Musicians salute peers on Titanic

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And the Band Played On also showcased Nova Scotia musicians

Tuesday night's And the Band Played On concert in the Cohn was advertised as a tribute to violinist Jock Hume, bassist John (Nobby) Clarke and the six other musicians of the Titanic orchestra.

They provided the accompaniment during most of the 2½ hours it took the Titanic to sink and while 710 of the 2,224 passengers managed to get away in lifeboats.

But the show, produced by Music Nova Scotia, turned out to be as much a showcase of Nova Scotia musicians as a tribute to the Titanic band.

The songs of Evans and Doherty — Silver Sea, Emigrant Eyes and Wild Mountain Thyme — typified what might have been played by an Irish passenger in third class. Rhapsody Quintet played selections from the White Star Music Book to give us a glimpse of th salon music popular in Edwardian society.

Lennie Gallant performed his ironic, Titanic-inspired song, The Band's Still Playing.

But the contributions of pop singers Meghan Smith (If You Asked Me and A little Love), Jenn Grant (Dreamer and Blue Skies) and Bruce Guthro (Falling), while musically interesting and attractively performed, had nothing to do with the White Star liner.

Bruce and Dylan Guthro's impassioned singing of How Great Thou Art, a hymn that didn't make it into the White Star music book's sacred music category, was in a class by itself, winding up the first half with suitable fervour.

Ably emceed and narrated by Steve Murphy, the concert began with the 33-piece Titanic 100 Orchestra (mostly Symphony Nova Scotia musicians) playing Scott Macmillan's Hail to the Gaels. Macmillan conducted quality arrangements of other music on the program by himself, Chris Palmer and David Christensen.

It was an upbeat show, with a temperament that was partly Irish pub, partly soft-seater pop concert and partly documentary, with a sense of humour that was all Nova Scotian.

It only began to sink into sentimentality with the communal bawling out of the choruses to Wild Mountain Thyme, which followed Gallant's defiant and somewhat mocking chorus to The Band's Still Playing.

It was authentic enough, since sentimentality cannot be avoided in the tale of the heroic decision of the band to keep the music coming, and in the final playing of Nearer My God to Thee (played by Rhapsody in the Horbury version, specially arranged by bass player David Langstroth).

In a pool of fractured light, the quintet played, with clarinettist John Rapson playing the last chorus of the tune solo, slowing it down to a fade out while the lights dimmed slowly to black. In the silence that followed, we all sat in darkness for a few minutes.

It had a Drury Lane aspect of theatricality that Joseph Conrad angrily remarked of the newspaper hoopla surrounding the news when it broke in the hours following the sinking.

The producers missed an even more dramatic possibility. According to survivors, Nearer My God to Thee had hardly died away when the tilt of the ship caused all the crockery aboard to crash and heavy boilers and engines broke free and crashed through the bulkheads of the hull with a truly frightening crescendo of noise.

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