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***Titanic's* Band: Killing Them Softly**

by Senan Molony

MUSIC hath charms to soothe the savage breast... but sometimes a savage breast, in one aroused to action, is just what's needed.

The playing of music on the boat deck of the RMS *Titanic* contributed to the death toll in that disaster. Bandmaster Wallace Hartley is the unwitting author of needless extra fatalities.

While celebrated for nearly a century for their undoubted gallantry, any rounded assessment of the actions of the band that night should be tempered by the realisation that their playing had subtle psychological effects that encouraged at least some passengers to choose death instead of life.

The strains of classical music early in proceedings conveyed the message that everything was as near normal as could be. Every wafting note spoke sweetly that the emergency was not what it was – an emergency - but instead a temporary inconvenience.

The playing of the band ran directly counter to the entreaties of officers and crew that women and children should enter the boats. As such, whoever asked for or instigated the music made a terrible mistake.

Classical music in particular has a comforting, relaxing effect – which is why it is increasingly to be heard in dentists' and doctors' waiting rooms. But it also creates a mood of conviviality, of unity, of optimism.

Conviviality meant staying with the crowd; optimism meant safety in numbers; unity meant preferring the majority. Those brave souls who opted to enter tiny lifeboats were defying the prevailing mood, a mood encouraged by the fact that

music was playing at all. They were swimming against the tide, but their conscious and independent choices would save their swimming later.

Dr Adrian North, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Leicester, has made a special study of the psychology of music – which effectively means human manipulation by music, a force depressingly deployed in every mall or shopping centre as a powerful sales tool.

We think we know about ‘muzak.’ It has been demonstrated time and again that restaurant customers spend more in a premises in which music is heard than one in which there is no such ambience. Cows deliver more milk when exposed to the pan-pipes, or Simon & Garfunkel. Whether human or animal, it is all about well-being.

We also know the contrary: that harsh music annoys and unsettles. Manuel Noriega was told that he fought the law, and the law won. North Korea blasts cacophonous Marxist joy at its southern neighbour. The point is that music has context.

Playing soothing music, even gay ragtime, on the boat deck of the *Titanic* was supreme folly. It was fiddling while Rome burned. It unquestionably dulled the instinct for self-preservation, at least in some.

North says music cannot be used to make people do something they do not wish to do. It only works at the margins – “It’s much more a case of turning a 50/50 decision into a 51/49 decision,” he says. “It’s very much when you’re undecided that these effects come into play.”

And *Titanic* passengers were at first unsure, undecided, hesitant, about the offer being made to them. They were being asked to enter tiny boats, to exchange light for darkness, warmth for cold. But the music in their ears was all the while speaking seductively to their souls; music that was light; music that was warm.

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Second Officer Lightoller, at boat six, commented: "They were not at all eager to get into the boat, anyway, any of them. I had to sing out. Naturally, no one looked on it as serious and they were not in any hurry to go down to the sea in a boat."

Music should not have been played by the *Titanic* band that night. Whether hymns were appropriate at the end or not is of little importance when set against the larger question of what their playing meant in the first place. *Titanic* passengers should not have been given auditory reassurance that all was well. A sense of unease would have served them far better than a sense of well-being. Unease would have helped to fill boats.

It is important to stress that the "music effect" was at first relatively minor, as North suggests. But if one person in a hundred was irrevocably influenced a particular way in their answer to the overwhelming question – Should I stay, or should I go? – then we can at least guess at the figures.

If 500 passengers were among the 712 officially saved (the British Report said 523 passengers saved) then North's rule of thumb says that the playing of Wallace Hartley and his colleagues directly drowned at least ten passengers among the *Titanic's* 1,500 dead.

The musicians would be appalled, surely, at such a realisation. The truth is, of course, that none of them knew what the final outcome would be, and there is no question of guilt. Instead happenstance was at work. But someone in authority took the decision that the band should play.

That person decided, effectively, that the band should communicate the message "there is no danger" when there was imminent and overwhelming danger. Mrs Emily Ryerson told how her husband joked with some worried women he knew, and she heard him say, "Don't you hear the band playing?"

The band was literally setting the tone. It first began playing indoors, in the first class areas, as people assembled. At this point the band was only killing time –

because the passengers were not yet wanted outside, as the boats first had to be uncovered and cleared away.

When the evacuation was ready to proceed however, there should have been an announcement, and the band should have stopped playing. Putting away their instruments would have acted as a potent visual signal. The time for relaxation and detachment was already over by a short time after midnight.

But instead the band kept playing. No-one ever told them to stop. And in the absence of any form of public address system aboard the vessel, the music continued to transmit blithe reassurance – even as the wireless was flashing silent and desperate appeals for assistance.

Vital time was thus wasted trying to fill early boats. Passengers were asked to enter, but the music was asking them to tarry, just as it persuaded them on other nights of the voyage to wait a while after dinner, to listen and luxuriate, rather than retire to their staterooms.

Had the early boats filled more quickly, with passengers stepping forward in the icy grip of silence, then precious minutes would have been made available later in the night when it was most needed.

Five or ten extra minutes might have seen Collapsibles A and B properly launched. If there had been a proper level of urgency earlier in the evening, the safe despatch of those boats could arguably have saved another hundred souls. Suddenly the music effect is much more pronounced.

What then does it matter if the band played when all the boats were gone? If they played *Nearer my God to Thee*, or *Songe d'Automne* – or instead simply flung down their instruments and took to their heels, as suggested by Colonel Archibald Gracie? Heroism is all very fine, but in this case it didn't fill boats.

As Joseph Conrad wrote in the *English Review* in July 1912: “I, who am not a sentimentalist, think it would have been finer if the band of the *Titanic* had been quietly saved, instead of being drowned while playing - whatever tune they were playing, the poor devils. I would rather they had been saved to support their families than to see their families supported by the magnificent generosity of the subscribers.”

Stripped of what he called the “romantic garment” with which the Press had draped the disaster, the band is shown by Conrad as ordinary wage earners, which indeed is what they were. Someone ordered them to play in the first place, as it surely did not spring from any impromptu outburst of nobility.

Therefore it is cant to say that the band began to play out of some automatic impulse. They did not take it upon themselves to calm panic, for it must be pointed out there was no panic when they first began to play. That an instruction was given points to the higher and grave responsibility of those who knew early in the night that the ship had been fatally wounded and was now nothing more than a “holed, helpless, big tank” in Conrad’s rudely fatal phrase.

Gracie says the band was first playing on A Deck, on the port side, towards the stern, as passengers ascended from their cabins. This is in the vicinity of the first class smoking room. The first class should have been expected to fill the early boats, at least in terms of the productivity of salvation.

Old soldier Gracie adds that the band continued to play “while the boats were being lowered,” adding that he and others considered this “a wise provision, tending to allay excitement.” Here he misses the point of the influence of music among the undecided at the very margins of decision-making. To be sure, if one’s mind is already made up to stay with the ship, then a little water music might be most appropriate.

The character “Tommy Ryan” in the 1997 motion picture *Titanic* remarks: “Music to drown by – now I know I’m in first class!” But his comment is placed much

later in the night. When the invitations to first enter the boats were being made, there was no tell-tale list and little discernible forward tilt. The ship seemed steady as a rock, the night magnificently clear.

In such circumstances it was easy to trust in the certainties of rescue, with only 73 passenger lives lost on the North Atlantic in the ten years to 1901, and fewer still in the ten years thereafter. Perhaps they saw the comforting ship's light on the bow, or heard that other vessels were already responding to the distress calls. Maybe passengers recalled the emphasis on inherent stability and security in the advertising, if they had read of bulkheads, watertight doors, and other impressive arrangements.

And then there was the music, rising above the whole and creating the overall note of optimism. "Cheerful tunes," said Gracie. Well, that's another reason to suppress one's fears. "Don't you hear the music playing?" asked Arthur Ryerson, as probably others did the same. The whiff of fear banished by aural dabs of grandeur and gorgeousness.

When the *Birkenhead* sank off South Africa, there was the steady military drumbeat to keep the men in line as they descended into shark infested waters. At Rorke's Drift, the men of the South Wales Borderers sang *Men of Harlech* and *Bread of Heaven* while feverishly attempting to hold off a Zulu horde.

In such examples, the danger is immediate and visible and the music stiffens the sinews and summons up the blood. Those who suggest the early playing of the band on the *Titanic* magnificently saved lives by averting panic miss the obvious point that there was no apparent danger. The music was thus nothing more than soporific. It sapped, instead of strengthened, the will to take action.

The playing of the band emphatically did not save lives, as was claimed in further frothing of Press sentiment when the body of Wallace Hartley was recovered. Instead it cost lives and exacted further human sacrifice.

Nowadays we hear of the *Titanic* band only in the context of the hymns, sacred strains that some doubt they played at all. Gracie says that if such had been the case, he would have regarded it as a “tactless warning of immediate death to us all.”

The corollary is that the cheerful tunes were the very opposite – what might be termed “tactless promises of swift and amusing cancellation of the problem.” Yet the problem did not go away, but grew steadily worse.

Let it be said again: the clear precaution to be taken, as soon as the boats were ready, was for the band to stop playing.

Anything else was life-endangering pretence and utter senselessness.

That the “band played on” is criminal, not heroic. But they played on because they had been roused from their beds, ordered to play, and never asked to cease.

If Wallace Hartley and the others *at the very death* wrote for themselves a page of ineluctable honour, then they were surely achieving a triumph of the human spirit over what they may have realised had been colossal miscalculation to begin with. At least they were now deciding for themselves, if they did play when all boats were gone and death very near, whereas in the crucial early stages they had answered to their paymasters

That independence of action might symbolically have undone a little of what their earlier playing actually did do – which was to interfere in deadly manner with the independence of action of others.

All these are deep questions which the men involved had no time to dwell on. In the last minutes they answered unconsciously to their calling, just as others had perhaps answered to beguiling siren sounds in the early part of the evening when they might have taken a lifeboat place and lived.

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How foolish it was to play music! How sad that it helped to encourage jibes at those who did enter the boats – “You’ll miss breakfast!” “You’ll need a pass to get back in the morning!” “We’ll see you in New York” – such that those who risked entering them also risked being ridiculed later. “How innocent you were, my dear. Danger, indeed! Why, we had a lovely time here all night, listening to the orchestra.”

The risk was in staying, not in going, yet it was made psychologically more difficult for passengers to enter an early lifeboat by a shipping line that compounded reckless navigation with grotesquely misplaced complacency and pride - even after their surpassing vanity had been devastatingly punctured.

Someone was needed who could have assessed clearly the importance of example when it came to the band. If Thomas Andrews, who told a stewardess to wear her lifejacket and to let others see her wearing it, could only have seen also that the band was talismanic of the true situation... if he might have persuaded them not only to cease playing, but to let people see the musicians trooping to a lifeboat...

The effect might have been powerful indeed. For Andrews and others knew from midnight that there was no making light of the situation. By sending off the light-givers, they would have sobered up the jokers. There would also have been the small matter of Wallace and his confrères living to support their families instead of lying under impressive granite, if their bodies were to be recovered at all.

The band was indeed emblematic of the *Titanic* that night. It could be compared to a “key battlefield asset,” and yet in this theatre of operations it was monumentally misused. A strategic blunder was committed by someone at a critical juncture when its judicious use would have clearly outlined the circumstances and proper course of action for all.

A glorious opportunity was thereby missed and a “glorious” failure followed. Comparisons might be made to the Light Brigade and other costly fiascos, except that the mistake here was too subtle to be appreciated at the time – or even

afterwards. It is only with developments in our understanding of music-induced psychology in particular that the grievousness of the error can begin to be seen.

Enough, then, of *Nearer my God to Thee*. Let us consider the men who made up the band as employees who were wonderful in the performance of light chamber music, their bread and butter. Substitute the *Tales of Hoffman* for the religious anthem later bestowed on them and made their garland.

A year after the disaster the Countess of Rothes suddenly froze at dinner and was carried instantly back to the horror of the *Titanic*. She realised at length that her clammy fear was caused by the music being played where she was – the Barcarolle, by Offenbach. It was the last piece played by the *Titanic* orchestra after dinner that final night.

The band possibly reprised it later in alien surroundings - hence the Pavlovian response of the titled lady. Did she realise with dread how this swelling serenade, washed with romance, had tried to kill with a soft caress? That it was primed to whisper sweet nothings while introducing a blade between the ribs?

The playing of the *Titanic* band lulled her people into a false sense of security. The Barcarolle did the job beautifully:

*Belle nuit, O Nuit d'amour
Souris à nos ivresses
Nuit plus douce que le jour
O belle nuit d'amour!*

*Beautiful night, O Night of love
Smile upon our raptures
Night, much sweeter than the day
O beautiful night of love!*

*Le temps fuit, et sans retour
Emporte nos tendresses
Le temps fuit, et sans retour
Loin de cet heureux séjour
Zéphirs embrasés
Versez nous vos caresses
Zéphirs embrasés
Donnez nous vos baisers!*

*Time flies, and does not return
Carrying away our tenderness
Time flies, and does not return
Far from this happy retreat.
Burning zephyrs,
embrace us with your caresses
Burning zephyrs
Give us your kisses!*

But they were kisses of betrayal.

**Click below to hear the *Barcarolle* from the *Tales Of Hoffman* by
Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880)**

Real Player Version

http://www.vitaminic.ie/cgi-php/get_file.php3?modo=4&bid=437091

MP3 Version

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