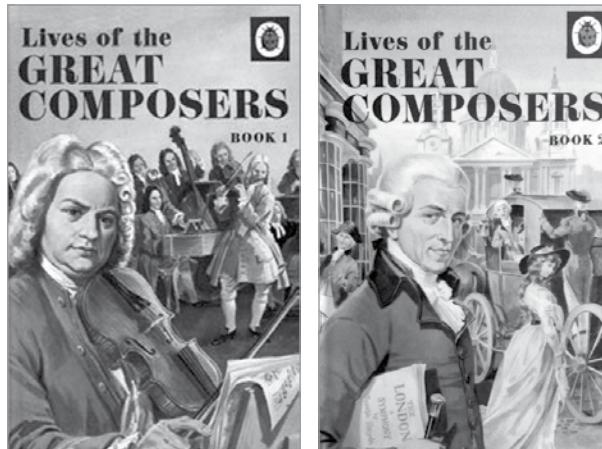


# Deaths of the Great Composers

Geoff Thomas

If you are of a certain vintage, and were raised in the UK, your music education will probably have included some reading from the Ladybird *Lives of the Great Composers* series. First sold at about 2/6, these illustrated books gave us information about Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, Handel, Haydn and Schubert. The pictures were nearly all of men in wigs and stockings.



*The Story of Music* did put a woman in the group of musicians, but they were still in stockings, with frills and lace. Even a *Ladybird Book of Musical Instruments* had men (of course) playing in tuxedos and bow ties. Apart from Bach having lots of children, Beethoven being deaf, and Mozart and Schubert dying young, I remember little of those

stories. As Stanley Holloway used to recite,

*'There was no wrecks and nobody drownded, fact, nothing to laugh at at all.'*

So, seeking for further amusement, without computers, internet or Wikipedia, I used to go to the library and, like many inquisitive youngsters, look for more memorable facts. Fifty years on, I still have a morbid fascination for the more tragic aspects of composers' lives and the mystery that still surrounds the deaths of some.

*"Reader, I murdered him."*

Well, almost. There are four composers whose names come to mind when murder is mentioned. The most famous of these is Carlo Gesualdo. An article in The Guardian some five years ago posed the question, Carlo Gesualdo: composer or crazed psychopath? He was an Italian nobleman, lutenist and composer of the late Renaissance era. His compositions are often performed today and some of his chromatic harmonies still sound quite modern to our ears. However, it is his life and death which make him even more memorable. In 1586, Gesualdo married his cousin, Maria. Two years later she began an affair with the Duke of Andria and another two years later he decided to do something

about it. On October 16, 1590, when Gesualdo had allegedly gone away on a hunting trip, he returned to his palace apartment in Naples, caught them and murdered them both in their bed.

The most reliable account of the crime comes from a delegation of Neapolitan officials, who inspected the apartment the following day. Those of a delicate disposition, look away now. On the floor of the bedroom, they found the body of the Duke of Andria; the corpse was “covered with blood and pierced with many wounds,” including a gunshot that had gone “straight through his elbow...” The visitors observed another gunshot wound, to the head —“a bit of the brain had oozed out”—and there were wounds on the “head, face, neck, chest, stomach, kidneys, arms, hands, and shoulders.” Underneath the corpse, they found a pattern of holes, “which seemed to have been made by swords which had passed through the body, penetrating deeply into the floor.” Lying on the bed was the body of Donna Maria d’Avalos. Her throat had been cut and her nightshirt was drenched in blood. The officials noted other wounds, to her face, right arm, right hand, and torso. Interviews with eyewitnesses left no doubt about who was responsible for the murders. However, being a nobleman, he was immune from prosecution. Italian noblemen of the time were virtually duty-bound to kill their wife once they had been found guilty of adultery. That doesn’t make Gesualdo’s crime any less shocking, but it demonstrates that his is far from a special case.

*“So long as you use a knife,  
there’s some love left.”*

Some composers met their deaths at the hands of others. Alessandro Stradella, like Gesualdo, is remembered for his colourful lifestyle as much as for



Alessandro Stradella 1639 – 1682



Jean-Marie Leclair 1697 – 1764

## Festa 2015

his music. A Tuscan by birth, he studied at Bologna, then at the age of about twenty-seven moved to Rome. He attempted to embezzle money from the church, and had affairs with women, resulting in him having to flee from Rome. He went to Venice, had an affair with the mistress of his employer and fled with her to Turin. He married her in Turin but was attacked and left for dead as he left the church. He fled to Genoa where, at the age of only forty-two, he was stabbed to death at the *Piazza Banchi* by a hired assassin.

Jean-Marie Leclair also spent a little time in Turin, but he was a musical nomad, spending time in Lyons, Kassel, Paris, the Netherlands and Spain. Originally a ballet dancer and lace-maker, it was his skills at the violin and composing that brought him to prominence. In 1758 his marriage broke up and his wife went to live in lodgings, and Leclair lived in a hovel on the outskirts of Paris - although he had no need to do this. In the early morning of 23rd October 1764 Leclair was found lying dead in the vestibule of his home in a pool of blood from three vicious stab wounds. Suspicion fell on his gardener, Jacques Paysant, who found the body, although the official investigation of this suspicious death incriminated both his nephew and his second wife; neither was ever formally charged with his murder.

Concluding our trio of stabbing victims is Claude Vivier. I’m sure many of you will remember the jokes about the thinnest book in the world. Could it be Successful Maltese Bus Companies? Effective Greek Economic Strategies? In the UK, it was Irish members of MENSA and Good Motorway Restaurants. Now what about Canadian composers? Singers – no problem (Michael Bublé); actors – easy (Michael J Fox); but composers? After some struggling I came up with Howard Shore (Lord of the Rings), Leonard Cohen and R. Murray Schafer.



Claude Vivier 1948 – 1983

So who is Claude Vivier?

*"In his short life and his art, the French Canadian composer Claude Vivier was a man diving, often recklessly, into the ultimate... And from the edge of experience, he began to bring back, in the years leading up to his death in 1983, a new sound." – Paul Griffiths, The New York Times.*

Having visited Bali, and studied with Stockhausen, amongst others, Vivier explored shimmering orchestrations and new sound worlds including the use of texts in an invented language. Unfortunately, his overt homosexuality (the reason he was asked to leave the order in which he was preparing for the priesthood) eventually led to his demise. After a spell back in his native Canada, he moved to Paris in the early 1980s and was murdered on 7 March 1983 by a 19-year-old male he had met that evening at a bar. His body was discovered five days later, on 12 March.

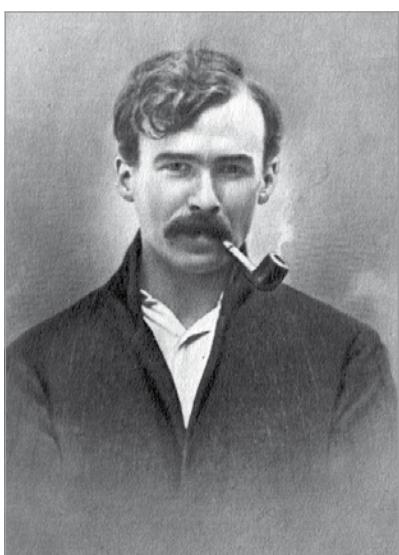
*"The fascination of shooting... depends almost wholly on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun."*

Rather more tragic are the deaths of George Butterworth and Anton Webern. Best known for his orchestral idyll *The Banks of Green Willow* and his setting of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, **Butterworth** was born in London. At the outbreak of the first World War, G.S. Kaye-Butterworth joined the British Army as a Private in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, but he soon accepted a commission as a Subaltern (2nd Lieutenant) in the 13th Battalion Durham Light Infantry, and he

was later temporarily promoted to Lieutenant. His platoon was made up of miners from Durham, whom he respected immensely. He was awarded the Military Cross for action on 16–17 July 1916, but never lived to receive it. The Battle of the Somme was at its height. On 4 August, his division was ordered to attack a communication trench that was now in German hands. At 04:45 on 5 August, amid frantic German attempts to recapture the position, Butterworth was shot through the head by a sniper. "A brilliant musician in times of peace, and an equally brilliant soldier in times of stress."

Anton **Webern**, on the other hand, was eventually discharged from the forces due to his poor eyesight and moved to Prague before settling near Vienna. His music forms part of the 'Second Viennese School' which developed serialism (twelve-tone music). Unfortunately, the Nazis branded the music of the "New Vienna School" as "cultural Bolshevism" and "degenerate art" and banned performances of this type of music. Webern's artistic isolation grew and his economic plight became desperate after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. The political upheaval brought to a halt the publication of his works and, with almost no private pupils left, Webern had to resort to accepting such tasks as piano arrangements of works by lesser composers.

Towards the end of the war, as the Russian Army neared Vienna, the composer and his wife fled to Mittersill near Salzburg, where their daughters and grandchildren had sought refuge. On 15 September 1945, Webern was shot and killed by an American Army soldier following the arrest of his son-in-law for black market activities. This incident occurred when, three-quarters of an hour before a curfew was to have gone into effect, he stepped outside the house (so as not to disturb his sleeping grandchildren) in order to enjoy a cigar given to him by his son-



George Butterworth 1885 – 1916



Anton Webern 1883 – 1945



Ernest Chausson 1855 – 1899



Johann Schobert 1735 – 1767

in-law. The soldier responsible for his death was Raymond Norwood Bell of North Carolina, who was traumatised by his error and died of alcoholism in 1955.

Whilst death is often tragic, some composers do seem to have been potential recipients of the Darwin award. For example, Ernest **Chausson** who, though not a prolific composer, left behind a few beautiful pieces, including the Poème for violin and orchestra. One day, at the age of 44, Chausson was out for a bicycle ride outside his property in Limay when he lost control of the bike on a downhill slope and crashed into a brick wall. He died instantly.

The prize, though, must surely go to Johann **Schobert**, a renowned composer during his time. His music was studied by a young Mozart, who at an early age was largely influenced by Schobert's music. Besides having his name frequently mistaken for Schubert's, today, Schobert is largely remembered for the way he died. During a dinner amongst friends and family at his home in Paris,

Schobert had mushrooms brought to the table. His guests informed him that the mushrooms were poisonous, but Schobert managed to convince them, and himself, that they were not. Schobert was wrong about the mushrooms, and as a result Schobert, his wife, one of his children, his maid, and four of his friends died eating them.

*"I know what blood poisoning is, Katniss," says Peeta... "And you risked your life getting the medicine that saved me" ... "You were the reason I was alive to do it."*

Unfortunately some composers were not as aware of the problems associated with gangrene and septicaemia as our two protagonists in the Hunger Games series. Jean-Baptiste **Lully** is probably the best-known of our strange deaths, and his manner of dying is still the cause of jokes against conductors. In January 1687, while conducting a performance



Jean-Baptiste Lully 1632 – 1687



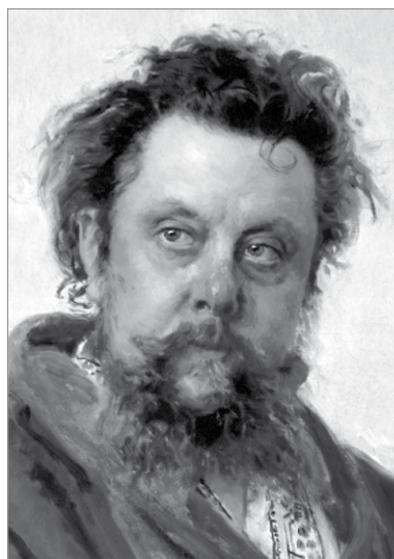
Alexander Scriabin 1872 – 1915



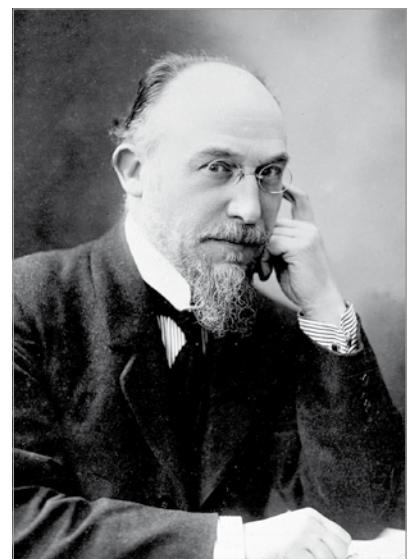
Alban Berg 1885 – 1935



*Henry Purcell 1659 – 1695*



*Modest Mussorgsky 1839 – 1881*



*Erik Satie 1866 – 1925*

of his sacred piece, Te Deum, in honour of Louis XIV's recovery from illness, he inadvertently struck his foot with the pointed staff he had been using to keep time (this is long before batons were used to conduct). The wound became gangrenous and Lully refused to have the affected area amputated which ultimately led to his demise on 22 March of that year.

No less avoidable were the deaths of Alexander Scriabin and Alban Berg. **Scriabin** was eccentric, to say the least. He produced some achingly beautiful music, but suffered from synaesthesia and at times he thought he was God (being born on Christmas Day reinforced this delusion). He even once tried to walk on water on Lake Geneva and preach to the fishermen. His manner of death should act as a warning to all male readers. Apparently he cut himself while shaving. The ‘nick’ did not heal properly and became a boil, which in turn became infected. Scriabin’s immune system overreacted, making his official cause of death septicaemia. **Berg**, on the other hand, received an insect bite on his back which caused a carbuncle to appear. Instead of going to a hospital he convinced his wife to cut the carbuncle with a pair of scissors, in order to save money. The do-it-yourself home operation was a failure, and Berg was rushed to a hospital where he succumbed to blood poisoning and died at the age of 50 on Christmas Eve, 1935.

Oh, and while I am warning male readers, take note of Henry **Purcell**. Although it cannot be proved, it is said that he died, aged 36, at his home in Dean’s Yard, Westminster, having caught a chill after returning home late from the theatre (or tavern) one night to find that his wife had locked him out...

*“Death: “THERE ARE BETTER THINGS IN THE WORLD THAN*

*ALCOHOL, ALBERT.”*

*Albert: “Oh, yes, sir. But alcohol sort of compensates for not getting them.”*

There is a long list of composers whose death was basically self-inflicted, mostly through their chosen lifestyle – especially the abuse of alcohol. **Mussorgsky** is probably the most dramatic example, as this portrait shows.

He had turned just 42 when this was painted and he died within the month. Erik **Satie** is another; he particularly loved absinthe and died on 1 July 1925 from cirrhosis of the liver. After his death, his followers discovered in his home over 100 umbrellas, 84 handkerchiefs, and numerous letters, most of which he’d written to himself. One of these outlined his diet, which consisted of nothing but foods that were white: eggs, sugar, shredded bones, animal fat, veal, salt, coconuts, rice, pasta, turnips, chicken cooked in white water, white cheese, cotton salad, and certain kinds of fish. You don’t have to be mad to be a composer, but it helps!

*“No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness.”*

Hugo Wolf, Bedrich Smetana, and Robert Schumann all ended their years in asylums. Madness was sometimes brought on by over work, by lack of success, by women (too many, too few, or the wrong sort), by inappropriate friendships, by disease, depression or simple frustration. **Wolf** was placed in a Vienna asylum at his own insistence, **Smetana**’s mental collapse early in 1884 led to his incarceration in an asylum and his subsequent death whilst, following a suicide attempt in 1854, **Schumann** was admitted to a mental asylum, at his own request. Diagnosed with “psychotic



Hugo Wolf 1860 – 1903



Bedřich Smetana 1824 – 1884



Robert Schumann 1810 – 1856

melancholia”, Schumann died two years later in 1856 without having recovered from his mental illness.

Occasionally the madness was seen as eccentricity, as is the case with Peter Warlock. **Warlock** was born Philip Heseltine in the Savoy hotel, London, in 1894. Although many writers use pseudonyms, few composers do. Yet, by 1916, Philip had become Peter Warlock, composer, writer and connoisseur of the occult. The following year, D. H. Lawrence was writing *Women in Love* in which Warlock and his wife, Puma, were being introduced as two unattractive characters. When in 1921 he learnt that the book was to be published, he threatened legal action and Lawrence was forced to rewrite certain passages.

Warlock wrote a study of Gesualdo, another of Delius, yet made himself quite unpopular, and therefore out of work, due to his controversial ways and comments. Dividing his time mostly between

Wales and Eynsford (Kent), he composed some wonderful works, including the Capriol Suite and The Curlew, but became more and more depressed. Black moods of depression settled more frequently and he was found dead, of gas-poisoning, in his flat in Chelsea on the morning of 17 December 1930. At the inquest the coroner recorded an open verdict as there was insufficient evidence on which to decide whether death was the result of suicide or accident. More recently, the art critic Brian Sewell discovered that Peter Warlock was his father. Sewell, in his memoirs, claims that Warlock was quite uninhibited and that, “If his girls became pregnant, as often they did, he gave them a fiver to pay for an abortion. My mother, pregnant with me, refused this offer — as a devout Roman Catholic — and within days of a blazing row over the matter, Warlock committed suicide. For this my mother blamed herself.”

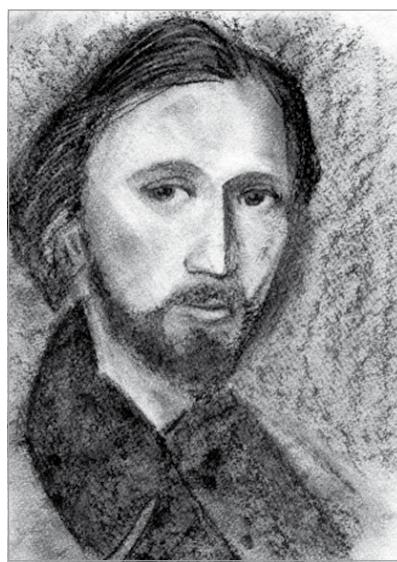
*“He brought it on him-self”.*



Peter Warlock 1894 – 1930



Piotr Tchaikovsky 1840 – 1893



Charles Alkan 1813 – 1888

This is just one of many mysteries that we will never have solved with concrete evidence. **Tchaikovsky**, too; what was the cause of his death? With Charles **Alkan** it was believed that his death occurred while reaching for a copy of the Talmud on a high bookshelf causing the shelf to topple and crush him under the weight of the books. This tale has recently been disproved upon the discovery of a contemporary letter from his concierge who said that he had found Alkan in his kitchen moaning under a coat rack (possibly from fainting, a stroke or heart attack) and that he then died later that night. And what about **Ravel**, composer of the famous Bolero? Was his death in 1937 the result of a taxi accident five years earlier? Or was it fronto-temporal dementia, Alzheimer's disease or Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease that led to the operation, from which he never recovered? His obituary was vague: he had been operated upon for a brain ailment. We'll never know.

So, who's left? Well there aren't as many famous female composers, but there were two who died tragically young: Lili Boulanger and Vítězslava Kaprálová. Lili **Boulanger** was the first woman to be awarded the prestigious Premier Grand Prix de Rome for composition. She was the sister of the more famous Nadia (who taught Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Daniel Barenboim, John Eliot Gardiner, Philip Glass, Thea Musgrave, Ástor Piazzolla, and Virgil Thomson amongst others). She lived to the ripe age of 92, unlike her younger sister who, ill from the age of 12, died of Crohn's disease towards the end of the Great War, aged 24. Lili's works are well worth discovering, as are those of the Czech composer Vítězslava **Kaprálová**. When she died in exile in France at the age of twenty-five, Vítězslava Kaprálová was on the threshold of a successful international career as a composer and conductor. During her short life, she composed no

fewer than fifty works, and conducted orchestras in Prague, London, and Paris. For the last three years of her life, she spent much of her time with the composer Martinů, before marrying the son of the famous artist Mucha just three months before she died. She died, probably of miliary tuberculosis, in June 1940, two days after the Germans invaded Paris.

One of the most poignant and, in the end, needless deaths was that of the Spanish composer, Enrique Granados. At the height of his success, during WWI, the Spanish nationalist composer was invited by President Woodrow Wilson to give a piano recital at the White House. When Granados and his wife missed the boat back to Spain, they travelled to England, then boarding the "Sussex" ferry to take them on to France. On March 24, 1916, while crossing the English Channel, the Sussex was hit by a German U-boat torpedo. The ship broke in two parts. Granados, who had a life-long fear of the ocean, drowned after he jumped out of his lifeboat in a valiant but futile attempt to save his wife. Ironically, the part of the ship that contained his cabin did not sink and was towed to port, with most of the passengers, except for Granados and his wife, on board.

There are many rumours about other composers, especially **Mozart**. Forget the play Amadeus. He did not die in obscurity, neither was he living in penury. Despite all the first hand evidence available, we will never know the real cause of death but the most compelling theory is that he died from trichinosis. This is a parasitic disease caused by eating raw or undercooked pork or wild game infected with the larvae of a species of roundworm *Trichinella spiralis*. "*Trichinosis could explain all the features of Mozart's disease ... The plausibility of this diagnosis, however, depends on Mozart's diet: it*



Maurice Ravel 1875 – 1937



Lili Boulanger 1893 – 1918



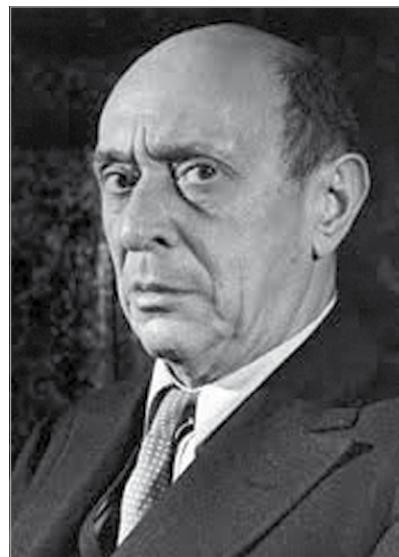
Vítězslava Kaprálová 1915 – 40



Enrique Granados 1867 – 1916



Wolfgang Mozart 1756 – 1791



Arnold Schoenberg 1874 – 1951

*requires evidence that he ate meat, especially pork. In a letter to Constanze written on October 7, 1791, 44 days before his illness, Mozart asked, “What do I smell?... pork cutlets! Che gusto. I eat to your health.” If his final illness was indeed trichinosis, whose incubation period is up to 50 days, Mozart may have unwittingly disclosed the precise cause of his death: those very pork chops.”*

I can't mention Frantisek Kotzwara; the details surrounding him are even more salacious than those of Warlock and Gesualdo, for both of whom I have omitted some details in this family-friendly publication. However, you can look him up; he could teach Christian Trevelyan Grey a thing or two!

Since I've mentioned Berg and Webern, let me close with their mentor – **Arnold Schoenberg**. The father of twelve-tone music was famously a triskaidekaphobe: he had an irrational fear of the number 13. Born in Austria on September 13, 1874, he considered the date of his birth an evil portent. When he noticed that the title of his work “Moses und Aaron” contained 13 letters, he crossed out the second “a” in Aaron to make it 12.

So, in 1951, when Schoenberg was 76, a friend jokingly pointed out that the digits “7” and “6” add up to 13. The thought greatly upset the composer, who became convinced he would not survive his next birthday. He was born on the thirteenth and would die on the thirteenth. That July 13th—a Friday, as it happened—Schoenberg stayed in bed, anxious and ill enough to call a doctor. At 11:45 P.M., his wife looked at the clock and said to herself, “another quarter of an hour and the worst is over.” A few minutes later, the doctor called her in. Schoenberg’s throat rattled twice, his heart gave a powerful beat, and he died, just as he had feared.

As a postscript, since I've already provided salutary tales for my male friends, here's one

for the female readers. Dame Nellie Melba. I know she's not a composer but allow me a slight diversion. In any case, it leads nicely on to next year's article. What do you know about her? She helped popularize opera throughout Europe and the United States; her name became attached to several popular foods named in her honour: Melba toast and the dessert, Peach Melba; she changed her name to a diminutive of Melbourne; she used to do lots of farewell tours (probably as many as Frank Sinatra!). But how did she die? Her death was reported as septicaemia “*A medical man who attended Dame Nellie Melba discloses that death resulted from blood poisoning as a result of fever lowering her vitality.*” Hmm. “*The doctor expressed an opinion that large quantities of watercress which Melba ate in England was the cause of the mild form of typhoid from which she suffered.*” Her obituary on the Obituaries Australia website (yes, I do need to get out more) states, “*Dame Nellie Melba had been ill ever since her return to Australia, but the original infection, paratyphoid, from which she was suffering, had cleared up. However, she was run down in general health, and common germs, found generally in boils and pimples, which have a natural pre-disposition to affect the skin only, got into her system and ultimately caused her death. Her kidneys and a gland in her neck were affected, and finally the muscles of her heart.*”

So what was the real cause? Well, Dame Nellie's biography comes closer to the truth with “*she died on 23 February 1931 of septicaemia, which had developed from facial surgery in Europe some weeks before.*” So, ladies, do you now know what happened? The transcript of a programme broadcast in 2004 provides the details.

*The details are usually fudged. People say, “Oh, she died of a blood infection,” that sort of thing.*

In 1929, some German friends are surprised to meet her on a street in Munich. Melba tells them she's been ill and is on a rest cure. She returns to Australia within days and her friends never see her again. Melba died at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney in February 1931. Why had the apparently healthy singer died so suddenly? Historians have long puzzled over her death certificate. It says she died from septicaemia, but how did she contract this fatal infection?

For 70 years, the nuns at St Vincent's kept the cause of Melba's death secret.

**NURSING SISTER'S MEDICAL REPORT:** "While in Europe, Dame Nellie Melba had a facelift, possibly in Switzerland. But an infection developed, so that by the time her homeward voyage had progressed as far as the Red Sea, she had erysipelas and was indeed seriously ill. Not only was Dame Nellie in great pain from the incision on each side of her face, but she had a heart condition. She was specialised by a Sister of Charity and so strict were the rules of confidentiality that scarcely any other member of the nursing staff knew the nature of the complaint, even to this day."

In Melba's time, the treatment was brand-new, developed to help those disfigured in World War I. But the risks were enormous. Without antibiotics,

an infection could be fatal. Unfortunately for Dame Nellie, it was. She had carefully planned the official photo to be released at her death. This is the image she preferred us to remember - Melba as Juliette, a romantic heroine who died tragically young.



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