

'HOME, SWEET HOME' AND 'SICILIAN MARINERS'

[By Anne G Gilchrist]

If a postscript by another hand may follow Mr. Frank Kidson's most illuminating true story of the origin of Home, Sweet Home, in the November number of THE CHOIR, musical readers may perhaps be interested to learn that the melody was vastly improved by compression in Sir Henry Bishop's later edition of it (the one now familiar). The original so-called 'Sicilian Air,' which Bishop - as Mr. Kidson has told - confessed to having written himself for lack of the required specimen of Sicilian melody, is a tedious affair, with much repetition. The first two bars (now counted as four) of the melody are sung, with the variation of a single note, *four times*, and after two bars of something a little different, a fifth time. It is as if one sang the strain,

*'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it never so humble, there's no place like home,'*

twice over, then two bars of variation, then the music of the above two lines once more. There is as yet no refrain of 'Home, sweet home,' but instead, the strain belonging to 'There's no place like home, there's no place like home' is sung (except for one note) twice over, as a conclusion.

The truth as it appears to me is that Bishop's notion of Sicilian music was exclusively derived from the hymn-tune 'Sicilian Mariners,' whose character he imitated as closely as prudence would allow. 'Sicilian Mariners' was set to Psalm xix. in Merrick's version of the Psalms, 1794, announced as 'with new music collected from the most eminent composers.' It is said to have been a Sicilian boat-song, and is printed as such in J. G. Herder's Collected Works, 1807, the original Latin words being a hymn of supplication to the Virgin beginning:

*O sanctissima,
O piissima,
Dulcis Virgo Maria!
Mater amata,
In temerata
Ora pro nobis!*

Sicilian melody - one may imagine Henry saying (in effect) - begins in the major mode with a strain in conjunct motion on an even keel; then leaping up to the octave of the keynote, it slides down in a descending passage to rest upon the tonic. So must my Sicilian air ...

Now, compare, in the original form of Bishop's tune,

The image displays four staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). The first staff is labeled 'BISHOP.' and shows the original melody of 'Home, Sweet Home' with a long, repetitive eighth-note pattern. Below it, the word 'with' is written. The second staff is labeled 'Sicilian Mariners.' and shows a more varied melody with a similar eighth-note pattern but with more rhythmic interest. Below it, the word 'and' is written. The third staff is labeled 'BISHOP.' and shows the compressed version of the 'Home, Sweet Home' melody, which is more concise and varied. Below it, the word 'with' is written. The fourth staff is labeled 'Sicilian Mariners.' and shows the same melody as the second staff, providing a direct comparison between the original and the compressed version.

But it is still a puzzle why he could not have set 'The home of my childhood' to the existing Sicilian air, with a slight adaptation of the 'Mariners' which at that period would have been accounted quite legitimate. Though whether 'Sicilian Mariners' or 'O Sanctissima' itself was *really* a Sicilian melody has never, I believe, been proved. It may simply have been some earlier composer's notion of one - or a travesty of the original, like Tommy Moore's 'Canadian Boat-song' - which is strangely transformed from the rude chant he noted on the Canadian river.

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