

Happy Hollow

transcribed from the playing of Marcus Martin

Original in "Calico" tuning AEAC#, except sounded tonic is down a major third, between E and F

A A E A

5 A D A E A

9 A A E A

13 A D A E A

17 A E E A A E E A

21 A D A E A

25

VARIATIONS

DC mostly when he feels like it

“Happy Hollow” — Lessons for Tunersmiths

©2014 Mark Simos—msimos@berklee.edu

“Happy Hollow” is a fiddle tune from the repertoire of Marcus Martin, played in “Calico” tuning (AEAC# low-to-high, or in several of Martin’s recordings, down to G or even lower). It’s a great tuning because tunes with a third above the high tonic form a lovely, reedy unison with the lowered top string, a characteristic sound of the tuning. Marcus Martin’s version of “Calico” is another great tune in this tuning, in fact the tune that gave the tuning its name. (It’s also known as “Black Mountain” tuning from the tune “Black Mountain Rag”; and Scandinavian musicians know the tuning as well, associating it with the “Necken” water-spirit.) I’ve loved this tune for many years, and have played it at Clifftop as the last tune of the evening (or morning!) on many occasions.

It is a deceptively simple tune. If you study it in terms of its phrases, you will discover something quite magical. The B part of the tune differs from the A part by just *one bar* (the first bar)! And yet, because of the mysterious qualities of fiddle tune “grammar” it doesn’t sound the same.

To understand this, look at the tune first in two-bar phrases. Naming phrases that are clearly repetition or near-repetition, vs. contrasting phrases, we have:

A part:	A	B	C	D
B part:	E	B	C	D

But that’s not the whole story! Dig down to look at what happens in each bar:

A part:	a b	c d	e f	g h
B part:	c f	c d	e f	g h

Note that D = “g h” – that’s our “refrain” that ends each part, clear enough. Note also that A = “a b,” two bars that are heard just *once* in the whole tune. But the mystery lies in what happens in that first two-bar phrase of the B part, “c f.” Note how it steals one bar, the *third* bar, from the A part, and then concludes with a different bar, the *sixth* bar, or “f.” That makes us hear both these phrases differently. More importantly, it changes the way we hear “c d”: Now it sounds like an answer to a different question—“c f c d”!

You can go even deeper, and discover ways that these seemingly different phrases are actually built by *transformations* of one idea. Sometimes the melodic contour is turned upside down or *inverted*; sometimes it is moved to a different scale degree or *sequenced*. In fiddle tunes, patterns are built of repeating and contrasting phrases, but even contrasting phrases are connected in these wonderful ways. Each musical question has many answers; each answer answers many questions. This creates the balance of unity and surprise that characterizes a great and timeless fiddle tune.