

Dominic Combe responds to Alan Peat's article:

There is an Edison 4 minute wax cylinder version of "Be British" by George D'Albert (catalogue number 12476). It is much the same as the Winner version except that it is longer. I have not listened to either version for a while, but my impression was that it came over more melodramatically and less like a recruiting speech. Rather charmingly, the cylinder version has "Asleep in the Deep" playing softly during the spoken section. It was announced in August for September 1912 in the Edison Phonograph monthly.

There is also a mountaineer's ballad on a late period Edison Blue Amberol 5200 "The Sinking of the Titanic" sung by Ernest V. Stoneman and issued as late as August 1926. The lyrics are quite different, very banal and repetitive – this one springs to mind: "So when death came gliding by, 1600 had to die, It was bad when the great ship went down!" However, it shows, as do recent films and salvage operations, how profoundly the Titanic disaster has imprinted itself on our cultural consciousness.

As to the release of "Nearer my God to Thee", I would not rule out a resurgence of interest in that fine old hymn as a result of the disaster; the benefit performances you mention are an indication of that. The record companies at that time seem to have taken several weeks to respond to current events and hit tunes with releases, as the cylinder of "Be British" issued for September 1912 suggests.

"Nearer my God to Thee" as an Edison 2 minute has 6 versions, 3214 Chimes, 3408 Edison Brass Quartet, 109 and 8136 Edison Grand Concert Band, 7267 Edison Male Quartet and 8022 Mandolin and the Wax Amberol 379 is the one you mention for March 1910 which was later re-released as a Blue Amberol 1557 in Dec 1912 . I have looked it up in the "New Phonogram" magazine, and also in the EPM, but there is no sense of any awareness of the record's commemorative quality, only a general buzz about the new Blue Amberol.

My feeling is that none of these versions were marketed specifically for the Titanic disaster by the Edison Co. but the record may well have been bought or promoted at local level along these lines. Songe d'Automne exists in the British 4 minute list as 12020 by the British Concert Orchestra, May 1909. The Blue Amberol is 3379, way beyond the event and promoted without any mention of the Titanic. I'm not sure if there is a wax 4 minute record of it.

You may be right about the March 1913 release of Ferdinand Himmelreich's piano version being an anniversary release because the record slip which accompanied the cylinder mentions the Titanic... but also President McKinley. I quote:

"When President McKinley lay dying from an assassin's bullet, it was on his lips to the very "last, and when the great steamship "Titanic" sank in mid-ocean in April 1912 it was being "played by the band and sung by the doomed passengers, even as the boat took her final "plunge."

To my mind, there is no sense of anniversary from the text, only a list (these items among others) of points of interest to market the record. The record is announced in February for March 1913, not April. However, live dealers in the US would not have missed the opportunity to push such a record in April, with or without tact! However in the UK, the record was not released until June 1913 which would have missed the mark.

In no way would I contest your attempt to make a connection between the "Titanic" disaster and the release of these records, but the "Be British" and the Himmelreich piano solo with its chiming effects are the only ones which have an element of "Titanic" promotion in the sales blurb.

Edison did become sharper at capitalising on things like St Patrick's Day and the outbreak of war in Europe not to mention the US's own involvement to push records, but most records were issued 2 or 3 months after the event (ie a Broadway success). When Lehar's "Gipsy Love" had its first American performance in 1911, the star singer, Marguerita Sylva was already under contract and 4 cylinders of her creator role were made and released in time for the event. This was trumpeted and boomed in the EPM very conspicuously. Sadly the records then seem to have been withdrawn. This, and a stunt whereby a dance record (Feather Your Nest, I think) was released and danced to within a week of the dance's first outing in that same hotel in the early 20s, are the only instances that spring to mind of really pushing a record to match an event.

I am sure however, that given the emotional impact on the public either side of the Atlantic of the "Titanic" disaster would have led to many sales of what were already very popular pieces of music.....and "Be British" is a tear jerker to this day.

I have not considered other makes of cylinder or record in this letter, and I entirely agree with your last paragraph. You have only to listen to the hill-billy and mountaineer or rail-road songs by Stoneman, Dalhart and others. How about "There's a New Star in Heaven Tonight" Dalhart 5239 which commemorates the death of Rudolph Valentino, or 23093 'Tis a Story that Shall Live for Ever (Stanley Kirkby) which commemorates the death of Scott of the Antarctic. The Scopes Monkey trial is celebrated, and all manner of deaths and accidents. Consider the famous "Runaway Train" we all grew up with!

I have heard of the San Francisco earthquake record; there is a Sterling cylinder (570) descriptive selection of the eruption of Vesuvius, and a descriptive selection of the Battle of Manila on brown wax etc etc etc.

Dominic