



TACET TIMES – 11

This whole COVID-19 experience seems to have been an object lesson in how varied responses can be to a situation and how quickly we can adapt. As we gathered to hear the wonderful concert in February, who would have thought that six months later we (some/most of us) would have spent many weeks under instructions not to go far from our homes? Even less that we would generally be borrowing the practice that has always seemed odd in travellers from the Far East, that of wearing a face covering when in shops and out and about in contact with our fellow humans.

But we can change our habits, and now it is becoming an automatic reaction to check that we have car/house keys, shopping bag and a mask (as well as a clean handkerchief, of course) as we close the front door. Walking through Tunbridge Wells the other day, I was shocked to see lots of people sitting together without face coverings – until I realised (silly woman that I am) that they were in a restaurant and that eating and drinking with a mask on is not really feasible!

Of course, we in TPS have had to change our habits too. ExCo and others have tried to create opportunities for members to come together and join in activities, and now we would like to know how you feel about what we have done and not done. You will have received two surveys, one to gather your thoughts on general activities and one on subs. If you have any problems receiving the surveys or completing them, let me or Stewart Dearsley know, and we will see what we can do to ensure that your voice is heard.

I would also love to have some COVID-19 reminiscences from members as a record of what we have been getting up to. How did it feel to sing alone in your room? What was it like to play string quartets in Chloë's garden and elsewhere? What did you do in place of your planned holiday? How did your garden benefit from your time and attention? What did you miss/welcome?

It would be so interesting to have something to look back on when all this is past. If you don't feel you can write about it, give me a call or drop me an email, and I can collate your thoughts, then feed back to you what I have written for your approval.

In the meantime, we will just keep on keeping on and look forward to the time when we can get together again.

Joanna Mace

secretary@tonphil.org.uk

© 2020 Tonbridge Philharmonic Society

Memories are made of this

David Price takes us back fifty years and five thousand miles for another of his colourful reminiscences.

Mutton grab

Eating for Queen and Country

In 1974 the communist insurgency in Oman's Dhohfar province had been won by the good guys. So it was party time. The sultan flew in, the tribes gathered, the Brits (ambassador, SAS and me) stood discreetly in the shade and background.

The main – and only course – was goat or sheep in a huge pyramid of rice on a plate the size of a cartwheel. After speeches, and a bugle fanfare, we all sat down to eat. The technique is a 'mutton grab', in which you put your right hand into the pile of rice, grope for and tear off some meat, dip it in some sauce and then chew and chew. The SAS trooper next to me said: 'It could have done with another half hour'.

But I had my eye on a pile of fresh dates next to the sultan. He picked them up, looked at them and put them down again, untasted. The sultan looked bored, so the SAS captain suggested he might like to fire a heavy machine gun. The sultan was happy. The weapon was set up, pointed down the valley and fired. The noise was deafening and the five-second burst shredded palm trees, frankincense shrubs and punched holes everywhere. I thought of the impact it would have on a Communist terrorist. Probably vapourised him. The sultan handed out medals, gave a speech and then left by helicopter.

In an instant, the tribesmen fell on the food and dates and it was soon all gone. The women scavenged for scraps. I left for Salallah, and after two long flights later, I was reporting to a joint committee of the Foreign Office and MoD.

David Price July 2020

And:

Lots of the pieces that have been included in this section have been from our members, but here are memories of another sort of lockdown from a former colleague of Peter Mace.

LOCKDOWN - some hazy reflections on life underwater

I am really quite enjoying all this time, and have reverted to what we all did in the submarine: sitting and growing a beard. It keeps you fit!

Submariners experience lockdown. Imagine... going aboard alongside in Faslane, double checking that everything is in place, packing your stuff into the very limited space at your disposal (a bunk in a stack of 3 with a curtain for privacy, a small cupboard and a couple of drawers), then report to the Captain and we're off...

We sail down the Gareloch, a wave to Stroual Lodge with R, K and A in the garden, more families on the spit at Rhu Narrows, out into the Clyde and "doon the watter" past Bute and the Cumbraes, passing Arran on the starboard side and Ailsa Craig to port, then round the Mull through the North Channel and out north of Rathlin Island looking out for the ever-present Russian "trawler" with more aerials and masts on it than a hedgehog has spines. We almost wave as we pass, then in the dark the hatches to the conning tower are shut and the orders to flood tanks and dive. We descend into the depths for the next 8 weeks.

The boat was always quite a guddle alongside: stuff everywhere, cramped, no room to swing a cat. At sea, with everything "ship shape and Bristol fashion", it quickly becomes our whole world and going aft, all the way through the missile compartment, seems too far to contemplate without a good reason.

We soon get into the routine: white lighting during the "day" and red lighting from 7pm – 7am helps the diurnal rhythm and generally keeps us regular. Most people have a specific job to do, stokers back aft, navigators, engineers, chefs/stewards... and, of course, the Doc. With 160 fit and healthy young men in the black cigar tube that is our home, there is not a lot of medicine to be done. For the first couple of weeks a virus used to circulate until everyone had had it and gained immunity; thereafter the main calls on my medical time were cuts and bruises from exercising in confined spaces: I discouraged such anti-social behaviour! An appendicitis was always good news, something to talk about, and visible evidence that there was a doctor on board. The patient would be admitted to the sick bay, conveniently just opposite the wardroom, where he lay with a drip in his arm, nil by mouth, with as many visitors as gawpers.

Beyond the occasional call to the Sick Bay, and I did do a morning surgery most days I think, for trivia, the Doc was also the SLJO (Shitty Little Jobs Officer): Atmosphere Control Officer, Radiation Control Officer, Education Officer, Photographic Officer, Periscope Officer, Entertainments Officer, Press Officer, Church Officer, Wardroom Wine Caterer and Duty Free Officer (we could take "duty-free" back after a patrol during which presumably we had gone beyond territorial waters). Every day I checked various dials and meters: if the oxygen was low and the CO2 was going up, then I could ban cigarette smoking, not a popular move with some. Entertainments meant Ship's Inter-Mess Quiz nights: it takes a day to work out a 30 minute quiz, which had to include various pitfalls so that

the Comms Officer, who had appeared on University Challenge, didn't always win. And every mess had a Mess Dinner every patrol, so the Photographic Officer was on hand to take photos which I then developed and printed in my dark room.

One medical information effort was to write/draw the development of a foetus and put it up on a bulkhead for all to see. I did it with twice weekly episodes to keep up the tension through the voyage, not quite real time baby development but that sort of thing. The lads loved it: some of them had left wives/girlfriends pregnant, so they enjoyed following the process and I photocopied the final set for some to take home. There were also First Aid Courses to run and exams to set and mark. Some Ship's Doctors did vasectomies, but not me!

Excitements? We had a few. A fire in some machinery meant I could ban smoking for about 3 days; some other vessel being in our area could mean going silent for a period, no air conditioning, confined to work station or bunks; occasional forays to periscope depth, up periscope (doc on the Periscope) to catch a satellite to confirm our position – the early days of GPS, still a military bit of kit then; venting the heads tank in-board, rather than overboard, because of a malfunction put one off one's food for a day or so!

My major input on the Entertainments side was the writing and production of "*The Water Baby*", a panto-style spectacular enacted by the officers for the entertainment of the lads on Boxing Day of our Christmas Patrol. The Captain was the Queen, the Navigator was The Bent Fairy, the Assistant Mechanical Engineering Officer was Jack in a story mixing Sleeping Beauty with Peter Pan and Cinderella and a few other things, in which the young hero... That's another story! We had had an off-crew time to acquire scenery, curtains, lighting and costumes. It went well.

Movies were the other great entertainment. 4 or 5 nights a week there were 3-reeler old-style (pre-video) movies in the messes. We took about 80 to sea, and the Doc was supposed to watch them all as he had nothing else to do. All "flashes" and even FOMs (Flash Opportunity Missed) were marked on the reel with a slip of paper so that near the end of the patrol they could be reviewed and we could remember what we had been missing.

Press Officer indicates the Ship's Magazine: I edited "PULSAR", and wrote much of it as well as getting the lads to contribute features and cartoons. It came out roughly weekly, a highlight in my life, and sometimes in theirs! I still have them somewhere, yet to be uncovered.

Every week a news bulletin came in ticker-tape strips of paper – football results, usually, sometimes a bit of news. With the News came the Familygrams, 40-word telegrams that each of the crew could get weekly from designated senders. We used to pour over the 40 words into which the wives/senders became adept at including maximum information, always pre-read by 2 or 3 people, including the Captain, to check for anything that might undermine morale. We could receive but not transmit as transmitting would give away our position, so we could never respond to the Familygram and the sender could never be certain that we had received it.

Eight weeks after submerging we re-emerged in the same place. We might never have moved as far as I was concerned. The hatches to the conning tower were opened, and a strong fishy smell pervaded the Control Room and the rest of the boat as "fresh air" was drawn in. Lockdown was unlocked. In the Firth of Clyde we were visited by Dental technicians, the first females sighted in two months, always popular. Then the slow progress up to Coulport so that the nuclear weapons could be unloaded. When all was tidied up, the 'other' crew (we were Starboard Crew, our oppos were Port Crew) came aboard to take over command of the boat, and we stepped ashore (a strange

experience after 8 weeks) with our Duty Free Black Tower or Liebfraumilch and went home to scatter green Smarties on the lawn to keep the kids occupied for ... obvious reasons.

There was always a party on board within a day or so of arriving home. I remember drinking brandy from my shoe after a few Harvey Wallbangers (I was illustrating the Cinderella story), and we were then the Off-Crew with 8 to 10 weeks to fill, never a problem. Wives always wondered why we kept going out golfing or whatever with the people we had been cooped up with for weeks; and I was able to go off to Vale if Leven Hospital and the local GP practice to be a real doctor.

Lockdown 2020 is different, but we have much to be grateful for: windows on to the outside world, fresh air, daily walks, time to do things we never have time to do – and may not even now.

Jamie Hill
July 2020



Poetry corner

A trip out on my brother's boat reminded me of this, one of the favorites with the sailing men of my family:

Sea Fever

John Masefield

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

Short Story

Stop

April was not in a hurry. She enjoyed driving and the sense it brought of being isolated from the world, not knowing anyone and unknown to all. Her phone battery had expired in a flurry of insistent bleeps around half an hour ago, and she hadn't bothered to plug it in to the charger in the glove compartment.

She'd set out early that morning, with the sun showing its face in a brief tease before disappearing for the rest of the day behind increasingly heavy clouds. This journey was a sort of pilgrimage, a remembrance, an acknowledgement of some of the high and low spots of her life. Where she was christened, in the church shown in a crumpled black and white snapshot on the spare bedroom mantelpiece. The school where she had collided with another pupil in the playground at lunchtime and ended up in hospital having her tongue stitched back together. The house that had been her parents' for the last decades of their lives, now seeming too small to have accommodated the family of four: parents, April and her brother. Schools, flats, places of work, not in chronological order, that wouldn't have made geographical sense. North of Aberdeen would be the furthest point, even though the events there, the marriage, the studies, the singing, happened decades ago.

This was the first day of her trip, and she didn't know how long it was going to be until she turned south again. There was no work to tie her to a schedule, no spouse to demand her presence, no parents to attend to. She was free to go. There had been brief periods of similar freedom in her life, but they'd always ended in one form of commitment or other. She couldn't envisage such a thing happening again. Marianne, the only friend who'd remained from their class of '69, had suggested long ago that they would end up in neighbouring flats or cottages, but even she was gone now, worn out by caring for others, a nurse, wife and mother.

April had a satnav, but she liked to trace her route on a real map. She felt the machine gave you no sense of perspective, no idea of the relative distances or directions. In the next small town she spotted a café, and even a parking spot – it seemed like a sign she should stop, so she did. She'd only been on the road for two and a half hours, but had to unwind herself slowly out of the car. Taking the map with her, she stepped down off the pavement into the café, instinctively bending her head, even though at five foot three (she had been five foot three and a half at one time) there was no danger of hitting her head.

'Yes, m'dear, what can I get you?' The woman stood over her, small notepad in hand, pen poised.

'Just a black coffee, please.' The budget for the trip wasn't that tight, but it wasn't limitless either.

'Can't I tempt you to a slice of cake? We've a lovely lemon drizzle, fresh in today.' April struggled with her desire for the sugar, and her need to resist. The battle went on in

her head for some nano-seconds, a new battle since she had heard the doctor say *diabetes*. But she'd got the kit, she could check her blood sugar level when she got back to the car.

'Oh, go on, just a small one.'

'Be right with you.' The woman's movements could only be described as *bustling off*, iced with an evident sense of satisfaction at having won that small tussle. April watched her go and noted that the woman obviously had no difficulty giving in to temptation, judging by the bulges that spilled above and below her bra strap and were clearly visible encased in a slightly too tight black blouse.

April sat in a seat by the window and watched the small market town go about its weekday business. It rained briefly, a blooming of umbrellas. Coffee came, and cake, which she consumed while studying the map carefully. She noted the numbers of the principal roads on her route, jotting them down on a small notepad that she could lodge behind the steering wheel to confirm her decisions. She was avoiding the motorways. It was much more interesting to take A roads and wind through the country, as she and her family had during those summers before the motorways and when it never seemed to rain. Except there was that year when it snowed in June, to everyone's amazement and her mother's disgust.

She glanced at her watch and was surprised to find that she'd been there for an hour and a half. It was almost lunchtime. She'd better find something to eat before she left the town, but didn't want to stay in the café. She signalled for the bill to the young girl who was bringing someone else's order. The girl caught her eye and nodded, and as she did she caught her foot on the strap of April's bag, which had escaped from under her chair.

'Watch out,' April called as the coffee cup tottered. The girl turned away hastily, but not before some of the liquid had slopped over April's sleeve.

'Oh, I'm so sorry miss madam ...' The girl's wail brought the older woman rushing over.

'Oh, dear, look Tansy, look what you've done, you stupid girl. I'm so sorry madam, let me get a cloth.' With a stern look at the distraught waitress, she dashed off to the kitchen and came back with the damp cloth. On a navy jacket there was not too much of a mark, but April was subjected to a vigorous scrubbing before she could pull her arm free. She tried to help the unfortunate Tansy by offering an explanation to the woman.

'It's as much my fault, I should have been more careful with the strap,' she said, but to little avail. Anyway, it was time to be on the move again; there was still quite a way to go until she reached tonight's b&b. She extricated herself from the café owner's continuing protestations of apology. Outside she followed the smell of fresh bread – evocative of leaving on dark winter's mornings for an early shift when she'd lived above a bakery – and found a place where she could buy a sandwich. Cheese and pickle on brown bread slid into a brown paper bag, and she knew the grease stain wouldn't take long coming through.

Back on the road her mind was set free to follow its own byways. She contemplated the question of whether she would mind being on her own for the rest of her life? That might be another twenty-five or thirty years, judging by the longevity of her antecedents. At some time she would have to stop singing in choirs, although she could still go to church.

She could walk to town from her flat. Would she become one of those old ladies who knew the names of all the staff in the cafés as she treated herself to coffee or the occasional lunch, just so that she had a reason to go out?

The sky above was even darker than before, and in the distance she could see the bright, hard cumulo-nimbus clouds that presaged the coming storm as they piled higher and higher. The first few heavy drops smashed against the windscreen. April hated driving in the rain. Should she stop? The rain was harder now. She peered forward into the sheets of water that crashed onto the road and then leapt back up like mini-fountains, as if in surprise at the impact. She struggled to see the vehicles around her through the murk as she slowed down. Few seemed to have any lights on, although she'd ensured hers were as soon as the visibility dropped.

She was down to around twenty-five miles an hour when she caught sight of the green traffic lights. There was a car in front of her and one behind. She saw brake lights and pushed her foot down on her own brake, but the car continued at much the same speed. The light went orange. The car in front had cleared the junction. Aquaplaning – the word went across April's brain in capital letters. What were you supposed to do? Brake or not brake. Still her foot was hard down, but the car continued inexorably on its own path. In her head she heard her father's voice, *take your foot off the brake, you idiot, you're not doing any good*, but her leg was rigid and her foot didn't seem connected to her any more. As if projected onto the inner surface of the windscreen, she saw the picture of her father and mother at her christening, mother in a floral 'New Look' dress, father in what was a probably his 'demob' suit. Then the photo changed to her own first wedding, her groom kilted, April holding balloons. Next it was the round kitchen from the oast house, and then the sight of an airfield below her as she circled on her maiden solo flight.

Still the light was orange, still her foot was on the brake, still she was moving apparently silently, inexorably, towards the junction. Just the hiss of the surface water and the disembodied voice of the radio weather forecaster telling of heavy rain, followed by intermittent sunshine. The slide show continued, all the memorable events fading one after the other. So, your life does flash before you, she thought, now with a calm acceptance of the inevitable. Apart from her leg and foot activating the brake, the rest of her body was quite relaxed. The car was turning now, describing an arc that she thought might be called parabolic, reaching the apex while she was still some yards from the lights. Now the pictures on the screen were just individual faces, some of which she couldn't have named. And then, as the car reached the now-red light, there was the nurse, holding out a swaddled figure to her and encouraging her to take it. The voice said *it's important, later on you'll need to know you held her, we'll take a photo*. A camera flashed in the dark, no, not a camera. The truck headlights were coming straight for her. The nurse's voice was blocked out by the blaring horn. The light was brighter and brighter, filling the screen, washing away the faces. Then she could hear the baby crying. She'd never used the words before, they felt unfamiliar in her mouth, but she heard herself say,

'Hush, now, Mummy's here.'

Joanna Mace

There are lots of opportunities to carry on making music and listening to it. Here are just a few together with some other things to interest you:

- **BBC's Music Magazine** – has a website www.classical-music.com with lots of amazing resources, including chances to join virtual choirs and orchestras
- **BBC4 (and iPlayer)** – *Being Beethoven*: the conductor Marin Alsop heads up a group of musicians and passionate lovers of Beethoven's music over a three part series. Given five stars by the 'i's reviewer, Sarah Hughes.
- **BBC4 (and iPlayer)** – *Tunes for Tyrants*. Another three part programme with some compelling snippets of music put into the context of their time. Suzy Klein is a very intelligent presenter who roves over recent (for most of us) history in Europe and how music has been put to sometimes malign purposes. Shostakovich and his fellow Russians were surprising omissions, but if you only have three programmes over which to cover such a wide premise, something has to give.
- **BBC Proms** – selection of music from the *BBC Grand Virtual Orchestra*, and also broadcasts of archive concerts. 350 musicians will be brought together electronically to perform the Beethoven 9 on Friday 17th July at 19.00: rather more technologically demanding than we can manage at the moment!
- **Royal Opera House** – wonderful operas and ballet available for watching and listening
- **London Philharmonic** - fortnightly streamed performances with something for everyone. String players on 15 July at 7.30, Wind on 29 July, Brass and Percussion on 12 August and Beethoven 250 on 26 August
- **Classic FM** have a wonderful collection of live-streamed online concerts and performances listed by date

I'm sure that there are lots more like this – if you send them to me I'll add them to the list – secretary@tonphil.org.uk