

A new auditory fog generated from vinyl crackle now envelops Gavin Bryars's elegiac, openended piece *The Sinking Of The Titanic*. By Mark Fisher



Left: Philip Jeck's turntable orchestra. Above, left to right: Francesco Dillon, Gavin Bryars, Paolo Ravaglia

Gavin Bryars with Alter Ego & Philip Jeck *The Sinking Of The Titanic*

TOUCH CD

What can be heard in crackle? What spectres does it veil and reveal? The presence of vinyl surface noise is the most immediate difference between this version of Gavin Bryars's *The Sinking Of The Titanic* and previous recordings of the work, originally composed in 1969. The blankly suggestive audio crackle – “a blanket of thin dust”, as Manuel Zurrira puts it in his sleevenote – has been added by turntable artist Philip Jeck, an expert at drawing power from discarded sonic objects. He is part of this new performance, along with Italian ensemble Alter Ego and Bryars himself on double bass.

Burial is the contemporary artist perhaps best known for his use of surface noise as a sound source in itself, but when vinyl crackle began to be foregrounded in the 90s – on records by Jeck himself, Tricky, Basic Channel and Pole – it was precisely at the moment that vinyl was becoming superseded. Crackle both invokes the past and marks out our distance from it, destroying the illusion that we are copresent with what we are hearing by reminding us that we are listening to a recording.

Crackle also suggests radio static. The Titanic's demise is usually seen as a great failure of technology, and that was how Thomas Hardy dramatised it in his typically overwrought poem *The Convergence Of The Twain*, which painted the sinking of the unsinkable ship as a humbling of hubristic human “vaingloriousness” by an indifferent Fate. But if the disaster was the defeat of a – giganticist, very visible – Victorian technology, it also saw the triumph of another, more ethereal, science: Marconi's wireless telegraphy. The sinking prompted the first large-scale use of wireless in sea rescue, and appropriately this new version of the piece was recorded in Marconi's home country.

At another level, crackle also suggests auditory

fog: a miasma in which threatening objects loom, barely perceived. As we listen, we come to distrust our own hearing, begin to lose confidence in our ability to distinguish what is actually there from audio hallucinations – an effect with which any listener of Philip Jeck's records will be very familiar. In the first section of the work, dominated by Jeck's vinyl crackle, the ensemble are indistinct shadows in an abstract Turner-esque squall. Ominous strings and a solitary bell produce an atmosphere of quietly disquieting foreboding. It is nearly 14 minutes before strings, keyboards and bass fully emerge from the murk. By then, we are in the beguiling, elegiac territory that previous versions of *The Sinking Of The Titanic* staked out, as a rendition of the Episcopal hymn “Autumn” – played, in an act of miraculous defiance, by the Titanic's band as the ship sunk – makes itself heard. Around a hypnotic repetition of a fragment of the hymn, diverse sonic materials constellate: implacable strings swell and bottles tinkle like flotsam and jetsam gently agitated by the icy sea. The spectral voices of survivors, sounding like radio transmissions at the edge of earshot, tell their half-heard tales.

The Sinking Of The Titanic is intensely moving because of the complexity of emotions it invokes. Bryars's take on the Titanic disaster is not primarily tragic, nor does it share Hardy's Schopenhauerian disdain for human overreaching. Instead, the piece is a work of unashamed mystical materialism: the ship band's self-sacrifice was an assertion of the eternal power of music, and in Bryars's audio-vision, the sea ceases to simply be an indifferent destroyer of human life and ambition, and becomes a medium for the preservation of sound. From the fact of the band's playing, Bryars extrapolates an impossible sonic scenario: what would the music sound like if it continued to play underwater? He imagines the sea as both a massive recording studio producing “echo and deflection phenomena”, and as a superior “acoustic medium”, with echoes and repetition creating the

impression that the music is continuing indefinitely.

Mutability and persistence are the two great themes of the piece. First performed in 1972, it was always intended to be an open, endlessly revisable work, which would change in response to any new data about the sinking that became available. The first recorded version appeared in 1975, as one of the first ten releases on Eno's *Obscure* imprint, with the second appearing nearly two decades later, while an Aphex Twin remix, “The Raising Of The Titanic”, appeared in 1995. Jeck's involvement makes this version particularly contemporary, allowing it to be heard anew as part of what has been called the ‘hauntological’ moment in 00s music. The spectres heard here are often those of analogue recording technologies, and in the use of vinyl surface noise by Jeck, Burial and *The Caretaker*, or the sound of tape dissolving on William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops*, it's as if we are hearing the analogue mode of technological memory digitally exhumed and elegised at the same time.

What this new version of the piece especially emphasises is the importance of Marconi and his spectral technology. At the end of his life, as Bryars writes in his own sleevenote, Marconi “became convinced that sounds once generated never die, they simply become fainter and fainter until we no longer perceive them. Marconi's hope was to develop sufficiently sensitive equipment, extraordinarily powerful and selective filters I suppose, to pick and hear these past, faint sounds. Ultimately he hoped wto be able to hear Christ delivering the Sermon on the Mount.” In the lack of such ultra-sensitive equipment, Jeck and Alter Ego are sensitive in another sense: they make mediumistic contact between an age of ubiquitous digital recording and monitoring technologies, and the era of black and white photography, primitive film and telegraphy. This wonderful act of recovery makes us keenly aware of the ways in which recording devices of all kinds both preserve the past and veil it from us. □