Morris Rosenfeld

Music of the Sea

Ranges from symphony to simple shanty—the sailors' working song

When von Bulow wrote "In the beginning was rhythm," he must have been thinking of the sea. Unquestionably, many descriptive musical expressions match the crashing symphony of waves breaking on shore or rolling, rolling far from land. Many are songs ranging all the way from grand opera to working songs like "What shall we do with the drunken sailor—early in the morning" —which is from one of the sea's best known branches of music—the shanties.

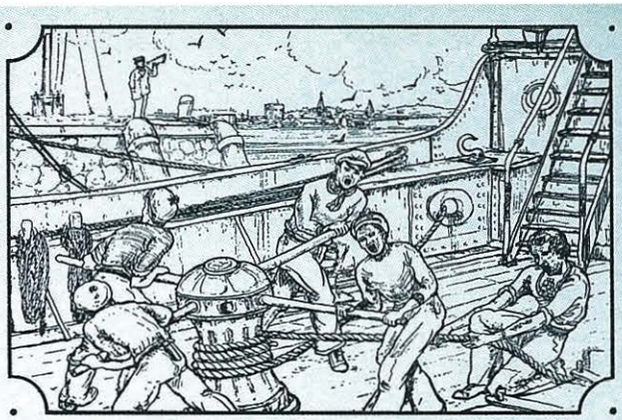
For most people, "music of the sea" brings to mind these shanties. For they are truly songs of the sea, more so indeed than any other music, irrespective of its connection with the sea.

Shanties were the working songs of the sailing ship era. Seamen sung them to set a rhythm for hauling halliards, turning the capstan and the windlass. Little is recorded about them before the nineteenth century, but for the greater part of the 1800's, the custom flourished.

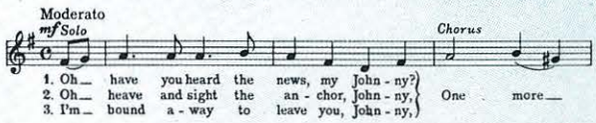
Rebirth of the British Merchant Service and the American Merchant Marine in 1815 contributed greatly to the spread of shantying. Before this time most seamen were employed aboard Naval ships where shantying was practically non-existent. Included in a Royal Navy ship's company, however, was a fiddler whose job was to provide music and rhythm for the task in hand. Even dancing the hornpipe to the fiddler's music was part of the daily routine on board ship. It helped keep the crew fit, lessened the chance of scurvy, it was thought.

When peace returned in 1815, navy men gradually drifted back to the merchant service. With them went the naval fiddler's dance tunes and war songs. Since there were no fiddlers for merchant ships, the "hands" probably hummed the tunes at first before putting words to them. Shanties resulted. But there are other sources. The earliest for example developed from the hauling cries of Elizabethan seamen. British folk songs and ballads also provided material, and many have been derived from Afro-American sources.

Negroes have always been noted for using songs to accompany their labors. In port visiting seamen heard these songs, adapted them for their own working songs. Saloons in America and public houses in England provided opportunities for the shore-going seamen to hear the minstrel songs of the country. These too provided material

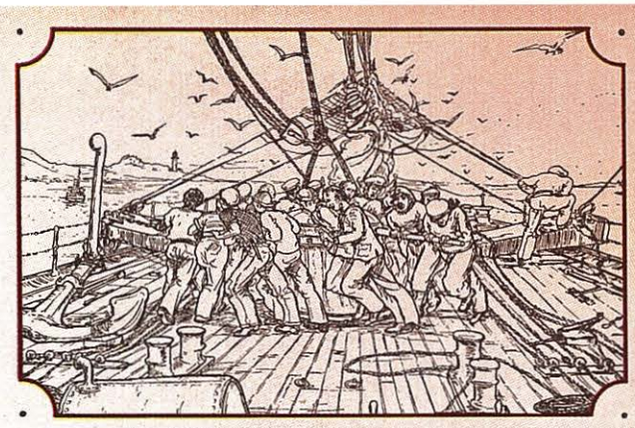


ONE MORE DAY

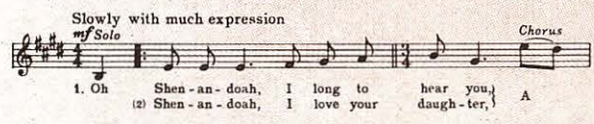


Homeward bound shanty

Shantyman: Oh, have you heard the news, my Johnny?
Crew: One more day!
Shantyman: We're home-ward bound to-morrow,
Crew: One more day!
Only one more day, my Johnny,
One more day!
Oh, rock and row me over,
One more day.
Shantyman: Oh, heave and sight the anchor, Johnny,
Crew: One more day!



SHENANDOAH



Capstan shanty

Shantyman: Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you,
Crew: Away, you rolling river.
Shantyman: Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you,
Crew: Away I'm bound to go,
'Cross the wide Missouri.
Shantyman: Shenandoah, I love your daughter,
Crew: Away, you rolling river.
Shantyman: Oh, Shenandoah, I love your daughter,
Crew: Away I'm bound to go,
'Cross the wide Missouri.

for their shanties. Another source was the folk songs of North America, songs of the backwoodsmen, lumbermen, and the army. Some shanties have their origins in Northern European folk songs and in the emigrant songs of various countries. They even included hymn tunes.

This variety of sources for the shanty resulted in an equally wide variety of subject matter. Seamen sang of girls and love; of beer, rum and whisky; of men, ships, and places; as well as irrelevant subjects such as soldiers, revolutions and wars; in fact anything and everything provided the subjects for their shanties.

The shanties of Caucasians usually had a narrative extending through several verses, but the negro shanties often called for improvisation after the first verse. It was usual for a shantyman to be employed with the ship's crew and his task was to sing the verse of the shanty, the sailors joining in for the chorus. The shantyman also had to supply improvisations when necessary.

Most of the shanties can be divided into two different types—those for hauling and those for turning the capstan or windlass. Among the former could be grouped "Blow the Man Down," "Haul away, Joe," "Whiskey Johnny." The shanty sung when weighing anchor was often of a sentimental nature as this particular work usually meant the beginning of a voyage. "Shenandoah," and "Goodbye—Fare-ye-well" are two well-known examples of this type. Others used for the same work, not of a sentimental nature were "A-Roving," and the "Drunken Sailor." One of the best-known shanties "Fire Down Below" was a pumping shanty, but others of this type disappeared to a great extent when iron and steel replaced wood in sailing ship construction.

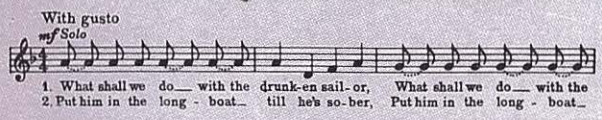
It is interesting to note that shore sea-songs were never sung at sea as shanties, and seamen, being superstitious, held a rigid tabu against singing their shanties ashore. The shanty was always associated with work. No doubt sailors gave little thought to work when on shore leave.

Though shantying flourished from 1820 to 1880, few new ones appeared after 1860. This was the time when steam began to compete with sail, and windship men, trying to keep their ships competitive, sang with greater gusto, increased their work output. But when steam finally did displace sail, shanties, no longer necessary, disappeared from use. Only the ever popular folk singers keep their "catchy" tunes alive.

A great deal of music has been inspired by the sea, mainly through the poets whose words composers used as a basis for their compositions. An example of such music is the "Sea Symphony" by Ralph Vaughan Williams, written for orchestra and chorus. It was Walt Whitman's poetry that inspired this talented English composer to musically create his very personal feelings of the eternal, overwhelming sea. The piece has four movements; "A Song for all Sea, All Ships," "On the Beach at Night Alone," "The Waves," and a final one, "The Explorers." Each one reflects a restless, ever moving sea—the basic fact in the composer's mind.

A composition similar in presentation, with orchestra and chorus, is "Sea Drift" by Frederick Delius, again using words from a Walt Whitman poem. His music resembles

THE DRUNKEN SAILOR

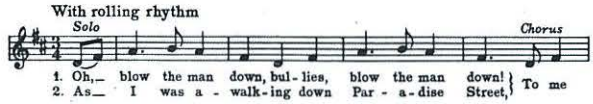


Walk away shanty used when working braces or hauling up small boat . . . sometimes used as a pumping shanty.

Shantyman: What shall we do with the drunken sailor?
What shall we do with the drunken sailor?
What shall we do with the drunken sailor?
Earlye in the morning?

Crew: Way hay and up she rises.
Way hay and up she rises.
Way hay and up she rises.
Earlye in the morning.

BLOW THE MAN DOWN



Halyard shanty

Shantyman: Oh, blow the man down, bullies,
blow the man down!

Crew: To me way-aye blow the man down.

Shantyman: Oh, blow the man down, bullies,
blow him a-way.

Crew: Give me some time to blow the man down!

Shantyman: As I was awalking down Paradise Street,

Crew: To me way-aye blow the man down.

Shantyman: A pretty young damsel I chanced for to meet.

Crew: Give me some time to blow the man down!

the impressionistic art—subtle nuances of color, ever changing; echoing sounds of the sea in all its different moods.

"Peter Grimes," an opera composed by Benjamin Britten, tells a story about the people of a fishing village. Britten, an English composer, was closely in touch with the sea for most of his life. As a child his thoughts were colored by the fierce storms that battered the coastline near his home. His aim—to express an "awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea."

Richard Wagner conceived the idea for his opera "The Flying Dutchman" while on a stormy voyage across the North Sea in 1839 (see Cape With an Eternal Legend, *The Compass*, November–December 1961). During the voyage Wagner recalled the legend of the Flying Dutchman and decided to use it as the story for an opera. This legend tells of a Dutch captain who set sail on Good Friday to show his contempt for Christian belief. For doing so, he was condemned to sail the seven seas without rest till doomsday. In the opera Wagner includes songs of the Norwegian sailors while the feeling of the restless stormy sea dominates the music throughout.

Two comic operas with subjects pertaining to the sea are "H.M.S. Pinafore" and "The Pirates of Penzance," with librettos by Sir H. S. Gilbert and music by Sir Arthur Sullivan. "H.M.S. Pinafore" is a satire on naval discipline and social snobbery and "The Pirates" is built on a similar formula but with more elaborate plot and presentation.

The overture "Fingal's Cave" was composed by Mendelssohn after a visit to the Hebrides. In it the sea is heard rushing into the mouth of a cave and the plaintive cries of sea birds. An earlier composition by the same composer was "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage." Both were written before Mendelssohn had ever seen the sea. Yet, in the latter's music, he presents a vivid picture of the depressed feeling aboard a becalmed sailing ship waiting for the breeze that will take her safely into harbor.

Further classics connected with the sea include the songs "Sea Fever" by John Ireland, "Sea Pictures" by Edward Elgar, a tone poem "The Oceanides" by Sibelius, three symphonic sketches by Debussy under the title "La Mer," and Benjamin Britten's opera "Billy Budd." An interesting and unique feature of the latter is its setting. The entire action takes place at sea.

"Music of the sea," whether it be shanty, tone poem, opera or symphony, has a fascination all its own. It holds one spellbound. It lets the mind wander to dream about the days of "wooden ships and iron men," to fancy the incomparable sounds of wind whistling in the rigging or water swishing by the hull. To we moderns "on the beach" it's a way back, a means of conjuring up mental pictures that ease 20th century tensions. No wonder this music lives on and on.

The Compass wishes to thank The Melbourne Harbour Trust and Miss M. A. Jenkins, Mus. Bac., for their kind permission to use this edited version of the latter's story, Music of the Sea, that appeared in the Port of Melbourne Quarterly.