

Two pieces of music are inextricably linked with the sinking of the Titanic: 'Nearer, my God, to Thee' and 'Autumn'. After the 'Titanic' sank in April 1912 and the survivors were conveyed to New York in their rescue ship 'The Carpathia' many were interviewed. Harold Bride (the Titanic's junior wireless operator) was quoted in the New York Times as saying,

"...the last I saw of the band, when I was floating out in the sea with my lifebelt on, it was still on deck playing *Autumn*".

Many other survivors, however, reported that 'Nearer My God to Thee' was the last hymn played by the band.

Before the end of April 1912 Benefit performances, in both the United Kingdom and America, were arranged for the relief of both the surviving crew, passengers and their families. At the Metropolitan Opera House the first half of the programme concluded with 'Autumn' followed by 'Nearer My God to Thee'. Other examples of the direct association of these songs and the disaster can be found in sheet music printed in 1912. The cover of 'Nearer my God to Thee' includes the words 'In memory of the heroes of the ill-fated Titanic' and in fact more than 300 songs were written directly about the sinking.

A French postcard titled 'Plus Pres de toi Mon Dieu' is made up of a photograph of the Titanic with the score of 'Nearer, my God, to Thee' to its right and below the ship's image, the hymn's lyrics in both French and English. A British company, Bamforth and Co. Ltd also produced a series of six postcards, each with a verse form 'Nearer, my God, to thee'.

It is clear that 'Nearer, My God, to thee' was already popular prior to the disaster. It was, for example, recorded by the Edison Male Quartet on a Gold moulded cylinder before the tragedy. What needs to be established is whether a link exists between the release dates of the hymn and the disaster itself. Put bluntly: Were cylinder record producers 'cashing' in on the disaster by releasing tunes that the public already associated with the sinking of the Titanic?.

On Blue Amberols 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' was in fact released three times. It's first release was as number 1557 recorded by the 'Knickerbocker Quartet'. The release date is December 1912 \*. The hymn was commonly associated with the disaster by this date and its choice for release can tentatively be ascribed to the sinking, particularly when one releases that it was actually recorded in March 1910. It would have been a less than hasty response but as it was never released before and the actual date of release being no more than 8 months after the sinking it is possible to hypothesise that there is a direct link.

The next release of the tune has an even more striking relationship to the event as it coincides directly with the anniversary of the disaster. Blue Amberol 1647 by Ferdinand Himmelreich was released in March 1913, coinciding exactly with the demand that would have been anticipated on the first anniversary of that fateful night.

This must be more than a mere coincidence. It is also a direct recording rather than a dubbing from a disc master.

Further evidence for a direct link between the Blue Amberol recordings and the tragedy can be found in the third and final June 1914 release, Blue Amberol 2318.

Knickerbocker Quartet 'Elks' initiatory march / Nearer My God to Thee

The release date, although close to the second anniversary, would have been a little late. It is not the release date which is striking but rather the recording : April 1912 - the exact month of the sinking.

It is possible to suggest, after considering all of this evidence, that in April 1912 the Knickerbocker Quartet recorded Elks' initiatory march / Nearer My God to Thee but it was decided not to release this ( perhaps because the Initiatory march element had no relationship to the disaster) and so an earlier recording by the Knickerbocker Quartet was chosen and released in December 1912. A year later things were far more coordinated and a direct recording was made and released to coincide exactly with the first anniversary. The final 1914 release was the last 'outing' for 'Nearer My God, to Thee' and the advent of World War One and its attendant horrors ended the anniversary releases.

The tune 'Autumn' is more problematic. It is easy to assume that this must be the Episcopal hymn 'Autumn' but it is equally likely that it could refer to the popular piece 'Songe d'Automne'. the release date, as Blue Amberol 3379, was January 1918 but it was recorded close to the first anniversary in May 1913. With this tune I see no direct link. The Titanic's sinking may have made it more popular and Edison may have been responding to this popularity but any direct link can be no more than tenuous.

When one considers other cylinder manufacturers the evidence becomes more problematic and ascribing release dates is certainly more complex. The author has found only one other cylinder recording of 'Nearer My God to Thee' on an Indestructible Record, Albany, New York. 868. Band. Nearer My God to Thee. (Paraphrase). The author has not yet been able to accurately date this record ( can anyone assist?)

In conclusion, disasters have been the unfortunate stimuli for a multitude of recordings. Cylinder manufacturers were certainly not averse to 'cashing in' on these disasters, sometimes even recreating the sounds of a disaster in dramatic manner as occurred on cylinder after the San Francisco earthquake. The link between the Blue amberol releases of 'Nearer, my God, to thee' and the Titanic's sinking seems to be more than a tenuous one.

*The author would be keen to know of any other Titanic related recordings, either as 78's or cylinders. The most well known is the Charity record 'Be British' on 'The Winner' record label. Do others exist? Photographs and details would be greatly appreciated. Alan Peat can be contacted directly at [alanpeat@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:alanpeat@tiscali.co.uk)*