



Article:

Mysteries - Music to Drown By

The subject of the music that the *Titanic's* band played during the sinking is filled with controversy.

Shortly after midnight, some twenty-odd minutes after the collision, the *Titanic's* band began to play in the ship's first class Lounge, trying to cheer the spirits of the passengers who had begun gathering there. But exactly what they did over the ensuing two and a quarter hours has always been the subject of countless rumors, myths, and endless speculation in the absence of detailed evidence.

The *Titanic's* band was not one single group of eight men, as is commonly conceived; there were actually two groups. The first group was a quintet formed by bandmaster and lead violinist Wallace Hartley, second violinist Jock Hume, cellist Jack Woodward, bass player Fred Clark, and pianist Theodore Brailey. This group performed regular entertainment for first and second class passengers, including mealtimes, concerts, Sunday services, and the like. The second group was very special, in that they performed in the Reception Room of the á la carte Restaurant and Café Parisien, on B Deck, at the foot of the aft Grand Staircase. This group was comprised of violist George Krins, cellist Roger Bricoux, and pianist Percy Taylor. These three men added to the distinctive flavor and atmosphere of the Restaurant and Café Parisien, furthering the illusion that one was in a restaurant or sidewalk cafe in the heart of Paris. Each of these groups had a separate repertoire of music that they could play - both of which were completely different from one another - supplied by the White Star Line, and the two groups did not play in unison under normal circumstances. These eight men were some of the finest musicians playing on the Atlantic.

Concerts, mealtime accompaniment, and all the normal routine of the ship's two musical ensembles came to a grinding halt with the collision, however.

At about midnight, twenty minutes after the collision, Purser McElroy had all of the musicians assemble, and told them to play. As bandmaster, Wallace Hartley organized the two groups into one makeshift orchestra, and they began playing in the First Class Lounge on A Deck, where many of the curious and even worried passengers had begun to assemble. Jack Thayer remembered it as a restless crowd who didn't pay much conscious attention to the music.

At this point, only seven of the eight musicians would have been playing - one of the two pianists would not have been needed. The music was upbeat: ragtime, waltzes, and, according to Steward Edward Wheelton, "selections from the opera and the latest popular melodies of England and America". After not too long, perhaps a half-hour, Hartley moved his men from the Lounge to the top level of the forward First Class Grand Staircase. This was a prime spot for their music to be heard by those heading up to the Boat Deck, and there was also an upright piano fixed on the port side of the Entrance there, so that the seven members

could still play together. Pierre Marechal saw them playing there a while before he left in Boat No. 7 at 12:45 a.m.

Hartley noticed that his men were not wearing their lifebelts, for after only a few selections in this new location, he dismissed the men and had them go below for their overcoats and lifebelts, telling them to return afterwards and reassemble to continue to play.

It took time for the men to trudge down, gather their lifebelts, and return. Lawrence Beesley saw one of the cello players running down the Boat Deck at around 12:40 a.m.

When they had reassembled, they took up a position just outside the First Class Entrance to the forward Grand Staircase on the port side of the Boat Deck. As there was no piano out on the Boat Deck, and there was certainly no feasible way of getting one there, the second piano player would not have been needed now.

The musicians would now have needed to retune their instruments to compensate for the havoc that the cold air would have wreaked. Also, the two cellists would have needed something to sit on while playing, as it is next to impossible to play a cello while standing. Somehow, Hartley would have ensured that this was seen to - there were a variety of seats just inside the Entrance. Another problem revolved around sheet music; since the two orchestras were playing together, and their repertoires were different, they would have needed to play old, familiar numbers, as well as frequently played and requested songs that were popular at the time.

What they played from that time forward is still a mystery. Their orders were to help squelch feelings of panic. As per their orders, they played upbeat pieces that would try to squelch feelings of panic. There is some evidence that they played patriotic music among their selections, such as Sir Edward Elgar's *Land of Hope and Glory*, or *Londonderry Aire*. Some also remembered that they heard hymns, such as *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. However, this particular hymn was first class passenger J. Clinch Smith's favorite piece. Although he died, he was with Colonel Archibald Gracie almost the entire night, and Gracie survived the disaster and wrote a detailed account afterwards. He did not mention hearing his friend's favorite hymn that night (although it was played that morning at the first class church services). In fact, Gracie - who was in the area where the band was playing for most of the disaster - did not recall hearing hymns at all; he thought that playing hymns would have been a poor idea. There is a lot of evidence from survivors that the band played ragtime, waltzes, and popular music of the day - not hymns.

This brings us to the question of the band's last selection. We know that they played right to the last minute, but what exactly were they playing? That the band was playing *Nearer My God to Thee* has reached the status of legend. But was this really the case?

A great many survivors recalled both on the *Carpathia* and later in life that they heard this song played just before the end. The idea that the band had stoically played this song in the face of almost certain death was so appealing that the news began circulating at an unheard of speed. It was an easy song to play, and Hartley had told a friend not long before the disaster that if he was on a ship that was sinking he didn't think he "could do better" than play *Nearer My God to Thee*. It has even been suggested that this particular hymn - one of his favorites - was the one he would have chosen to be played at his own funeral.

But, like so many other things that took place that night, and especially in those last few minutes, there

is a good deal of evidence to the contrary.

First, most of the eyewitnesses that said they heard that particular hymn were in lifeboats, a ways away from the vessel. Several eyewitnesses who were very close to where the band was playing said specifically that they did not hear *Nearer My God to Thee* or any other hymns.

Additionally, those who said that they heard *Nearer My God to Thee* were both British and Americans - a sore point because the hymn is played to completely different melodies on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, there are three different melodies. Unless all of those who later said they heard this hymn played were familiar with all three versions of the hymn or the band played all three versions of it - a ridiculously unlikely scenario - then right off the bat, between half and two-thirds of those who claimed to have heard it must have been mistaken.

Considering how unlikely this looks upon inspection, if *Nearer My God to Thee* wasn't played before the sinking, what was?

Just after the *Carpathia* docked in New York, Guglielmo Marconi and a reporter from *The New York Times* boarded and spoke with Harold Bride in the ship's Marconi room. Working ceaselessly with the *Carpathia's* wireless operator, he had been insulated somewhat from other survivors and the stories that they were telling. As such, his might have been the freshest impression on the matter available at the time. He and Phillips had emerged from the Marconi room on the port side of the Boat Deck, just forward of where the band was playing. At that point, he said that they were playing "a rag-time tune". When he climbed up onto the roof of the Officers' Quarters to assist the efforts being focused on Collapsible B, however, the ragtime selection had ended. He then heard them begin to play another song, which he identified as "*Autumn*." This was the last song they played as the ship sank out from under him and them.

Three days later, on April 21, *The New York Times* announced that this was the Episcopalian hymn *Autumn*. However, there is a problem with this supposition. *Autumn* is the name of the tune that one rarely used Episcopalian hymn, *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*, could alternately be set to - the same way that *Nearer My God to Thee* could be set to three different pieces of music. But there was no Episcopalian hymn entitled *Autumn*.

But if Bride was referring to a hymn, he would have used its name according to its opening verse, not the tune it was set to. At the same time, the melody *Autumn* was a difficult one to play, not a simple, well known one that the band could readily perform. So what song was Harold Bride referring to?

It turns out that there was another song the Bride could have been referring to: English composer Archibald Joyce's waltz, *Songe d'Automne*. At the time, this particular piece of music was extremely popular in England, but wasn't as well known in America. Its French name meant "*Autumn Dream*." This particular piece was easy to play, and would have been familiar to Bride, and also to the orchestra. (At least one White Star Line music book contained it, and it was well known among fellow passenger liner bandsmen traveling on the Atlantic at that time.) Additionally, this waltz was commonly referred to as "*Autumn*," instead of its more verbally challenging full French name. Thus, even Bride's reference to "*Autumn*" fits, and so does the American newspaper's confusing it with the Episcopalian hymn tune *Autumn*. Bride would probably have assumed the reporter knew what piece he was speaking of.

In fact, it seems as though the general opinion among many shipboard musicians of the period was that

Hartley and his men played *Songe d'Automne* at some point that night. The piece fit with their other selections that night; it feels upbeat, and yet its tune is almost haunting. And if the band really was playing *Nearer My God to Thee*, why did Bride think they were playing another piece? It seems highly unlikely that *Nearer My God to Thee* was the orchestra's final piece... from evidence in hand, it seems far more likely that it was *Songe d'Automne*.

As Hartley himself said before the *Titanic's* fateful maiden voyage, "music is a bigger weapon than a gun in a big emergency, and I think that a band could do more to calm passengers than all the officers." Knowing that Hartley was so partial to the Methodist version of *Nearer, My God to Thee*, and that he most likely refrained from playing it in favor of cheerier selections that would keep the passengers' spirits up, actually heightens one's respect for his sense of duty, and for his performing that duty to the last. Indeed, the picture of Hartley and his men playing *Songe d'Automne* just before the sea washed them all off the Boat Deck is a most endearing one.

Certainly, no matter what tunes they played, Hartley and his men performed their duty and then some, bravely continuing to try to calm the passengers without even a hope for saving themselves.

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