is produced, coincidentally, at the major 3<sup>rd</sup> on the string (it also happens in 3 other places, equally spaced up the neck).

I use natural harmonics a lot in my playing and composing, both in traditional and contemporary music. I actually don’t like the “node” notation much, since it’s confusing and, as I mentioned, a form of tablature. However, it’s the notation that most performers are most comfortable with. I would prefer to think of and write harmonics as actual pitches, notated simply by the sounding pitch and the string, and trust the player’s own knowledge of the instrument to know how to play them. Every string player should know the harmonics up to 5 (and maybe a lot higher), where to find them on the string (which they evenly divide, e.g., there are four places for the 5<sup>th</sup>, 2 for the 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.), and even something about their intonation (the 5<sup>th</sup> harmonic is always about 14¢, or 14/100<sup>ths</sup> of a semitone, flat of its equal-tempered notation). The mandocello is an especially rich source for this kind of technique — the lower the string, the easier it is to sound high harmonics. It’s great to experiment with natural harmonics and split-string scordatura techniques (more about that some other time maybe).

You can hear Stepp’s original recording, made by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax, in 1937 on the Library of Congress, Archive of Folk Culture collection American Fiddle Tunes (Rounder 18964-1518-2). You can see Ruth Crawford Seeger’s transcription in *Our Singing Country* (1941), which has been reissued by Dover Publications recently. And you can read more about this tune and Seeger’s approach to American folk music in her book *The Music of American Folk Song*, edited by me and Judith Tick, University of Rochester Press, 2001.

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2004  
(rev. 1/31/06)