



1999

Was Gauss Smart?

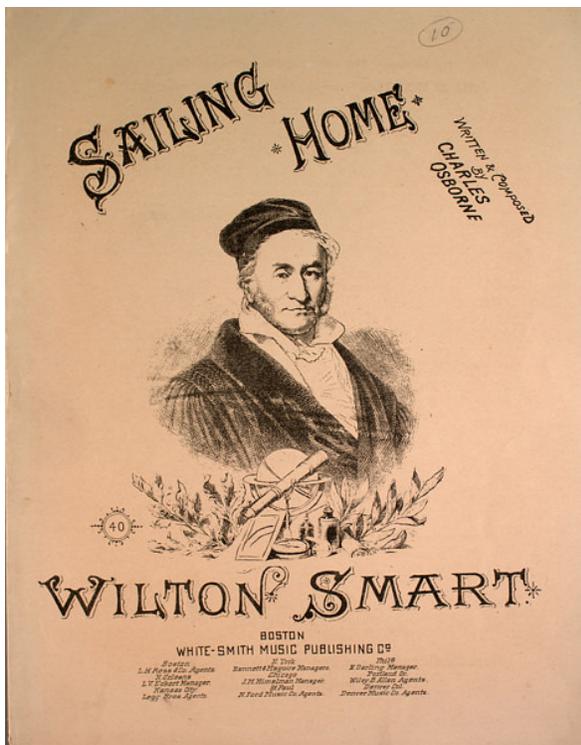
Thomas Moore

Bridgewater State College, MOORE@bridgew.edu

Virtual Commons Citation

Moore, Thomas (1999). Was Gauss Smart?. In *Mathematics and Computer Science Faculty Publications*. Paper 12.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/math_compsci_fac/12

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.



Cover sheet courtesy of [Levy Sheet music Collection at Johns Hopkins University](#)

Was Gauss Smart?

In my avocation as music director at St. Joseph the Worker Church in Hanson, Massachusetts, I often search for choral music both traditional and contemporary. The World Wide Web has turned out to be a terrific resource in this endeavor with many

music publishers, composers, and music notation software companies providing links to sheet music or sound files.

Sitting at my desk at Bridgewater State College with a few hours to go before my first class of the new semester, I was surfing the web for material like this when I stumbled on the repository at Johns Hopkins University known as the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music.

Looking for Hymns or Sacred Music, I was disappointed not to find any such category. Instead I found links to boxes of sheet music whose contents were indicated by titles such as U.S. Presidents and Presidential Candidates; Patriotic Songs; Drinking, Temperance, and Smoking; Maritime; and so on. There was nothing among them that appealed to me. However, curious to see the contents of a typical box, I decided to choose a link from those visible on my screen. I arbitrarily chose the third-listed Maritime box.

The thumbnail-size JPEG images of the cover pages of 150 pieces of sheet music began to fill the screen. As I started scrolling through them I was astounded to see a familiar image. Enlarging this image (Item 38 of Box 183) confirmed that the cover art was a lithograph of Carl Freidrich Gauss!

This is the image with which everyone in the scientific and mathematical community is familiar and virtually the only image of him to be found in texts on the history of mathematics. Here it is. Compare to the image on the sheet music cover above.



The music itself was titled *Sailing Home* by Charles Osborne, composer and lyricist. It told a tale of Britons who had struggled to make their fortune in the gold fields of Australia and were bound for home aboard a ship that, unfortunately, foundered at sea.

Unfortunately, the music has no date of publication, but we may deduce from the lyrics that *Sailing Home* was penned in the late 1850s or in the 1860s. For, according to the first stanza, the ship embarks from Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, and the gold strike in Victoria began in the 1850s. (Osborne was definitely composing around this time as can be seen from some of his other work, including *Bonnie Jean*, dated 1858, also in the Levy Collection.)

Wilton Smart was the performer of the ballad. The bibliographical data on *Sailing Home* tells us that the engraved image on the cover page is "an unattributed lithograph of Wilton Smart," but we know it is Gauss. What can this mean? We are told that Gauss died in 1855. Maybe not. Perhaps he survived to enjoy another career, as a balladeer! Gauss was smart, but was he actually Smart in the 1860s? Is Gauss actually a time-traveller, visiting us at different times under different guises? (Come to think of it, doesn't the comedian Robin Williams look a little too much like our Gauss?)

Leaving aside such fancy, we wonder how Gauss came to be the cover art for a piece of popular music. Was Osborne or his publisher, White-Smith of Boston, putting one over on the American public? Did the engraver lose the image of Smart and substitute that of another smart guy?

I also wonder what serendipity led me, idly surfing for hymns, to choose to look only in the third box of Maritime-related music and to find Gauss, the Prince of Mathematics, looking back at me.

CHORUS

*Over the sea like a bird she skimmed,
Back from the Land of Gold.
Pulses were beating, and eyes were
dimmed,
Thinking of friends of old.
Soon they would stand in their
Fatherland,
Never again to roam;
But little they thought that their ship
so taut
Would founder while sailing home.*