

OLD-TIME TUNE OF THE WEEK – 8/8/14

DURANG'S HORNPIPE

The widespread popularity and the history of our current TOTW, Durang's Hornpipe, surprised me, as well as its origins in New York, not the British Isles.

John Durang--a well-known actor and dancer in his time, born in Pennsylvania in 1768--was presented with the tune in 1785, written expressly for him by his violin teacher in New York, a German dwarf named Mr. Hoffmaster. As the tune's popularity spread, Durang claimed that his hornpipe was heard from New York to "the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains." It's still popular today.

It's amazing to me that John Durang is reported to have been a favorite entertainer of George Washington. Seven tunes were recently recorded called "George Washington—Tunes for the First President." If you go to the next link at 4:30 you'll hear the original Durang's Hornpipe (tabbed for banjo below): [original Durang's Hornpipe on violin](#). To learn more about his career, which included acting, dancing, puppetry, mime, tightrope walking, and painting, check out these links: [Excerpt from John Durang's memoirs plus musical notation for Durang's Hornpipe](#) and [Description of Durang's career, including Rickett's Circus](#) (you'll need to scroll down).

In the above descriptive article by Andrew Kuntz, Durang is credited for popularizing the dance for Sailor's Hornpipe as well. Here's one of his believe-it-or-not feats: He boasted in his memoirs that in 1790 he danced "a hornpipe on thirteen eggs blindfolded without breaking one." Kuntz states "his hornpipe dancing seems to have been an immediate success, perhaps because audiences appreciated a native-born American performer in what was a largely English company in the years just after the American Revolution."



John Durang

Samuel Bayard's book Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife states "this is one of the very few traditional dances about which we have dependable information as to its composer and date of composition." Subsequent versions "improved the original," which Bayard called "banal" and he notated Durang's Hornpipe for six Pennsylvanian fiddlers. Keep in mind that Durang himself was born there, too, so the tune must have been quite common there, akin to something like Soldier's Joy.

The tune is included in several other banjo and fiddle books in my own collection, including Dan Levenson's Old-Time Festival Tunes for Clawhammer Banjo (with both old-time fiddlers and newer festival versions), The Banjo Picker's Fakebook (arrangement by Bob Carlin), O'Neill's Music of Ireland (#1772), and Ozarks Fiddle Music .

Bruce Molsky, playing with Bob Carlin on the CD *Take Me As I Am*, credits Brad Leftwich for their Durang's Hornpipe, and from it I based the first section of three on my own recording and tab. Here's a snippet of their lively performance: [Track 3, Take Me As I Am](#)

Brendan Doyle posted on BHO an MP3 Clifftop jam with Adam Hurt. Their version comes from Bruce Greene, who learned it from his own 1973 recordings of Kentucky fiddler, Jake Phelps (1883-1977): [Jake Phelps on Slippery Hill site](#) and [Adam, Beth Hartness and Brendan's Durang's Hornpipe](#). It has a modulating part, considered unusual for this tune. I use it for the second section of my MP3. There isn't a lot of information about Jake Phelps (1885 – 1977), but Bruce stated, "I met him when I was just getting started looking up older fiddlers....He was a farmer, lived in a little country place called Pea Ridge, Todd County, KY. He learned many of his unusual tunes from a fiddler, Will Stigall (born in the 1860's)while working in far western Kentucky....He also learned some from a local Black fiddler, George Holland....He did play for dances when younger. Almost all of his versions of tunes were unusual, and for me, very appealing." I couldn't find a photo of Jake Phelps, but have subsequently listened to several of his recordings and also find them appealing.

A second historic recording comes from the eminent Virginian fiddler Emmett Lundy. He played it with a genuine hornpipe feel: [Lundy's Durang's Hornpipe recorded in 1941 by the Lomax's](#)

Here's another version found on both *Old Time Banjo Festival* and Adam's *Insight* CDs: [Adam Hurt playing Durang's Hornpipe](#) He says that he learned this from Jarred Nutter who learned it from West Virginian fiddler and Clifftop organizer Bobby Taylor, who in turn learned it from the powerful fiddling of famed Clark Kessinger—Bobby's mentor when a teenager. Bobby notes that Durang's Hornpipe was one of Kessinger's show pieces. Adam calls this experience of learning the "folk process in action."

When reading up on West Virginian fiddler Clark Kessinger's life in The Devil's Box by Charles Wolfe you discover that the elegance and intricacy of his bowing was partly influenced by popular classical violinists of the day. He both listened to and even played for one—Joseph Szigeti. In his words, he "caught the touch they had....Some kind of their kind of bowing, who I could kind of add to it with hillbilly. Made it a lot better."

There's been discussion on BHO about Adam's lovely version of this piece, so I asked him about it and learned it for our current Skype lesson. The added third C part Adam says is a variation on the second B part and is based on a bouncing bowing technique used by Clark Kessinger. You can hear (and purchase for \$.99) this Durang's Hornpipe as a download from Smithsonian Folkways: [Clark Kessinger live at Union Grove, 1976](#).

[Donald Zepp](#) plays Durang's Hornpipe in a relaxed, stylish manner. I especially liked his slide into the B part and worked out the third section for my own recording of Durang's Hornpipe based on Donald's.

Banjo Hangout has some good MP3s and videos worth investigating in the Media Archive:

[J-Walk's Jam](#)

[Laurence Diehl's take on Alan Munde](#)

[Mark Ralston's fiddle/banjo duet](#)

[Eric's solo](#)

From searching YouTube's SIX-page list of Durang's Hornpipe videos I found several I liked:

Carolina Chocolate Drops [Carolina Chocolate Drops with dancing](#) (barefoot Rhiannon)

Timothy Twiss [Timothy Twiss playing minstrel style from Ryan's Mammoth Collection](#) (with notation from that 1800's resource)

Tim Rowell [Tim Rowell's clawhammer version](#) (I hear some Jake Phelps influence)

Dean O. Robinson [Luthier Dean playing a newly made banjo](#)

Janet Burton [My clawhammer banjo version](#)

My tabs are available on my [TABS link](#). I hope to hear your own Durang's Hornpipe this week and am glad I finally worked on it, as it seems to be a basic tune to have in one's repertoire.