The Anacreontic Song

Melodic Source of “The Star-Spangled Banner”
1775 or 1776

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Words by Ralph Tomlinson
Music by John Stafford Smith

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(B-flat Major • Medium Voice)
Edited by Mark Clague and Andrew Kuster
The Anacreontic Song, 1775 or 1776
Melodic source of “The Star-Spangled Banner”
Lyric by Ralph Tomlinson (1744–1778); music by John Stafford Smith (1750–1836)

Historical Note
The song that gave Francis Scott Key the melody for “The Star-Spangled Banner” was among the more popular broadside ballad tunes in the new American nation. It was created as the constitutional anthem of The Anacreontic Society, an all-male music club based in London and founded around 1766. The club drew inspiration from the sixth-century BC Greek poet Anacreon and indeed the song's text calls upon this namesake for support. Verses 2 through 5 tell a story about Zeus (also referred to as Old Thunder, King of the Gods, and Jove) becoming concerned that club members are having so much fun that they will disrupt heaven and hell. He threatens to send lightening bolts to quash their revelry and to hang (swing) their leader. As the god of music, Apollo intervenes as does Momus (the god of mockery), and Zeus swears by the River Styx that the club will prosper. The tale is comic but its classical allusions speak to the elite cultural aspirations of the club. Their song's final verse extolls the virtues of “Unanimity, Friendship, and Love!”

Undoubtedly club members laughed heartily and drank deeply at meetings, and indeed the lyric toasts the club’s future in its final stanza, but the song’s purpose is distinctly different from its “drinking song” reputation. Yes, the song uses the choral refrain, fast tempo, jaunty affect, and melodic leaps common to the drinking song genre. Here, however, the purpose is to celebrate the joys of musical fellowship and thus to help attract new members. Also, the song is too long and too musically sophisticated for the typical pub ditty. To be sung by an exceptional soloist accompanied by harpsichord and with a chorus in four-part harmony, “The Anacreontic Song” required substantial skill to perform.

Anacreontic Society meetings were relatively elite affairs starting with a two-hour symphony concert. The club’s anthem was later sung after the meeting’s dinner to introduce a set of popular part songs. Professional singers, borrowed from London’s theaters, performed along with select, trained amateurs while general members joined to echo as the chorus. As a challenging song written to showcase the club’s artistic aspirations, “The Anacreontic Song” would typically have been sung by a professional, allowing him to show off his vocal talents. Thus the song’s athletic melody was never intended for mass singing.

Performance Suggestions
Approach this song with an emphasis on text delivery and story telling; acting gestures and distinct voices for different speakers were probably used in the 18th c. but were criticized in excess. At club meetings verses would be sung by a soloist with a four-part men’s choral echo of the final lines. Group unison and SATB realizations should not be feared, however. If used, a men’s chorus can be distributed from top to bottom as T1 & B1 (top stave), T2 & B2 (lower stave). The tempo should be quick. Note the characteristic triple rhyme in measures 9, 10 and 12 of each verse. It is sometimes forced (e.g., v.1: flute, mute, and boot, but also v. 3: fear on’t, errand, and warrant, plus v. 5: jealous, fellows, and tell us). The choral refrain functions to 1) give the soloist a brief respite, 2) to affirm the text in the style of a Greek chorus, and 3) to enact ritual camaraderie. Club members would join hand-in-hand when instructed by the text of verse 6. All members likely sang in unison with the pick-up to m. 9 (While thus...), breaking into harmony at the chorus. There is no keyboard introduction in the original source, but measures 13–16 with pickup can be used. The accompanying keyboard was originally a harpsichord, but a piano can be used with limited pedaling and a light touch.

Source
This edition is based on the original 1779 imprint by Broderip in London with its revised text.

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Melodic source of “The Star-Spangled Banner”
This score a whole step lower than the source.
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Words
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(1744–1778)

Music
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[Con Spirito]

1. To Anacreon in Heav’n where he sat in full Glee, A
2. The news through Olympus immediately flew; When Old
3. “The Yellow-hair’d God and his nine fusty Maids, From
4. Apollo rose up; and said, “Pr’y thee ne’er quarrel, Good
5. Momus got up, with his risible Phiz, And
6. Ye sons of Anacreon, then, join Hand in Hand; Pre-

few Sons of Harmony sent a Petition, That He their Inspirer and
Thunder pretended to give himself Airs, “If these Mortals are suffer’d their
Helicon’s Banks will incontinent flee, I’dalia will boast but of
King of the Gods, with my Vat’ries below: Your Thunder is useless” then,
swore with Apollo he’d cheerfully join, “The full Tide of Harmony
serve Unanimity, Friendship, and Love! ’Tis your’s to support what’s so

Patron would be; when this Answer ariv’d from the Jolly Old Greek; “Voice,
Scheme to sue, The Devil a Goddess will stay above Stairs. Hark! alters
nament Shades, And the forked Hill a mere Desart will be. My
shewing his Laurel, Cry’d, “Sic evitafulmen, you know! Then
still shall be his, But the Song, and the Catch, and the Laugh shall be mine. Then,
happily plann’d; You’ve the Sancion of Gods, and the Fiat of Jove. While

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Fiddle, and Flute, no longer be mute, I'll lend you my Name and in-

read-y they cry, In Trans-ports of Joy, A-way to the Sons of A-

Thun-der, no fear on't, Shall soon do it's Errand, And dam' me! I'll swinge the Ring

o-ver each Head My Lau-rels I'll spread; So my Sons from your Crack-ers no

Jove, be not jealous Of these hon-est Fellows." Cry'd Jove, "We re-lent, since the

thus we a-gree, Our Toast let it be. May our Club flour-ish hap-py, u-

-spire you to boot, And, be-sides, I'll in-strut you like me, to in-twine, The

-nac-reon we'll fly, And there with good Fel-lows, we'll learn to in-twine, The

-lead-ers, I'll warrant. I'll trim the young Dogs, for thus dar-ing to in-twine The

Mis-chief shall dread, Whilst snug in their Club-Room, they jo-va-ly in-twine The

Truth you now tell us; And swear by Old Styx, that they long shall in-twine The

-nit-ed, and free! And long may the Sons of A-nac-reon in-twine The

Chorus

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. And be-sides I'll in-strut you like

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. And there with good Fel-lows, we'll

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. I'll trim the young Dogs, for thus

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. Whilst snug in their Club-Room, they

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. And swear by Old Styx, that they

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus's Vine. And long may the Sons of A-
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me to in-twine, The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine.
learn to in-twine, The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine."
daring to twine The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine."
jo-vially twine The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine."
long shall in-twine The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine."
-nacreon in-twine The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine.