

CASCADING TUNES: ON THE DESCENDING CONTOUR IN THE FIDDLE TUNES OF THE UPPER SOUTH

Alan Jabbour

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From 1966 to 1968 I visited and recorded many fiddlers in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, and during the same period I did a great deal of comparative research on the instrumental tradition in the English-speaking world since the later 18th century. I began with the premise that the tradition I was recording in the Upper South was closely related to the traditions of the Northern United States, Great Britain, and Ireland. That was borne out overall, but I gradually came to notice and focus on the divergences and dissimilarities as much as the links and borrowings.

One visible divergence was in the predominant contour of the tunes. The difference between the Upper South and the rest of the English-speaking world was brought home to me dramatically one day when I was recording a fiddler in North Carolina. He played “Arkansas Traveler,” a staple in American music since the 19th century minstrel stage. His version was the full “Arkansas Traveler” skit, as often performed on the minstrel stage. In it he played only one strain of the tune between brief comedy routines. The conceit is that the traveler through Arkansas only knows one part of the tune, and the local squatter, with whom he is exchanging tart observations and smart rejoinders, finally supplies him with the missing second part to the tune, thus making his day. Typically, the skit version of “Arkansas Traveler” features the low strain of the tune, interspersed with the comic routines; then at the end the squatter supplies the missing second strain, and all’s well again with the world. But the fiddler I was visiting reversed the sequence, playing the high strain throughout the comic routine and only adding the low strain at the consummation.

[ARKANSAS TRAVELER]

This curious rearrangement of such a well-known tune signals something larger in the idiom of Southern fiddling, which I quickly became aware of as I visited fiddlers and hung out at fiddlers’ conventions. To describe the departure from the norm, let me first describe the norm.

The English-speaking world since the later 18th century has favored instrumental tunes consisting of two parts, or “strains.” Each strain typically consists of four shorter musical phrases, and each strain is repeated once before the music proceeds to the next strain. After the musicians play both strains, the whole two-part tune is repeated till the dancers or the musicians’ imaginations are satisfied. The Upper South shares this overall model for instrumental tunes with the rest of the English-speaking world.

But there is one significant structural divergence between the repertory of the Upper South and the rest of the English-speaking world. The two strains are typically cast in different ranges, with the first strain typically being lower in pitch and the second strain being higher. Further, the lower strain, which is performed first, is usually the more memorable strain – the part of the overall tune that gives it its identity and character – while the higher strain is sometimes a kind of glorified filler. But in the older repertory of the Upper South this typical pattern is complemented by an opposite pattern. Much of the repertory consists of tunes that begin with the high strain, then proceed to the low strain. And the high strain is generally the more musically memorable strain, if one strain can be said to be more memorable than the other.

On closer examination, many of the older Southern tunes that follow what I'll call the classic contour – low strain followed by high strain – are also tunes that were imported into Southern tradition from Great Britain, Ireland, or the American North. Thus “Soldier’s Joy,” “Hop Light Ladies,” or “Leather Britches” (the last two derived from the Old World “McLeod’s Reel” and “Lord MacDonald’s Reel”) usually begin with the low strain and conclude with the high strain, in proper Old World and Northern New World fashion. On the other hand, most of the tunes that begin with the high strain seem to be tunes that originate in the South – tunes like “Forked Deer” or “Old Joe Clark.”

A few tunes have contrasting Southern and Northern versions, in which the Northern version begins with the low strain and the Southern version with the high strain – tunes like “The Downfall of Paris” (recast as “Mississippi Sawyer” in the South) or “The Fairy Dance” (known to Southerners as “Old Molly Hare”).

[FORKED DEER]

The South not only seems to favor this reverse pattern, where the high strain comes first and the low strain second. The region also seems to have generated a sizable number of tunes that begin at the very top of the tune’s musical range and cascade downward. Thus the high strain, which begins the tune, has a downward contour rather than an upward or an up-down contour. The second strain may also replicate this cascading contour, so that the whole tune seems to be tilting downward as it progresses.

[SANDY BOYS]

To be sure, this is not a tidy and clearcut regional distinction. Let me cite some of the factors that make it murky to contemplate. First, the Old World and the northern regions of North America are not altogether bereft of tunes beginning with the high strain. There are quite a few, and many of them are from the older layers of repertory – some of the simpler Scottish reels and marches, for example. And the Southern tunes beginning with the low strain include some that probably originate in the South. So one can easily conjure up examples that contradict any simple generalization. “Yankee Doodle” starts on the higher strain, while “Dixie” starts on the lower strain.

What is more, not all tunes conform to the classic bipartite model. Some lack the repetition of each strain. Some have extra beats or bars, and some are truncated to three phrases per strain. There are hundreds of tripartite tunes scattered throughout the English-speaking world, including the American South. Many of them do not progress consistently either up or down, jumping around instead – for example, from low to high to middle. But, interestingly, most of the Southern tunes with three strains follow the descending pattern from beginning to end.

[Henry Reed's PADDY ON THE TURNPIKE]

Finally, we have to reckon with the fact that fiddlers aren't always consistent about which strain they begin with. They sometimes seem to start with whichever strain pops into their head first; or they may noodle a few notes of the first strain to remind themselves of the tune, then plunge in earnest into the second strain. So saying flatly that "Forked Deer" starts on the high strain slightly distorts the cheerful blur of fiddling reality by pretending that things are always clear. It usually starts on the high strain, but I myself may have started it on the low strain on occasion – just because.

Considering all these blurry factors, I decided last spring to get scientific. I was on a grand jury for five weeks, so I carried my fiddle tune collections with me and made fiddle tune charts and hash marks in between murder cases. But the documentation has subsequently disappeared. I believe it got bundled up with my grand jury notes and now lies quarantined with the proceedings of our grand jury in the D.C. Superior Court files. Thus ended my fling with science. But I can report that collections like One Thousand Fiddle Tunes or Francis O'Neill's Folk Music of Ireland are overwhelmingly cast in the contours I have described as the dominant pattern – perhaps over 90% featuring the low strain followed by high strain. Southern field collections tend more to an evenly mixed melange of some beginning on the high strain, and some on the low.

This Southern predilection clearly diverges from the instrumental predilections of the rest of the English-speaking world. Though there is a scanty Old World precedent for it, one cannot account for its dominant popularity by simply citing the recessive Old World analogues. Nor is it explainable as a likely African influence, like syncopation. One could simply say that "they made it up." But there is one other possible cultural influence.

The fact is that American Indian music of the Eastern Woodlands and Plains favors a descending tune contour. Today's American Indian powwows are an excellent contemporary window into the same musical tradition, and one can hear thousands of tunes that follow the same overall melodic contour as the Upper South fiddle tunes. It is worth reminding ourselves that powwow tunes are dance music, and they are often sung using vocables instead of words. In effect, they are tunes of a class and function comparable to the fiddle tunes of British-American tradition. We cannot prove this cultural influence on fiddling from the world of American Indian culture, and the evidence is more tenuous than in the case of syncopation and African American influence. But no other cultural influence is in sight that can account for those thousands

of fiddle tunes of the Upper South that, in contradistinction to all other regions of the English-speaking world, start at the top of the tune and cascade down.

We tend to picture American Indian traditions as isolated from the new emerging society of the Upper South in the 18th and early 19th century. But the evidence suggests much more sustained cultural interaction in the early South than in the West later in the 19th century. There was extensive intermarriage in the South between American Indians and both Whites and Blacks. And although we are not used to thinking about American Indian influence in the musical realm, there are many examples of American Indian cultural influence on Southern life in other realms, such as foodways and material culture.

The concept of syncretism is useful to invoke at this point. When two cultures come into close contact, or one is superimposed on the other, syncretism is the cultural sorting process whereby cultural traits found in both cultures are selected for survival or heightened emphasis. We should remind ourselves that the trait of a descending musical contour exists in British tradition, though it is infrequent and recessive. So one may imagine this to be a case of a syncretic marriage between a recessive musical trait in a dominant culture and a dominant musical trait in a recessive culture. If so, the marriage was fruitful, and the progeny number in the thousands today.

But our flights into the realm of genetic metaphor are still flights of fancy. It seems to me that such questions of cultural history, drawn from close interpretation of the folk art itself, should be the stock in trade of folklorists. But we have done far too little to pursue large cultural questions such as this. It is astonishing that a cultural trait of such prominence and distinctiveness in the fiddle tunes of the Upper South has been generally ignored by folklorists and ethnomusicologists. I will confess to oscillating between the triumphal sense of having identified a feature of great cultural importance, and the anxious sense of being the only one in the world who thinks that such features are of any consequence. Be that as it may, I invite you all to contemplate the importance and ponder the meaning of the cascading tunes of the Upper South. Thank you.