

The Guardian

A hum about my ears: from the Titanic to the Tempest

A strange journey over this last year has taken singer Clara Sanabras from James Horner and his Titanic soundtrack, via a plane crash and a shipwreck, to the rough magic of Shakespeare's Tempest



Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises... singer songwriter Clara Sanabras. Photograph: PR

Clara Sanabras

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Carl Jung defined synchronicity as a “meaningful coincidence”: just as events may be connected by chance, or casuality, they can also be connected by meaning. As a musician who writes lyrics, I’ve always been curious about coincidence but nothing more than that. My feet are firmly on the ground, and any talk of spiritual awakenings makes me shudder.

But the last year has sent me on a strange journey involving the film of Titanic and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a journey that has altered my perception.

It began in May 2015 when I was invited to sing the suite from Titanic at Norway's Stavanger Konserthus in as part of an evening of music by the composer James Horner.

Horner and I had met three years earlier at London's Abbey Road Studios when I sang the title song of his score for the film *For Greater Glory*. We became friends, and worked together on several further projects, and he asked me to be his soloist on the "Titanic Live-to-Projection" tour.

The "Live-to-Projection" concert is an increasingly popular format which involves screening a classic film with a live symphony orchestra, choir and soloists who perform the soundtrack. TitanicLive toured stadiums in 11 European cities and my job was to sing the original vocal parts, play the mandolin in Ceilidh band scenes, and close the show with a rendition of the power ballad *My Heart Will Go On*, made famous by Celine Dion.

The Stavanger concert, however, was a one-off and James and I were booked on the same flight out. I hate flying, and he loved it. After a rough landing, he could see the fear in my face. He showed me pictures of his planes and said one day he would fly me and I'd be cured. We talked a lot during that trip, and he asked what else I was working on. I told him I'd been commissioned to write a piece for choir and orchestra based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which I was about to record with the Britten Sinfonia and my local choir, Chorus of Dissent.

He knew *The Tempest* well, he said, quoting: "Be not afeard... this isle is full of noises" and was amused by my choice of title for the piece, *A Hum About Mine Ears*.

On the morning of the concert, the Stavanger Konserthus had organised a press conference on the water. I was kitted out in a safety suit on a rib speedboat captained by a 21st-century hipster Viking, with one hand on the wheel and the other midair, holding his iPhone aloft to film us against the backdrop of the Norwegian fjords. I hated the first five minutes of the trip as much as I hate taking off in a plane; but then suddenly I tuned in to the spirit of the occasion, and felt so exhilarated that I never wanted it to end. I turned to James and said, "flying is next".

It was a transformation that connected with my experience of working with Shakespeare's magical late play. Before we got back to shore, I had decided to return to Stavanger to film in the fjords for my *Tempest* project, hiring an old wooden ship, featuring the very captain as boatswain.

But first I had to play the final few dates in the Titanic live tour. Two weeks later, as we about to go on stage in Cologne, we were told that James Horner had died in a plane crash, piloting his own plane.

There were three shows left to do in Paris. Having to sing *My Heart Will Go On* in such circumstances at first didn't seem possible, but every word took on new meaning: "... near,

far, wherever you are". Eric Rigler, the original piper in both *Titanic* and *Braveheart*, was also performing. He'd known James for 20 years and was devastated by the news of his death. But we decided that going ahead with the performances was the best tribute we could pay.



Sanabras: 'Going ahead was the best tribute we could pay'

While in Paris, I went with a fellow musician to light a candle for James at the Sacré Coeur de Montmartre. As we climbed the steps of the cathedral, a busker played *My Heart Will Go On* on the flute. My grounded self immediately reasoned with this "funny" coincidence and concluded that it was probably the only tune she knew. Maybe she'd heard the news and decided to pay tribute to James too. But our sense of loss made us want to read a greater significance into it.

And that would have been that, had we not walked into the Sacré Coeur to find ourselves confronted with a poster of *For Greater Glory*, the movie that had originally connected me to James. Well, my rational self reasoned again, it was a movie that didn't do so well commercially, possibly because it was aimed at the Christian market, and that's why it was displayed in a church.

But rationality did not ring so true this time. It felt like a reality check in reverse - an unrealitycheck, in fact, recalling Caliban's speech in the *Tempest*: "And sometimes voices, that if then I had waked after a long sleep, would make me sleep again, and then, in dreaming, the clouds methought would open and show riches ready to drop upon me, that when I waked, I cried to dream again". Just like that.

It is with these words that my album *A Hum About Mine Ears* starts, in a setting of Caliban's speech. And that's why, three months later, I returned to Stavanger to film a video to accompany that movement, featuring the bearded captain himself, who'd not only agreed to be "boatswain" but had organised boat trips for me and my film crew to various locations, including Preikestolen, the famous Pulpit Rock.

Whenever I mentioned Shakespeare to the captain, though, he would politely dismiss me, claiming he didn't know about that stuff. Then, the evening before the shoot, after months of fruitful correspondence, the captain and I had an uncomfortable exchange.

I told him I'd reimagined some of the characters in the play as if "after the *Tempest*" - especially Miranda, who never gets much of a say in Shakespeare, but who in my *Tempest* becomes emancipated, independent, rebellious, strong-minded. I told the captain I identified with her, that I was a feminist, and he became confused, hostile even. He said women in Norway had become too strong, hindering men like him from being masculine, virile and in control.

In *The Tempest* Miranda and Ferdinand are discovered playing a game of chess; my discussion with the speedboat captain became one too – a contest over belief systems and ideas as to what love involved: he believed in open relationships and something he kept calling “the level of perfection”, while I believed in the undying love of Rose and Jack from *Titanic* – “under love’s heavy burden do I sink”.

He got cold feet and said he wasn’t sure any more what my motives were for the film. I told him the truth, I simply wanted him to be himself – a 21st century boatswain. He calmed down and that evening we filmed on a beautiful old wooden ship, capturing a heavenly sunset, though a dark animosity kept growing between us, which fancifully felt as if we’d angered something beyond ourselves.

Three hours later we were back on the original speedboat, on our way to hike to Pulpit Rock, when we suddenly crashed. Though it was a clear, moonlit night, this experienced captain hadn’t seen the shore.

Nobody was seriously hurt, but I broke my nose and spent the night in hospital with the captain at my bedside. He held my hand and said he’d never crashed his boat before... then he cried and asked me to tell him about *The Tempest*. Though I could hardly speak, I whispered a tale of a vengeful magician, of free spirits trapped in trees, of monsters inhabiting islands, of a girl falling in love.

The captain’s last words to me were “The magician put a spell on me and we crashed the boat”. He repeated it like a mantra. Then a nurse bustled in to check me for concussion. Did I have any symptoms, she asked. “No,” I replied. “Just a hum in my ears”.

And perhaps that’s all that synchronicity is: a hum about one’s ears. But for me it has connected Shakespeare with James Horner, the *Titanic* with the *Tempest*, Caliban and Miranda with a soul-searching Norwegian sailor who, despite his scepticism, came to believe that it might just be some sort of rough magic that had caused his boat to be shipwrecked.

• *A Hum About Mine Ears* is released on 6 March. Clara Sanabras performs with Chorus of Dissent, Vox Holloway and Britten Sinfonia conducted by Harvey Brough at the Barbican, London on Sunday 6 March, part of the Shakespeare Weekender Play On

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