Antonio Magnotta is an Italian pianist and composer based in London. Since 2013, he has been resident pianist aboard the cruise ship, the Costa Concordia, when it tragically sank in 2012, claiming 32 lives. Miraculously surviving the shipwreck, which took the lives of some of his fellow musicians, Magnotta’s remarkable story serves as a reminder of the restorative powers of music and the resilience of the human spirit.

How was life aboard Costa Concordia?

As a resident musician and crew member, life aboard the Costa Concordia was a combination of many marvels. In the same way with any large cruise ships, of course. Playing the piano and traveling has been the crowning of my childhood dreams; something I have been doing for almost 18 years of my life. I was the happiest man on earth but I discovered it was not as easy a life afterwards, despite the great excitement.

Such a very special environment requires a particular hisotric and attitude you need to be flexible, enthusiastic, resilient, strong and willing to treasure the bright side of being at sea, traveling the world, meeting people, being lightheartedly privileged, experiencing memorable moments, etc. These are downsides, of course. Your life will be occupied in a cabin for a relatively long time. A volunteer, you need to share in most cases, with someone else.

No privacy, no natural light, no fresh air and the food on board for the crew is something one would prefer to forget about.

Please tell us about how you became pianist on the ship?

The opportunity arose right after my graduation from the music conservatoire in Italy. One of my fellow musicians got a proposal he strangely refused. He was asked to sign a contract to cruise ship as on board pianist. The problem with this guy was that he was suffering from seasickness, so he offered me the replacement. I accepted, successfully passed the audition and my adventure started. It was during the late ’90s.

How was life onboard Costa Concordia?

No sound of a collision was heard on deck five, although these on lower decks would later tell me of the terrible tearing sound as a submerged rock ripped a huge hole in the engine compartments, just off the coast of the island of Giglio.

It took about 6 hours to abandon the Costa Concordia. No one would speak. We were all shocked, silent, not uttering a word, because of the tremendous trauma.

When I touched the ground I suddenly thought I had to celebrate my second birthday from that moment on. I was alive!

There were several blackouts and people started screaming and calling out names. I could hear children’s voices: Where are you? Daddy, where are you? Mummy!

One took over and the nightmare began.

Dreadful would describe the dance floor and the lights would suddenly come on maneuvering a wave of terrified passengers crying and wrestling around the tilting room, holding on to their seats in their heads of drowning from fear. Their bodies incredibly

They cared sound the general emergency signal — seven short blasts and one long — and the mass of people began to disembark — with as much haste as they could. We were joined in a common cause of emergency training. I was supposed to take a roll call of 250 staff members. Four were missing.

What was the first thought that crossed your mind when you finally reached safety?

If I were to use a musical analogy, it was a swan in agony. Once outside, on the deck of the Concordia, it seemed like I was Katya in Tchaikovsky’s world’s ending, on a stage. I felt such a profound sense of loss that I couldn’t express myself.

I realised that, because the ship was so close to land, I had a mobile phone signal, and I called my mom. At first, I led to her and said I had a technical problem. We put off the call. I called back, having checked on the internet, and said, ‘You are in a shipwreck.’

Finally, when the scenario came to abandon ship, I noticed the lifeboat designated for my muster group was underwater. There were no more procedures or protocols to follow, so everyone scattered. By now the sound of people screaming in all languages was joined by loud metallic crashes as the ship started to break up — a swan in agony.

As I wrote in my book — titled towards its final sentencing angle of about 80 degrees.

When I jumped from the ship into a small lifeboat I felt I was literally jumping off a shipwreck. ‘Where are you, Daddy, where are you, Mummy?’

When I finally got ashore, I was the happiest man on earth but I discovered it was not an easy life though, despite the great excitement.

Distancing myself from my old life seemed to quell the anxieties, although I still had post-traumatic stress for years. I started to write more than I played, in the beginning. I couldn’t play the piano after that accident. Every time I played, it would bring back memories of the shipwreck. I also decided to sell all my possessions and move from Italy to London. While working, I wrote a book in my spare time about the disaster, which was published in Italy (‘Sette squilli e un sol umano’ — ‘Seven Rings and One Human’), and was about to be published in the UK in English. The English title will be ‘Seven short blasts and one long’ — a reference to the emergency signal at the time of the disaster.

How do you feel about the 32 passengers and crew, and the cruise worker that lost their lives?

If given the opportunity, would you ever go back to playing on board a cruise ship?

Yes, but only for a very short time or for a ‘one off’ to perform my piano show. How do you find the ship-life changing experience influenced your music? How did music help you?

Music and my writing have been massively influenced by the experience and they turned out to be the best form of self-therapy. I was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and I unexpectedly started to write more than I played. In the beginning, I couldn’t play the piano after that accident. Every time I played, it would bring back memories of the shipwreck. I also decided to sell all my possessions and move from Italy to London. While working, I wrote a book in my spare time about the disaster, which was published in Italy (‘Sette squilli e un sol umano’ — ‘Seven Rings and One Human’), and was about to be published in the UK in English. The English title will be ‘Seven short blasts and one long’ — a reference to the emergency signal at the time of the disaster.

Distancing myself from my old life seemed to quell the anxieties, although I still had flashbacks to the terrible noise of screaming. Gradually, the urge to play again grew, and finally I started composing again. My album ‘Luminous Landscapes’ based on my introspective thoughts after the disaster, is a work for solo piano dedicated to those who died on the Concordia. In this album there’s also track called ‘32’. The main melody is composed of 32 notes, each one dedicated to the memory of the victims who lost their lives that tragic night.

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