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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(C Major • High Voice)
Edited by Mark Clague and Andrew Kuster
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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 (swinging) 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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[Con Spirito]

1. To A - nacreon in Heav’n where he sat in full Glee, A
2. The news through O - lym - pus im - me - diate - ly flew; When Old
3. “The Yel - low-hair’d God and his nine fuss - ty Maids, From
4. A - pol - lo rose up; and said, “Pr’y thee ne’er quarrel, Good
5. Next Mo - mus got up, with his ris - i - ble Phiz, And
6. Ye sons of A - nacreon, then, join Hand in Hand; Pre -

few Sons of Har - mo - ny sent a Pe - ti - tion, That He their In - spir - er and
Thun - der pre - tend - ed to give him - self Airs, “If these Mor - tals are suf - fer’d their
Hel - i - con’s Banks will in - con - ti - nent flee, I - da - lia will boast but of
King of the Gods, with my Vot’ries be - low: Your Thun - der is use - less”– then,
swear with A - pol - lo he’d clear - ful - ly join, “The full Tide of Har - mo - ny
- serve U - na - nim - i - ty, Friend - ship, and Love! Tis your’s to sup - port what’s so

Pat - ron would be; when this An - swer ar - riv’d from the Jol - ly Old Gre - cian, “Voice,
Scheme to per - sue, The De - vil a God - dess will stay a - bove Stairs. Hark! al -
ten - nant - less Shades, And the bi - fork-ed Hill a mere De - sart will be, My
shew - ing his Laurel, Cry’d, “Sic e - vi - ta - bi - le ful - men, you know! Then
still shall be his, But the Song, and the Catch, and the Laugh shall be mine, Then,
hap - pi - ly plann’d; You’ve the Sanc - tion of Gods, and the Fi - at of Jove. While

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Fiddle, and Flute, no longer be mute, I'll lend you my Name and in-
ready they cry. In Transports of Joy, A-way to the Sons of A-
Thur-der, no fear on't, Shall soon do it's Errand, And dam' me! I'll swinge the Ring
over 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-
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-struct you like me, to in-twine, The
nac-reon we'll fly, And there with good Fel- lows, we'll learn to in-
lead-ers, I'll warrant. I'll trim the young Dogs, for thus dar-ing to in-
Mis-chief shall dread, Whilst snug in their Club-Room, they jo-
Truth you now tell us; And swear by Old Styx, that they long shall in-

-nit-ed, and free! And long may the Sons of A-

Chorus

Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus’s Vine. And be-sides I'll in-
Myr-tle of Ve-nus with Bac-chus’s Vine. And there with good Fel-
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-

Toast these soon our Club flourish happy, unto ye—
The Anacreontic Song

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-vial-ly 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.