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MINSTREL BANJO BRIGGS BANJO INSTRUCTOR



Synopsis

The Banjo Instructor by Tom Briggs, published in 1855, was the first complete method for banjo. It contained "many choice plantation melodies," "a rare collection of quaint old dances," and the "elementary principles of music." This edition is a reprinting of the original Briggs' Banjo Instructor, made up-to-date with modern explanations, tablature, and performance notes. It teaches how to hold the banjo, movements, chords, slurs and more, and includes 68 banjo solo songs that Briggs presumably learned directly from slaves.

Book Information

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Age Range: 2 - 5 years

Grade Level: Preschool - Kindergarten

Customer Reviews

Great book for the beginning minstrel player. A CD would be helpful, but you can get mp3's from Timtwiss.com. I recommend both.

Lots of fun for those that appreciate early banjo music. Takes much of the mystery out of playing these old tunes.

Very good instructional book! A reproduction of one of the first banjo how-to books from the mid 19th century.

Lots of good tunes...easy to read and comprehend.

Minstrel, or early, banjo has made a comeback in recent years due to a resurgence of interest in Civil War and pre-Civil War American music. The earliest complete source of this music remains the Briggs' Banjo Instructor of 1855. Thomas Briggs made a name for himself as a virtuoso banjoist and teacher in the early-mid 19th century. He also claimed to have learned banjo techniques and songs directly from African-American slaves. All of this was published in his 1855 instructor, complete with lessons and music. He taught a variation on today's clawhammer style, known as "Stroke Style," which involves curving the fingers up under the palm and striking down on the strings with the index finger nail, making for somewhat percussive playing. The thumb plays the drone string and occasional lead when appropriate. This style dominated early banjo for some time until finger style, also featured in Brigg's original book, became more popular in late 19th century "parlor" settings. Briggs' book remains one of the most important, influential and studied of the early banjo tutors. It's also a great place to start playing early banjo. This book of tablature (no musical notation included), appropriately called "Minstrel Banjo: Briggs' Banjo Instructor" includes many songs from the original book. It only covers the book's instrumental pieces, some of which have Briggs' name in their titles ("Briggs' Jig," "Briggs' Breakdown"). None of the songs with words, and intended for finger style playing, which appear at the end of Briggs' book, appear here. True, many of the instrumental pieces, which make up the bulk of the 1855 book, do include songs that historically have vocals, but Briggs did not present them this way. The tablature book follows the original, meant primarily for learning banjo, not singing, which could come later. This book thus focuses on straight banjo playing and provides a great starting point for learning this technique. Parts of Briggs' lessons also appear at the beginning of the tablature book in a mini-tutorial. Though the most efficient way to learn stroke style is visual, the front section provides enough information to get anyone started. To learn visually, look up "minstrel banjo lessons" or "minstrel banjo instructions" on YouTube or go to the Ning Minstrel Banjo site's lesson page (as of this writing located under Resources --> Lessons) to find video instructions to accompany the book. For optimum sound when playing these pieces, which the tablature makes incredibly easy, one could use an actual fretless early banjo. Many incredible banjo builders exist today who specialize in reproducing mid 19th century banjos. A simple web search will uncover them. Many are not cheap. But this book does not assume you have an early banjo reproduction. It provides tuning for modern banjos (gCGBD; Briggs' original tuning uses dGDF#A). So nearly any banjo owner can play this music. In many of the songs an African influence peeks through, especially on "Congo Prince Jig," the incredibly funky "Injin Rubber

"Overcoat" and many others. Briggs' collection might be the closest anyone will get to hearing the actual music of African-American slaves. Unfortunately, not much is known about Briggs' interaction with slaves at the time, apart from his own words. Lastly, the term "Minstrel banjo" remains somewhat of a misnomer. The minstrel era lasted for about a century and included many styles of playing and even different styles and makes of banjos. In Briggs' time stroke style dominated and many banjos were handmade until manufacturers such as Boucher and Ashborn began cranking them out. By the late 19th century banjos looked and sounded different and were even played in various styles. But both time frames fall under the "minstrel" category. So some prefer the term "early" banjo to describe the style and music in Briggs' collection. And one final warning: delving into the music of the 19th century exposes the prejudices and language of the time. Some of the song titles in this book clearly display attitudes we now see as racist. Not to mention that "Minstrel Show" conjures up blackface, dialect and other very questionable things now buried in murky history. Though some clean up this unsavory language, many prefer to preserve it in the name of historical accuracy. This collection preserves the original language of Briggs.

First off, most of these songs are in the larger "The Early Minstrel Banjo" book by the same author. There aren't that many minstrel banjo books out there so I try to get em all!!! The tunes on these pages are easy to read, one tune per page. They aren't cluttered up with embellishments, just straight ahead notes TAB style, thank goodness. If you don't have any minstrel banjo tab books, get this one. It has Briggs tunes, they sound the most "Minstrelly" to me. And there are some in here you'll HAVE to know if you wanna be a minstrel banjoist. This is just a great little book. I see the other review states that the words are missing. Yes they are. I googled the words. This book will make a player out of you.

This book is fascinating as a beginner's guide to the minstrel banjo playing style, but it comes with a major flaw. None of the songs in the book have any lyrics! I don't know if this is the case in the original, "Brigg's Banjo Instructor," but it does cripple the book as a whole. Most of this music was made to sing to, and minstrel music is quite a bit less "colorful" in its choice of epithets than most of what blasts out of people's stereos these days. If you're looking for the definitive introduction to minstrel banjo, this is unfortunately not it.

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